ForumIAS

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Features :

- Arranged as per syllabus Topics
- Most complete coverage of major News Papers editorials

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GS Paper 1

Subject: Indian Society

Topic: Population and associated issues

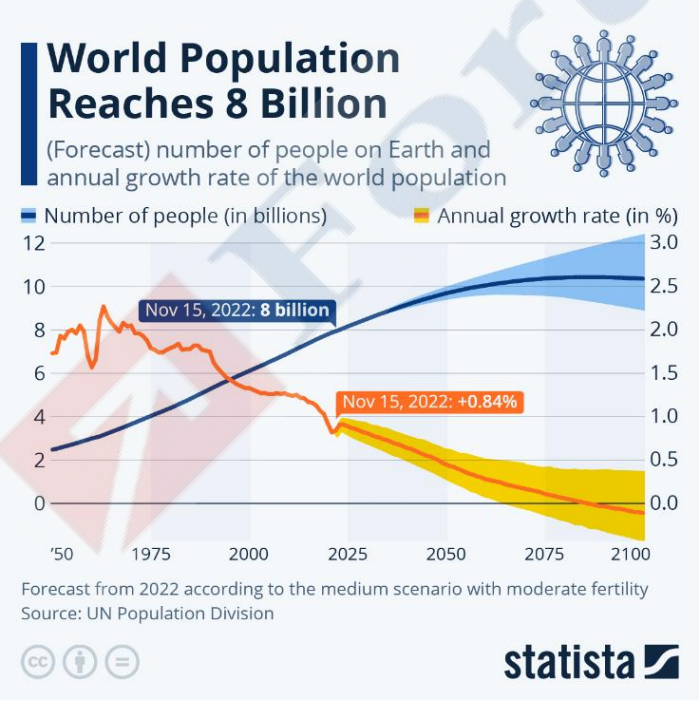
On Increasing global elderly population – The world is getting older. Can India cope?

News: This article discusses the trends in human population growth, especially ageing, as reported by the UNFPA. It also highlights the challenges associated with a rapid pace of ageing and low fertility levels.

What are the findings of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)?

Findings of the UNFPA include:

1. **Ageing of Population:** Globally, **~14%** of the total population comprises those aged 60 years and above in 2022. By 2050, this share is expected to **rise to 22%.**
2. **Early Onset of Low Fertility Rates in developing countries:** A significant drop in fertility levels is being seen very early in their economic development journey.
3. **Shrinking Population in Asia and Europe:** By 2100, Asia and Europe's population will shrink by the highest percentage.
   For instance, China's population will decline from 1.4 billion to 732 million in 2100.



1Global Population Trends. Source: Statista

What is the ageing scenario in India?

According to UNFPA's **India Aging Report, 2023:**

1. **Rapid Ageing of Population:** In 2022, the 10.5% of India'sjudi population was aged 60 years and above. By **2050**, this share will double to **20.8%.**
2. **Cohort of the aged surpassing the cohort of children:** The number of elderly people will be larger than the number of children (those below 15 years) by 2046.
3. The report also points out that this unprecedented rise in the ageing population will have significant **implications for health, economy and society** in India.

What is the "greying" phenomenon?

Greying is a cumulative result of **increasing longevity**, **declining fertility** and the **progression of larger groups of population to older ages**.

In the 1970s, there were 3 times as many 15 to 24-year-olds then older people. By **2050**, these age groups will have equal populations.

What is the status of India's Fertility Rates?

According to the **National Family Health Survey 2022**, except for Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (amongst the larger states), fertility rates elsewhere have **dropped below the replacement level of 2.1**.

In **urban India**, the **fertility rate is at 1.6**. This is below replacement level. When low fertility is combined with **increased longevity,** it will increase the elderly population at a rapid pace.

For a detailed breakdown of **India's Fertility Rates**, read here.

What are the implications of a rapid ageing of population?

1. **Unsustainable economic burden:** Developed countries with better economies could sustain their elderly people when their populations began to age rapidly. This is not the case with developing countries like India. It will also increase the healthcare burden of taking care of elderly.
2. **Slowing of economic growth:** Ageing populations mean **fewer workers**, **fewer taxpayers** and hence, a **reduction in a country's ability to generate wealth**. **For instance,** China is expected to replace USA by 2035 to become the largest GDP. However, the rapid decline in China's population and liberal immigration policy of USA will help USA in reclaiming the top position soon.
3. **Impact on geopolitical power:** Lancet research points out that by the end of this century, the world will be **multipolar**, with **India, Nigeria, China and USA** as the dominant powers, **due to a larger working age population.**

What can countries do to prevent rapid ageing?

1. Policy decisions such as **immigration** and **strong reproductive and sexual rights for women** will be key to reversing the ageing trend.
2. Following policy decisions can persuade working women to have more children:
    2.1. Good healthcare
    2.2. Work-life balance
    2.3. Childcare and maternity leave
    2.4. Educating male partners about sharing burden in household tasks.

Terminology used:

Total Fertility Rate: It refers to the total number of children born or likely to be born to a woman in her lifetime. TFR of about 2.1 is called **Replacement-level fertility.** TFR less than 2.1 indicates that a generation is not producing enough children to replace itself, eventually leading to an outright reduction in population.

Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies

Unsustainable Urban infrastructure development – Planning for megapolises

News: The article discusses the extensive construction and infrastructure development in Indian cities like Delhi and Mumbai, which includes new transport links and real estate. However, this rapid growth brings challenges like traffic and pollution.

What is the National Urban Policy Framework?

The National Urban Policy Framework (NUPF) is India's plan for future city development.

It **follows two main aspects**. **First,** it has **ten basic principles,** called sutras**. Second,** these principles are used in ten areas of city life and management. Each area is examined for current issues, goals are set, and actions are recommended.

Here are the **10 guiding principles** simplified:

1. Cities are made up of people's skills and talents.
2. Cities need their own unique identity.
3. City plans should change and grow, not be fixed.
4. Cities should be built to use space well.
5. There should be public areas for people to meet.
6. Cities need many types of transport systems.
7. Cities should not harm the environment.
8. Cities need to make and manage their own money.
9. One clear leader should guide a city.
10. Cities should help the area around them grow too.

How is Mumbai's infrastructure evolving?

1. **Metro Expansion:** New metro lines are being constructed to improve connectivity in the suburbs, which is a significant leap in public transit for the city.
2. **Road Infrastructure:** A coastal road project is in progress, expected to manage four times the traffic compared to the current sea link.
3. **Trans-Harbour Link:** A 22-kilometer trans-harbor link nearing completion promises to enhance the connection between Mumbai and the mainland, potentially transforming traffic flow and commerce.
4. **New Airport:** Construction of a new airport is underway, anticipating the future growth of Mumbai's population and its increasing air travel demands.
5. **Real Estate Boom:** Real estate development is booming, with construction areas expanding, indicating a major urban transformation.

What are the potential challenges posed by infrastructure development in the city?

1. **Traffic Congestion:** Despite new transport links, the infrastructure struggles to keep pace with the growing needs. As observed in Delhi and Bengaluru, better roads often lead to more traffic, not less.
2. **Pollution:** The construction activities, especially in Mumbai, are contributing to high levels of air pollution. This could worsen as development continues.
3. **Resource Strain:** The increase in construction approvals could lead to a surge in population growth. This would put additional pressure on the water supply and waste management systems.
4. **Land Scarcity:** Although improved connections can mitigate land scarcity by integrating neighboring regions, they can also lead to uncontrolled urban sprawl, as seen with the expansion of Delhi through Gurgaon and Noida.
5. **Socio-economic Challenges:** The redevelopment of areas like Dharavi slum leads to displacement and socio-economic issues that need to be carefully managed.
6. **Urban Sprawl:** As transport links improve, cities are likely to spread out further, resembling vast urban sprawl.

GS Paper 2

Subject: Indian Polity

Topic: Parliament and State legislatures

On the Speaker – Give up impropriety, demonstrate impartiality

News: This article discusses the various issues in the functioning of the Speaker lately, which have signaled a decline in the independence of the office. It also highlights reforms to ensure its impartial functioning.

Article 93 of the Constitution provides for the election of both the Speaker and the Deputy Speaker to the Lok Sabha. (**Article 178** for **Speaker in state legislative assemblies**).

What are the functions of the Speaker in India?

1. **Interpretation:** He/She is the **final interpreter** of the provisions of the **Constitution of India**, the **Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business of Lok Sabha** within the House.
2. **Constitution of Committees:** The **Committees of the House are constituted by the speaker** and function under the speaker's overall direction.
3. **Custodian of the rights and privileges** of the House, its committees and its members.
4. **Money Bill:** He/She **decides whether a bill is a Money Bill or not** and his/her decision on this question is final.
5. **Disqualifying Members:** It is the speaker who **decides the questions of disqualification of a member** of the Lok Sabha, arising on the ground of defection under the provisions of the **Tenth Schedule**.

What are the issues with the functioning of the Speaker?

