



CHROME IAS

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ADDRESS

53/5, First Floor, Old Rajinder Nagar

Contact: 011-49789720, 9990356664, 7840048445

(E-mail-info@chromeias.com, Website- <http://chromeias.com>)

INDEX

- 1. CUTTING THROUGH THE SMOG(GS 3)**
- 2. SHORT ON NUANCE (GS 3)**
- 3. STILL ON THE LAST CHANCE SALOON (GS 3)**
- 4. AN INVITATION TO CORRUPTION? (GS 2)**
- 5. A SHOT IN THE ARM (GS 02)**
- 6. DEATH IN THE AIR (GS 03)**
- 7. QUICK FIX FOR THE FARMER (GS 03)**
- 8. ANCHORED IN HUMAN RIGHTS (GS 02)**
- 9. IS IT TIME TO ABOLISH THE DEATH PENALTY? (GS 02)**
- 10.FARMING IN A WARMING WORLD (GS 03)**
- 11.THE SPECTRE OF DEPORTATION (GS 02)**
- 12.MAKING EVERY CITIZEN AN AUDITOR (GS 02)**
- 13.RESTORING THE BALANCE (GS 2)**
- 14.RBI's INDEPENDENCE (GS 03)**
- 15.TOWARDS A GENETIC PANOPTICON (GS 03)**
- 16.ISLAND HOPPING (GS 02)**
- 17.IF YOU WANT TO HELP FARMERS (GS 03)**
- 18.BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOUR (GS 2)**
- 19.STRANGE DEAL (GS 03)**
- 20.PLAN BEFORE MAKING A BID (GS 2)**
- 21.LIFELINES BEYOND FARM LOAN WAIVERS (GS 3)**

CUTTING THROUGH THE SMOG

Relevance: GS 3

Theme of the article

Practical interventions exist to tackle the issue of stubble burning.

Introduction

Air pollution is a worry especially in north India. Stubble burning is said to be a key factor behind the formation of a dense cover of smog in this part of India though its contribution is less than 20%.

Are only farmers to blame?

Farmers are held responsible for the crisis but what is at fault are the flawed and short-sighted policies of the Central and State governments.

Has the policy of wheat-paddy crop rotation been beneficial?

- In the 1960s, wheat-paddy crop rotation was encouraged in Punjab and Haryana to make India self-sufficient in foodgrain production.
- Large public investments in irrigation and adoption of high yielding varieties under the Green Revolution helped achieve the goal and make the nation food secure.
- However, the negative externalities in terms of land degradation, adverse soil health due to overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, and plummeting water tables have surfaced.
- The share of paddy (rice) in the gross cropped area in Punjab and Haryana has considerably increased. However, the increase has undisputedly been at the cost of the area under maize, cotton, oilseeds and sugarcane.
- The policy of minimum support price for crops, in tandem with their assured procurement and input subsidy, have left farmers with no option but to follow this rotation.
- Besides, Punjab enacted a water conservation law in 2009 which mandates paddy sowing within a notified period. As a result, farmers who are pressed for time to sow wheat and maintain crop yield find stubble burning to be an easy and low-cost solution.

How to tackle stubble burning?

- One possibility to curtail the practice is to ensure that the government encourages crop diversification towards less water-intensive crops by extending price incentives and better marketing facilities.
- The policy of a 'price deficiency system' — as initiated in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh — should be adopted to strengthen the production and marketing of alternative crops.
- Another option is to replicate the Telangana model of providing farmers an investment support of ₹8,000 per acre each year and withdraw price-based support.

