

CURRENT AFFAIRS

WEEKLY

WEEK 5
MARCH
2021

MAINS

GS-I

- Arctic Ocean and its Relevance

GS-II

- No proposal to implement Panchayat system in Sixth Schedule areas of Assam: MHA

GS-III

- Financial inclusion: The last mile challenges
- NITI Aayog vision for Great Nicobar ignores tribal, ecological concerns
- Uranium exploration in Arunachal Pradesh

GS-IV

- Non-partisanship and Neutrality are key attributes of Civil Servants

PRELIMS

HISTORY & CULTURE

- Connection of Indus Valley Civilization to Bengal

POLITY & GOVERNANCE

- Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020
- Gandhi Peace Prize announced
- National commission for allied and healthcare professions bill 2021

ECONOMY

- RODTEP Scheme
- Suez Canal 'traffic jam': hitting the trade

ENVIRONMENT

- African elephants listed as critically endangered
- Deadly drug-resistant superbug found in the wild in Andamans
- International Day of Forests
- Tiger Relocation Project

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— Disclaimer —

The current affairs articles are segregated from prelims and mains perspective, such separation is maintained in terms of structure of articles. Mains articles have more focus on analysis and prelims articles have more focus on facts.

However, this doesn't mean that Mains articles don't cover facts and PT articles can't have analysis. You are suggested to read all of them for all stages of examination.

CURRENT AFFAIRS ANALYST

WEEK- 5 (MARCH, 2021)

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SECTION: A

(MAINS)

CURRENT AFFAIRS

ARCTIC OCEAN AND ITS RELEVANCE

CONTEXT

Recently, India has unveiled a new draft 'Arctic' policy that, among other things, commits to expanding scientific

◎ BACKGROUND

- India has been invested in the Arctic region for years and to secure its share of the pie that the region offers in terms of research and resources, including minerals and hydrocarbons, the Indian government has now unveiled a draft Arctic policy.
- It envisages India's engagement in the Arctic region for climate research, environmental monitoring, maritime cooperation and energy security.
- "India's Arctic Policy Roadmap For Sustainable Engagement" draft rides on five pillars:
 - scientific research
 - economics and human development
 - connectivity
 - global governance and international cooperation
 - development of Indian human resource capabilities
- Through the policy, India seeks to play a constructive role in the Arctic by leveraging its vast scientific pool and expertise in Himalayan and Polar research.
- India also aims to contribute in ensuring that as the Arctic becomes more accessible, the harnessing of its resources is done sustainably and in consonance with best practices formulated by bodies such as the Arctic Council.
- India's engagement with the Arctic dates back to nearly nine decades when it signed the '**Svalbard Treaty**' in February 1920 in Paris.
- The country became an **Observer in the Arctic Council** for the first time in 2013; its membership in that body was renewed for a second five-year term in 2018.
- In this context, we will comprehensively go through the importance of the Arctic Ocean for India and the World.

◎ ANALYSIS

Mapping the region

- The Arctic region comprises the Arctic Ocean and parts of countries such as Canada, Denmark

(Greenland), Norway, Russia, USA (Alaska), Finland, Sweden and Iceland.

- These countries together form the core of the **Arctic Council**, an intergovernmental forum.
- **Arctic Ocean**, smallest of the world's oceans, centering approximately on the North Pole, is almost completely encircled by the landmasses of North America, Eurasia, and Greenland.
- It lies entirely within the Arctic Circle and contains,
 - deep (~ 4500m) basins,
 - the slowest spreading oceanic ridges in the world
 - about 15% of the world's continental shelf area
- **Diminishing Ice-cover in the Arctic:** The Arctic is most remarkable for its perennial (multiyear) sea-ice, which historically covered about half of the Arctic Ocean, although in recent years (2007 onward, compared to the 1980s), warming of the Arctic has reduced the perennial sea-ice area by around 40%.

Resource rich Ocean

- The natural resources of the Arctic are the **mineral and animal resources** within the Arctic Circle that can provide utility or economic benefit to humans.
- **Living resources:** These are primarily the abundant fisheries.
- **Mineral resources:** They include major reserves of **oil and natural gas**, large quantities of minerals including iron ore, copper, nickel, zinc phosphates and diamonds.
 - The Arctic could hold some of the world's largest remaining untapped oil and gas reserves.
 - But oil exploration poses a tremendous risk to vulnerable Arctic ecosystems and communities.
 - However, recent low oil prices, a low carbon economy climate agenda, and technical challenges of Arctic oil extraction have curbed interest in these Arctic resources.
- **Fresh water:** It is a critical renewable resource that can be obtained. Several of the world's largest



rivers flow into the Arctic Ocean. This offers the opportunity for two possible developments.

- ▶ the first is to divert the flow, or part of it, to regions short of water
- ▶ the second (and the two are not mutually exclusive) is to use the energy in hydroelectric schemes

Role in regulating Climate

- Despite its remoteness, the Arctic Ocean is a critical component in the interconnected "machine" that regulates Earth's climate.
- **Influence on Atlantic meridional overturning circulation (AMOC):** The "global conveyor belt" of currents (i.e AMOC) that regulate temperatures across the globe starts with the cold water of the North Atlantic.
 - ▶ The Arctic ocean plays a significant role in strengthening this ocean current.
 - ▶ Fresh water from melting glaciers, thawing sea ice, and the Greenland ice sheet flooding through the Fram Strait has the potential to slow down or disrupt this cycle.
- Normally, the **Stratospheric Polar Vortex** swirls around the Arctic, trapping cold air near the Pole. Warming of the Arctic Ocean can weaken this polar vortex disturbing the weather pattern in North America and other regions around the Arctic coast.

Diminished Arctic ice has far-reaching impacts

- **Arctic amplification:** Ice acts as an "air conditioner" for the planet, **reflecting** about 70 percent of incoming solar radiation; a dark, **ice-free ocean absorbs about 90 percent, which further accelerates warming.**
- **Threat to food chain:** Decreased ice has major impacts on the Arctic ecosystem, from algae growing on sea ice at the base of the food chain to whales and Inupiaq people at the top. Ice also provides hunting platforms critical for the survival of walrus and polar bears.
- **Change Ocean circulation patterns:** Melting ice adds fresh water that can flow into the North Atlantic, shifting the density of its waters, and potentially leading to **ocean circulation shifts** and further climate change.
- **Rise in sea levels:** Accelerated input of Greenland ice into the ocean means higher, **faster sea-level rises.**
- **Thawing permafrost poses threats:** It increases coastal erosion and damage to roads, buildings, and pipelines. It **releases the greenhouse gas methane**, and toxic and other materials into the

environment, according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

- **World Security:** An ice-free Arctic Ocean will **intensify military operations** in this strategic part of the globe.
 - ▶ Antarctica, though uninhabited, is governed by the 1959 Antarctic Treaty ensuring that it is used for exclusively peaceful purposes. There is no similar international regime for the Arctic.

Opportunities unearthed as Ice melts:

- **Easy access to resources:** An ice-free Arctic Ocean opens possibilities for increased shipping, oil and gas exploration, and fisheries.
- **Shorten Trade Routes:** The **Northern Sea Route (NSR)** which connects the North Atlantic to the North Pacific through a short polar arc was once not open for navigation.
- The melting ice has now made it a reality and a trickle of commercial cargo vessels have been going through every summer since the last decade.

Why the region assumes significance for India?

- Though none of India's territory directly falls in the Arctic region, it is a crucial area as the Arctic influences atmospheric, oceanographic and biogeochemical cycles of the earth's ecosystem.
- The frigid Arctic, which keeps losing ice due to global warming, is one of the batteries feeding the variations in Indian monsoons, over 7,000 kilometres away.
- Studying the response to warming in the form of melting is quite relevant to India as it provides tools to monitor changes in the Arctic.
- Changes in the Arctic and global ecosystem, induced by melting Arctic ice, can thus be highly disruptive for India.

Indian initiatives in Arctic

- India already has a research station in the Arctic, Himadri, for the research work.
- India received the 'Observer' country status in the Arctic Council in 2013 and is one among the 13 countries across the world, including China, to have that position.
- The status was renewed in 2018.

Geopolitics of Arctic

- Russia, Canada, Norway, and Denmark have put in overlapping claims for extended continental shelves.

- The US, not a party to UNCLOS, is unable to put in a formal claim but is under pressure to strengthen its Arctic presence.
- For the present, Russia is the dominant power, with the longest Arctic coastline, half the Arctic population, and a full-fledged strategic policy.
- Russia anticipates huge dividends from commercial traffic including through the use of its ports, pilots, and ice-breakers.
- China, playing for economic advantage, has moved in fast, projecting the Polar Silk Road as an extension of the BRI, and has invested heavily in ports, energy, undersea infrastructure, and mining projects.

What are the concerns for India?

- India has a large coastline that makes it more vulnerable to the impact of Arctic warming on

ocean currents, weather patterns, fisheries, and most importantly, our monsoon.

- Scientific Research in the Arctic will help India in better understanding of climate changes in the Himalayas.
- With China actively participating in developments in the Arctic and as its relationship grows with Russia, close monitoring for India becomes strategically important.