1. **Regarding suspension of members for misconduct:** It is noticed that the Speakers misuse these provisions usually against the Opposition members.
   For instance, no swift action was taken against a member of the ruling party for passing communal slurs in Parliament recently.
2. **Regarding referring of bills to committees:** Significant bills that require detailed scrutiny are not referred to committees.
   As against more than **60%** of Bills referred to committees in the Lok Sabha during 2004-14, less than **25%** have been referred during 2014-2023.
3. **Regarding certifying bills as Money Bills:** There have also been challenges in the Court in recent years against certification of certain Bills as a Money Bill by the Speaker of the Lok Sabha. For instance, the Aadhar Bill.
4. **Regarding disqualification:** Past instances have shown the Speakers favouring the ruling dispensation. This can derail the stability of elected governments.

What should be the way forward?

The Supreme Court in **Keisham Meghachandra Singh vs The Honble Speaker Manipur** (2020), recommended that Parliament amend the Constitution to vest the powers of the Speaker regarding disqualification in an independent tribunal to be headed by judges.

In **Britain**, the Speaker, once elected, resigns from his/her political party, thus reflecting impartiality while presiding over the House. Adopting this practice will build confidence in the office of the Speaker.

It is also important that Speakers avoid actions that are inappropriate and **demonstrate 'impartiality'**, in consonance with sound democratic practices.

On 16th Finance Commission - Finance Testing the South's Patience

News: The article talks about India's Finance Commission deciding tax sharing between the Centre and states. It discusses the debate over richer states subsidizing poorer ones, the impact of political freebies on the economy, and whether to create a fiscal council to oversee government spending. The 16th Finance Commission may present challenges to wealthy and southern states that have stabilized their populations.

For more detail on 16th Finance Commission read here

What is the role of the Finance Commission?

1. **Determining Tax Distribution:** The Finance Commission's main role is to decide how to share the central tax revenue between the central government and the states in India. Currently, states get 41% of the taxes collected by the Centre.

2. **Balancing Vertical and Horizontal Sharing:** The Commission must balance vertical sharing (how much money states get from the Centre) and horizontal sharing (how the money is split among states).
3. **Advising on Fiscal Challenges:** Beyond tax distribution, the Finance Commission is expected to provide guidance on broader fiscal issues. This includes looking into the trend of political freebies and considering the need for a fiscal council to oversee the government's budget and spending.

For more detail on the roles of finance commission read here

What federal issues will arise after the 2026 delimitation?

1. **Reduced political influence for southern states:** After the 2026 delimitation, southern states may have fewer seats in Parliament. Their slower population growth compared to northern states could lead to a decrease in their political representation.
2. **Financial implications of delimitation:** With potential reduced influence in Parliament, southern states may find it harder to argue against continued financial support to poorer, faster-growing states. This could exacerbate the north-south economic divide.
3. **Cross-Subsidization Debate:** The ongoing requirement for richer states to subsidize poorer ones may become more contentious. Southern states, which are economically better off, might resist the pressure to support the poorer northern states if their political clout diminishes post-delimitation.

For more detail on delimitation read here

What should be done?

1. **Addressing Tax Sharing Concerns:** The Finance Commission should review the current tax sharing formula, considering states' demands for a greater share due to their front-line role in service delivery, against the Centre's need to fund its own commitments.
2. **Tackling the Freebie Culture:** To prevent fiscal strain from political promises of freebies, the Commission could recommend setting clear guidelines or limits, promoting sustainable financial practices over short-term gains.
3. **Evaluating the Need for a Fiscal Council**: The Commission should reconsider the establishment of a fiscal council as suggested by the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) committee, to ensure responsible fiscal management and to provide informed assessments of the Centre's fiscal performance.
4. **Building Consensus:** Address the emerging economic divide by fostering dialogue between southern states worried about losing parliamentary seats and financial autonomy, and northern states in need of support.

On cash for query case – Ethics, parliamentary conduct and the Indian MP

News: This article discusses the recent allegation of taking money for putting up questions in Parliament by a Lok Sabha MP. It also highlights the issues with the procedure followed in this case.

Recently, a complaint was lodged with the Lok Sabha Speaker alleging that an MP had received money from a businessman for putting questions up in Parliament with a view to promoting the person's business interests.

The Speaker in turn referred the complaint to the **Ethics Committee** for examination. The committee's proceedings have resulted in much public debate.

A detailed article on **Questions in Parliament** can be read here.

What is the Lok Sabha Ethics Committee?

Read in detail about the Lok Sabha Ethics Committee here

What is the procedure followed in the case of an MP taking money for putting up questions in Parliament?

If an MP takes money for putting questions up in Parliament, they will be **guilty of breach of privilege and contempt of the House.**

Such complaints are usually referred to the **Committee of Privileges** for investigation. The committee **submits its findings in a report** along with the **recommendation for action** against the MP.

If a case involving illegal gratification for conducting parliamentary work is proven, the **MP may even be expelled** from the House.

What are the various issues in this case?

1. **Referring to the Ethics Committee instead of the Privileges Committee:** Complaints of MPs accepting money for parliamentary work are usually referred to the privileges committee or special committees appointed by the House for that purpose.
2. **Lack of rules and regulations regarding submission of questions:** The Lok Sabha has not framed any rules to regulate the online submission of questions.
3. **Freedom of speech under Parliamentary Privileges: Article 105** of the Constitution gives the freedom to say "anything" in the House. This right can be extended to using any source for information for putting questions up. Therefore, an investigation into the sources of information of an MP may not have legal sanction.
4. **Issues with the Ethics Committee's functioning:** The term 'unethical conduct' has not been defined anywhere. It is left entirely to the committee to examine a particular act of conduct and decide whether it is unethical or not.

How does a parliamentary probe differ from a judicial probe?

The differences between the two include:

Judicial probe	Parliamentary probe

1) A judicial probe is conducted by judicially trained persons. 2) A judicial body probes a matter as in the statutes. 3) The rules of evidence under the Indian Evidence Act are applicable to a judicial probe.	1) Parliamentary committees consist of Members of Parliament who are not experts. 2) Parliament does the investigative work through its committees which function under the Rules of the House. 3) The Indian Evidence Act is not applicable to a probe by a parliamentary committee. The question of the relevance of the evidence is finally decided by the Speaker.

Topic: Evolution of powers and finances up to local levels and challenges

Issues faced by urban local bodies

News: This article discusses the various issues plaguing the efficient working of urban local self-government bodies.

A detailed article on **Local Governments in India** can be read here.

What is the constitutional basis of urban local bodies?

The Indian Constitution provides a clear mandate for **Democratic Decentralisation** through the 73rd and 74th Amendments which seek to create an institutional framework for grassroot democracy through self-governing local bodies in both urban and rural areas of the country.

The **74th Amendment Act** pertaining to urban local government was passed in 1992. It came into force on 1st June 1993.

This added **Part IX -A** and consists of provisions from **Articles 243-P to 243-ZG**.

It also added **the 12th Schedule** to the Constitution. It contains 18 functional items of Municipalities and deals with Article 243 W.

What are the various issues with local governments?

Issues regarding Funds:
i. Most local governments are financially dependent on their state governments.
ii. Except 5 States, all others have to get approval from the State before borrowing money.

Issues regarding Functionaries:
i. They also have limited control over who to hire and how to distribute work. Due to this, they are not able to build a strong organization and ensure accountability for the workers.
ii. Mayors and councils have limited power over staff appointments and promotions. No city has

complete power over its staff. Due to poor control over the appointment of staff, there is a high level of unfilled posts.
iii. Data shows that **35% of posts** in India's municipal corporations are vacant.

Lack of transparency:
i. There is a lack of transparency in publishing cities' civic information which citizens can access easily.
ii. Only 11 of the 35 States/Union Territories have enacted the Public Disclosure Law that mandates publishing of key civic data.

Lack of financial transparency:
i. Data shows that no city publishes a quarterly financial audit statement.
ii. Only 28% of the capital cities disseminate their annual audited financial statements.
iii. None of the major capital cities publish their internal audit information.

Irregular Elections:
i. Elections to the local bodies are often delayed. For a long period of time, there have been no functional local governments in various states.

State Finance Commissions not established:
i. SFCs are not established every 5 years as per Constitutional requirements.
ii. Not all recommendations are accepted by State governments.

Excessive State Control:
i. There is also strict control exercised by the state government over urban bodies.
ii. Instead of providing guidance and support through the control mechanism, the control turns out to be negative, restricting the functioning of these bodies.

Corruption:
i. Corruption, favoritism and nepotism are rampant.

Lack of coordination:
i. Poor coordination among center, state, and various departments at local level leads to poor implementation of urban policies.
ii. Inability to coordinate leads to administrative inefficiency and thus poor urban governance.

Topic: Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies

On the challenges faced by the Information Commission - Rescue RTI

News: The Supreme Court criticized governments for not filling vacancies in information commission. This makes the Right to Information Act ineffective. Despite past instructions, many commissions remain understaffed. This threatens the Act's role in promoting transparency and exposing scams.

What directives did the Supreme Court provide in its 2019 judgment to the Centre regarding the appointment of Information Commissioners?

SC has directed the Centre on Appointments of Information Commissioners:

1. **Start Early:** Begin the appointment process 1-2 months before a vacancy arises.
2. **Comparable Terms:** Appoint CIC and Information Commissioners on terms similar to the Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners.
3. **Transparency Measures:** Clearly mention appointment criteria in advertisements and on websites.
4. **Advance Advertisement:** Promote vacancies well before the incumbent's retirement.
5. **Selection Criteria:** Make the selection criteria and the search committee's decisions public on the website.
6. **Diverse Qualifications:** Appointees should be eminent individuals from varied fields like law, journalism, public service, etc.
7. **Bias Observation:** The court noted a trend of appointing only government employees and stressed broader representation.