- Increasing pressure by the government on farmers to purchase the 'happy seeder' to abate stubble burning adds to the cost incurred by farmers. Even if the machine is available at a subsidised rate of nearly ₹1 lakh, it would remain idle the whole year and become a liability in terms of maintenance. It is not a viable option for small and marginal farmers.
- If the state provides an app-based support system, to rent out tractors and farm implements and earn additional income — there are examples of this in Nigeria and also in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar — it would be akin to the 'Uberisation of agriculture'. It would avoid stubble burning and at the same time make farming more mechanised, cost effective and a source of employment.
- Another far-sighted approach could be in effective use of paddy straw. Unlike wheat residue, which is used as fodder, paddy straw is non-palatable to animals as it has high silica content.
- Farmers, who have already been sensitised to refrain from burning residue, should be given options such as biomass generation.
- The government should use geospatial techniques to identify areas where stubble burning is severe and encourage installation of biomass plants at such locations. This will not only reduce transportation costs for the firm or village entrepreneurs but also help the government achieve its target of generating 227GW based on renewable energy sources by 2022.
- Farmers can also be incentivised to sell the residual for additional income. The residual has uses, such as in paper, cardboard and packing material making and also hydroseeding (defiberised rice straw can be used in hydroseeding for erosion control).

Conclusion

Incidents of stubble burning cannot be averted by imposing fines, or giving notice or giving farmers capital subsidy. Instead, the issue requires long-term vision and strategic policy interventions.

SHORT ON NUANCE

Relevance : GS 3

Why has this issue cropped up?

B N Srikrishna committee's draft data protection bill is expected to be tabled soon in Parliament.

Pros of the committee

- The committee's inclusive functioning style and seeking a public opinion at all stages are commendable.
- Its recommendations pertaining to user-centric design, setting up of an independent data protection authority, regulating the government along with the private sector and a new law for intelligence gathering for national security are steps in the right direction.
- Also welcome is the suggestion that the Aadhaar Act requires several modifications and provisions for regulatory oversight.
- So is the recognition the committee has accorded to data portability.

Cons of the committee

- It has suggested that the UIDAI be both the data fiduciary and the regulator for Aadhaar.
- There is also the suggestion that even though personal data can be transferred outside India, data fiduciaries will be required to store a local copy.
- The committee's cliched vocabulary and superficial treatment of several important issues are the most disappointing. For example, the concepts of fair and reasonable processing, purpose and collection limitation, notice and consent, data quality and data storage limitation are not new. They have largely failed to prevent identity thefts, unethical profiling and other privacy violations.
- The committee does discuss artificial intelligence and big-data analytics but fails to define clear-cut guidelines for their safe use. It ends up vaguely suggesting that no processing of personal data should result in taking decisions about a person without consent, but does not provide guidelines about enforcement.
- It does not appear that the committee has carefully evaluated the data processing requirements of the diverse private sector, spanning healthcare, insurance, social media and e-commerce, and how these requirements may infringe upon privacy.

Way forward

- A data protection framework is incomplete without an investigation of the nuances of digital identity, and guidelines for the various use cases of authentication, authorisation and accounting.
- It is also incomplete without an analysis of the extent to which personal information needs to be revealed for conducting businesses, and during eKYC processes.
- In addition, effective protection requires an understanding of the possible pathways of information leaks, comprehending the limits of anonymisation with provable guarantees

against re-identification attacks and a knowledge of the various possibilities with virtual identities.

- Also required is an analysis of the possibilities of privacy preserving tools, techniques and protocols from computer science including hash functions, symmetric and public key cryptography, etc.
- Most theories for improving state efficiency in the delivery of welfare and health services using personal data will have to consider improved data processing methods for targeting, epidemiology, econometrics, tax compliance, corruption control, analytics, and topic discovery.
- This, in turn, will require digitisation, surveillance and processing of large-scale personal transactional data. Acquisition, storage and processing of personal health data will be crucial to such systems.
- There should be detailed analyses of how such surveillance — targeted towards improving efficiency of the state's service delivery — can be achieved without enabling undesirable mass surveillance that may threaten civil liberty and democracy.
- The committee needs to balance the seemingly conflicting requirements of individual privacy and the benefits of large-scale data processing, and it is not obvious that a trade-off is inevitable.
- A data protection framework is incomplete without defining the requirements and standards of access control, and protection against both external and insider attacks in large data establishments, both technically and legally.
- The computer science sub-areas of security and automatic verification will certainly have a lot to offer.
- Civil society can play a crucial role as it's participation in discussions on data protection has been exemplary, especially in the wake of the Aadhaar debates and privacy judgment.