◎ CONCLUSION

The impact of rapid changes in the Arctic region goes beyond the littoral states and any legitimate and credible mechanism to respond to these challenges calls for active participation of all those actors who have a stake in the governance of global commons. The interplay between science and policy has the potential to contribute to the better handling of the complex issues facing the Arctic.

NO PROPOSAL TO IMPLEMENT PANCHAYAT SYSTEM IN SIXTH SCHEDULE AREAS OF ASSAM: MHA

CONTEXT

In a recent development, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) informed the Lok Sabha that “presently, there is no proposal to implement the ‘Panchayat system’ in the Sixth Schedule areas of Assam”.

◎ BACKGROUND

- In January 2019, the Union Cabinet approved various amendments which were aimed to increase the financial and executive powers of the **autonomous councils in the scheduled areas**.
- Subsequently, the **Constitution (125th Amendment) Bill, 2019** was introduced in the Rajya Sabha that provides for ‘elected village municipal councils’.
- The Bill (still active) proposes that the **State Election Commissions (SECs)** will hold elections to the autonomous councils, village and municipal councils.

◎ ANALYSIS

- **What is Sixth Schedule of the Constitution?**
- The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India consists of provisions for the administration of tribal areas in north eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Tripura, according to **Article 244** of the Constitution.
- Along with protecting the tribal population, the Schedule provides autonomy to the communities through creation of autonomous development councils (ADCs) which are empowered to frame laws on land, public health, agriculture and others.

Fifth Schedule of the Constitution

- The Fifth Schedule deals with administration of scheduled areas where majority of the population comprises of the tribal communities.
- Currently, the schedule is in force in 10 states of the country.
 - These states include Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Telangana.

What Autonomous districts and regional councils?

- The Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India provides for Autonomous district, along with separate Regional Councils for each area constituted as an autonomous region in the district.
 - Under the Schedule, these councils have been given Legislative, Administrative and Judicial powers
 - No Central or State law in respect of the legislative powers conferred on the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) could be extended to those areas without their prior approval.
 - Also, these councils are empowered to constitute **Village councils** and courts.
- In all, there are 10 autonomous councils in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. The specified tribal areas are –
 - **Assam:** the Bodoland Territorial Area, North Cachar Hills and Karbi Anglong
 - **Meghalaya:** Khasi Hills, Jaintiya Hills and Garo Hills
 - **Mizoram:** Chakma, Mara and Lai districts
 - **Tripura:** Tribal Areas
- Each ADC and regional council consists of not more than 30 members.
- Out of 30, four are nominated by the Governor and the rest through elections. The members remain in power for five years.

The exception (Bodoland Territorial Council)

- The Bodoland Territorial Council is an exception as it can constitute up to 46 members out of which 40 are elected.

Panchayat rule in India

- The Constitution (73rd Amendment) Act enacted in 1992 vests power in the Government of the respective State to endow Panchayats with such powers and authority as may be necessary to

allow them function properly as institutions of self-government.

- With the **amendment of the Act**, Panchayats were given 'constitutional status' as an institution of **local self-governance for rural India**.
- The Act mandates provisions for:
 - Establishment of a three-tier structure
 - Village Panchayat
 - Panchayat Samiti or intermediate level Panchayat
 - Zilla Parishad or district level Panchayat
 - Establishment of Gram Sabhas (village level).
 - Regular elections to Panchayats every five years.
 - Proportionate seat reservation for SCs/STs.
 - Reservation for women (not less than one-third seats).
 - Constitution of the State Finance Commissions to recommend measures to improve the finances of Panchayats

- However, the areas, predominantly inhabited by the Adivasi population, called scheduled areas, were exempted from these new amendments.
- In 1996, the **Panchayat (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) (PESA Act)**, took local self-governance rules to the areas listed under the fifth schedule.

About PESA Act

- **Panchayat (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) (PESA Act)** extends the provision of the Indian Constitution to formalise the three-tier Panchayati Raj system to fifth Schedule areas with certain modifications and exceptions.

◎ CONCLUSION

Implementation of Panchayati Raj in tribal areas will give them the right to address and resolve issues of the tribals. Furthermore, it will comfort them out of their fears around the modern, "alien" system of engagement.

FINANCIAL INCLUSION: THE LAST MILE CHALLENGES

CONTEXT

◎ BACKGROUND

- **Financial Inclusion and the Evolving Scenario** - India has developed its financial ecosystem to increase the last-mile connectivity of financial services to its people with only the intent to provide the underprivileged and marginalised access to financial resources to improve their lives.
- **Financial Inclusion in rural India** - Direct benefit transfer synonymous with the Aadhaar Payments Bridge Systems (APBS) is used in rural India for various government programmes such as maternity entitlements, student scholarships, wages for MGNREGA workers
- **Coverage** - According to research, only 16% of rural users access the Internet for financial transactions due to lack of electricity and poor network quality.
- **Last-mile challenges** - Majority of the rural population faces digital problem due to a lack of technical knowledge and nexus of service providers, intermediaries, government officials, and others. Thus facing many hurdles in accessing their money.

and in rural and semi-urban centres it is a hindrance for both consumers and financial institutions.

- **Corruption** - This gave rise to a new form of corruption just like the massive scholarship scam in Jharkhand, where many poor students were deprived of their scholarships owing to a nexus of middlemen, government officials, banking correspondents and others.

Case study: To understand some-last mile challenges, LibTech India Surveyed nearly 2,000 MGNREGA workers across Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, and Rajasthan.

What were the Outcomes of the survey?

The survey attempted to understand the experiences of workers in obtaining wages in hand after they were credited to their bank accounts.

- Rural banks are short-staffed and tend to get overcrowded therefore 45 per cent of workers had to make multiple visits to the bank for their last transaction.
- An estimate 40 per cent of the workers had to make multiple visits to withdraw from CSPs/BCs due to biometric failures which sometimes cause loss of day's wages.
- More than two-thirds of the time workers were denied the facility to update their passbooks at banks. Some workers get charged for transacting at CSPs/BCs which is meant to be free.
- However, branch expansion into rural unbanked locations significantly reduced poverty and with technological advances, the costs of running rural banks will also be lower.

What are the Government measures?

- **Service Points (CSP) and Banking Correspondents (BC)** - This is promoted in rural areas as they are private individuals who offer banking services through the Aadhaar Enabled Payment Systems (AePS) and Subject to network connectivity and electricity, beneficiaries can perform basic banking transactions such as small deposits and withdrawals at these kiosks.
- **Optical Fibre Network (NOF-N)** - National Optical Fibre Network (NOFN) is an ambitious initiative to

◎ ANALYSIS

What are the implications?

- **Lack of Financial literacy** - Workers have little or no clue about where their wages have been credited and what to do when their payments get rejected.
- **Lack of accountability** - When the payment gets rejected they have no idea who is accountable for the repayment.
- **Absence of grievance redressal** - Due to technical reasons such as incorrect account numbers and incorrect Aadhaar mapping with bank accounts there is no one to address their grievances for APBS and AePS and that would continue to impact all DBT programmes.
- **Lack of adequate checks and balances** - Absence of any accountability framework for payment intermediaries that have made the already vulnerable at higher risk of being duped.
- **Lack of infrastructure** - Lack of infrastructure can simply mean distance to a formal banking outlet

trigger a broadband revolution in rural areas by connecting 2.5 lakh gram panchayat.

- **Unnati** – An initiative of Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) which strives to provide Computer education in the schools of rural students with poor economic and social background.
- **Pradhan Mantri Gramin Digital Saksharta Abhiyan (PMGDISHA)**–It is the scheme to make six crore persons in rural areas, across States/UTs, digitally literate, reaching around 40% of rural households
- **E-pathshala** - Providing study materials online for every rural and urban student.
- **Inclusion of regional language:** The Government's digital payment services like Unified Payments Interface (UPI) and Rupay has been enabling digital inclusion on a large scale by offering easy and secure payment options using various Indian languages.

◎ WAY FORWARD

- **Returning to basics** - Rights of the marginalised must attain primacy over technological quick fixes.
- **Transparency** - The right to access your own money in a timely and transparent manner should be the priority.

- **Accountability** - The rights of the marginalised must be protected through strengthening grievance redressal processes and setting accountability norms for all payment intermediaries.
- **E-Governance** - A technological intervention must have a governance framework in which more choices can be provided to the marginalised.
- **Inclusion of digital Literacy** – An increase in digital literacy in a rural area can improve the overall usability of digital banking.

◎ CONCLUSION

- There has to be a multidimensional approach through which existing digital platforms, infrastructure, human resources, and policy frameworks are strengthened. More importantly, human resources should be leveraged by skilling and positively engaging with them to achieve the last-mile connectivity of financial institutions.
- However, if corrective measures are taken to tide over the existing problems, interventions, such as Digital India, have the potential to amplify the benefits of economic growth to the poor. Not only will it reduce the costs for the financial institutions, but it would also address safety concerns and the accuracy of the data involved in financial transactions.

