

CURRENT AFFAIRS

WEEKLY

WEEK-4
OCTOBER
2020

MAINS

- Bangladesh's economic rise & its implications on India
- Is transparent taxation the panacea for tax terrorism?
- Potholes on the Digital Payment Superhighway

ECONOMY

- Ethos of Justice and Its Adversaries

ETHICS

- India-US Defence Deals

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

PRELIMS

- Zoological Survey of India lists 62 Species of Skinks

BIODIVERSITY

- Global Hunger Index 2020
- IFSCA releases Framework for Regulatory Sandbox
- India's first Seaplane Service to begin 31 October

ECONOMY

- Aldabra's Coral Reefs recovered faster from bleaching, Finds New Research
- Conservation of the World's Seagrasses

ENVIRONMENT

- Hyderabad Rainiest Place in India

GEOGRAPHY

- China Passes Export Law to Protect National Security, Technology
- Israel and Bahrain establish Formal Diplomatic Relations
- Pakistan, China re-elected to UNHRC

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

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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- 4 (OCTOBER, 2020)

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SECTION: A

(MAINS)

CURRENT AFFAIRS

BANGLADESH'S ECONOMIC RISE & ITS IMPLICATIONS ON INDIA

CONTEXT

(C-DAC), Mohali at Guru AngadDev Veterinary University (GADVASU), Ludhiana.

◎ CONTEXT

The International Monetary Fund's latest World Economic Outlook has triggered much outrage in India.

- The provocation was the IMF's prediction that Bangladesh's per capita GDP will overtake that of India this year.
- The projected difference is rather small — \$1,888 to \$1,877 — and unlikely to last beyond this year.
- But it offered enough ammunition for a political attack on the government's economic record.

In this context, let's analyse the strategic consequences of Bangladesh's economic rise.

◎ BACKGROUND

To understand the emergence of Bangladesh as an economic power, one needs to look at the past.

- The decades long oppression, suppression, injustice and severe discrimination against East Pakistan by West Pakistan made the people of the East Pakistan poor and illiterate.
- For instance, in a typical year of between 1960 and 1970, per capita annual income was Bangladeshi Taka 450 (US\$ 5.30, based on 2020 value), nearly half of the population had a deficiency in calories intake, and the literacy rate was 17 percent only.
- Between 1949-50 and 1969-70, the per capita income of Bangladesh could increase at an annual rate of hardly 0.7 per cent.
- In fact, during the fifties, the per capita income of Bangladesh declined at an annual rate of 0.3 per cent. Per capita consumption of milk, fats, oil, fish and other protein items were extremely low in Bangladesh.
- In March 1972, **P. C. Verma** wrote in the **Economic and Political Weekly** that **'During the last 24 years, while Bangladesh was a part of Pakistan, its economy stagnated. The economic policy pursued by the central government of Pakistan kept it economically backward'**.
- Development expenditure in Bangladesh was extremely low.
- It is also argued that the policies taken by the central government of Pakistan in the context of

foreign aid, trade, interregional trade had severe adverse effects on Bangladesh.

◎ ANALYSIS

What made Bangladesh's economy 'grow'?

- **Women empowerment:** Bangladesh has made significant strides towards educating girls and giving women a greater voice, both in the household and the public sphere.
 - ▶ These efforts have translated into improvements in children's health and education, such that Bangladeshis' average life expectancy is now 72 years, compared to 68 for Indians and 66 for Pakistanis.
- **Support to grass-roots initiatives:** The Bangladesh government has supported grass-roots initiatives in economic inclusion.
- **Digitisation:** Among Bangladeshi adults with bank accounts, 34.1% made digital transactions in 2017, compared to an average rate of 27.8% for South Asia. Moreover, only 10.4% of Bangladeshi bank accounts are "dormant", compared to 48% of Indian bank accounts.
- **Successful manufacturing industry:** Another partial explanation for Bangladesh's progress is the success of its garment manufacturing industry. That is itself driven by a number of factors.
 - ▶ One notable point is that the main garment firms in Bangladesh are large—especially compared to those in India, owing largely to different labour laws.
- Other reasons include-
 - ▶ inward remittances
 - ▶ sustained growth in agriculture
 - ▶ growth in microfinance
 - ▶ public investment in big infrastructure projects

Thus, having been born without the law, Bangladesh offered a better environment for manufacturing firms to achieve economies of scale and create a large number of jobs. And though Bangladesh still needs much stronger regulation to protect workers from occupational hazards, the absence of a law that explicitly curtails labour-market flexibility has been a boon for job creation and manufacturing success.

Has this ever happened earlier?

- In 1991, when India was undergoing a severe crisis and grew by just above 1%, Bangladesh's per capita GDP surged ahead of India's.
- Since then, India again took the lead.

Is India expected to regain the lead again?

- The IMF's projections show that India is likely to grow faster next year and in all likelihood again surge ahead.
- But, given Bangladesh's lower population growth and faster economic growth, India and Bangladesh are likely to be neck and neck for the foreseeable future in terms of per capita income.

What are the regional implications of Bangladesh's economic success?

- **Altering the world's mental maps:** Rapid and sustained economic growth in Bangladesh has begun to alter the world's mental maps of the subcontinent. Over the last five decades and more, South Asia, for most purposes, has meant India and Pakistan.
 - ▶ The other countries were generally described as the "smaller" states of the region. Bangladesh was never really small; its population today stands at about 160 million. It is demographically the eighth-largest nation in the world.
 - ▶ The economic rise of Bangladesh is changing some of that. Bangladesh provides a positive narrative about the subcontinent's prospects.
- **Changing economic weights:** This year, Bangladesh's GDP is expected to reach about \$320 billion. Its growing economic muscle will help Dhaka steadily accumulate geopolitical salience in the years ahead.
 - ▶ A decade ago, Pakistan's economy was \$60 billion larger than Bangladesh. Today, Bangladesh's weight is bigger than Pakistan by the same margin.
- **Economic integration:** Third, Bangladesh's economic growth can accelerate regional integration in the eastern subcontinent.

Collective economic advance

- The region's prospects for a collective economic advance are rather dim due to

- ▶ Pakistan's opposition to economic cooperation with India
- ▶ Pakistan's support for cross-border terror, the main regional forum for the subcontinent, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (Saarc), is in a coma.

- Instead of merely praying for the revival of Saarc, Delhi could usefully focus on promoting regionalism among Bangladesh, Bhutan, India and Nepal (BBIN).
- The **BBIN sub-regional forum**, activated in the middle of last decade — has not advanced fast enough.
- It is time for Delhi and Dhaka to take a fresh look at the forum and find ways to widen the scope and pace of BBIN activity.
- Meanwhile, there is growing interest in Bhutan and Nepal for economic integration with Bangladesh.

- **New geo-politics of the Indo-Pacific:** The economic success of Bangladesh is drawing attention from a range of countries in East Asia, including China, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. The US, which traditionally focused on India and Pakistan, has woken up to the possibilities in Bangladesh. The great power wooing of Dhaka is bound to intensify in the new geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific.
- **A boost to India's plans:** The economic rise of Bangladesh could boost India's national plans to accelerate the development of its eastern and northeastern states.
 - ▶ Bangladesh's economy is now one-and-a-half times as large as that of West Bengal; better integration between the two would provide a huge boost for eastern India. So would connectivity between India's landlocked Northeast and Bangladesh.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The economic boom has given the country the confidence to surge ahead. Bangladesh, seen as a bridge between the South and south-east Asia, may not be making a big splash with its development story, but is certainly proving to be the proverbial "tortoise" that may eventually overtake many "hares" with its perseverance.