What are the changes to Central Information Commission (CIC) and State Information Commission (SIC) under the RTI Amendments Act 2019?

Term Changes: Central Government will decide the term for Chief Information Commissioner and Information Commissioner.

The term for State Chief Information Commissioner and State Information Commissioner will also be set by the Central Government.

Salary and Conditions: Central Government will now determine the salary, allowances, and service conditions for the Chief Information Commissioner and Information Commissioner.

Similarly, the pay and conditions for the State Chief Information Commissioner and State Information Commissioner will be set by the Central Government.

Why did the Supreme Court say that the RTI Act has become a dead letter law?

The Supreme Court said the Right to Information Act has become a "dead letter law" because:

1. Governments haven't filled vacancies in information commissions.
2. 7 out of 11 commissioner posts in CIC are vacant.
3. Commissions in Telangana, Tripura, and Jharkhand are defunct.
4. Despite a 2019 judgment ordering timely filling of vacancies, governments haven't complied.
5. The RTI Act's role in promoting transparency and exposing scams might be undermined.
6. The RTI, born from a grassroots movement, risks subversion by the government's inaction.

What is the government's view on the Supreme Court remark?

Official Stance: Despite the vacancies, the government continues to highlight the importance of the RTI Act to democracy.
MoS Statement: Jitendra Singh, the Minister of State for Personnel and Public Grievances, spoke favorably about the RTI Act. He described the law as crucial for ensuring transparency in governance. He emphasized the RTI Act's role in nurturing trust between citizens and the state.

Topic: Salient features of the Representation of People's Act

On electoral bonds – On electoral bonds, Supreme Court must uphold Right to Information

News: This article discusses the issues with the Electoral Bonds scheme in light of the ongoing proceedings in the Supreme Court regarding its validity. It also suggests reforms to tackle the issue of a lack of transparency in political funding.

A detailed article on the **Electoral Bonds Scheme** can be read here.

Recently, a Constitutional Bench of the Supreme Court has taken up petitions challenging the electoral bonds scheme.

The proceedings focused on arguments pertaining to the **voters' right to information** and the **right to confidentiality of donors.**

What is the citizen's 'Right to Know'?

1. The citizens' **right to know** was established by the Supreme Court rulings in the **People's Union for Civil Liberties case, 2003** and in the **Association for Democratic Reforms case, 2002**.
2. The Court ruled that the **right to know** about public officials is derived from the **right to freedom of expression.**
3. The Court mandated the Election Commission to **disclose information related to candidates** running for office to the public.
4. This information included information on their **assets**, **criminal records**, and **educational background**.

What is the stand of the government on the citizen's 'Right to Know'?

The **Attorney General** has told the Supreme Court, in the written submissions, that the "citizens' right to know is **subject to reasonable restrictions**".

The argument put forward by the **Solicitor General** is that **citizens have no right to know** the donors/recipients' identities.

As per the author, this statement doesn't suit the world's largest democracy.

What should be the way forward?

1. **Disclosing the identities of donors and recipients.**
2. **Eliminate private funding and introduce public funding for political parties.** It's a small investment for the preservation of democracy (estimated at around Rs. 10,000 crore every 5 years).
3. **Establish a National Election Fund to which all donors could contribute**. The funds could be allocated to parties based on their electoral performance.

Subject: Social Justice

Topic: Issues relating to Education

On challenges of Higher Education Institutes – The IITs are overcommitted, in crisis

News: The article discusses the challenges faced by the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs), including their expansion in India and abroad, the struggle to maintain high standards, and difficulties in hiring and retaining qualified faculty members.

What is the status of expansion of the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)?

Domestic Expansion: The IITs have expanded to 23 institutes, with over 120,000 students currently enrolled, with 25,237 students graduating in the 2022-23 academic year.

Global Expansion: IIT Delhi has plans for a campus in Abu Dhabi, UAE. IIT Madras has inaugurated a branch in Zanzibar, offering programs in Data Science and AI.

What are the challenges faced by the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)?

1. **Quality:** Newer IITs struggle to uphold the high standards of the original institutes, with **vacant seats** indicating potential quality issues.
2. **Faculty Vacancies:** The IITs face a significant faculty shortage, with 4,370 out of 10,881 faculty positions vacant as of 2021.
3. **Lack of Competitive Salaries:** Low salaries compared to international standards make it difficult to attract and retain top academic talent.
4. **Location of New Institutes:** The seven new IITs established after 2015, often located in remote areas, are less appealing to both prospective faculty and students.
5. **Issues of Prestige:** There is a concern about a developing hierarchy within the IIT system, where some IITs may be perceived as less prestigious than others.
6. **Overseas Challenges:** The expansion to international campuses. like in Zanzibar raises questions about the timing and investment priorities amidst domestic challenges.

What should be done?

1. **Focus on Quality at New IITs:** Addressing the issue of unfilled seats by enhancing the quality and reputation of the newer IITs to match that of the original institutions.

2. **Rationalize Expansion Plans:** Re-evaluating the decision to establish overseas campuses, ensuring that domestic challenges are prioritized, and quality is not compromised.
3. **Invest in Resources:** Allocating sufficient funds to improve infrastructure and resources, especially in remote IIT locations, to attract both faculty and students.
4. **Standardize Admission Processes:** Maintaining consistent and rigorous admission standards across all campuses, including international ones, to preserve the IIT brand of excellence.
5. **Review Faculty Policies:** Revising policies that affect faculty recruitment and retention, aiming to fill the high number of vacancies and reduce turnover.
6. **Clarify Overseas Objectives:** Clearly defining the goals of international campuses, ensuring they align with the broader objectives of the IIT system and India's educational ambitions.

Subject: International Relations

Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India

On India's stance in the UN on the Israel-Palestine Conflict

News: This article discusses the implications of India's vote at the United Nations General Assembly resolution on the war in Gaza considering the complex geopolitics of the Middle East.

A detailed article on the **Israel-Palestine Conflict** can be read here.

What is the Israel-Palestine Conflict?

It is one of the world's longest running and most controversial conflicts. It is a conflict between two self-determination movements - the Jewish nationalist project and the Palestinian nationalist project, in the same territory.

Recently, on October 7th, 2023, Palestinian militant organization Hamas attacked Israel. The ongoing retaliatory attacks from Israel in the Gaza Strip have led to a huge loss of life and property.

What was India's stance in the UN?

India **abstained (chose not to vote)** on the Arab resolution calling for a **humanitarian truce in Gaza**. Additionally, India **supported** a Canadian resolution **condemning the Hamas attack** on Israel.

What does India's stance at the UN signify?

1. **Departure from the earlier stance:** In the past, India voted in favour of Arab resolutions against Israel as a matter of routine and avoided the question of terrorism emanating from the Arab world.
2. **Condemning terrorism:** With its latest vote, India has underlined its **concerns on international terrorism**. India was right in pointing out that the Arab resolution did not condemn the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel.
3. **Two-state solution:** India also reiterated its support for a **two-state solution** between Israel and Palestine.

This replaces the **traditional defensive political correctness** with a policy rooted in a **hard-headed realistic assessment** of the shifting regional dynamic.

Why is India's stance right with respect to terrorism?

With respect to Israel: The world's fight against terrorism cannot be successful if countries targeted by terrorism respond in a violent way (like Israel), which will birth another generation of terrorists.

With respect to Hamas: Terror groups often have **transnational links** and being selective, serves no purpose.

What diplomatic and political efforts can help India protect its geopolitical interests?

1. **Diplomatic and political outreach to the Arab world:** India should explain its commitment to Palestine's full statehood, press Israel to respect the laws of war, and increase humanitarian assistance to Gaza. PM's recent **telephone calls to moderate leaders** of the Arab world was a good step.
2. **Ensure all-party consensus:** The government needs to invite Opposition leaders for a full briefing and explain the considerations shaping its regional policy.
3. **Regulate fringe groups:** India needs to crack down on the extremist groups that are spreading disinformation and undermining its strategy of interest-based realism in the Middle East.

Topic: Important International institutions, agencies and for a

On the functioning of the IMF – Act with urgency to reform

News: The global economy faces challenges like climate change, pandemics, and debt. To address this, the article suggests reforming the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The proposed changes focus on making the IMF fairer, updating its responsibilities, and improving its decision-making process. This will help stabilize the global financial system.

Why is there a need to reform the International Monetary Fund (IMF)?

1. **Limited Resources:** The global economy's challenges, from climate change to debt burdens, require more resources than are currently available.
2. **Addressing Inequalities:** Current IMF practices risk increasing global inequalities and shortages, necessitating reforms for a fairer system.
3. **Quota Discrepancies:** Quotas in the IMF don't reflect the current economic significance of member countries. For example, China's quota (6.40 % of total) is disproportionately small compared to its economic stature, while the U.S. (17.43%) enjoys outsized influence. Whereas India's quota is (2.75%).
4. **Decision-making Power:** An 85% majority is needed for crucial IMF decisions, effectively giving the U.S. a veto. This was highlighted as an issue by the Palais Royal Initiative.