NITI AAYOG VISION FOR GREAT NICOBAR IGNORES TRIBAL, ECOLOGICAL CONCERNS

CONTEXT

In what appears to a re-run of recent developments in Little Andaman Island, more than 150 sq. km. of land is being made available for Phase I of a NITI Aayog-piloted 'holistic' and 'sustainable' vision for Great Nicobar

◎ BACKGROUND

- India is planning to develop a "sustainable" mega-city in Little Andaman.
- The move to develop Great Nicobar Island is the latest in an ongoing Holistic Development of Islands (HDI) programme launched by the Niti Aayog in 2017.
 - An **Island Development Agency** was set up at the time under the Home Minister, with the specific aim of developing the islands.
- The government is looking to make the most of these reserves of natural resources.
- However, this latest NITI Aayog's project seems to have ignored all the concerns regarding tribal and ecology of the region.

- The project is spread over three zones:
 - the first covering 102 sq. km along the east coast with a full-size airport which can host all aircraft types, aerocity, an expanded jetty and marina, tourism centres, convention centres, and hospitals or 'medicity'
 - the second a leisure district spread over 85 sq. km of pristine forest with a tourism SEZ, film city and residential area
 - the third a 52 sq. km zone with a nature retreat, forest resort and natural healing facilities.
- In the islands of the Little Andaman and Great Nicobar two new **Greenfield Coastal Cities** will be built.
- The cities will be developed as **Free Trade Zones** to compete with global cities like Hong Kong, Singapore, and Dubai.

The region profile

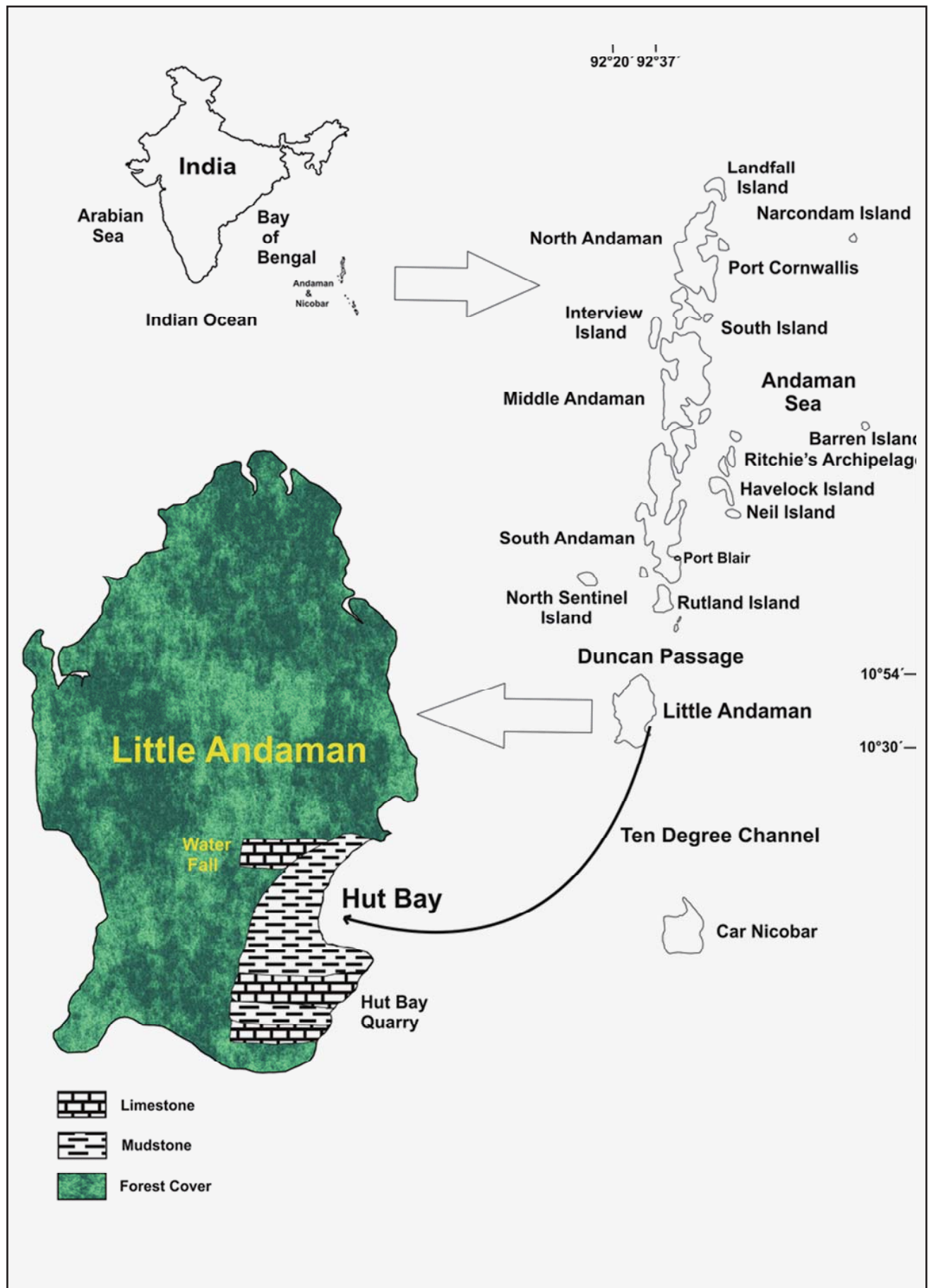
- Nestled in the **Bay of Bengal** on India's eastern coast, Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a union territory (UT) with more than 300 islands – among the largest of which is the 1,000 square foot **Great Nicobar Island**.
- Little Andaman is the fourth largest island in the 836-strong archipelago.
- The island is southernmost in the Andaman cluster and is about 88 kilometres south of Port Blair.
- Little Andaman is socio-ecologically of high importance and large parts of the island are protected: as **Reserve Forest** under the **Indian Forest Act** and as the **Onga Tribal Reserve**.

◎ ANALYSIS

What is the proposed project?

- The 'Sustainable Development of Little Andaman Island - Vision Document', is the NITI Aayog's proposal to leverage the strategic location and natural features of the island.
- The plan suggests conserving 65% of the island's virginal landscape while denotifying 6% of existing tribal reserved area on land and 57% of existing tribal area on the water.

Converting a pristine landscape (in Sq km)				
	Total area for development	Revenue land	Forest area to be denotified	Tribal area to be denotified
PHASE I (Financial City & Med City)	102.0	32.5	69.5	6
PHASE II (Leisure zone)	85.4	1.5	83.9	79.6
PHASE III (Nature zone)	52.0	-	52.0	52.0
Total	239.4	34	205.4	137.6



Andaman and Nicobar Islands

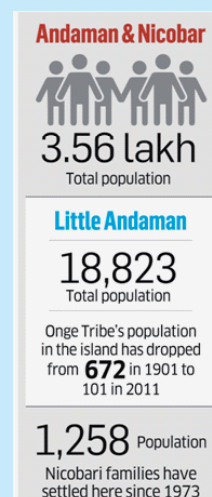
- Andaman and Nicobar Islands comprise 572 islands with a total geographical area of about 8,249 sq km, 0.25% of the total geographical area of India.
- Of the 8,249 sq km, over 80% of the land – 6,742.78 sq km – is recorded as forest land, which includes nine national parks, 96 wildlife sanctuaries and one biosphere reserve.

What has caused outrage?

- The proposed plan to relocate the PVTG has caused global outrage.
 - ▶ "If required, the tribals can be relocated to other parts of is land" that are "conserved and protected," as per the plan.
- According to the latest census, from 2011, there are 44 Great Andamanese, 380 Jarawa, 101 Onge, 229 Shompen and 15 Sentinelse remaining in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The Onge tribe

- Onge, one of four major 'Negrito' tribes in the Andaman Island group, now number only 101 persons, having dwindled to that number since 1900.
- With the arrival of mainland Indians, some refugees from the Bangladesh war of 1971 and a small number from the Nicobar Islands totaling around 18,000 on Little Andaman island, the Onge were "settled" in **two tiny reserves** near the **western coast**.
- The Onge, along with other Andaman tribes are believed to have been part of the early out-of-Africa migrations around 50,000 years ago.
- India's latter-day policy has already pushed the **Jarawas** in that island to a dysfunctional existence or sub-optimal isolation in the deepest interiors of the Great Island with Port Blair in the north of the chain.
- The Onge are likely to be similarly pushed closer to extinction by this project if it materializes.
- Similar concerns exist about the impact on the **Shompen community**.



Other issues and challenges

- **Concerns over biodiversity preservation:** The Project calls for clearing a
- **Vulnerability to tsunamis and earthquakes:** The Andaman & Nicobar islands are in a **seismically highly active zone**. The 2004 earthquake and accompanying tsunami devastated large parts of the island chain.
 - ▶ Nicobar and Car Nicobar lost almost one-fifth of its population and close to 90% of its mangroves.
 - ▶ Many islands were completely submerged or even split into two.
- **Environmental damage:** The Forest Department reportedly objected to the project citing-
 - ▶ massive environmental damage
 - ▶ harm to wildlife including habitats and breeding grounds of the globally endangered **Giant Leatherback sea turtles**

◎ CONCLUSION

- Drawing on these natural reserves and enhancing infrastructure are tourism hot spots such as Great Nicobar will be a crucial part of India's economic recovery.
- However, the potential impacts of the project on the ecosystem are worrisome. The region is incredibly important cultural heritage sites and such sort of development can destroy the valuable ecosystem.