IS TRANSPARENT TAXATION THE PANACEA FOR TAX TERRORISM?

CONTEXT

In a recent report “The Human Cost of Disasters 2000-2019”, the United Nations pointed out that climate change is largely to blame for a near doubling of natural disasters in the past 20 years.

◎ CONTEXT

The Income-tax Act, 1961 (the Act) was amended in 2019 to introduce the concept of faceless assessment and in 2020 to provide for statutory recognition of a tax-payers’ charter and an enabling provision for faceless appeals. The “Transparent Taxation-Honouring the Honest” platform was launched on 13 August 2020, covering the aforesaid aspects.

What is Transparent Taxation?

- A transparent taxation regime is a pre-requisite for growth in every country and it assumes much more importance in a country like India where the phrase “tax terrorism” got coined for the country’s tax administration.
- While these initiatives do make an attempt to do a makeover of the tax administration by putting in place a structure for transparent taxation, questions, however, can be asked about its intention of “Honouring the Honest”.
- When you want to honour someone, you make him feel special and the transparent taxation scheme does not do that.

Tax structure in India

- In India, the Tax structure is a three tier federal structure.
- The central government, state governments, and local municipal bodies make up this structure.
- Article 256 of the constitution states that **“No tax shall be levied or collected except by the authority of law”**.
- The Tax structure in India consists of 3 federal parts:
 - ▶ Central Government
 - ▶ State Governments
 - ▶ Local Municipal bodies
- Taxes are determined by the Central and State Governments along with local authorities like municipal corporations. The government cannot impose any tax unless it is passed as a law.

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Types of taxes

Taxes are classified under two categories namely direct and indirect taxes:

- **Direct taxes:** Direct taxes are levied on individuals and corporate entities and cannot be transferred to others.
 - ▶ **Example:** These include income tax, wealth tax, and gift tax.
- **Indirect taxes:** Indirect taxes are not directly paid by the assessee to the government authorities. These are levied on goods and services and collected by intermediaries (those who sell goods or offer services).
 - ▶ **Example:** Value Added Tax (VAT), Customs duty, Octroi, Excise duty, Service Tax

Goods and Service Tax (GST):

- As a significant step towards the reform of indirect taxation in India, the Central Government has introduced the Goods and Service Tax (GST).
- GST is a comprehensive **indirect tax** on manufacture, sale and consumption of goods and services throughout India and will subsume many indirect taxes levied by the Central and State Governments

Faceless Assessment

- Faceless assessment is faceless tax scrutiny which eliminates the interface between the taxpayer and the income tax department.
- Under this system, the selection of a taxpayer will be done only through systems using data analytics and AI.
- Moreover, **territorial jurisdiction will be abolished**, and the draft assessment order, the review and the finalisation will take place in different cities. Cases will be also be automatically allotted on a random basis.

- Further, there will be no need for the taxpayer to visit the income tax office or the officer.
- Additionally, the appellate decision will be team-based and reviewed and any assessment, other than the exceptions to the faceless scheme, will be invalid.

Faceless Appeal

- Under this system, appeals will be randomly allocated to any officer in the country and the identity of officers handling the appeal will remain unknown.
- There will also be no need to visit the officer or the office. The appellate decision will further be team-based and reviewed.
- Exceptions to this will be cases of serious frauds, major tax evasions, Black Money Act, Benami property etc.

What will this new scheme do?

- The scheme removes the **physical interaction** between the actual Assessing Officer (AO) and the taxpayer.
- For the taxpayer, it is only the **National e-Assessment Centre (NeAC)** which will be the contact point and all correspondence will take place between the taxpayer and the NeAC.
- The NeAC will, in-turn, allocate the case based on an automated allocation system to an Assessment Unit (AU) under the charge of a Regional e-Assessment Centre.
- The AU can then seek assistance of other specialized units i.e. the Verification Unit (VU) and Technical Unit (TU), for the purposes of assessment.
- The scheme also has an in-built mechanism of a review of the order by a separate Review Unit (RU).

Global Tax Landscape

- The global tax landscape has been witnessing exponential changes, with tax administrations around the world continuously upgrading their old tax administration system.
- Most **European countries** are implementing the standardisation of exchange of accounting data such as **Standard Audit File for Tax (SAF-T)** [Luxembourg, France, Portugal, Netherlands, Norway etc]
- **Latin American countries** are adopting transactional level reporting through e-invoicing (Mexico, Chile, Brazil, Peru etc) and Public System of Digital Bookkeeping (SPED) [Brazil]
- **Australia** is applying computer assisted verification/e-audit, and also many countries and tax organisations are contemplating the use of

internet of things (IoT), blockchain technology for automation of data exchange and compliance.

- The reforms will place India amongst the frontrunners of the facilitative tax administration system.

Merits of the Scheme

- **Friendly system:** With the implementation of the scheme, the waiting time at the tax office is going to be a thing of the past.
- **Safe game for the payers:** The taxpayer is not exposed to the whims and fancies of the Assessing Officer (AO).
- **Increase in quality assessments:** This scheme is going to increase the quality of the assessments manifold. With the support of the technical unit, the verification unit and the review by the review unit, the AO can actually do a quality assessment.
- **Proper consideration:** For the taxpayer, it gives the confidence that the response being submitted by the taxpayer is considered by an independent specialized unit set up for that purpose.
- **Trust building:** The mechanism of a review by the RU gives comfort that the order being passed has been reviewed thoroughly and would not have any frivolous additions.

Downside of the Scheme

- **Increase in appellate proceedings:** It could get more intrusive and investigative as there would be specialized units looking at the whole assessment process which, in turn, could lead to an increase in appellate proceedings.
- **Decision on mere written submission isn't correct:** Assessment proceedings are **quasi-judicial proceedings** and to let the authorities decide whether the case merits an opportunity for oral submissions is not correct. Mere written submissions cannot substitute a face-to-face/oral hearing.
- **Rise in disputes:** The whole aspect of service of notice on the registered account of the taxpayer on the portal, through emails and messages, is bound to raise disputes.

CONCLUSION

The overall aim and effort of the scheme is to make India's tax system smoother. The tax administration will work to solve the problem instead of engaging every taxpayer – attempting to simplify the process and ensuring it doesn't matter who is paying tax and who is the tax officer. The reforms are aimed at bringing about more trust, fairness, transparency, efficiency, accountability, ease and convenience and therefore, more compliance.

POTHoles ON THE DIGITAL PAYMENT SUPERHIGHWAY

CONTEXT

In Budget 2020-21, the government prescribed zero Merchant Discount Rate (MDR), the rate merchants pay to scheme providers, for RuPay and UPI, both NPCI products, to popularise digital payments benefiting both customers and merchants.

◎ BACKGROUND

- A major thrust toward large value payments was effected through the Real Time Gross Settlement System, or RTGS, launched by the RBI in March 2004.
- The large value payments on stock trading, government bond trading and other customer payments were covered under the RTGS, providing finality of settlement, thereby reducing huge risks such as the Harshad Mehta scam; besides this, it substantially reduced the time taken for settlements.
- The RBI introduced National Electronic Funds Transfer, or NEFT, and bulk debits and credits to support retail payments around the same time.
- Now, NEFT is available round the clock and RTGS will follow from December 2020, only a few countries have achieved this.
- The finance minister said the government has already amended two laws, Income Tax Act and the Payments and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, to give effect to these provisions.