STILL ON THE LAST CHANCE SALOON

Relevance: GS 3

Theme of the article

The Katowice climate meet must ensure that today's children don't inherit a planet heading to a catastrophe.

Why has this issue cropped up?

The 24th meeting of the Conference of the Parties (COP-24) to the UNFCCC in Katowice, Poland is meant to take forward steps to address the threat of climate change.

The threat to climate change

The world is in deep trouble. Average global temperatures have crossed a degree Celsius above preindustrial levels and such concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (410 ppm) has never been seen by humans before.

Purpose of COP 24

- The purpose of the meeting is to set guidelines, or agree on a rulebook, to implement pledges that were made by various countries at the Paris Climate Conference in 2015.
- At Paris, the global community agreed to try to limit warming to 1.5° C above preindustrial levels.
- The current conference at Katowice comes soon after a special publication by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the 1.5 Degree Report, according to which what we need are far-reaching, speedy transformative changes in our societies in order to stay below 1.5°

NDCs

- In the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), planned ahead of the Paris COP-21, each country described the actions it would take and the levels to which greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions would be reduced (mitigation).
- Many of them also described what they would do to improve their capacity to live in a warmer world (adaptation), and the extent to which these goals required support in the form of finance or technology transfer.

Provision of finance under the Paris Agreement

- Article 9 of the Paris Agreement calls for financial support from developed countries. This was expected to result in at least \$100 billion per year to address needs and priorities of developing countries for mitigation and adaptation.

- Article 9.5 requires developed countries to communicate their levels of support, including pledges of additional finance. Even a rough estimate of financial needs for implementing all the NDCs puts it at \$4.4 trillion.

The Hurdles

- There has to be a general agreement on how to estimate adaptation. This is more complicated and varied and is still being developed.
- There has been little progress on finance, technology transfer and capacity development.
- The Climate Funds Update of 2018 notes that multilateral funds pledged until 2017 are less than \$30 billion, of which around \$20 billion has been deposited and about \$4 billion disbursed.
- There have also been charges of double counting and counting of development aid levelled against developed countries.
- The inability to have any agreement between developing and rich countries ensures that the fights on finance and technology will intensify.
- The ethical foundations of the climate change fights on the global stage are based largely on the occupation of atmospheric carbon space by rich countries, leaving little room for growth by the latecomers, which are poor nations.
- The implementation of the activities for the PA formally begins in 2020 and concludes in 2030. We are currently in the Doha Amendment period, or the second phase of the Kyoto Protocol, which has not been ratified.
- While the U.S. and its current policies are much to blame for the situation, other developed countries are not doing that much better.
- Australia and France have had political turmoil due to their climate policies even while experiencing severe weather events. Protests on fuel charge hikes have rocked France. Europe is still heavily reliant on coal.

Way forward

- What is required is credible, accurate and verifiable numbers on the climate flows expected from developed countries. Such reliable flow will encourage and persuade all countries that commitments made will be fulfilled.
- Countries with average income exceeding \$15,000 typically have the capacity and finance and technology to reduce their emissions dramatically. They must also alter their lifestyles considerably, which is required for the transformational change that the 1.5 Degree Report calls for.

- As extreme events are on the rise, the separate stream referred to as “loss and damage” needs attention. This is a provision for support to poor countries experiencing economic and non-economic losses and destruction from climate change events.

Conclusion

Today's children are inheriting from their parents and grandparents an earth that is out of control and heading to be 3-4° C warmer by the end of the century. Perpetual growth is not viable for any species. Business-as-usual policies with high consumption by the rich are driving the destruction of ecosystems and the mass extinction of species.

CHROME IAS

AN INVITATION TO CORRUPTION?