5. **Special Drawing Rights (SDR) Allocation:** The $ 650 billion Special Drawing Rights (SDR) allocation in 2021 was distributed based on quotas, benefiting richer countries more than those in need.
6. **Uneven Surveillance:** Currently, the IMF's scrutiny is primarily on countries seeking its funds, leaving influential nations unchecked.

What are the reforms required by the International Monetary Fund (IMF)?

1) **Fairness:**

a. **Quotas:** Adjust quotas to reflect true economic importance of the present.
b. **Composition of Board of Directors:** Modify for a balanced representation. Propose reducing the 85% majority criterion for important decisions. It currently grants the U.S. a de facto veto power.
c. **Distribution of Special Drawing Rights (SDR):** Change the system for fairness. For instance, earmark 20% of future SDR allocations for the poorest countries, contrasting the 2021 $650 billion distribution based on quotas.
d. **In IMF Surveillance:** Focus on countries with significant external reserves or systemic influence, ensuring an even-handed approach.

2) **Mandate:**

a. **Surveillance of Capital Flows:** Monitor capital movements closely to manage economic stability.
b. **Role of a Global Central Bank:** Use SDRs to manage global liquidity, effectively functioning as a global central bank.
c. **Role of Lender-of-Last-Resort:** Explicitly recognize this role, providing security against capital-flow fluctuations.

3) **Governance:**

a. **Strengthen the Decision-Making Role:** Empower the International Monetary and Financial Committee (IMFC) for enhanced decision-making.
b. **Review the G20's Composition:** Ensure universal and equitable representation. Example: Steps taken under India's G20 presidency for broader representation.

Terminology used:

Special Drawing Rights (SDR):

1. The SDR is an international reserve asset created by the IMF to supplement the official reserves of its member countries.
2. The SDR is not a currency. It is a potential claim on the freely usable currencies of IMF members. As such, SDRs can provide a country with liquidity.
3. A basket of currencies defines the SDR: the US dollar, Euro, Chinese Yuan, Japanese Yen, and the British Pound.

Palais Royal Initiative:

1. The Palais-Royal Initiative is a response to the global financial crisis.
2. A group of 18 experts wanted to understand if the international monetary system caused the crisis. They met at the Palais Royal in Paris. They wrote papers and sought advice from institutions like the IMF. They made proposals to improve the global finance system.
3. These were given to the G-20 president in 2011.
4. The initiative is private and aims to promote international cooperation.

On the shortcomings of UN – Is the United Nations toothless in ending wars?

News: This article discusses the reasons behind the inability of the United Nations to prevent violent conflicts. It also highlights reasons for the lack of diplomatic efforts to curtail the ongoing violence in Gaza.

A detailed article on the **Israel-Palestine Conflict and India** can be read here.

The recent conflicts in Gaza and between Russia-Ukraine have led to questions about the inability of the United Nations in bringing about peace.

How does the United Nations maintain peace and prevent conflict?

1. **Preventive Diplomacy and Mediation:** UN plays an important role in conflict prevention, using diplomacy, offices and mediation.
2. **Peacekeeping Operations:** Peacekeeping operations are called upon to maintain peace and security, and also to facilitate political processes, protect civilians, assist in disarmament, etc.
3. **Peacebuilding Efforts:** These are aimed at assisting countries emerging from conflict.
4. **Countering Terrorism:** 18 universal instruments against international terrorism have been elaborated.
5. **UNGA: The General Assembly** makes recommendations in the form of resolutions. Decisions on important questions, such as those on peace and security, are taken here.
6. **UNSC: The Security Council** can take enforcement measures to maintain or restore international peace and security. Such measures range from economic sanctions to international military action.

Why is the UN ineffective in bringing in a ceasefire in violent conflicts?

1. **Disagreement among the major powers:** The major powers in the UN have differences, it has made it impossible for the UN with its frozen membership of decision-making bodies, such as the UNSC, to be able to undertake any meaningful action.
2. **Unipolarity due to lack of a counterbalancing power:** The end of the Cold War saw the demise of the Soviet Union and chaos. Post the Cold War, we saw a gradual decline in the ability of the UN to undertake any kind of meaningful role (in resolving conflicts).
3. **Issues with the Veto Power:** The UNSC, in its present veto model, does not provide any hope for addressing any international issue, since the national interests of the permanent 5 are in conflict.
4. **Myth of the Liberal international order:** During the Cold War, we had a liberal Western order led by the USA, not an international order. **For instance,** the USA's actions in Afghanistan and then in

Iraq, reflected the ineffectiveness of the UN and the USA did what it wanted. There was no UN sanction to any of these conflicts.

Why is there a lack of diplomatic willingness to control the violence in this conflict?

1. **Delicate domestic political situation:** There have been sustained protests in Israel over controversial judicial reforms. The continuation of the conflict may serve a political end.
2. **Lack of sympathy from the Arab World:** Within the Gulf Arab states, there is little sympathy for the Palestinian cause. Even in Egypt and Jordan, there is little sympathy.
3. **USA's domestic political situation:** The USA is also caught up with an election. The progress on the Abraham Accords has been stalled.

What is India's foreign policy stance on the recent Israel-Palestine conflict?

1. India's interests in the West Asian region have grown. India has **strong ties** with the Gulf Arab states and with Israel, and a **large diaspora**. In addition, India gets **energy supplies** from the Gulf Arab states.
2. In the recent Gaza Conflict, Hon'ble **Prime Minister tweeted in a pro-Israel manner** at the beginning of the conflict.
3. A few days later, the official spokesperson balanced it out by reiterating **India's traditional position** on the Israel-Palestinian issue, stressing the **two-state solution**. Thereafter, we have sent **aid to Palestinians** and the Prime Minister has talked to various Arab leaders.

Subject: Disaster Management

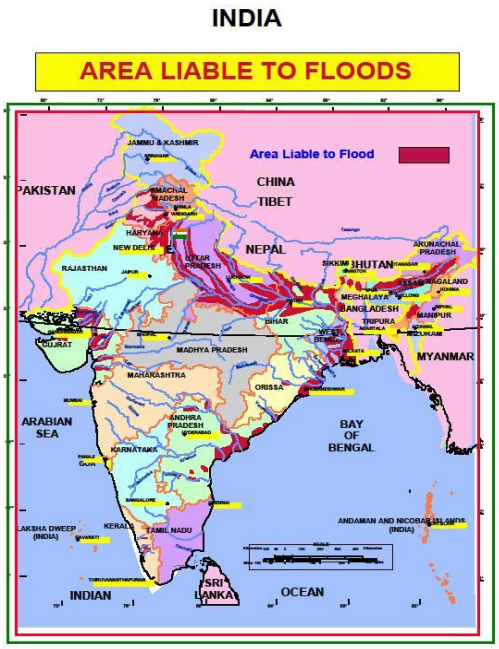
Urban flooding – The expansion of settlements

News: This article discusses the recent findings of a World Bank Report highlighting the rising flooding risks due to expansion of settlements in flood-prone areas. It highlights the associated challenges and suggests steps to tackle them.

India's urban areas have been flooding more and more often, destroying lives and livelihoods.

What is the current situation of floods in India?

India is highly vulnerable to floods. Out of the total geographical area of 329 million hectares (mha), more than 40 mha **(~12%)** is flood prone.



What does a recent study by the World Bank say about flood risks?

1. According to the study, **flood risk in many cities is rising** because they are **expanding into flood-prone areas**. Since 1985, human settlements in flood-prone areas have more than doubled.
2. The study also found that **middle-income countries like India have more urban settlements in flood-prone zones** than low- and high-income countries.
3. This highlights the **risk of unsustainable urbanization** in India.

What is the situation of urban flood risk in India?

1. India is the **3rd highest contributor to global settlements exposed to flood hazards**.
2. India is also **3rd in countries with new settlements expanding** into flood-prone areas.

This means India is at significant risk of flood-related problems.

Who is the most vulnerable to this risk?

The risks are disproportionately **higher for those living in informal structures.**

Informal housing in cities is on land that is vacant and less desirable, so that they are not immediately driven off. So, they often lie in **"low-lying, flood-prone areas".**

What are the reasons for the growth in human settlements in flood-prone areas?

1. **Lack of environmental regulations:** Environmental regulations are often applied only to big infrastructure projects and not to medium- and small-scale localities.
2. **Violation of regulations:** People violate existing government regulations. For instance, a rise in eco-tourism resorts on forest land and the construction of large structures on rivers' floodplains.
3. **Market forces:** Market forces, such as cost of land, tend to increase expansion into flood-prone areas.

What should be done?

1. **Recognition of the problem:** Recognising that we are actually expanding into flood-prone areas is the first step towards sustainable urban planning.
2. **Preventing disproportionate harm to the poor:** There is a need to differentiate between low-income residents and unauthorised structures erected for the elite.
3. **Scientific mapping:** Every city needs to do a proper scientific mapping of the flood prone areas.
4. **Resilient infrastructure:** Urban governments need to make housing in such areas more flood-resilient and protect low-income housing.

For example, riverside settlements that use stilt houses used by the Mishing and the Miyah communities along the Brahmaputra.