◎ ANALYSIS

NPCI

- National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), an umbrella organisation for operating retail payments and settlement systems in India, is an initiative of Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and Indian Banks' Association (IBA) under the provisions of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, for creating a robust Payment & Settlement Infrastructure in India.
- NPCI has been incorporated as a "Not for Profit" Company under the provisions of Section 25 of Companies Act 1956 (now Section 8 of Companies Act 2013), with an intention to provide infrastructure to the entire Banking system in India for physical as well as electronic payment and settlement systems.
- Some of the payment services of NPCI are as follows- **NFS, IMPS, AePS, CTS, RuPay, UPI, Bharat BillPay, NETC, BHIM, BharatQR, BHIM Aadhaar Pay**

Merchant Discount Rate (MDR)

- MDR is usually 1% to 3% of the overall transaction and is the rate charged to a merchant for payment processing services on debit and credit card transactions.
- MDR is required and necessary because it funds the acquiring system and helps players deploy service QR codes and service the merchants.
- It is the cost which is paid to banks and payment service providers (PSPs), during a transaction.
- It is important for laying down UPI acceptance infrastructure and critical for servicing and spread of the UPI in the country.
- MDR is the only source of revenue for the (UPI) ecosystem.

What NPCI had to do?

- NPCI had to revise the interchange fee and PSP fee to zero for debit card payments through RuPay and for UPI payments in the country, leaving UPI payment apps and players with no revenue model around the infrastructure.

Expected Benefits

- The business establishments with annual turnover more than Rs 50 crore shall offer such low-cost digital modes of payment to their customers and no charges or Merchant Discount Rate shall be imposed on customers as well as merchants.
- Indigenously developed digital payment medium like RuPay and BHIM UPI will now have edge over the payment gateway promoted by foreign companies.

Drawbacks of the decision

- This has also caused several large players to move away from expanding the acceptance of UPI in the country, questioning its monetisation model.
- The waiver of the **merchant discount rate (MDR)** on **digital payments** will slow down its deployment in the country.
- Major banks and payment companies were expected to transfer a percentage of their proceeds from fees accrued from processing digital

payments to grow the payments infrastructure in Tier 3 and 4 parts of the country. But now they will be discouraged to invest in this field.

- Around half a billion dollars is needed in MDR for the UPI ecosystem to sustain servicing cost and compliances around Know-Your-Customer (KYC) norm, which payment companies are expected to comply with. Now the burden will fall on the payment service providers.
- The government left out other providers of digital payment products from this MDR prescription, which is unjustified and had adverse effects.
- Taking advantage of this dualism, many issuing banks switched to mainly Visa and Master cards for monetary gains.
- It resulted in indirect market segmentation and cartel formation.

Government and RBI Role

- Zero MDR can work out very well for the growth of the fintech industry but had additional expectations from the government.
- The government has to offer around INR 2000 Cr for the upcoming fiscal year, to compensate

banks for the revenue loss incurred due to MDR charges.

- The Reserve Bank of India earlier this year had set up a Payment Infrastructure Development Fund of Rs 500 crore to support the sector, reeling under the loss of revenue, in deploying devices in rural geographies.
- RBI and banks will absorb these costs from the savings that will accrue to them on account of handling less cash as people move to these digital modes of payment.

◎ CONCLUSION

The Digital mode of payment system has been crucial for the real time transfer and instant services. It had played an important role in inclusive growth and development in the form of direct benefit transfers for government schemes. The need is to promote the home driven technology and to make rules and policies more competitive for the domestic products. In this wake the decision to make Zero MDR has to be taken by considering all the players and with active government and RBI participation.

ETHOS OF JUSTICE AND ITS ADVERSARIES

CONTEXT

Rape atrocities tragically suggest that justice is in dire need of egalitarian commitment by every citizen.

◎ BACKGROUND

- Handing over the Hathras rape atrocity case to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) to proceed with the investigation indirectly questions the Uttar Pradesh (UP) police's rationality to pursue the case without prejudice.
- Further, it has been suggested to bring even the CBI inquiry under the supervision of the Supreme Court.
- The role of police is seen as **complementing the partisan position** taken by the local Savarnas whose response seems to favour the accused.
- The **Lucknow bench of the Allahabad High Court** has been more categorical in expressing its reservation about the role of the UP police in (mis) handling the Hathras rape case of a Dalit woman.
- According to media reports, the parents of the deceased have accused the police of being soft on the Savarna castes.
- As was evident from the television reporting, some of the Savarna members went ahead with conducting a mass meeting in support of the accused in the case, thus violating the law and order situation in the vicinity.
- In this regard, what is more astonishing is the discriminatory response that the members of the Savarna community seem to have offered not in favour of the victim but in defence of the accused.
- The response is more shocking on two counts: ethical and legal.
 - Ethical conviction, if not compulsion, is necessary particularly for a sentient human being to at least refrain from siding with the accused if not expressing grief over the loss of a human being.
- It is not the benumbing brutal rape that has emotionalising impact on the Savarna consciousness, but what rules such consciousness is the caste affinity that suddenly jumps out of the Savarna skin.

◎ ANALYSIS

Caste consciousness weighing more than moral and legal consciousness

- In the present issue, the caste consciousness trumps both moral and legal consciousness.

- Caste consciousness weighs heavily on the moral judgment of some the members of the Savarna community, thus making the latter both indifferent and insensitive to the tragedy inflicted on the victim.
- An ethical initiative taken by the sentient being helps in motivating such a being to actively side with the victim.
- If this initiative, for subjective reasons overburdened by caste consciousness, finds it difficult to come forth, then one expects the members from Savarna community to respect the judicial system that as a common good is also available to the Savarnas.
- So, it is in the interest of the Savarnas to be law-abiding citizens to at least side with legal procedures.
- This does not seem to have happened in the Hathras rape case.

What is the ethos of justice?

- Ethos is societal; societal resources that have to be collectively nurtured by the enlightened citizen of India.
- This can be done with the presence of **moral conditions**; conditions that are constitutive of such ethos.
- These conditions include
 - the conversion of a caste person into a citizen
 - the citizen's capacity to develop willingness to recognise the burden of the judicial judgment that is likely to go against the accused and consequently against the collective interest of the community (in the present case the Savarna community).
- Such ethos demands that the Savarnas as the law-abiding citizen should reconcile with the consequences of the criminal of such a rape allegedly committed by the culprit, in this case the four members who incidentally belong to a Savarna caste.
- The ethos of justice further expects from the citizens that they be reasonable to share with others, including the Dalits, the commitment to due process of law.
- This commitment motivates the citizens to respect the universal principle of justice.
- This **universally neutral principle** safeguards everyone's, including the Savarnas', **right to feel safe and secure**.

A caste continuum

- India is primarily a caste society. Neither democracy nor a liberal Constitution has changed that.
- It's a caste society that determines its citizen's access to resources tangible and intangible (such as knowledge), and ownership of the means of production (such as land), almost exclusively on the basis of the family you are born into.

The two faces of Justice

- The rape atrocities against women in general and women from the most oppressed castes in particular continue to bear two faces of injustice: active and passive.
- The rape atrocity to which a teenager from the **most oppressed caste** in Hathras, Uttar Pradesh, was subjected once again reveals the malignant face of injustice.

• Active injustice

- Active injustice occurs in a conundrum where the tormentor is accused of being directly responsible in forcibly trapping the victim in the heinous act of rape but receives support from various sources.
- A society that refuses to express its allegiance to the value of justice does not find the efforts that some of its members make to defend the accused morally objectionable.
- Injustice gets intensified when the accused of rape atrocities continue to get either direct or indirect support from the social groups to which they belong.
- Injustice begins to acquire an intensified mode when investigating agencies of the state are accused of not taking their public responsibility seriously.
- The responsibility to stand with the victim can be seen as standing with justice.