URANIUM EXPLORATION IN ARUNACHAL PRADESH

CONTEXT

The Atomic Minerals Directorate for Exploration and Research (AMD), has begun exploring uranium deposits in

◎ BACKGROUND

- The **Atomic Minerals Directorate for Exploration and Research (AMD)**, under the Department of Atomic Energy (DEA), has been mandated to identify uranium and thorium resources required for the Atomic Energy programs in India.
- **China** has expressed disappointment over India's uranium exploration in Arunachal Pradesh, which China refers to as 'South Tibet' and has refused to recognise Indian sovereignty in the region.
- Discovery of significant uranium reserves in Arunachal Pradesh can complicate India-China border talks and relations in general as both countries would now have more at stake in Arunachal Pradesh.
- Current sources of Uranium in India,
 - Domestically, a major portion of Uranium comes from **Jadguda mines in Jharkhand**.
 - Uranium is also extracted from Tummalapalle mines in **Andhra Pradesh**.
 - We source most of our uranium through **import** uranium from **Kazakhstan, Canada and Russia**.
- Imported uranium is used for civil purposes only, while domestically produced uranium is used both for civil and military applications.

◎ ANALYSIS

Uranium was first discovered in the 18th century, and is an element **found in trace quantities**, almost everywhere on Earth.

About Uranium

- Uranium is a **radioactive and toxic** element with atomic number 92.
- Naturally occurring uranium consists of 99% uranium-238 and 1% uranium-235. **Uranium-235 is the only naturally occurring fissionable fuel** (a fuel that can sustain a chain reaction).
- Uranium occurs naturally in several minerals such as uraninite (pitchblende), brannerite and carnotite. It is also found in **phosphate rock and monazite sands**.

Uranium reserves in World

- The largest deposits of Uranium in the world are found in **Australia, Kazakhstan and Canada**. Over two-thirds of the world's production of uranium is from these three countries.
- Russia, South Africa, Namibia, Niger and China also have uranium reserves to some extent.

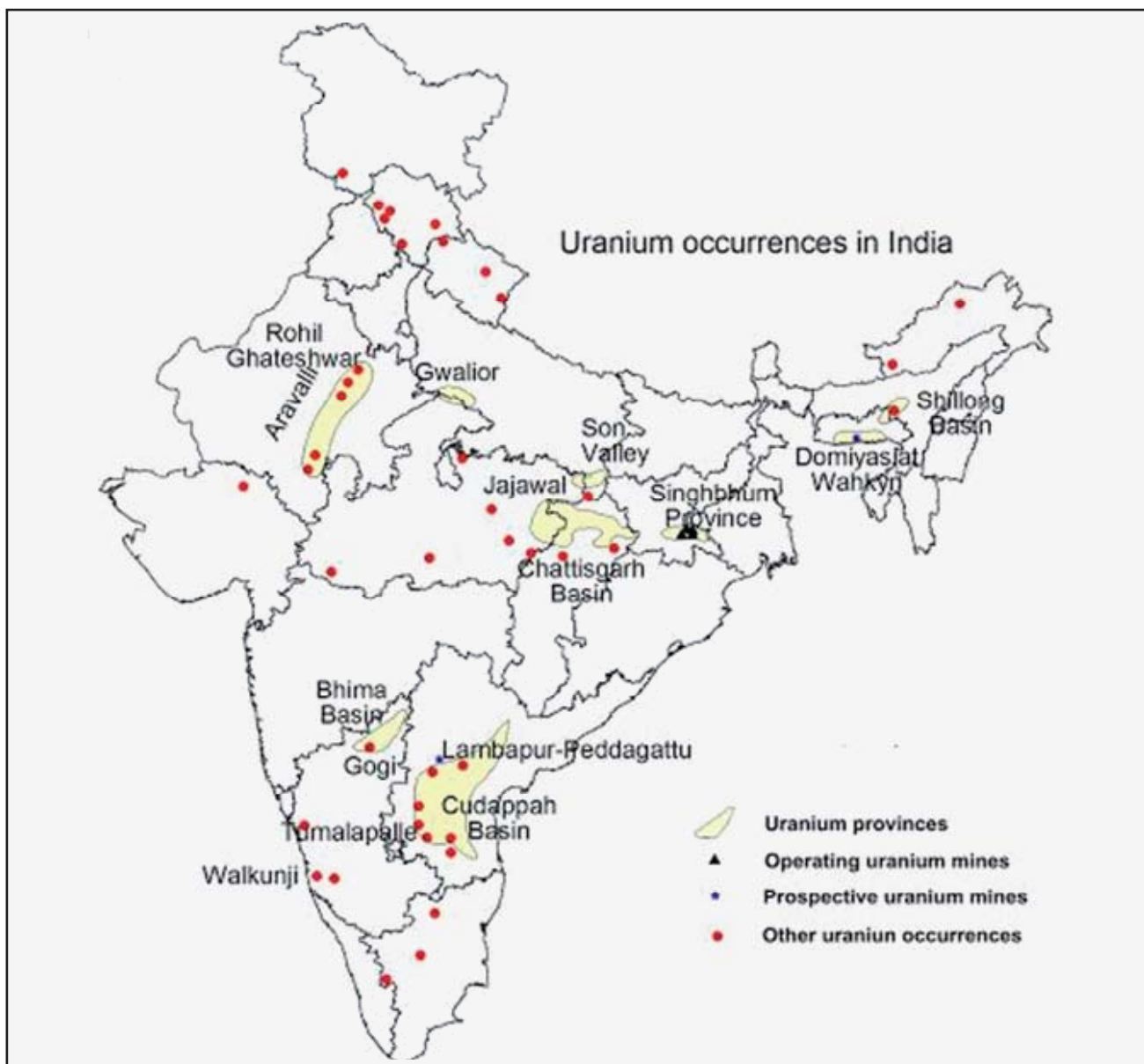
Major international treaties on peaceful use of nuclear energy

- The Treaty on the **Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)**, the **Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT)** are the most important global efforts towards nuclear disarmament.
- Only five nuclear weapon states (China, France, Russia, the UK and the USA) are recognised in the NPT. All others are understood to be non-nuclear states.
- Therefore, India refused to sign NPT as it was seen to perpetuate nuclear inequality between nations.
- The export of uranium is not prohibited by the NPT unless the state party exporting the uranium knows that the export material is likely to be used for a nuclear explosive device.
- In 1974 after India had used Canadian uranium to test nuclear weapons, uranium exporting nations saw the need to limit the export of nuclear materials and technology. Thus, the **Nuclear Suppliers group (NSG)** was formed.

Uranium in India

- In India, Uranium is associated with the **Dharwar rock system**.
- As there are no significant Uranium deposits in India, most of the country's demands are **met through imports**, from countries like Russia, France and Kazakhstan.
- Following image highlights significant uranium reserves in India,

Uses of Uranium

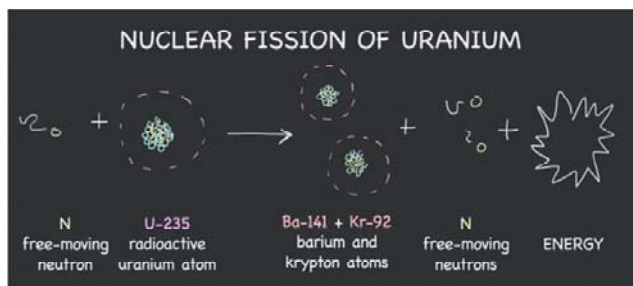


• Civil Purposes

- Uranium provides us with nuclear fuel used to **generate electricity in nuclear power stations.**

around 2% (total capacity of 6.7 GW) of the country's total electricity supply.