Topic: India and its neighborhood – relations

On India-Bhutan Relations - India's emerging challenge in Bhutan

News: The article discusses Bhutan's Foreign Minister Tandi Dorji's visit to China, marking progress in resolving border disputes and potentially normalizing relations between the two nations. India remains quiet but watchful, as these developments could impact the regional dynamics and its relationship with Bhutan.

What was the significance of Bhutan's FM visit to China?

1. **Historic visit:** Tandi Dorji made a historic visit to China as Bhutan's first foreign minister to do so, marking a potential turning point in long-standing border disputes.
2. **Border Negotiations:** The visit concluded the 25th round of border talks, moving closer to resolving territorial disagreements that have lasted for decades.
3. **Cooperation Agreement:** Bhutan and China signed a cooperation agreement to create a joint technical team responsible for the demarcation of disputed boundaries. Diplomatic Progress: The visit indicates a move towards normalizing diplomatic relations between Bhutan and China, which has been a cautious and gradual process over the years.
4. **Economic Considerations:** Bhutan's economic engagement with China has grown, with Chinese exports to Bhutan increasing significantly from ₹200 crore in 2020 to ₹1,500 crore in 2022, reflecting a shift in Bhutan's economic alliances.

Why is Bhutan changing its approach to China?

1. **Strategic Pressures:** Bhutan is responding to China's new territorial claims and border activities, which include intrusions and settlement promotions in disputed areas, driving Bhutan to seek a resolution.
2. **Economic Shifts:** The growth in trade with China, from ₹200 crore to ₹1,500 crore in two years, and Bhutan's increasing imports of Chinese capital goods and appliances, reflect a deeper economic bond influencing Bhutan's foreign policy.
3. **Societal Changes:** With the challenge of a youth exodus and the need for economic reform, Bhutan views China as a crucial partner for development and stability.
4. **Global Realignment:** Bhutan acknowledges China's significant place in global affairs and is realigning its diplomatic stance to match the changing geopolitical landscape.

How would it impact India?

1. **Strategic Silence:** India has remained quiet, suggesting it trusts Bhutan to respect mutual interests despite its new engagements with China.

2. **Trade Dynamics:** India's significant trade with Bhutan, which includes importing 70% of Bhutan's exports and has grown to ₹13,400 crore in 2022, might face changes with Bhutan's increased economic ties with China.
3. **Hydropower Projects:** India's involvement in Bhutan's hydropower sector, critical for both economies, could be impacted by Bhutan's economic diversification.
4. **Security Cooperation:** India trains Bhutanese soldiers, and any shift in Bhutan's foreign policy might require adjustments in this longstanding cooperation.

For more information on India-Bhutan relations read here

GS Paper 3

Subject: Indian Economy

Topic: Issues relating to planning, mobilization, of resources, growth, development and employment

On NITI Aayog's Vision @2047 - India in 2047

News: This article discusses the NITI Aayog's goal for India's economy to hit $30 trillion by 2047, requiring a 9% yearly growth. It also highlights the major challenges in achieving this target, and the importance of investing in education and renewable energy.

What is India's vision@2047?

1. **Amrit Kaal:** Period between 75th and 100th independence anniversaries symbolizing transformative growth.
2. **Viksit Bharat@2047:** Aim to become a developed nation by 2047 through a collective 'Team India' approach.
3. **Balanced Economic Growth:** Focus on both macro-economic growth and micro-level welfare.
4. **Technological Advancements:** Promote digital economy, fintech, and technology-enabled development.
5. **Environmental Commitment:** Prioritize energy transition and proactive climate action.
6. **Investment Strategy:** Public capital investment to stimulate private investments.

Saptarishi Principles:

1) Ensure Inclusive Development.
2) Benefit even the most remote areas.
3) Develop infrastructure and encourage investment.
4) Tap into national strengths.
5) Advocate for sustainable, green growth.
6) Empower the youth.
7) Strengthen the financial sector.

What will NITI Aayog's Vision @2047 document include?

Based on India's vision for 2047, NITI Aayog is preparing a document, containing following issues, to ensure that India can achieve their goal within the given time.

1. **Economic Target:** Aim to become a $30 trillion economy by 2047 with a per capita income between $18,000-20,000.
2. **Sectoral Focus:** It includes 10 sectors like rural and agriculture, infrastructure, technology, and governance.
3. **Structural Changes:** Highlight reforms to achieve the economic target and address overlaps in roles of different ministries and departments.
4. **Global Engagement:** Details of India's role in global trade, investment, technology, research, and development will be included.
5. **Indian Companies:** Identify potential Indian businesses that could become global leaders and strategize their growth ecosystem.
6. **Human Capital:** Insights on developing human resources and leveraging India's market size.
7. **Addressing Disparities:** Strategies to address regional economic disparities.
8. **Milestones:** Provide a roadmap detailing India's position in 2030 and 2047.
9. **Governance:** Recommendations to modernize bureaucracy, emphasizing strategic ideation over traditional paperwork.

What challenges lie ahead in achieving a $30 trillion economy by 2047?

1. **Global Economic Factors:** Global growth is expected to remain below average. Additionally, some economists predict higher U.S. interest rates for longer durations due to structural factors.
2. **Manufacturing Constraints:** Despite numerous attempts, India hasn't achieved the desired manufacturing output levels. This limitation affects quality job creation, essential for boosting consumption and sustaining growth.
3. **Trade Hurdles:** India's trade strategy, characterized by higher tariffs with fiscal incentives for big producers, might be ineffective in the long run. There's an anticipated trade deficit of over $3 trillion by 2047.
4. **Infrastructure and Finance:** The government's increased post-pandemic capital expenditure is improving infrastructure but delaying fiscal consolidation. Such continuous high budget deficits and public debt could restrict government interventions.

What should be done?

1. **Review Growth Strategy:** Policymakers should conduct regular reviews and make necessary adjustments to achieve the 9% annual growth target.
2. **Invest in Education and Health:** Allocate more resources to education and health sectors. A skilled workforce is key for long-term growth.
3. **Focus on Renewable Energy:** Increase investments in renewable energy. This will reduce import dependence and make growth sustainable.
4. **Monitor Fiscal Consolidation:** While post-pandemic capital expenditure is crucial, there's a need to balance it with fiscal consolidation to manage deficits and public debt.

Topic: Inclusive growth and issues arising from it

On Inequality – The world must fight inequality

News: The article discusses how recent crises have highlighted the growing instability in politics worldwide – due to populism, technological advances, and increasing inequality. It emphasizes the extreme wealth disparity and its damaging effects on democracy. It suggests economic interventions as potential solutions to mitigate inequality and preserve democratic values.

What is Inequality?

Inequality is the state of not being equal, especially in terms of status, rights, and opportunities.

The various types of inequality are:

1.Economic Inequality: This refers to disparities in economic assets and income among individuals or groups.

Inequality of Outcomes: Here, individuals face differences in actual material wealth and living conditions. It includes variations in income, education, health, and other standards of living.

Inequality of Opportunity: Here, disparities arise from uncontrollable factors, such as ethnicity, family background, or gender.

2.Inequality of Rights: Some people lack legal and political power, leading to disparities in how they're treated by legal systems or in their political influence.

3.Sen's Capability Framework: Introduced by **Amartya Sen**, this perspective emphasizes well-being, focusing on **personal freedoms and capabilities** rather than just income.

What does data say about inequality?

Data from 1995 to 2021 reveals significant disparities:

1. The world's **richest 1% accumulated 38% of the increase in global wealth**.
2. In contrast, the **bottom 50% only secured a mere 2%** of this growth.
3. Global wealth grew at an annual rate of 3.2%. However, the **wealth of the top 0.000001% surged by 9.3%** annually.

What are the implications of Inequality?

1. **Democracy at Risk:** Concentrated wealth can grant a few individuals, an excessive political power. Billionaires can dominate public discourse by controlling major media platforms.
2. **Global Power Dynamics:** Wealthy nations, like the US, can impose decisions affecting countries far away. For instance, choices by the US significantly impact people in Burkina Faso, despite them having no say in US elections.

3. **Technology and Wealth: The** tech age has further empowered the ultra-rich. They can sway public opinion by controlling major digital platforms.
4. **Historical Perspective:** Future generations might condemn our tolerance of extreme inequality, just as we disapprove of past societies accepting slavery and feudalism.

What should be done?

1. **Taxing the Ultra-Rich:** Significant taxes on the rich can help, especially if their relative standings among the wealthy remain unchanged.
2. **Profit Caps and Patent Waivers:** The goal is to design mechanisms that limit excess profits without hurting innovation and efficiency.
3. **Commodity Tax Strategy:** Use a commodity tax to cap the profit of a group of companies. This can increase competition within the group.
   For instance, there are several companies that make smartphones. When their profits are capped, they will need to compete more with each other to sell their products. This means they might lower their prices or make better products to win customers.