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

The Electoral Bond Scheme inhibits the citizen's capacity to meaningfully participate in political and public life.

Why has this issue cropped up?

Early this year the government introduced an Electoral Bond Scheme purportedly with a view to cleansing the prevailing culture of political sponsorship.

Problems with the electoral bond

- There is no ceiling on party expenditure and the EC (Election Commission) cannot monitor it, then how can one be sure that what is coming in is not black money as there is a secrecy of the donor.
- Too opaque In its present form, the scheme permits not only individuals and body corporates, but also "every artificial juridical person," to purchase bonds.
- The scheme allows for complete anonymity of the donor. Neither the purchaser of the bond nor the political party receiving the donation is mandated to disclose the donor's identity. Therefore, not only will, say, the shareholders of a corporation be unaware of the company's contributions, but the voters too will have no idea of how, and through whom, a political party has been funded.
- Just as damaging to the most basic democratic ideals is the elimination of a slew of other barriers that were in place to check the excesses of corporate political sponsoring. For instance, the programme removes an existing condition that had prohibited companies from donating anything more than 7.5% of their average net-profit over the previous three years. This now means that even loss-making entities can make unlimited contributions.
- The requirement that a corporation ought to have been in existence for at least three years before it could make donations — a system that was meant to stop shell concerns from being created with a view purely to syphoning money into politics — has also been removed

Violation of the constitution

- Article 110 of the Constitution allows the Speaker to classify a proposed legislation as a money bill, only when the draft law deals with all or any of the subjects enlisted in the provision. It's impossible to see how the provisions pertaining to the electoral bond scheme could possibly fall within any of these categories.
- The scheme subverts the fundamental rights to equality and freedom of expression. There's no doubt that the Constitution does not contain an explicitly enforceable right to vote. But implicit

in its guarantees of equality and free speech is a right to knowledge and information. In the absence of complete knowledge about the identities of those funding the various different parties, it's difficult to conceive how a citizen can meaningfully participate in political and public life.

Conclusion

The electoral bonds scheme , unless immediately rescinded, may well irredeemably damage India's democratic edifice.

CHROME IAS

A SHOT IN THE ARM

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

The under-five mortality rates have declined considerably from 126/1000 live births in 1990 to 39/1000 in 2017, much faster than the global rates. Much of this can be attributed to the successful immunisation programme in India.

Introduction

Mission Indradhanush (MI), one of the largest public health programmes in the world, and one of the greatest health-related accomplishments of India, was launched in 2014.

The importance of vaccines in India

- Around 27 million children are born every year in India.
- India also has the largest burden of under-five mortality, more than what prevails in some of the poorest countries in the world. Nearly 39 children under the age of five years die for every 1,000 live births each year — pneumonia and diarrhoea are the leading killers.
- Approximately 0.1 million children die due to rotavirus-induced diarrhoea alone, which is around 50 per cent of all deaths attributed to diarrhoea.
- Unimmunised and partially-immunised children are most vulnerable to diseases and disability, and are at three to six times higher risk of death than fully immunised children.
- A large percentage of under-five mortality in India can be averted through vaccination.

Challenges to vaccination programme

India faces a threefold challenge:

- Low full immunisation coverage (65 per cent),
- limited basket of vaccines and,
- issues regarding quality and logistics of vaccine management for such a vast and diverse country.

Mission Indradhanush

- India's full immunisation coverage (FIC), which used to be 61 per cent in 2009, improved to 65 per cent in 2013 at a meagre increase rate of 1 per cent per year.
- To hasten the full coverage to at least 90 per cent till 2020, the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare launched Mission Indradhanush in 2014.
- Under this, seven vaccines would be given to all those children and pregnant women who have missed out or are left out under the routine immunisation rounds. It would cover all far-flung areas.