• Passive injustice

- Passive injustice, on the other hand, occurs when certain onlookers, by and large, choose to remain indifferent to rape or caste atrocities.
- Thus, one may not directly support the accused at any level or in any form, and yet, such passive

spectators would contribute to injustice to the extent that their indifference to such an act would embolden the accused who then continue to reproduce tragic, traumatising experience for the oppressed.

What needs to be done?

- **Recognise the (Dalit's) right to live their life with social safety and human dignity:** The society needs to consider the fact that the Dalits in India in general and that of Hathras in particular are asking the Savarnas to reciprocally recognise the former's right to live their life with social safety and human dignity.
- **Equality of rights:** Dalits are not asking for special rights for themselves because their rights are as human as Nirbhaya's. Thus, their appeal for equality of rights is morally minimum.
- **Moral commitment to the judicial system:** This appeal for its effective realisation depends on the Savarnas' moral commitment to the judicial system.
- **Considering justice as 'a common good':** Justice is a common good that needs to be protected by both the Savarnas and the Dalits collectively. Justice as a common good should therefore motivate the Savarnas to respect such a commitment.
 - And as a part of fulfilling this commitment, they are expected to refrain from diluting the concrete evidence or putting it into a zone of ambiguity by adding surplus details to the genuine narratives of the rape atrocity.
 - This concern has validity not just in the immediate tragic experience of Hathras, but has been generally true in other cases as well.

◎ CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The state, in order for it to be on the side of justice, has to act on the basis of the premise of justice rather than prejudice. The fate of justice, in the particular case of Hathras, seems to hinge on the elimination of the possibility of injustice that is likely to overshadow the investigation. When rape consciousness gets reinforced by caste consciousness of the socially dominant, such overlap should add strength to the investigation heading towards justice for the victim and her family.

INDIA-US DEFENCE DEALS

CONTEXT

At 2+2 meeting, the two countries will look to push intelligence sharing pact BECA. With key deals LEMOA and COMCASA already signed, what does it mean for defence, particularly in light of LAC standoff?

◎ BACKGROUND

- Items on the agenda will be the Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement (BECA) — a pact with deep military implications.
- Till now, agreements known as LEMOA and COMCASA are signed.
- Now, with BECA, these have been dubbed the troika of foundational pacts — essentially laying the foundation for deeper military cooperation.

◎ ANALYSIS

What is BECA?

- The Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement largely pertain to geospatial intelligence, and sharing information on maps and satellite images for defence.
- Anyone who sails a ship, flies an aircraft, fights wars, locates targets, responds to natural disasters, or even navigates with a cell phone relies on geospatial intelligence.
- Signing BECA will allow India to use the US's advanced geospatial intelligence and enhance the accuracy of automated systems and weapons like missiles and armed drones.
- It will give access to topographical and aeronautical data and products that will aid navigation and targeting.
- BECA will provide Indian military systems with a high-quality GPS to navigate and missiles with real-time intelligence to precisely target the adversary.
- This could be key for Air Force-to-Air Force cooperation.

The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)

- The Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement was signed between India and the US in 2016.
- It allows the military of each country to replenish from the other's bases: access supplies, spare parts and services from the other country's land facilities, air bases, and ports, which can then be reimbursed.

- This is extremely useful for Navy-to-Navy cooperation, since the US and India are cooperating closely in the Indo-Pacific.

The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement (COMCASA)

- The Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement was signed in 2018.
- It allows the US to provide India with its encrypted communications equipment and systems so that Indian and US military commanders, aircraft and ships can communicate through secure networks in peace and war.
- COMCASA paved the way for transfer of communication security equipment from the US to India to facilitate "interoperability" between their forces — and potentially with other militaries that use US-origin systems for secure data links.

- LEMOA means one partner trusts the other enough to expose its valuable assets.
- COMCASA means one is confident that it can rely on encrypted systems to connect the two militaries.
- BECA means it can share highly classified information in real time without fear of being compromised.

What is its effect on the recent stand-off on the India-China Border?

- Amid the longest stand-off on the India-China border in three decades, India and the US have intensified under-the-radar intelligence and military cooperation at an unprecedented level, especially since June.
- The cooperation includes sharing of high-end satellite images, telephone intercepts, and data sharing of Chinese troops and weapons deployment along the 3,488 km Line of Actual Control (LAC).
- The Indian defence establishment also has enhanced capability with some American equipment. The armed forces have used at least five American platforms at the LAC which are:
 - C-17 Globemaster III for military transport
 - Boeing's Chinook CH-47 as heavy-lift helicopters

- ▶ Boeing's Apache as tank-killers
- ▶ P-8I Poseidon for overland reconnaissance
- ▶ Lockheed Martin's C-130J for airlifting troops.

Challenges in India-US relations

- Trade has been a major bone of contention between India and the US. India has been referred by the US, as "tariff king" that imposes "tremendously high" import duties.
- Removal from the GSP list amidst rising trade tensions prompted India to finally impose retaliatory tariffs on several American imports. This made the US approach the WTO against India.
- US have softened its position on Pakistan in the last seven months, due to the role Pakistan can play in the Afghan deal (between the US and the Taliban).
- India-US strong strategic partnership is also based on an idea of "shared values" of democracy, rule of law, religious freedom and protection of minorities. However, the revocation of Article 370, the new citizenship law and the NRC is testing this "shared values" principle.

Convergence in Indo-US relations

- A foundational military agreement that allows for the sharing of encrypted communications and equipment (COMCASA- Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement).
- A change in U.S. export control laws that places India in a privileged category of NATO and non-NATO U.S. allies.
- The signing of an Industrial Security Annex that will allow for greater collaboration among the two countries' private defence industries.
- A new '2+2' foreign and defence ministers dialogue.

- The bilateral Strategic Energy Partnership was launched in April 2018 under which India has started importing crude and LNG from the US. Now, the US is India's sixth-largest source of crude oil imports and hydrocarbons.
- Inauguration of the first India-US tri-service military exercise and expansion of existing military exercises.
- Inclusion of India and South Asia in the US Maritime Security Initiative.
- The US under its Pivot to Asia policy views India as an ideal balancer to check the aggressive rise of China. Therefore, the US has formulated the concept of Indo-Pacific to counter China in the South China Sea and the Indian ocean.
- The US has designated India as an integral part of the Indo-Pacific narrative by the conception of Quad.

◉ WAY FORWARD

- Chinese aggressive behaviour being the clear and present danger, New Delhi's strategic embrace of Washington is the obvious outcome. Every administration in the last 20 years has left the Indo-US relationship in a better shape than how they inherited it.
- In order to counter China in the maritime domain, India needs to fully engage with the US and other partners in the Indo-Pacific region, in order to preserve the freedom of navigation and the rules-based order.
- India-US relation remains critical for the shaping of world order in the 21st century. In order to realise the full potential of relations, the two governments must now strive to complete the unfinished agreements and set the course for a Comprehensive Strategic Global Partnership.

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ZOOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA LISTS 62 SPECIES OF SKINKS

◎ CONTEXT

A recent publication by the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI) reveals that India is home to 62 species of skinks and says about 57% of all the skinks found in India (33 species) are endemic.

◎ ABOUT

• What are Skinks?

- With long bodies, relatively small or no legs, no pronounced neck and glossy scales, skinks are common reptiles around homes, garages, and open spaces such as parks and school playgrounds, and around lakes.
- Although they are common reptiles and have a prominent role in maintaining ecosystems, not much is known about their breeding habits, and ecology because identification of the species can be confusing.
- Skinks are highly alert, agile and fast moving and actively forage for a variety of insects and small invertebrates.
- Certain skinks have green blood. Unique color of the blood is result of accumulation of the green, bile pigment called biliverdin.
- The reduced limbs of certain skink species or the complete lack of them make their slithering movements resemble those of snakes, leading people to have incorrect notion that they are venomous.
 - This results in several of these harmless creatures being killed.