Topic: Infrastructure: Railways

Increasing Indian Railways' revenue – Easing the transport of cargo by Railways

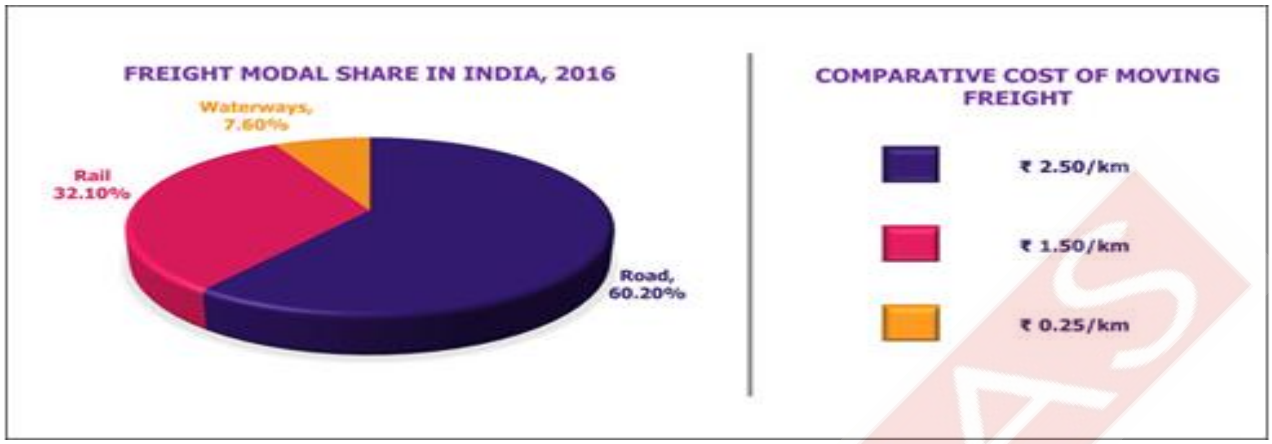
News: This article discusses the actions taken by Indian Railways (IR) to increase its share in moving bulk cargo. It also suggests steps that IR can take in order to achieve this.

What policy actions have been taken to improve Railways infrastructure?

1. **PM GatiShakti (PMGS) policy for a National Master Plan (NMP):** The PMGS aims to bring synergy to create a seamless multi-modal transport network with the NMP employing technology tools for coordinated planning.
2. **National Logistics Policy (NLP):** The NLP focuses on building a national logistics portal and integrating platforms of various ministries.
3. **Integration of postal and railway networks**.
4. **One station – one product**.
5. Introduction of **400 Vande Bharat trains**.

What is the modal share of freight (cargo) in India?

India's modal share of cargo movement:



2.*Source: Automotive World.*

The Railways is one of the cheaper modes of transportation for moving bulk cargo. However, it only has a **~30% share**.

What is the distribution of Indian Railways' revenue?

1. **Earnings from goods traffic:** Out of Indian Railways' ₹2.4 lakh crore revenue that it earned in the financial year 2022-23, the freight revenue was ₹1.62 lakh crore (~67.5%).
2. **Earnings from passenger traffic:** Its passenger revenue reached ₹63,300 crore in 2022-23 (~26%).
3. **Other earnings:** These include earnings from rents from retiring rooms, rest houses, land leasing, bridge tolls, receipts from catering department, etc.

What are the initiatives for increasing bulk cargo?

The IR has taken some initiatives in the bulk cargo arena:

1. **Relaxation of rake movement rules:** It provides a facility to load from/to multiple locations, permitted mini rakes and introduced **private freight terminals (PFTs).**
2. **Gati Shakti Terminal (GCT) policy:** It will lead to all PFTs and private sidings being converted into GCTs.
   A **private siding** is **a railway line that is owned by a company and is connected to a railway**.
3. **Partnership with private freight operators:** IR has encouraged them to invest in wagons thus helping in the induction of privately-owned wagons to facilitate specialised traffic like automobiles and fly ash.

What should IR do?

1. **Reducing barriers:** IR should reduce non-price barriers to entry of private players.
2. **Developing common-user facilities at cargo aggregation and dispersal points:** Especially in mining clusters, industrial clusters and large cities.
3. **Collaboration with State governments:** The knowledge of these clusters rests with the States, and thus collaboration with State governments is necessary.

4. **Transport new commodities as well:** For instance, fly ash.
5. **Wagon-design reforms:** IR should encourage and liberalize the design of new wagons amenable to higher and efficient loading.
6. **Parity in environmental regulation:** Absence of stringent environmental regulations in road sector has led to some users moving cargo by road. There should be no such disparity in regulation between modes of transport.

Issues of merger of railway budget and union budget

News: The article discusses the issue of the declining revenues of Indian Railways and the various reasons which have led to this situation.

Why was Indian railway budget merged with Union budget?

In 2017, the two budgets were merged, simplifying financial processes and increasing efficiency. The reasons behind this decision were:

1. **Historical Context:** The separate Railway Budget started in 1924 under British rule.
2. **Global Uniqueness:** India was the only country with a separate Railway Budget.
3. **Size Reduction:** Over the years, the Railway Budget has shrunk.
4. **NITI Aayog's Recommendation:** NITI Aayog suggested that a separate budget wasn't needed anymore.
5. **Clear Financial Picture:** A combined budget offers a complete overview of the government's finances.
6. **Integrated Planning:** The merger promotes joint planning across railways, highways, and waterways.
7. **Financial Flexibility:** It allows the Ministry of Finance to better allocate resources mid-year.

Why is Indian Railways spending more?

1. **Budget Merger:** Indian Railways combined its rail budget with the main budget. This merger allows for greater Gross Budgetary Support (GBS) from the central government, leading to increased spending without much oversight.
2. **Lack of Surplus:** Indian Railways doesn't have enough surplus from its earnings. To fund projects, they've had to seek additional funds from both GBS and Extra Budgetary Resources (EBS).
3. **Debt Accumulation:** Repayment costs for principal and interest have risen, accounting for **17% of their revenues**.
4. **Possible Economic Boost:** The increased capital expenditure is based on the belief that investing in railways will stimulate the country's economy. Which can lead to gains in manufacturing, services, tax revenues, and job opportunities.

What are the issues with the business performance of Indian Railways?

1. **Freight Growth Lag:** Between April-July 2023, freight volume grew by only 1%, and revenue by 3%. This is low considering the economy grew by 7%.

2. **Decreasing Market Share:** Once handling over 80% of India's freight business at the time of independence, it's now down to **just 27%**.
3. **Declining share in Coal Transport:** The share of coal transported by railways remains below past levels.
4. **Lack of share in Container Transport:** Only 13% of containers moving in and out of ports use the railways.

Terminology used:

Gross Budgetary Support (GBS): This is the money the government sets aside to support its annual spending plan, which aligns with its long-term (5-year) development goals. The spending goes towards a variety of sectors, from agriculture to education to justice administration.

Extra Budgetary Borrowings (EBRs): These are essentially loans taken out by government-owned companies to fund various schemes initiated by the government. Even though these loans are used for government projects, they aren't directly included in the official budget numbers. So, while these borrowings don't impact the fiscal deficit directly, they do increase the overall debt of the government.

On demands for reservation –Why everyone wants a 'sarkari naukri'

News: The article discusses three different groups in India: Yadav men demanding an Ahir regiment, skill development trainees in Ranchi wanting government jobs, and Maratha protestors seeking reservations. All these groups, despite living in a time of increasing private enterprise, are looking towards the state for social and economic mobility. The state appears more powerful and secure, especially in contrast to the precarious private sector.

Why do a very large number of people desire state jobs in India?

1. **Perceived Power of the State:** The state is seen as more powerful than ever. People feel that being within the state system offers protection against arbitrary actions.
2. **Job Security, Stability and Respect:** Government jobs offer a higher standard of "respectability", Stability and security compared to private sector jobs.
3. **Economic and Social mobility:** Even with the rise of private enterprise, the state's role in economic and social mobility remains attractive, making government jobs more desirable.
4. **Market Regulation:** The state has been lax in regulating the market, leading to potential vulnerabilities for those in private jobs. The weakening of labour laws has also tilted preference towards state jobs.

How is the market failing the people?

1. **Lack of Regulation:** The state hasn't adequately regulated the market, leaving many exposed to its vulnerabilities. Persistent efforts to **dilution of labor laws** have left workers without protection. This shows the state siding with private employers over individual workers' needs.

2. **Lack of Trust in the Private Sector:** Despite the push for private enterprise, many see state jobs as more desirable due to their security and respectability. This suggests a lack of trust in the private sector's ability to provide stable employment.
3. **Unlimited Market Power:** The market's unchecked power determines many aspects of life, yet without the necessary protections, it fails to ensure the well-being of all its participants.

Subject: Science & Technology

Topic: S&T Developments and their applications and effects in everyday life

On international AI Regulation – AI Summit

News: This article discusses the various kinds of risks associated with Frontier AI and the international regulatory mechanisms being put in place by various countries. It also analyses India's policy stance on AI.

Recently, 28 major countries met at Bletchley Park in the UK for the **world's first ever Artificial Intelligence (AI) Safety Summit and** agreed to collaborate **to minimize risks from 'Frontier AI'.**

These 28 countries included the United States, China, Japan, the United Kingdom, France, and India, and the European Union.

Read in detail about the **Bletchley Park Declaration** here.

What is Frontier AI?

"Frontier AI" is defined as highly capable foundation generative AI models that could possess dangerous capabilities that can pose severe risks to public safety.