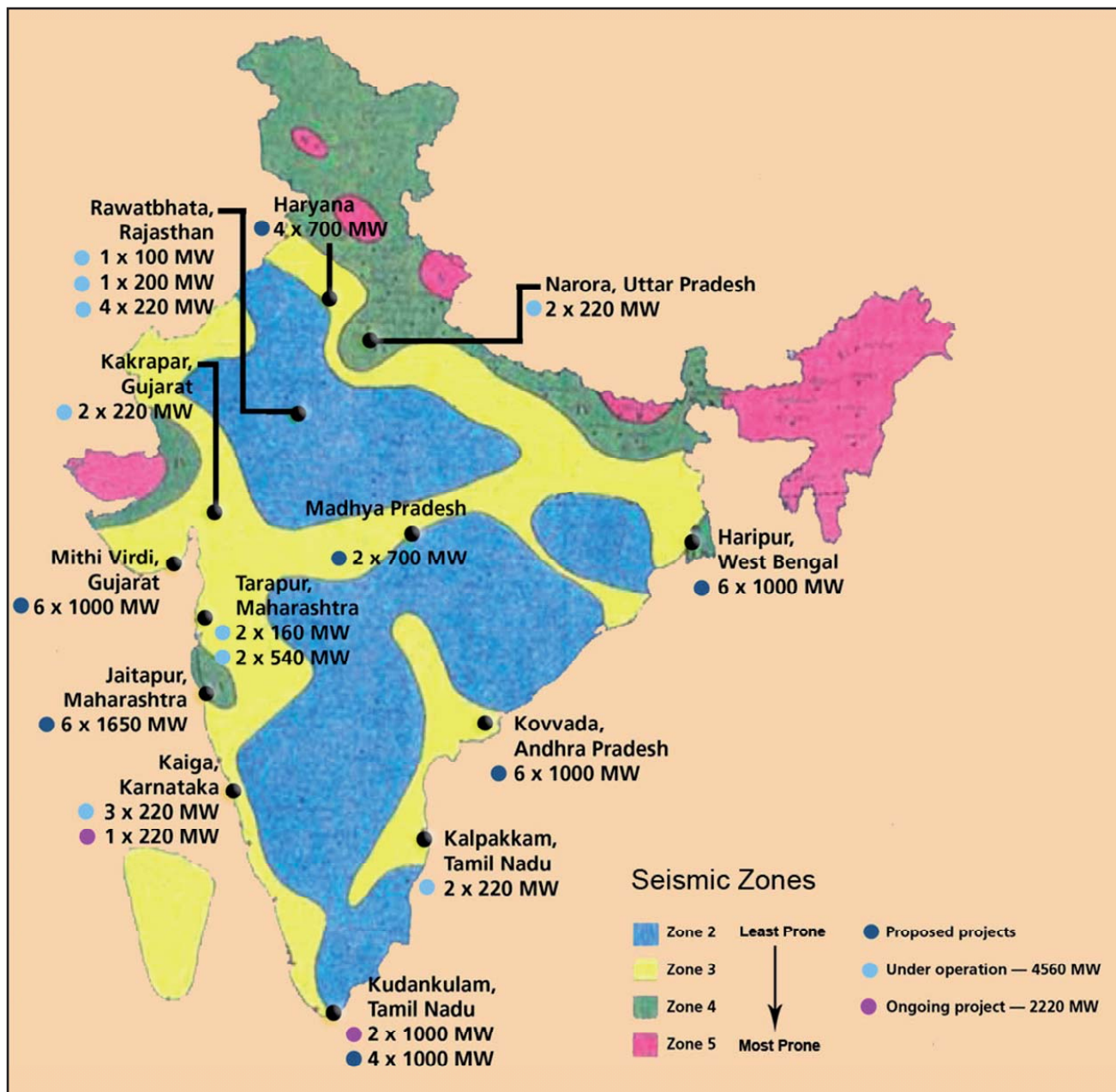
- Nuclear Energy is a **zero-emission, clean source of Energy.**



- Nuclear Reactors using uranium generate about 10% of the world's electricity.
- In India, Nuclear Power **contributes to only**



- India's nuclear plants are controlled by **Nuclear Power Corporation of India (NPCIL)**, a state-owned corporation which was founded in 1987.
- Nuclear Power Plants in India:



• Military Purposes

- Uranium is used by the military to
 - power nuclear submarines
 - nuclear weapons.

Problems associated with Nuclear Energy Production in India

- **Harmful Radiation:** The major concern from Nuclear Power Plants is the leak of radiation. This radiation can have harmful impacts on humans, animals and the environment.
- **Waste Disposal :** Disposal of Radioactive waste has been the cause of major concern, as the waste will emit radiation for thousands of years to come.

- **Liability in case of accidents:** The Atomic Energy Act, 1962, does not provide any clear answer to the question of liability in case of accidents.

Some Measures that can be taken

- **Periodic Inspections:** Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, established under Atomic Energy Act, 1962, should ensure periodic supervision of Nuclear Power Plants.
- **International standards,** such as those established by IAEA, should be followed.
- **Technology Upgradation:** This will help in minimizing the risks further.

◎ WAY FORWARD

- Less than 2% of India's electricity demand is met through nuclear energy. One of the major reasons for such low scale is lack of availability of nuclear fuel in India.
- India has been advancing in the field of thorium-based fuels, working to design and develop a prototype for an atomic reactor using thorium and low-enriched uranium, a key part of India's three stage nuclear power programme.
- If significant uranium reserves are discovered in Arunachal Pradesh, it could prove transformative for India's energy landscape.

◎ CONCLUSION

Nuclear Energy has great potential to support our endeavours to achieve green energy to deal with the Global Climate crisis. However, Nuclear Energy has two major concerns. One is that nuclear fuels like uranium, can be misused to produce weapons of mass destruction. Second, nuclear reactors, though non-polluting, pose severe contamination risks in case of a mishap or disaster. Fortunately, the world is on the right track to deal with both problems in the most comprehensive way possible.

NON-PARTISANSHIP AND NEUTRALITY ARE KEY ATTRIBUTES OF CIVIL SERVANTS

CONTEXT

Days after being shunted out from the post of Mumbai Police Commissioner, Param Bir Singh has alleged that Maharashtra Home Minister Anil Deshmukh had demanded Rs. 100 crore every month from suspended police officer Sachin Vaze, now in custody of National Investigation Agency (NIA) in the Mukesh Ambani bomb scare

◎ BACKGROUND

- Sachin Vaze, was a so-called 'encounter specialist' in the Mumbai Police force. He was suspended from the force 16 years ago, due to a case of custodial death.
- After suspension he associated himself with Shiv sena, which allegedly reinstated him in the Police force in 2020.
- Such cases of Civil Servants being associated with Politicians have come up many times throughout the length and breadth of the Nation.
- This requires civil servants to maintain political neutrality and Non partisanship.
- Thus, a discussion on key attributes of civil services, Non Partisanship and Political Neutrality becomes evident.

◎ ANALYSIS

Non-Partisanship

- **Non-partisanship** implies that the officer is to do his task without any fear of, or favor to any political party, even if he has strong faith in any political thought.
- **Why are they needed?**
 - It brings credibility and trust among the public in the functioning of the public service.
 - It makes the civil servants gutsy, rather than merely capable, so that they can ask relevant questions with respect to the policy, law etc.
 - It ensures equality, justice among different sections of the society.
 - It ensures the morale, effectiveness and efficiency of civil services, as the transfer, posting etc. are expected to be based on merit alone rather than any extraneous factors.
- **How are they ensured?**
 - The **Central Civil Services Conduct Rules,**

1964 and All India Services Conduct Rules 1968

- which stipulate certain guidelines for the Civil servant to perform the duty with full devotion; and shall not adopt dilatory tactics in their dealings with the public
- **Code of Ethics, 1997**
 - It was the first initiative to introduce the code of ethics for public servants in India, which was considered a step towards better governance

Neutrality

- Civil Service Neutrality refers to political impartiality.
- Neutrality is not being biased in providing facts, feedback, opinions, etc. to the political executive or diligently carrying out tasks ordered by the government, irrespective of which political party's government is in power.

Importance of Non-partisanship and Neutrality in Bureaucracy

- Non-partisanship helps to maintain trust of people in Administration.
- It helps to maintain a healthy relationship between political executives and civil servants.
- It motivates civil servants to provide recommendations/suggestions to policy makers without ill-will or favor.
- It helps in effective policy formulation and its implementation.
- It also helps in mending self-interest based political ideology towards holistic development.
- It keeps the ideology of the constitution above any other political, religious or economic ideology.

Types of neutrality

- Sometimes, it is classified into two types.
 - **Passive neutrality:** Here the public official

will do anything that the political executive orders him to do. But then he may end up violating some legal/constitutional provisions. It was the neutrality that was actualized by Nazi bureaucracy. Hence passive neutrality is undesirable.

- ▶ **Active neutrality:** The Officer will do what the constitution, rules, laws and office manual says, without following any particular party. Sometimes, it leads to civil services activism.

Conduct Rules for Neutrality

The Central Civil Services Conduct Rules, 1964 and the All India Services Conduct Rules 1968: They lay down the following provisions to ensure neutrality of public servants:

- Public servants must not take part in politics.
- They must not give election fund/ assistance to any political party
- They can vote. But must not tell his preference to other people.
- They must not display any election symbols on his person, vehicle or home.
- They must not participate in rallies, demonstrations etc., without government permission.

Challenges to Neutrality

- **Lack of independent institutions:** There is a lack of independent institutions for transferring, posting,

and other service conditions. As a result, the civil servants align with one or the other political party to get their favorite postings and other perks.

- **Secrecy:** Secrecy in official functioning, as a result there develops nexus between the political executive and civil servants to fulfill their illegitimate gratifications.
- **In-service and intra-service rivalry:** In each government-service, there are various factions based on language, religion, caste and region. To gain promotion and perks for their faction, they'd bend to the wills of politicians.
- **Illegitimate Political agendas:** Wrong notion of committed bureaucracy, where the civil servants try to fulfill the political agenda of a particular political party.
- **Election and corruption:** Ministers need a lot of money to finance election campaigns, so they prefer a convenient subordinate. Many don't like an officer who gives free and frank advice.

◎ CONCLUSION

- Democratically elected leaders legislate and make policy, the permanent executive of civil servants is meant to advise and execute it, irrespective of their own views. Politicisation of Bureaucracy leads to undue political influence in the governance. Bureaucrats need to maintain political neutrality and impartiality to ensure the triumph of democracy and smooth functioning of its institutions.