Key-highlights of the Publication

- The publication is a result of four years of work and study of over 4,000 specimens in all 16 regional centres of ZSI and also at the Bombay Natural History Society, Indian Institute of Science, Wildlife Institute of India, and the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology & Natural History.
- It also makes an attempt to 'redescribe' all the 62 species with their taxonomic identification keys, distributional maps, habits, habitat and breeding biology.
- The book also gives a phylogenetic and bio-geographical analysis of distribution of these species in all the 11 bio-geographic zones of India and a detailed account on the historical studies on this group of lizards from the British era to the present.

Distribution of Skinks

- With 1,602 species of skinks across the world, making it the largest family of lizards, their occurrence in India is less than 4 % of the global diversity.
- Western Ghats: The Western Ghats are home to 24 species of which 18 are endemic to the region.
- Deccan Peninsular region: The Deccan Peninsular region is home to 19 species of which 13 are endemic.
- Northeast: There are records of 14 skink species from the northeast of which two species are endemic.

Endemic Species

- Of the 16 genera of skinks found in India, four genera are endemic.
 - Sepsophis (with one species) and Barkudia (with two species) are limbless skinks found in the hills and coastal plains of the eastern coast.

- Barkudia insularis believed to be found only in the Barkud Island in Chilka lake in Odisha.
- Barkudia melanosticta is endemic to Visakhapatnam.
- Sepsophis punctatus is endemic to the northern part of Eastern Ghats.
- Five species of Kaestlea (blue-tailed ground skinks) are endemic to the Western Ghats and four species of Ristella (Cat skinks) also endemic to the southern part of Western Ghats.

GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX 2020

◎ CONTEXT:

India ranked 94 among 107 nations in the Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2020 and continues to be in the 'serious' hunger category. Last year, India's rank was 102 out of 117 countries.

- 14 per cent of India's population was undernourished
- 37.4 per cent stunting rate among children under five and a wasting rate of 17.3 per cent
- Under-five mortality rate stood at 3.7 per cent.

Affordability of nutritious diets in rural India

- A paper published by the **International Food Policy Research Institute** has noted that three out of four Indians living in villages cannot afford diet which can be considered nutritious.
- The paper finds that "surprisingly few" discuss the **role of diets, particularly the affordability of nutritious diets in India.**
- 45-64% of the rural poor cannot afford a nutritious diet that meets India's national food-based dietary guidelines
- Among stiff problems that lend themselves to the appalling diet scenario in rural India are low wages and the significant structural problems facing India's agricultural sector, the paper posits.
- Currently, India uses **Consumer Price Indices (CPIs)** to measure food costs.
 - ▶ However, the paper states, "In poor countries such as India, CPIs are heavily weighted towards nutrient-sparse starchy staples, meaning that trends in the food CPI can be misleading from a nutritional standpoint."
 - ▶ In comparison, according to researchers, calculating the minimum cost of a recommended diet can give better insights into nutrition and poverty in rural regions.
- The paper arrives at the conclusion that **'malnutrition is endemic in India,'** based on information on rural food price and wages gleaned from the 2011 National Sample Survey.

Key-takeaways

- 17 nations, including China, Belarus, Ukraine, Turkey, Cuba and Kuwait, bagged the top rank with GHI scores of less than five.
- India features behind Nepal (73), Pakistan (88), Bangladesh (75), Indonesia (70) among others.
- Out of the total 107 countries, only 13 countries fare worse than India including countries like Rwanda (97), Nigeria (98), Afghanistan (99), Liberia (102), Mozambique (103), Chad (107) among others.

Global Hunger Index (GHI)

- The Global Hunger Index (GHI) is a tool for comprehensively measuring and tracking hunger at global, regional, and national levels.
- GHI scores are based on the values of four component indicators:
 - **undernourishment** (share of the population with insufficient caloric intake)
 - **child wasting** (share of children under age five who have low weight for their height, reflecting acute undernutrition)
 - **child stunting** (share of children under age five who have low height for their age, reflecting chronic undernutrition)
 - **child mortality** (mortality rate of children under age five, partly reflecting the fatal mix of inadequate nutrition and unhealthy environments).
- Based on the values of the four indicators, the GHI determines hunger on a 100-point scale where 0 is the best possible score (no hunger) and 100 is the worst.
- Each country's GHI score is classified by severity, from low to extremely alarming.

IFSCA RELEASES FRAMEWORK FOR REGULATORY SANDBOX

◎ CONTEXT

The International Financial Services Centres Authority (IFSCA) introduced a framework for regulatory sandbox enabling entities regulated by the watchdog to test their new solutions in a live environment and on a limited set of real customers with necessary safeguards.

◎ ABOUT:

What is in the framework?

- Under this sandbox framework, entities operating in the capital market, banking, insurance and financial services space shall be granted certain facilities and flexibilities to experiment with innovative financial technology (fintech) solutions in a live environment with a limited set of real customers for a limited timeframe.
- **Eligibility:** All entities (regulated as well as unregulated) operating in the capital market, banking, insurance and pension sectors as well as individuals and startups from India and FATF compliant jurisdictions, shall be eligible for participation in the Regulatory Sandbox.
- These features shall be fortified with necessary safeguards for investor protection and risk mitigation.
- The regulatory sandbox will operate within the **IFSC located at GIFT City**.

About IFSCA

- The IFSCA was established on April 27 this year with head office in Gandhinagar.
 - The first IFSC in the country has been set up at the **Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT) in Gandhinagar**.
- In December 2019, Parliament passed a Bill to set up a unified authority for regulating all financial activities at the IFSCs in the country.
- IFSCA, with an objective to develop a **world-class fintech hub** at the IFSC located at GIFT-City in Gandhinagar (Gujarat), endeavours to encourage the promotion of fintech initiatives across the spectrum of banking, insurance, securities and fund management.

What is Gujarat International Finance Tec-City (GIFT City)?

- GIFT City is being developed as a global financial and IT Services hub, a first of its kind in India, designed to be at par or above with globally benchmarked financial centres.
- It is a central business hub with state-of-the-art infrastructure and first of its kind operational smart city in India.
- GIFT City is home to domestic and international, financial services and IT/ ITES sectors.
- GIFT's Master Plan facilitates Multi Services Special Economic Zone (SEZ) with International Financial Services Centre (IFSC) status, Domestic Finance Centre and the associated Social infrastructure.
- The purpose of setting up the GIFT City is to develop a world-class smart city that becomes a global financial hub with the development of an IFSC.

Innovation sandbox

- As an additional step towards creating an innovation-centric ecosystem in the IFSC, IFSCA has proposed the creation of an "Innovation Sandbox".
- It will be a testing environment where FinTech firms can test their solutions in isolation from the live market, based on market related data made available by the Market Infrastructure Institutions (MIIs) operating in the IFSC.
- The Innovation Sandbox will be managed and facilitated by the MIIs operating within the IFSC.

INDIA'S FIRST SEAPLANE SERVICE TO BEGIN 31 OCT

◎ CONTEXT:

India's first seaplane service in Gujarat is set to begin from 31 October, the anniversary of Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, with the aim of providing air connectivity from the Sabarmati Riverfront in Ahmedabad to the Statue of Unity in Kevadia. The service will be operated by Spicejet Airlines.