For example, **Biometric Authentication, Automation, etc.**

What are the challenges posed due to Frontier AI?

Frontier AI models pose a distinct regulatory challenge:

1. **Inability to Predict Outcomes:** Dangerous capabilities can arise **unexpectedly**. According to various tech industry leaders, AI labs are in an uncontrolled race to develop systems that no one can fully control.
2. **Misuse:** It is difficult to robustly prevent a deployed model from **being misused**.
3. **Proliferation:** It is difficult to stop a model's capabilities from **proliferating** broadly.
4. There are also concerns regarding: **privacy**, **system bias**, and **violation of intellectual property rights**.

For more information of the **impact of AI on IPR**, read this.

What are the approaches on AI taken by different countries?

The policy response has varied across countries. For instance:

1. **EU:** The EU has taken a **tough approach**, proposing to bring in a **new AI Act** that classifies artificial intelligence according to use-case scenarios, based broadly on the degree of invasiveness and risk.
2. **UK:** The UK is at the other end of the spectrum, with a **"light-touch" approach** that aims to foster, and not stop innovation in this field.
3. **USA:** The US approach is seen to be somewhere in between. It is planning on defining an AI regulation rulebook ultimately becoming an **AI 'Bill of Rights'**. For instance, a new rule seeks to codify the use of watermarks that alert consumers to a product enabled by AI, which could potentially limit the threat posed by **deepfakes**.

What is India's stance on AI and AI regulation?

As per the Union Minister of State for IT, India's stance on AI includes the following:

1. India looks at AI and technology, in general, through the prism of **openness, safety, trust and accountability**. AI represents a big opportunity.
2. India believes that steps should be taken to ensure **AI safety and trust.** For instance, the Hon'ble Prime Minister had called for a **global framework on the expansion of "ethical" AI tools**.
3. India also maintains that steps should be taken to mitigate the downsides of AI or any emerging technology. India's position is of **actively formulating regulations** based on a "risk-based, user-harm" approach.
4. As per Telecom **Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI)**, the Centre should set up a **domestic statutory authority to regulate AI in India**.
5. The **NITI Aayog** has also published papers on **Responsible AI for All.**

However, the government is not considering bringing a law or regulating the growth of artificial intelligence in the country, according to the Union Minister of IT.

Terminology used:

Red teaming: In cybersecurity, "red teaming" refers to the practice of emulating real-world adversaries and their tools, tactics, and procedures to identify risks, uncover blind spots, validate assumptions, and improve the overall security posture of systems.

Subject: Environment

Topic: Environmental pollution and degradation

On Air Quality Standard of India – Indians are choking on pollution. How can it be stopped?

News: The article discusses India's severe air pollution problem. It highlights health risks, compares Indian air quality standards to WHO's, and identifies major pollution sources. The article also suggests solutions and emphasizes the impact on life expectancy, especially in cities like Delhi.

What are the major causes of air pollution?

Ambient (Outdoor) Sources:

1. **Vehicular Emissions:** Cars, trucks, and buses release pollutants.
2. **Industrial Emissions:** Factories and power plants contribute significant pollutants.
3. **Construction and Road Dust:** Building activities and unpaved roads add particulate matter.
4. **Stubble Burning:** Seasonal agricultural residue burning worsens air quality.
5. **Natural Events:** Forest fires and volcanic eruptions release pollutants.
6. **Waste Disposal Sites:** Garbage dumps and sewage treatment plants emit harmful gases.

Household (Indoor) Sources:

1. **Biomass Fuels:** Using wood, crop waste, and animal dung for cooking releases smoke.
2. **Open Fire-Cooking:** Traditional stoves emit large amounts of particulate matter.

What are the different Air Quality Standards used?

National Ambient Air Quality Standards (NAAQS)

- Established by CPCB, applicable nationally.
- Revised in 1982, 1994, 1998, and 2009.
- Monitors 12 pollutants including PM10, PM2.5, NO2, and SO2.

Air Quality Index (AQI):

- Launched in 2014 by CPCB, with IIT-Kanpur's consultation.
- Tracks 8 major pollutants like PM10, PM2.5, NO2, and SO2.
- The index ranges from 'Good' to 'Severe' across a 0-500 scale.

WHO Air Quality Standards:

- WHO Tightened global standards in 2021.

- The new annual limit for PM2.5 is 5 micrograms per cubic meter, down from 10.
- 24-hour ceiling for PM2.5 reduced to 15 micrograms from 25.

How do Indian air standards differ from WHO standards?

1. **PM 2.5 Levels:** The WHO has a limit of 5 microns for PM 2.5, whereas India's limit is much higher at 40 microns.
2. **AQI Categories:** India uses a six-category AQI system, ranging from "good" to "severe". Even at an AQI of 126, Delhi's air quality far exceeds both the national and WHO standards.
3. **Health Impact:** Health issues can arise even when the AQI is within what India considers "satisfactory". This indicates that Indian standards are less protective of public health compared to the WHO's guidelines.

How severe is the air pollution problem in India?

1. **Life Expectancy Impact:** Indians lose an average of 5.3 years of life due to air pollution. For Delhi residents, this number rises to 11.9 years.
2. **World Rankings:** Delhi often ranks at or near the top of the world's most polluted cities. In a 2022 list by IQAir, out of the 50 most polluted cities globally, 39 are in India.
3. **Rural Pollution:** Even rural areas face pollution from dust, burnt biomass fuels, and vehicular emissions.
4. **Pollutants:** India monitors pollutants like PM 10, PM 2.5, nitrogen dioxide, and others. PM 2.5 levels in places like Delhi far exceed both national and WHO standards.

What are the health impacts of air pollution in India?

1. **Immediate Effects:** Acute symptoms include burning eyes, irritation of the nose and throat, cough, and a feeling of choked breath.
2. **Cardiovascular Threats:** Air pollution can provoke heart attacks and strokes, as pollutants disrupt atherosclerotic plaques, triggering blood clots.
3. **Chronic Illnesses:** Prolonged exposure results in hypertension, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular diseases, cancers, diabetes, dementia, and cataracts.
4. **Respiratory Issues:** Pollution heightens the risks of chronic lung diseases and asthma.
5. **Organ Damage:** Air pollution-induced inflammation can damage various organs and lower immunity.
6. **Reproductive Concerns:** PM 2.5 particles have been found in maternal placentas and fetal brains. Pollution exposure during pregnancy heightens risks of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, low birth weight, and birth defects.
7. **Children's Health:** Kids exposed to pollution suffer from respiratory infections, are more susceptible to asthma attacks, and can experience reduced learning and physical growth.

What should be done?

1. **Transportation Reforms:** Adopt electric vehicles for cleaner transport. Promote public transport over personal vehicle use.

2. **Energy and Construction Management:** Shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy sources quickly. Follow environmentally friendly construction practices and efficiently manage debris.
3. **Household Improvements:** Substitute biomass fuels with cleaner alternatives like natural gas. Ensure better ventilation in kitchens to reduce indoor pollution.
4. **Waste Management:** Prohibit practices like stubble and garbage burning.
5. **Personal Protective Measures:** Use high-quality masks (like N95) and air purifiers. Breathing exercises can help maintain lung function. Reduce or avoid outdoor activities during high pollution times.

Challenges of mobilizing Climate Finance

News: This article discusses the challenges associated with mobilising climate finance. It also highlights in brief the purpose and amount of climate finance required.

A detailed article on **Climate Finance** can be read here.

What is Climate finance?

According to the **UNFCCC**, Climate finance refers to 'local, national or transnational financing, drawn from public, private and alternative sources of financing, that seeks to support mitigation and adaptation actions that will address climate change'.

In simpler words, climate finance relates to the money which needs to be spent on the activities (like renewable energy generation) which will contribute to slowing down climate change. Which will help the world to reach the target of limiting global warming to an increase of **1.5°C above pre-industrial levels**.

Under the **Paris Agreement**, developed countries have to meet the goal of a mobilisation of $100 billion climate finance per year to fund the climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts of the developing world.

However, at the 26th United Nations Climate Change conference in 2021, the developed countries could mobilise only a total of **~$80 billion.**

What are the issues related to mobilising climate finance?

1. **Inadequate amount:** The sum of $100bn per year is inadequate in terms of switching over to a low carbon development path and climate resilient development.
2. **Lack of strong political will and sense of urgency** in the Global North.
3. **Lack of a clear criteria:** Without any mandatory formula for collecting money, it is difficult to predict how climate finance will be mobilised. Neither the UNFCCC nor the Paris Agreement mention the criterion for mobilisation.
4. **Lack of agreement on division of financial burden:** There is no agreed approach among developed countries to share the burden of this goal.

What is the legal backing of climate finance?

Providing finance to developing countries is the operationalisation of the principle of **Common but Differentiated Responsibilities**.
The developed countries are required, in accordance with the decision accompanying the **Paris Agreement**, to collectively mobilise **$100 billion** through 2025.
After this, a **New Collective Quantified Goal (NCQG)** is to be set at the end of 2024. Read more about NCQG here.

What are the institutional mechanisms for climate financing?

1. **Global Environment Facility (GEF):** UNFCCC-designated funding agency providing grant and concessional loan to developing countries.
2. **Green Climate Fund (GCF):** It is also within the ambit of UNFCCC. It administers a portion of the $100 billion for developing country parties to switch over to low-emissions and climate resilient development path.