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CONNECTION OF INDUS VALLEY CIVILIZATION TO BENGAL

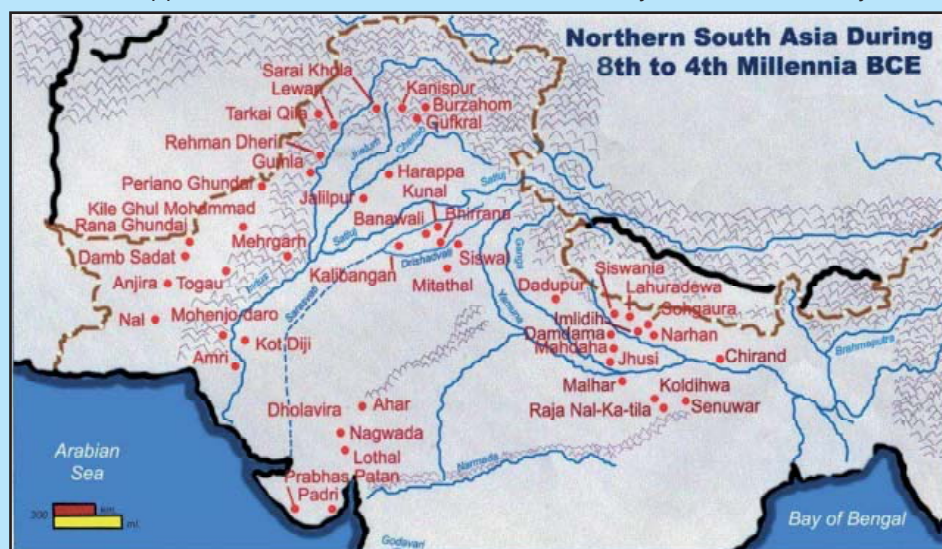
◎ **CONTEXT:** Researchers have recently unearthed many links which show that Chandraketugarh, a 2,500-year-old site in West Bengal, was linked to international trade in the mysterious Indus Valley Civilisation.

◎ **ABOUT:** **About the King Chandraketu and Chandraketugarh**

- Recent discoveries suggest that **Sandrocottus was the name Megasthenes, used for King Chandraketu.**
 - **Chandraketugarh (Fort of Chandraketu)**, often called "the city that never existed".
 - It was once reportedly an important coastal hub in international trade, between 4th Century BCE and 12th Century CE.
 - The archaeological site is over 2,500 years old and is located near the Bidyadhari River, which is around 35 kilometers northeast of Kolkata, in North 24 Parganas, near Berachampa and the Harua Road railhead.
- **Indus Valley Civilization, Mauryan and Gupta connection with Kolkata**
 - **Gupta Connection:** Post-Gupta temple complex shows the existence of a flourishing ancient civilization that possibly **spanned six periods from the pre-Maurya to the Pala dynasty.**
 - ▶ The **mound discovered in Chandraketugarh** had the names of Khana and Mihir (another name by which Varahamihira was known).
 - ▶ Varahamihira was believed to be part of emperor Vikramaditya or Chandragupta II's famed navaratnasabha.
 - **Mauryan connection:** Discoveries ranging from the **Mauryan to the post-Gupta periods** suggest the link.
 - ▶ Findings included **large-sized pots** and **chalcedony beads** possibly dating back to Mauryan times.
 - ▶ Semi-precious stones, copper coins, terracotta figurines, cosmetic sticks of bone and ivory, and a steatite casket.
 - **Indus Valley Civilization Connect:** Some of the terracotta items date back to the Indus Valley Civilisation.
 - ▶ A wide variety of **figurines, animals, toy-carts, erotic depictions, narrative plaques depicting sceneries of harvest**, aquatic motifs, among others, have been unearthed.
 - ▶ The female figurines are adorned with intricate headdresses, earrings, pendants, and other accessories that show the stellar craftsmanship of the civilization.
 - ▶ A pair of terracotta rattles in the form of Indian male nature spirits, called yakshas and (right) Coins unearthed at Chandraketu.

Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC)

- The **Indus Valley Civilisation (IVC)** was a **Bronze Age** civilization in the northwestern regions of South Asia.
- It lasted from **3300 BCE to 1300 BCE**, and in its mature form from **2600 BCE to 1900 BCE**.
- Together with ancient **Egypt and Mesopotamia**, it was one of three early civilizations of the Near East and South Asia.
- Its sites spanning an area stretching from **northeast Afghanistan, through much of Pakistan, and into western and northwestern India**.
- It flourished in the basins of the Indus River.
- The Indus civilization is also known as the **Harappan Civilisation**, after its type site, Harappa, the first of its sites to be excavated early in the 20th century.



CONSUMER PROTECTION (E-COMMERCE) RULES, 2020

◎ **CONTEXT:** A parliamentary panel has submitted its report on 'The Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020'.

- ◎ **ABOUT:**
- The E-Commerce Rules provide a framework to regulate the **marketing, sale and purchase** of goods and services online.
 - These are notified under the new **Consumer Protection Act, 2019**.
 - These rules are **mandatory** and are not advisories.
 - The panel is headed by **Partap Singh Bajwa**.

What is Predatory Pricing?

- Predatory pricing is the illegal act of setting prices low in an attempt to eliminate the competition.
- Predatory pricing violates antitrust law, as it makes markets more vulnerable to a monopoly.

- The difference between predatory pricing and competitive pricing is during the recouping phase of lost profits by the dominant firm charging higher prices.
- Predatory pricing usually will cause consumer harm and is considered anti-competitive in many jurisdictions making the practice illegal under some competition laws.

Major recommendations

- **Clear-cut definition of what constitutes 'unfair' trade practice:** The government should offer a more clear-cut definition of what constitutes 'unfair' trade practice as well as spell out a practical legal remedy to tackle the issue.
- **Predatory pricing by e-commerce firms:** Risk that predatory pricing by e-commerce firms may result in competition being wiped out and prove detrimental to consumers in the long run.
- **Fixing a cap on delivery charges:** It has also recommended fixing a cap on delivery charges levied by e-commerce firms, as well as providing for penal provisions for violation of rules related to misinformation.
- **Unfair trade practices:** While e-commerce enterprises offer many benefits, the development of the segment has rendered consumers vulnerable to new forms of unfair trade practices, violation of privacy and issues of unattended grievances.
- **Issue of drip pricing:** It should also clearly define 'drip pricing' wherein the final cost of the product goes up due to additional charges, and provide for protecting consumers against this by including penal provisions for violation.

What are the E-Commerce Rules?

- To **regulate all commercial transactions** sold over a digital or electronic network.
- It recognises **two e-commerce business models**, namely, marketplace model and inventory-based model.
- **Separate rules** specified for provisions for marketplace and inventory-based entities.
- **All information** on the return, refund, exchange, warranty and guarantee, delivery and shipment of the goods or services being sold, including their country of origin, be provided on the platform.
- These would enable consumers to make an **informed decision**.

Issues with the rules

- Unclear as to what would constitute **price manipulation**.
- **Small businesses** may not be in a position to comply with the provision of setting up a grievance redressal mechanism entity.
- It **prohibits** an e-commerce entity from levying a charge for cancellation post confirmation.
- It is **against business-friendly approach**.
- Most of the conditions are **impractical**.

GANDHI PEACE PRIZE ANNOUNCED

© **CONTEXT:** The Gandhi Peace Prize for the year 2019 and 2020 are being conferred.

© ABOUT:

Gandhi Peace Prize

- It is an annual award instituted by the Government of India **since 1995, the 125th Birth Anniversary commemoration year of Mahatma Gandhi.**
 - The award is open to all persons regardless of nationality, race, language, caste, creed, or sex.
 - It is given to **individuals and institutions** for their contributions towards social, economic, and political transformation through non-violence and other Gandhian methods.
 - The award is **not given posthumously.**
 - The award carries an amount of **Rs. 1 crore, a citation, a plaque, and an exquisite traditional handicraft/ handloom item.**
- **Selection committee:** The Jury for Gandhi Peace Prize is **chaired by the Prime Minister**, the Chief Justice of India, Leader of the single largest Opposition Party in Lok Sabha, the Speaker of the Lok Sabha, and one other eminent person.

Gandhi Peace Prize for the year 2019 and 2020

The Union government conferred Gandhi Peace Prize to-

- (Late) His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said of Oman for the year 2019
- Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman for the year 2020

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman

- Popularly referred to as "Bangabandhu" or the 'friend of Bangladesh', Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was one of the tallest leaders of Bangladesh.
- Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's birth anniversary is celebrated as the National Children's Day in the country.
- Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was born on March 17, 1920.
- He is considered as the **"architect of independent Bangladesh"** and the **'father of Bangladesh'.**
- In 1949, he joined the Awami League, a political party which advocated greater autonomy for East Pakistan.
- Rahman played an important role in the **six-point movement** and the **Anti-Ayub movement.**
- In 1970, his party secured an absolute majority in the Pakistani general elections.
- The election results were not honoured, leading to a bloody civil war, and Sheikh Mujib declared **Bangladesh's independence from Pakistan on March 26, 1971.**
- India under then **Prime Minister Indira Gandhi** provided full support to Rahman and **Bangladesh's independence movement**, resulting in the creation of a sovereign government at Dhaka in January 1971.

NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR ALLIED AND HEALTHCARE PROFESSIONS BILL 2021

© CONTEXT:

National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions Bill passed by Parliament to regulate practice of allied and healthcare professionals.

◎ **ABOUT:**

- The **health workforce in the Indian scenario** has been defined with a focus mainly on a few cadres such as doctors, nurses and frontline workers.
- Many other professionals belonging to more than fifty allied and health care professions continue to remain **under-utilised and unregulated in the health system** and there has been a persistent demand for a regulatory framework for such professions for several decades.