◎ ABOUT

The Project

- The first seaplane project of the country is part of a directive of the Union Ministry of Civil Aviation.
 - As per the directive, the Airports Authority of India (AAI) requested state governments of Gujarat, Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana and the administration of Andaman & Nicobar to propose potential locations for setting up water aerodromes to boost the tourism sector.
- SpiceJet, which has reportedly signed a contract with a French company that is manufacturing the seaplanes, will be using a 19-seater plane which will be able to carry 14 passengers.
- For India's first project being developed in Gujarat, the Kevadia terminal is likely to be built over 0.51 acres in the **Sardar Sarovar Narmada Nigam Ltd** premise in the **Panchmuli lake area**.
- The Kevadia terminal is 200 kilometres away from Ahmedabad.
- The terminal is proposed to have "modern amenities", and a daily footfall of 200 passengers is expected by the government.

Seaplanes operational in other countries

- Seaplanes by multiple airline carriers are operational in countries like the Philippines, Canada, Australia, the United States, Finland, the United Kingdom, Sri Lanka, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, United Arab Emirates, Italy, Maldives and Hongkong.
- In India, Jal Hans, a commercial seaplane service based in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was launched as a pilot project on 30 December 2010 by the then Indian Civil Aviation Minister, Praful Patel with a capacity of 10 passengers.

What is a seaplane?

- A seaplane is the amalgamation of the properties of speed and utility properties of an aeroplane and a boat, respectively.
- With fixed wings, a seaplane is equipped to take off and land on water.
- The two types of seaplane are
 - flying boats
 - floatplanes
- The bottom of a flying boat's fuselage is its main landing gear. This is usually supplemented with smaller floats near the wingtips, called wing or tip floats.
- The hull of a flying boat holds the crew, passengers, and cargo; it has many features in common with the hull of a ship or a boat.

What impact will it have on the environment?

- As seaplane operations are integrated with existing natural water bodies, ecological challenges come to the forefront.
- The **water aerodrome** is not a **listed project/activity** in the **Schedule to the Environmental Impact Assessment Notification, 2006** and its amendments.
- However, the Expert Appraisal Committee was of the opinion that the activities proposed under the water aerodrome project may have a similar type of impact as that of an airport.
- During seaplane operations, there will be turbulence created in the water while takeoff and landing of seaplanes.
- This will lead to more operation process i.e. mixing of oxygen in the water. This will have a positive impact on the aquatic ecosystem near seaplane operations increasing oxygen content and decreasing carbon content in this system.

ALDABRA'S CORAL REEFS RECOVERED FASTER FROM BLEACHING, FINDS NEW RESEARCH

◎ CONTEXT:

Coral reefs in the lagoon of the Seychelles' Aldabra atoll have recovered faster after the 2015-2016 bleaching event due to tolerance to heat stress, as per new research published in *Nature*.

◎ ABOUT:

- Aldabra, one of the world's largest atolls, is a **UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) World Heritage Site** in Seychelles.
- It is located in the **Indian Ocean**.
- It comprises four main islands of coral limestone separated by narrow sea passages and encloses a large shallow lagoon.

- It is home to a population of endemic giant Aldabra tortoises, which fluctuate to around 100,000 more than the 95,000 population of Seychelles.

Coral Reef and Climate Change

- Climate change is the greatest threat to coral reef ecosystems.
- Ocean warming and associated coral bleaching are one of the foremost causes of coral loss across the world.
 - Record-breaking high ocean temperatures, which occurred between 2014 and 2017, resulted in a prolonged and widespread coral bleaching, with the hottest temperature recorded (36.3 degrees Celsius) in early April 2016.
 - Half of tropical coral reefs have been lost during the past three decades and even if temperatures were kept no higher than 1.5C, between 70% and 90% of reefs would be lost by the end of the century.
- The average global temperature is already 1C hotter than in preindustrial times.
- In addition, climate change is intensifying periodic weather phenomena, such as El Niño warming events, increasing the temperatures reefs experience and reducing the recovery interval between bleaching events.
- Climate models predict that global heating will continue over the coming century because our carbon emissions are expected to continue rising.

What is Bleaching?

- Bleaching is a process where corals lose their vivid colour and turn white.
- Coral exists in a mutually beneficial relationship with zooxanthellae algae, which live inside the coral's polyps.
- The algae use the coral's waste products and provide the nutrients to feed them both through photosynthesis.
- Higher sea temperatures force the coral to expel the colourful algae and, if this process is prolonged, the coral starves.
- During a coral bleaching event, reefs lose so much zooxanthellae that they become white and experience massive die-offs.



- Ocean acidification exacerbates the problem, eroding the reef, forcing corals to expend more energy building their calcium carbonate skeletons and slowing down their growth rate.
- If bleaching continues for an extended period of time, corals eventually die.
- Coral bleaching and mortality exacerbated by climate change are one of the biggest threats to oceanic biodiversity.

Significance of the findings

- The results showed that **rapid reef recovery** of coral reefs is possible.
- It highlighted that reducing local stressors to coral reefs can enhance their resilience against climate change.
- The study underlines the urgency to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as time periods between bleaching events are projected to become too short for recovery, even for highly protected and more resilient areas like Aldabra.
- With severe bleaching events expected to occur annually on 90 per cent of the world's coral reefs by 2055, such research and long-term commitment to monitoring these valuable ecosystems is critical.

CONSERVATION OF THE WORLD'S SEAGRASSES

◎ CONTEXT:

Given the significant threat to Seagrasses, there is an urgent need to take earnest measures to conserve seagrasses and their habitats.

◎ ABOUT

• What are Seagrasses?

- Seagrasses are **flowering plants** that grow submerged in shallow marine waters like bays and lagoons.
- **Evolution:** Terrestrial plants evolved about 850 million years ago from a group of green algae. Seagrasses evolved from terrestrial plants that recolonised the ocean 70-100 million years ago. There are 60 species belonging to four families in the order *Alismatales*.
- Seagrasses occur all along the coastal areas of India. They are abundant in the Palk Strait and Gulf of Mannar in Tamil Nadu.
- Though seagrasses inhabit all types of substratas (layers) from mud to rock, the lush green seagrass beds are found extensively in muddy and sandy substratas.
- There are 21 islands in the Gulf of Mannar. Seagrasses abound in the waters around the islands of Kurusadi, Pumarichan, Pullivasal and Thalaiyari. All six genera and 11 species of seagrasses are found here.
- Some of the important seagrasses are
 - Sea Cow Grass (*Cymodocea serrulata*)
 - Thready Seagrass (*Cymodocea rotundata*)
 - Needle Seagrass (*Syringodium isoetifolium*)
 - Flat-tipped Seagrass (*Halodule uninervis*)
 - Spoon Seagrass (*Halophila ovalis*)
 - Ribbon Grass (*Enhalus acoroides*)
- These were once abundant in the Gulf of Mannar region but are now **threatened**.

Do they require Photosynthesis?

- Like terrestrial plants, seagrass also photosynthesise and manufacture their own food and release oxygen.
- With tiny flowers and strap-like or oval leaves, they require sunlight for photosynthesis.

Reproduction

- Seagrasses reproduce through both sexual and asexual methods.
- **Submarine pollination**
 - The pollen from the flower of the male plant is transferred to the ovary of the female flower through the sexual reproduction method.
 - This is known as submarine pollination. Most species undergo this process and complete their life cycle underwater.
- **Asexual reproduction**
 - Seagrasses can also reproduce asexually by branching off at their rhizomes (modified subterranean plant stem that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes).
 - Because of this character, they can recover after being cut by grazers like dugongs or disturbed by storms.