What is the quantum of climate finance needed?

1. **Global South:** Going by the needs of countries in the Global South expressed in their NDCs, the amount required touches close to **$6 trillion until 2030.**
2. **India:** Its financial needs derived from its NDCs for **adaptation and mitigation purposes** for 2015-30 are **$206 billion** and **$834 billion**, respectively.

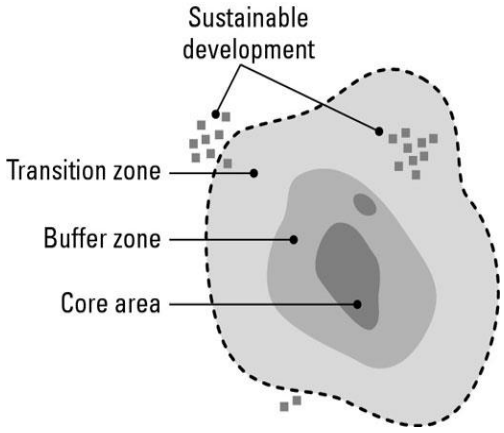
Why is climate financing required?

1. Most of the financial needs are required in **transitioning towards low-carbon, cleaner energy systems** from traditional systems.
2. Alternate livelihood for **people involved in the fossil fuel economy** through direct or indirect jobs related to the coal mining and power sector.

Significance of Biosphere Reserves

News: This article discusses the importance of Biosphere Reserves in areas ranging from protection of biodiversity to combating climate change. It also highlights the threats faced by BRs along with the conservation efforts being undertaken to counter these threats.

On the **World Biosphere Reserve Day, November 3**, it is important to reflect on the progress made in conserving and sustainably using these vital ecosystems.



3. *Biosphere Reserve. Source: National Parks of Paraguay.*

World Biosphere Reserve Day is celebrated each year to raise awareness of the importance of biosphere reserves and to promote their conservation and sustainable use.

What is the anatomy of a Biosphere Reserve (BR)?

1. **Core Zone:** In the centre lies the strictly protected core zone, providing habitat for flora and fauna, and protecting water, soil, air, and biota as a whole ecosystem.
2. **Buffer Zone:** This surrounding the core zone, where people live and work in harmony with nature; scientists can study nature here.
3. **Transition Zone:** The outermost edge is the transition zone where communities practise sustainable human activities.

How are BRs designated internationally?

1. BRs are designated by **UNESCO** to promote the conservation of biodiversity, sustainable development, and research.
2. They are also supported by other United Nations agencies, for example the **United Nations Development Programme**, the **United Nations Environment Programme**, as well as the **International Union for Conservation of Nature**.
3. According to UNESCO, there are currently **748 biosphere reserves across 134 countries**. **12 sites** can be found in India.

List of **India's Biosphere Reserves** can be found here.

What is the importance of BRs?

1. **Support wide variety of ecosystems:** They are home to a wide variety of ecosystems — from tropical rainforests to alpine deserts.
2. **Home to countless species:** They provide home to countless unique and endangered plants and animals species.
3. **Sustainable development:** In addition to playing a vital role in the protection of biodiversity, they also provide opportunities for sustainable economic development.
4. **Combating climate change:** BRs are home to many of the world's carbon sinks helping to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

What are the threats to BRs?

1. Deforestation
2. Invasive species
3. Land use changes such as mining.
4. Increasing urbanisation and constant growth of the world population leading to exploitation.

What are the conservation efforts being undertaken at the local level?

In the **Sundarban Biosphere Reserve** in India, local communities are working together to manage mangrove forests and protect the biodiversity of the region.

In the **Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve** in India, local communities are contributing towards conservation efforts by forming **self-help groups**, while the youth are getting engaged in **eco-tourism. It has also introduced the concept of 'plastic checkpoints'.** Community members check all vehicles and tourists for plastic waste, which is collected, recycled and used for the construction of roads.

What are the global initiatives being undertaken to conserve BRs?

1. **UNESCO in partnership with the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change** and the **National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management**, concluded the 10th South and Central Asian Biosphere Reserve Network Meeting (SACAM).
2. The **UNESCO Man and the Biosphere (MAB) programme** aims to improve livelihoods, safeguard ecosystems, and promote sustainable economic development.

Subject: Internal Security

Topic: Challenges to internal security through communication networks and cyber security

On ICMR data breach – Thieves & Servers

News: This article discusses the recent breach of healthcare data with the ICMR.

A detailed article on **Cybersecurity in India** can be read here.

What are the different types of cyber data breaches?

1. **Hacking:** Unauthorized access to computer systems, networks, or databases by exploiting vulnerabilities.
2. **Malware attack:** Malicious software infects systems to steal data, damage files, or gain unauthorized access.
3. **Ransomware attack:** Malware encrypts a victim's data, demanding a ransom for giving access.
4. **Phishing:** Attackers use deceptive emails or messages to trick individuals into revealing sensitive information or clicking on malicious links.
5. **Physical Theft or Loss:** Breach occurs when physical devices like laptops or storage media are lost or stolen.
6. **Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS):** Overwhelming a network or website with traffic to disrupt services and potentially expose vulnerabilities.

What is the recent incident of health data cybersecurity breach?

1. Last month a server breach in ICMR led to the leaking of personal information of about **81 crore Indians,** who had taken COVID vaccines. This data was put on auction on the **dark web.**
2. This is the third time that healthcare system servers were breached. The government had informed the Parliament that there was a leak of CoWIN data in June. Prior to that, there was a **ransomware attack at AIIMS, Delhi.**

More on **Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)** can be read here.

What do these incidents indicate?

1. **Vulnerabilities in the Digital Architecture:** The repeated breaches of healthcare data reflect the challenge faced by the **digital architecture.**
2. **Sensitive nature of Health Data:** Health data contains personal information, medical history, and sometimes even genetic information. It is considered highly sensitive. Hence, it has been a key target for ransomware and extortion.
3. **State-Sponsored Espionage:** Countries may target health data to gain insights into the spread of diseases or identify vulnerabilities in healthcare infrastructure for strategic purposes.
4. **Financial Gain:** Stolen health data can be used for medical identity theft or **insurance fraud**.
5. **Issues with Data Protection Laws:** Data protection law provides sweeping exemptions to the government which influences the approach to cybersecurity. Government agencies might focus on priorities which could be tilted towards data collection and surveillance, rather than data protection and privacy.

How does India's digital health infrastructure work?

As part of the National Digital Health Mission, India's digital health infrastructure consists of 4 key features:

1. **Health ID:** The national health ID will be a repository of all health-related information of every Indian. The Health ID is voluntary and applicable across states, hospitals, diagnostic laboratories and pharmacies
2. **Personal health records**
3. **Digi Doctor:** The Digi Doctor option will allow doctors from across the country to enroll and their details will be available here. These doctors will also be assigned digital signatures which can be used for writing prescriptions.
4. **Health facility registry:**

At a later stage, it will also include **e-pharmacy and telemedicine services.**

India's digital health infrastructure works on the principle of **federated architecture**, which means that information flows between all stakeholders in the healthcare universe but **doesn't get centrally stored**.

However, it could mean that the risks of a data breach can be magnified. A **World Bank study of ABDM** said **health insurers** can access patient data simply because they are in the ecosystem and use the information to hike premiums.

A detailed article on **Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM)** can be read here.

What needs to be done?

1. **Stricter oversight:** Governments need stricter oversight on security.
2. **Accountability towards people:** They need to be more accountable to people whose data has been leaked.

On the issues of government's fact-checking unit – Retrograde step

News: The article discusses concerns about Tamil Nadu's government creating a fact-checking group to identify false information about its activities. Critics argue this could threaten free speech and lack independent oversight.

In April 2023, IT Rules 2021 were amended, allowing the central government to establish a Fact-Check Unit (FCU) to identify and remove "fake or false or misleading" content online.

In the wake of the Centre's decision, Karnataka government and subsequently the Tamil Nadu government decide to constitute their own fact-checking units to tackle misinformation related to state matters.

What is the concern regarding the Fact-Checking Initiative?

1. **Conflict of Interest:** It raises concerns about bias since the government might not be neutral.
2. **Potential for Censorship:** Critics are worried that this unit could limit freedom of speech by controlling information.
3. **Infringes on Rights:** Changes to the IT Rules have been legally challenged for possibly infringing on constitutional rights. The Bombay High Court has questioned whether such a government-run unit could operate without compromising the constitutional guarantee of free speech.

For more information on **concerns surrounding the FCU**, read here.

What should be done?

1. **Specify Scope and Powers:** The government should detail the scope and powers of their fact-checking unit, as suggested by the Editors Guild of India.
2. **Independent Monitoring:** Misinformation and fake news should be managed by independent organizations, not by the government, to avoid conflicts of interest.
3. **Judicial Oversight:** A system of judicial oversight should be established to prevent the misuse of the fact-checking powers by the government.
4. **Prior Notice and Appeal:** There should be a process that allows for prior notice before labeling information as false, and a right to appeal against such decisions.
5. **Involve Stakeholders:** Fact-checking initiatives should be set up with the involvement of journalists and other stakeholders to ensure a more impartial approach.