Features of the Bill**What is allied health?**

- The term allied health is relatively new and there is still **no universally accepted definition** of allied health professions.
 - Allied health professionals provide a **broad range** of diagnostic, technical, therapeutic and **direct health services** to improve the health and wellbeing of the consumers they support.
 - Allied health professionals are health professionals that are **not part of the medical, dental or nursing professions**.
 - They are **university qualified practitioners** with specialised expertise in preventing, diagnosing and treating a range of conditions and illnesses.
 - Allied health practitioners often work within a **multidisciplinary health team** to provide specialised support for different patient needs.
- **National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions:** The Bill seeks to set up a National Commission for Allied and Healthcare Professions to regulate and standardize the education and practice of allied and healthcare professionals.
 - **The functions of the proposed National Commission:** include framing of standards for education and practice, creating and maintaining an online Central Register of all registered professionals, providing basic standards of education, and providing for a uniform entrance and exit examination.
 - **State Register or the National Register:** Under the legislation, only those enrolled in a State Register or the National Register as a qualified allied and healthcare practitioner would be allowed to practice as an allied and healthcare practitioner.
 - **The Bill defines an 'allied health professional':** as an associate, technician, or technologist trained to support the diagnosis and treatment of any illness, disease, injury, or impairment.
 - **A 'healthcare professional' includes:** a scientist, therapist, or any other professional who studies, advises, researches, supervises, or provides preventive, curative, rehabilitative, therapeutic, or promotional health services.
 - **Allied and healthcare professions:** that are mentioned in the Bill include professionals working in life sciences, trauma and burn care, surgical and anaesthesia related technology, physiotherapists, and nutrition science.

Significance of the Bill

- The bill will **increase the employment** opportunities for the healthcare and allied professionals and will also **provide dignity** to their valuable works.
- There is an **extreme demand** for qualified healthcare professionals and that the legislation will provide the required impetus in providing **affordable healthcare to the people**.
- It will **standardise and regulate** education and practice.
- It would provide for a **uniform entrance and exit examination**, among others.

RODTEP SCHEME

◎ **CONTEXT:** The notification of benefit rates payable to exporters under the Remission of Duties and Taxes on Export Products (RODTEP) scheme is expected to take more time as it is facing 'teething issues'.

◎ **ABOUT:**

- RoDTEP stands for **Remission of Duties and Taxes on Export Products**.
- It is formed to **replace the existing MEIS (Merchandise Exports from India Scheme)**.
- The scheme will ensure that the exporters **receive the refunds** on the embedded taxes and duties previously non-recoverable.
- The scheme was brought about with the **intention to boost exports** which were relatively poor in volume previously.

What is the need for the RoDTEP Scheme?

- The US had challenged India's key export subsidy schemes in the WTO (World Trade Organisation), claiming them to harm the American workers.
- A dispute panel in the WTO ruled against India, stating that the export subsidy programmes that were provided by the Government of India violated the provisions of the trade body's norms.
- The panel further recommended that the export subsidy programmes be withdrawn.
- This led to the birth of the RoDTEP Scheme, so as to ensure that India stays WTO-compliant.

The following were some of the export subsidy programmes recommended to be withdrawn:

- Merchandise Exports from India Scheme
- Export Oriented Units Scheme
- Electronics Hardware Technology Parks Scheme
- Bio-Technology Parks Scheme
- Export Promotion Capital Goods Scheme
- Special Economic Zones (SEZ) Scheme
- Duty-Free Imports for Exporters Scheme

Key Features of the scheme

- **Refund of the previously non-refundable duties and taxes:** Mandi tax, VAT, Coal cess, Central Excise duty on fuel etc. will now be refunded under this particular scheme. All the items under the MEIS and the RoSTCL (Rebate of State and Central Taxes and Levies) are now under the purview of the RoDTEP Scheme.
- **Automated system of credit:** The refund will be issued in the form of transferable electronic scrips. These duty credits will be maintained and tracked through an electronic ledger.
- **Quick verification through digitisation:** Through the introduction of the digital platform, the clearance happens at a much faster rate. Verification of the records of the exporters will be done with the help of an IT-based risk management system to ensure speed and accuracy of transaction processing.
- **Multi-sector scheme:** Under RoDTEP, all sectors, including the textiles sector, are covered, so as to ensure uniformity across all areas.

Who all can avail benefits of the RoDTEP Scheme?

- **All sectors, including the textiles sector**, may enjoy the benefits of the RoDTEP Scheme.
- **Labor-intensive sectors** that enjoy benefits under the MEIS Scheme will be given a priority.
- Manufacturer exporters and merchant exporters (traders) are **both eligible** for the benefits of this scheme.
- There is **no particular turnover threshold** to claim the RoDTEP.
- **Re-exported products** are **not eligible** under this scheme.
- To be eligible to avail the benefits of this scheme, the exported products need to have the **country of origin as India**.
- **Special Economic Zone Units and Export Oriented Units** are also **eligible** to claim the benefits under this scheme.
- Where goods have been **exported via courier through e-commerce platforms**, RoDTEP scheme applies to them as well.
- MEIS vs RoDTEP

MEIS	RoDTEP
Incentives available on the export of goods	Refund of duties and taxes that are currently not being reimbursed by any other schemes.
Not compliant with the WTO norms.	Compliant with the WTO norms.
2%-5% of the FOB (Free On Board) value of exports.	Product based % is yet to be notified
Issued in the form of physical transferable scrips.	Issued in the form of transferable duty credit or electronic scrips which will be maintained via an electronic ledger.

SUEZ CANAL 'TRAFFIC JAM': HITTING THE TRADE

- ◎ **CONTEXT:** The Suez Canal has been blocked by a large cargo-ship that stuck sideways across the canal.
- ◎ **ABOUT:** **Suez Canal**
- The **Suez Canal** is a sea-level water channel in Egypt.
 - It is an **artificial** route **commissioned in 1869**.
 - The Suez Canal is a critical shipping route that connects the **Mediterranean and Red Seas through Egypt**.
 - It provides a direct route between the **North Atlantic and northern Indian oceans**.
 - **Connecting Ports:** The canal extends from the northern terminus of Port Said to the Southern end of Port Tewfik at the city of Suez.

- **Control:** The Canal was initially controlled by the British and French, however was nationalized in 1956 by Egypt's leader Gamal Abdel Nasser.
- **Economic Significance:** It is one of the world's most extensively used shipping routes which carry more than 12% of the world trade by volume.

The reason behind the Suez Canal blocked

- **The Ship is expected to be stuck by a Sandstorm which is a frequent occurrence at this point in the Sinai Peninsula.**

Khamsin (Sandstorm) in Egypt

- It is locally known as Khamsin or Khamseen, in Egypt.
- It is a hot, dry, and sandy local wind which affects Egypt and the Levant.
- These dry, sand-filled storms blow sporadically in the spring season in Egypt over fifty days.
 - ▶ In Egypt, the khamsin arrives in April but occasionally can occur between March and May.
- It carries a good quantity of sand and dust from the deserts.
- It comes with a speed up to 140 kilometers per hour and shows a rise of temperatures as much as 20 °C in two hours.

Some other similar winds

- Bad-i-sad-o-bistoz - Iran and Afghanistan
- Haboob - Sudan
- Aajej - Southern Morocco
- Ghibli - Tunis
- Africo - Italy
- Sirocco - Middle East

AFRICAN ELEPHANTS LISTED AS CRITICALLY ENDANGERED

◎ CONTEXT

The **African forest elephant has been listed as critically endangered** along with the **African savanna elephant which is enlisted as endangered** on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species.

◎ ABOUT:

African Forest and African Savanna Elephants

- The two species were previously considered as a single species on the Red List.
- They were **earlier listed as vulnerable**.
- Now they have been assessed separately due to the emergence **of genetic evidence**.
- **Habitat:** They both live in different habitats:
 - **African Forest elephants** live in the **tropical forests of Central Africa**
 - **African Savanna elephants** live in the open country in **Sub-Saharan Africa, which includes grasslands and deserts**

Ecological Significance

- **African Forest elephants** are known as the '**gardeners of the forest**,'
- They help in distributing seeds
- **Savanna elephants** are '**keystone species**' in their habitat.

Reduction in number

- The number of **African elephants** has been decreased by more than **86%** over the last 31 years.
- **African savanna elephant's population** has fallen by around **60%** over the last 50 years.
- **Threats:** Poaching for ivory and loss of habitat.

Keystone species

- A keystone species is the species of the organism which help in defining an entire **ecosystem**.
- In the absence of its keystone species, the **ecosystem** would be different or cease to exist altogether.
 - **Examples:** lion, jaguar (shown below), and gray wolf, **Sea Otters** and Tiger Sharks

DEADLY DRUG-RESISTANT SUPERBUG FOUND IN THE WILD IN ANDAMANS

◎ CONTEXT:

A deadly hospital pathogen, the **Candida Auris**, has for the first time been identified in the environment, off the coast of South Andaman district in the Andaman and Nicobar islands.