Threat to Seagrass

- Seagrass beds are facing decline all over the world at the rate of 2-5 per cent annually.
- Some 30,000 square kilometres of seagrass has been lost during recent decades at a global level.
- Seagrasses face natural disturbances like grazing, storms, ice-scouring and desiccation.
- Human disturbances like eutrophication, mechanical destruction of habitat, overfishing and release of nutrients play havoc on seagrasses.
- Siltation, trawling, coastal engineering construction, pollution, etc, are considered to be significant causes for the deterioration of seagrasses.

Why are they considered as 'ecosystem engineers'?

Seagrasses are known for providing many ecosystem services. They are considered to be 'Ecosystem Engineers'.

- **Maintain water quality:** Seagrasses help maintain water quality. They trap fine sediments and suspended particles in the water column and increase water clarity.
 - In the absence of seagrass communities, the sediments are stirred by wind and waves, decreasing water quality.
 - This reduced water clarity affects marine animal behaviour besides decreasing the recreational quality of coastal zones.
- **Filter nutrients:** They filter nutrients released from land-based industries before they reach sensitive habitats like coral reefs.
- **Stabilises the sea bottom:** Ocean bottoms without seagrasses are prone to intense wave action from currents and storms. The extensive vertical and horizontal root systems of seagrasses stabilise the sea bottom similar to land grasses that prevent soil erosion.
- **Provide food and habitat:** Seagrasses provide food as well as habitat for fishes, octopuses, shrimp, blue crabs, oysters, sponges, sea urchins, clams, etc. They are called 'the lungs of the sea' as they release oxygen into the water through photosynthesis.
- **Protect small beings:** Seagrass habitats protect juvenile and small adult fish from large predators and strong currents. Marine animals that live in soft sea bottom sediments also take shelter in seagrass meadows. Seagrass leaves support seaweeds by providing anchoring facilities. Seahorses and lizardfish are found living in seagrass meadows almost throughout the year.
- **Releases nutrients after decomposition:** When it is further decomposed, it releases nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorous. The dissolved nutrients in the water are absorbed by seagrasses and phytoplankton.

- **Absorbs CO₂:** Even though seagrasses occupy only 0.1 per cent of the ocean floor; they sequester up to 11 per cent of the organic carbon buried in the ocean. Seagrasses absorb 83 million tonnes of carbon from the atmosphere annually.

HYDERABAD RAINIEST PLACE IN INDIA

◎ CONTEXT:

The city witnessed its third wettest day of October in the last 10 years and was listed as the rainiest place in the country by Skymet, an independent weather forecasting agency, after it recorded 72.5mm of rainfall.

◎ ABOUT:

• Geographic details of the city

- Hyderabad, the capital of the southern state Andhra Pradesh is located on the banks of **Musi River** in **Deccan plateau**.
- The city boasts of a unique landscape of rock formations that are almost 2,500 years old.
- The city has **red sandy type of soil** and falls in the **seismic zone-I** which makes the land least exposed to earthquakes.
- The highest point in Hyderabad is **Banjara Hills** and the contour level gradually falls from west to east which leads to the creation of a trough near the Musi River that runs through the city.
 - ▶ This feature has facilitated sufficient water supply to the city.
- Hyderabad is endowed with a system of catchments.
 - ▶ Its western edges are in the **Godavari river basin** (from Kukatpalli, Ramachandrapuram to Gachibowli)
 - ▶ Its eastern part is in the **Krishnaa river basin**
- The Deccan region as a whole has a chaotic drainage pattern – water does not flow in a single direction, as the slope moves in multiple directions.

Reasons behind the heavy rainfall

- There are occasions when winds are carrying huge amounts of moisture from the Arabian Sea and dumping all across Central India, including Maharashtra, Telangana, parts of Odisha and up to Assam, triggering such events.
- Temperatures are rising everywhere and in warm conditions, the air can hold more moisture for a longer period of time.
- Then there is the issue of land use patterns, which is dominated by concrete these days. When air holds a lot of moisture, then the rains are heavy.

IMD Data

- As per India Meteorological Department (IMD) data, Hyderabad witnessed 98.3mm rainfall on October 10, 2013 and 82.6mm on October 3, 2017.
- The IMD data indicates that the city has been pounded with 356mm of rains in 18 days, which is four times higher than the normal rains.
- The city received 18 days' worth rainfall in just one day.

What's exaggerating the situation?

- **Overflow of lakes:** Much of the damage was due to the overflowing of lakes — in particular, the Hussain Sagar Lake and the breaching of storm water drains.

- **Construction:** Construction over lake beds and encroachments of drainage channels have been identified as problems that have exacerbated flooding and inundation in the city in the past (the deluge in August 2000, for example).
- **Lost wetlands:** Wetlands and watersheds play a vital role in absorbing excess rainfall, but regrettably, rapid urbanisation has resulted in the loss of a large portion of the wetlands.
 - An analysis by the Centre for Science and Environment in 2016 revealed that 3,245 hectares of water bodies were lost in Hyderabad between 1989 and 2001.

Mokshagundam Viseswarayya recommendations

- The last time the city saw serious flooding was in August 2000, with rainfall of 24 cm in a single day, claiming 15 lives.
- In 1908, the River Musi was in deluge, subjecting leading to as many as 15,000 deaths.
- This calamity prompted the government to rope in veteran irrigation expert **Mokshagundam Viseswarayya** for a study on flood mitigation.
- **Osman Sagar** and **Himayat Sagar** were built to act as flood control centres as a result of the expert's recommendations.
- But one of his vital recommendations – a **modern drainage system** – still remains a dream.

What needs to be done?

- Hyderabad urgently needs to **expand and remodel its drainage system**.
- In the long term, the effects of flooding due to deluges can only be mitigated if urban planners take into account the hydro-geology of cities and ensure that construction, development and land occupation do not take place in a way that reduces the area of wetlands.

CHINA PASSES EXPORT LAW TO PROTECT NATIONAL SECURITY, TECHNOLOGY

◎ **CONTEXT:**

China has passed a new law restricting sensitive exports to protect national security, a move that adds to policy tools it could wield against the US as tensions -- especially in technology -- continue to rise.

What does the Law state?

- The law comes into effect on December 1.
- It allows Beijing to "take reciprocal measures" against countries that abuse export controls and pose a threat to national security.
- Technical data related to items covered will also be subject to export controls.
- The new law, "formulated to safeguard national security and interests", adds to China's regulatory toolkit which also involves a restriction catalogue of tech exports and an unreliable entity list.
- Where any country or region abuses export control measures to endanger the national security and interests of the People's Republic of China, (it) may take reciprocal measures.
- **Applicability:** Export controls under the law will apply to civilian, military and nuclear products, as well as goods, technologies and services related to national security.

- Chinese authorities will formulate and adjust an export control list of items to be published in a “timely manner”.
- Foreign individuals and groups can also be found liable for violating export control rules.

The ‘US’ factor

- The economic relationship between Beijing and Washington has been roiled by Trump’s unprecedented campaign of tariffs, threats of bans and sanctions on Chinese tech firms.
- With Trump facing a tough re-election campaign ahead of polls next month, US officials have described measures against China as national security safeguards -- prompting a backlash from Beijing.
- In September, China launched a long-expected “unreliable entities list”, widely seen as a weapon to retaliate against the US which has used its own “entity list” to shut Huawei out of the US market.
- Beijing’s latest measure gives it more room to hit back in US President Donald Trump’s war on Chinese tech firms, with the White House moving against popular platforms and major companies -- including apps TikTok and WeChat, tech giant Huawei and chipmaker Semiconductor Manufacturing International Corp.