◎ ABOUT:

About the Candida Auris

- **Candida Auris** or **C. Auris** belong to Fungi and was identified in 2009 in a patient in Japan.
 - It is a multidrug-resistant pathogen.
 - It can pose a serious global threat to human health.
- **Family:** It belongs to the **Candida haemulonii** clade of the **Metschnikowiaceae** family of the order **Saccharomycetales**.
 - **Related Species:** The related species of the **Metschnikowiaceae** family have been detected in plants, insects, and aquatic environments, as well as from human body sites.
 - **Closest Species:** The closest known relative of **C. auris** is **C.**



haemulonii, which was first discovered in 1962 from the gut of a blue-striped grunt fish, the skin of dolphins, and the seawater off the coast of Portugal.

- **Habitat:** This fungus is present in the environment as degraders of organic matter.
- Fungi predominately thrive in tropical and subtropical areas.
- Being an emerging pathogen, very little is known about the fungus so far.

Findings:

- **Habitat:** It has for the first time established that the fungus is found in tropical marshes and marine environments, outside hospital environments.
 - Its ability to survive on dry environmental surfaces for prolonged periods suggests that this yeast is well adapted to survival outside human host settings as well.
- **Threat:** These fungi have high mortality in immune-compromised patients.
- **Adaptation:** The *C. auris* shows thermal and salinity tolerance, which is because of its adaptation to global warming.

What are Superbugs?

- **Microorganisms:** These are strains of bacteria, viruses, parasites and fungi.
- **Resistance:** Superbugs are resistant to most of the antibiotics and other medications commonly used to treat the infections they cause.
 - **Example:** superbugs include resistant bacteria that can cause pneumonia, urinary tract infections and skin infections.

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FORESTS

◎ **CONTEXT:** The United Nations observes March 21 as the International Day of Forests, commemorating the green cover around the world and reiterating its importance.

◎ **ABOUT:** About International Day of Forests, 2021

- **Theme:** 'Forest restoration: a path to recovery and well-being,
- **Significance:** It emphasizes how restoration and sustainable management of forests can help address climate change and the biodiversity crisis.

About International Day of Forests

- The **United Nations General Assembly** proclaimed March 21 as the International Day of Forests (IDF) in 2012.
- **Objective:** The Day **celebrates and raises awareness** of the importance of all types of forests.
 - **Theme:** The theme for each year is chosen by the Collaborative Partnership on Forests.
- Themes of the International Day of Forests are aimed to fit into the UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030), which calls for the protection and revival of ecosystems around the world.
- **Activities:** On this day, countries are encouraged to undertake local, national, and international efforts to organize activities involving forests and trees, such as tree-planting campaigns.

- **Collaboration:** The Day is celebrated by the United Nations Forum on Forests and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (**FAO**), **in collaboration with governments**, the Collaborative Partnership on Forests, and other relevant organizations in the field.

Forest cover in India

As per the biennial State of Forest Report, 2019

- India's forest cover has increased by 3,976 sq km or 0.56% since 2017
- As **compared to the assessment of 2017**, there are an increase of 5,188 sq. km in the total forest and tree cover of the country.
- **The top three states** showing an increase in forest cover are Karnataka (1,025 sq. km) followed by Andhra Pradesh (990 sq km) and Kerala (823 sq km).
- **Area-wise** Madhya Pradesh has the largest forest cover in the country followed by Arunachal Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, and Maharashtra.
- In terms of **forest cover as a percentage of total geographical area**, the top five States are Mizoram (85.41%), Arunachal Pradesh (79.63%), Meghalaya (76.33%), Manipur (75.46%), and Nagaland (75.31%).

TIGER RELOCATION PROJECT

◎ **CONTEXT:** A tigress which was translocated to Satkosia Tiger Reserve in Odisha from Kanha Tiger Reserve (KTR) in Madhya Pradesh has been returned back to MP as translocation project fails.

- ◎ **ABOUT:**
- It was the **first inter-state tiger relocation project** held 3 years back.
 - The tiger relocation project was initiated in **2018** wherein two big cats, a male (Mahavir) from Kanha Tiger Reserve and a female (Sundari) from Bandhavgarh **from Madhya Pradesh were relocated to Satkosia Tiger Reserve in Odisha**.
 - The main aim was to **shore up the tiger population** in the state.
 - The translocation project was as per the **NTCA guidelines** and in collaboration with the **Wildlife Institute of India** and the Government of India.

The relocation was meant to serve two purposes:

- Reducing tiger population in areas with excess tigers to majorly reduce territorial disputes.
- To reintroduce tigers in areas where the population has considerably reduced due to various reasons.

Kanha Tiger Reserve

- It is one of the tiger reserves of India and the largest national park of the state of **Madhya Pradesh**.
- It is the **largest national park in central India**.
- The park hosts Bengal tiger, Indian leopard, sloth bear, barasingha and dhole.
- It is also the first tiger reserve in India to **officially introduce a mascot, Bhoorsingh the Barasingha**. An exciting conservation effort in this national park is the reintroduction of barasingha.

- Members of the **Baiga tribe**, a semi-nomadic tribe of central India have been working towards Tiger conservation within the Park.

Satkosia Tiger Reserve and why was it chosen?

- Satkosia Tiger Reserve is a tiger reserve located in the Angul district of **Odisha**.
- It was designated in 2007, and comprises the **Satkosia Gorge Wildlife Sanctuary** and the adjacent **Baisipalli Wildlife Sanctuary**.
- It is located where the **Mahanadi River** passes through a 22 km long gorge in the **Eastern Ghats Mountains**.
- The tiger reserve is located in the Eastern Highlands **moist deciduous forests ecoregion**.
- Mammals found include the leopard, indian wild dog or the (dhole), wild boars, striped hyena, sloth bear, leopard cat and the jungle cat.
- Satkosia falls under reserves where **"there is a potential for increasing tiger populations"**.
- The purpose of the relocation was to repopulate tigers in the reserve areas.

Why did the project fail?

- **Lack of confidence and trust** building between the forest department and the villagers.
- Their proximity to human habitations which are in abundance even close to the core area in Satkosia could have led to the **human-animal conflict**.
- Capacity for tiger **monitoring was poor**.
- The **local communities** were **not taken into confidence** nor conveyed the benefits from tourism that tigers could bring them.

National Tiger Conservation Authority

- It was established in 2005 following a recommendation of the **Tiger Task Force**, constituted by the Prime Minister of India for reorganised management of Project Tiger and the many Tiger Reserves in India.
- **The Wildlife Protection Act of 1972** was amended in 2006 to provide for constituting the National Tiger Conservation Authority responsible for implementation of the Project Tiger plan to protect endangered tigers.
- It is set up under the **Chairmanship of the Minister for Environment and Forests**.
- The Authority will have **eight experts** or professionals having qualifications and experience in wildlife conservation and welfare of people including tribals.

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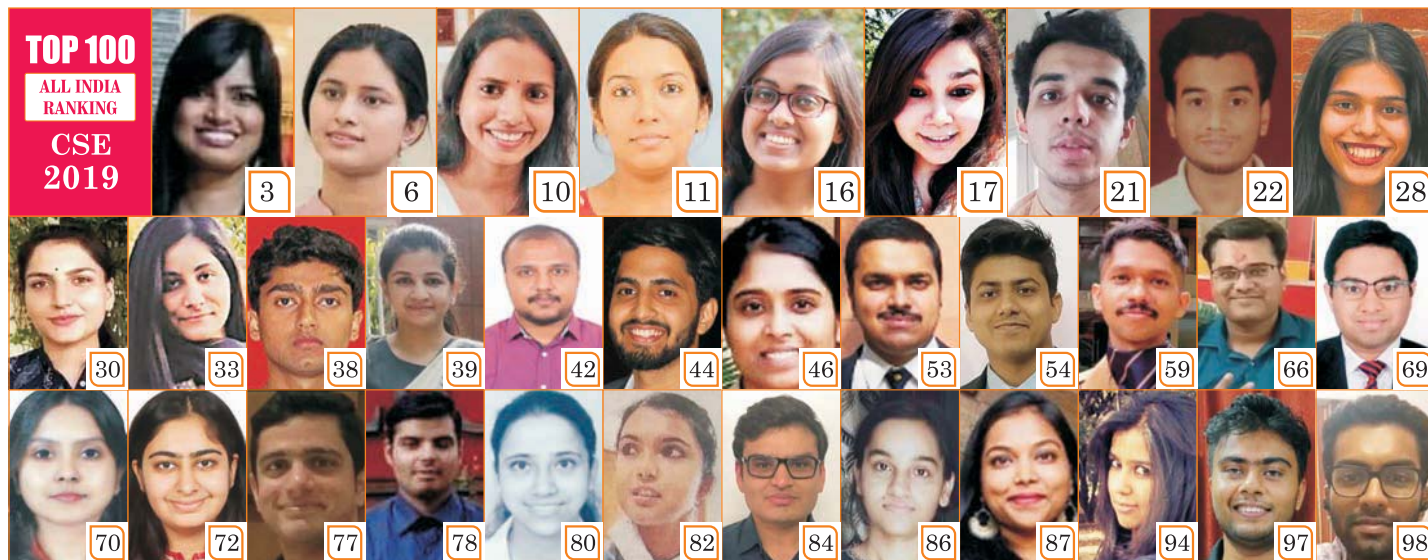
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