Implications for India

- The extraterritorial application of the NSL can cast criminal liability on a wide range of individuals and entities.
- Anyone, regardless of nationality or residency, can be prosecuted under the NSL for acts committed inside Hong Kong.
- Such extraterritorial reach of the law can be viewed as unreasonable interference in the domestic affairs of other states.
- India has an extradition treaty with Hong Kong in the form of the **1997 Surrender of Fugitives Offenders treaty**.
 - Hong Kong is home to a large Indian community, as well as many Indian professionals who work in the service industry, banking and finance, and shipping.
 - The Indian community in Hong Kong is estimated to be nearly 38,000 (including Indian nationals and those categorised as ‘People of Indian Origin’) and approximately 32,000 hold Indian passports.
 - Hong Kong has also emerged as a popular destination for Indian students pursuing higher studies.
 - ▶ In 2018, the number of Indian students in Hong Kong crossed 1,100. Indian citizens also take part in student and faculty exchange programmes and joint research activities carried out by Indian and Hong Kong educational institutions.
- In this context, India can consider if it wants to alter its visa, migration and residence policy for Indian nationals traveling to Hong Kong for work or other reasons.
- India could also re-examine its extradition arrangements, in line with the reasoning adopted by other countries.
 - Australia, Canada, France, Germany, New Zealand and the United States—have announced a suspension or termination of their extradition treaties with Hong Kong.
 - This will enable countries to refuse requests to extradite foreign nationals to China, if they have flouted the NSL through their actions, activities and statements.
- If India does suspend its treaty, it would amount to a conclusive positioning on where New Delhi stands on the NSL.

ISRAEL AND BAHRAIN ESTABLISH FORMAL DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

◎ **CONTEXT:** Israel and Bahrain have formally established diplomatic relations. The deal - brokered by the US - was signed in the Bahrain capital, Manama.

Recognition of Israel

- For decades, most Arab states have boycotted Israel, insisting they would only establish ties after the Palestinian dispute was settled.
- Bahrain is now the fourth Arab country in the Middle East - after the UAE, Egypt and Jordan - to recognise Israel since its founding in 1948.
 - The Arab World consists of 22 countries in the Middle East and North Africa: **Algeria, Bahrain, the Comoros Islands, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.**
 - ▶ Iran and Turkey are not Arab countries and their primary languages are Farsi and Turkish respectively.

The mediator

- It is important to note that the United States acted as a kind of "mediator" between the countries, openly supporting Israel.
- The current US president, Donald Trump, stressed that he restored "trust" with his regional partners, managing to eliminate the caliphate of the Islamic State.

PAKISTAN, CHINA RE-ELECTED TO UNHRC

◎ **CONTEXT:** Pakistan and Nepal have been re-elected to the UN Human Rights Council, while China won a seat by the smallest margin showing a drastic drop in standing.

◎ **ABOUT:**

- **What is UNHRC?**
 - UNHRC is an inter-governmental body within the **United Nations system** responsible for-
 - ▶ strengthening the promotion and protection of human rights around the globe
 - ▶ addressing situations of human rights violations and make recommendations on them.
 - The UNHRC has "the ability to discuss all thematic human rights issues and situations that require its attention throughout the year".
 - The Human Rights Council replaced the former **United Nations Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR)**.
 - The Human Rights Council holds no fewer than three regular sessions a year, for a total of at least 10 weeks.
 - ▶ The sessions are held at the UN Office in **Geneva, Switzerland**.

Items for Box

- **Highlights of the 75th General Assembly Session**
 - ▶ Saudi Arabia was defeated in the elections for the four seats up for vote to represent Asian and Pacific countries getting only 90 votes, seven shy of the 97 required for election.

- ▶ Russia, which was defeated in 2016 by two votes having received only 112, made a comeback getting 158 votes.
- ▶ Ukraine, its regional adversary, ran unopposed for the other seat.
- ▶ Pakistan got 169 votes in the election held by secret paper ballot with COVID-19 precautions, and Nepal 150.
 - The two South Asian countries are members of the council with their current terms ending on December 31 and will now serve for three more years.
- ▶ India and Bangladesh are also a member of the council last elected in 2018 to the term starting in 2019 and running out at the end of next year.
 - India had previously been elected to the Geneva-based Human Rights Council for the 2011-2014 and 2014-2017 terms.
- ▶ Uzbekistan was the fourth country elected from the Asia Pacific region with 169 votes.
- ▶ France, Britain, Cuba and Mexico were among the 15 countries elected to represent other regions at the 47-member council based in Geneva.

Membership

- The Council is made up of 47 UN Member States, which are elected by the UNGA through a direct and secret ballot.
- The General Assembly takes into account the contribution of the candidate states to the promotion and protection of human rights, as well as their voluntary pledges and commitments in this regard.
- Members of the Council serve for a period of three years, and are not eligible for immediate re-election after serving two consecutive terms.
- The HRC has a Bureau of one President and four Vice-Presidents, representing the five regional groups.
 - They serve for a year, in accordance with the Council's annual cycle.

Distribution of Seats

◦ African States	: 13 seats
◦ Asia-Pacific States	: 13 seats
◦ Latin American and Caribbean States	: 8 seats
◦ Western European and other States	: 7 seats
◦ Eastern European States	: 6 seats

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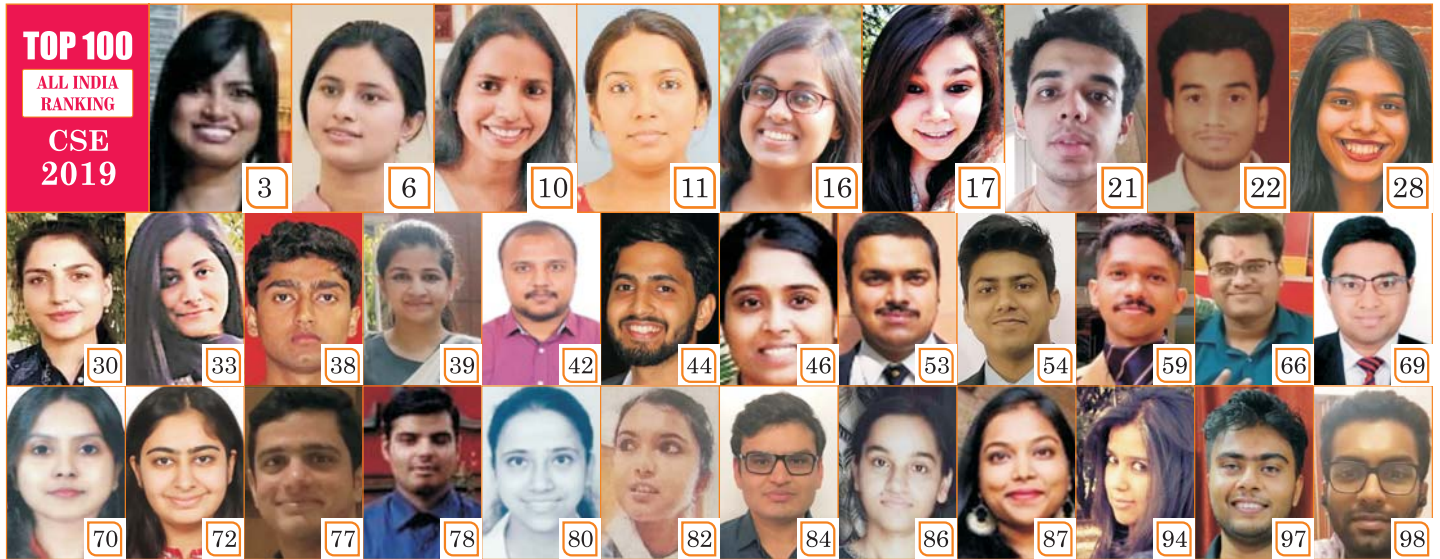
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