- To bring sharper focus onto the least vaccinated areas, MI has been transformed into “Intensified Mission Indradhanush” (IMI) that aims to reach those rural and urban slums that have under-performed during MI. One hundred and ninety high-focus districts and urban areas across 24 states have been selected for such intensified efforts.
- There is a sharper focus on surveillance activities and to create partnerships with states, community-level departments and ministries for grass roots implementation and monitoring.
- Mission Indradhanush has led to an impressive increase of close to 7 per cent in full immunisation coverage in one year as compared to 1 per cent increase per year in the past. This is apart from the Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) which targets to vaccinate about 27 million children against 12 deadly diseases every year, more children than any other similar programme in the world through more than nine million immunisation sessions conducted annually.
- It now aims to achieve 90 per cent immunisation by December 2018.
- On a global scale, MI/IMI is meant to reduce India’s contribution to the global burden of disease, including deaths in children under five, thereby achieving SDG-3 by 2030.
- The journey of Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP), which India embarked upon in 1985, has been further bolstered by Mission Indradhanush/Intensified Mission Indradhanush.

Conclusion

An immunisation programme, anywhere in the world, is the most cost-effective public health intervention. It is the basic and foremost right of children across the globe, that they receive a safe and effective “shot in the arm” in a timely manner. This is the minimum which any country must deliver to save their children from vaccine preventable diseases.

DEATH IN THE AIR

Relevance: GS 3

Theme of the article

It is time clean air is made a front-line political issue.

Why has this issue cropped up?

Air pollution has killed an estimated 1.24 million people in India in 2017.

Impacts of air pollution

- Millions of people are forced to lead morbid lives or face premature death due to bad air quality.
- India's national standard for ambient fine particulate matter, or PM2.5, is notoriously lax at 40 micrograms per cubic metre, but even so, 77% of the population was exposed to higher levels on average.
- No State met the annual average exposure norm for PM2.5 of 10 micrograms per cubic metre set by the World Health Organisation.

Air pollution and life expectancy

- If the country paid greater attention to ambient air quality and household air pollution, the researchers say, people living in the worst-affected States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Jharkhand could add more than 1.7 years to their life expectancy.
- Similar gains would accrue nationwide, but it is regions with low social development, reflected partly in reliance on solid fuels for cooking, and those with ambient air pollution caused by stubble-burning, construction dust and unbridled motorisation such as Delhi that would benefit the most.

Way forward

- Sustainable solutions must be found for stubble-burning and the use of solid fuels in households, the two major sources of pollution and State governments must be made accountable for this.
- The Centre should work with Punjab and Haryana to ensure that the machinery already distributed to farmers and cooperatives to handle agricultural waste is in place and working.
- A mechanism for rapid collection of farm residues has to be instituted. In fact, new approaches to recovering value from biomass could be the way forward. The proposal from a furniture-maker to convert straw into useful products will be keenly watched for its outcomes.
- The potential of domestic biogas units, solar cookers and improved biomass cookstoves has to be explored, since they impose no additional expenditure on rural and less affluent

households. Such measures should, of course, be complemented by strong control over urban sources of pollution.

- India's commitments under the Paris Agreement on climate change require a sharp reduction in particulates from fossil fuel
- There are not enough ground-level monitoring stations for PM2.5, and studies primarily use satellite imagery and modelling to project health impacts. This needs to be improved for real-time measurement of pollution should be employed.

Conclusion

Rapid progress on clean air now depends on citizens making it a front-line political issue.

QUICK FIX FOR THE FARMER

Relevance: GS 3

Why has this issue cropped up?

Thousands of farmers from different parts of India marched to Delhi on November 29-30 to register their protest against the government's perceived apathy and neglect of farmers' demands.

Demands of farmers

They were basically demanding three things:

- one, debate in Parliament to discuss farm distress;
- two, one-time loan waiver; and
- three, raising minimum support prices (MSPs) to 50 per cent above comprehensive cost (Cost C2) of production, and making MSPs legally binding on private traders — that is, if any trader buys below MSP, he should be put in prison for, say, three years.

Rationality of these demands

- Accepting the demand for a debate in the Parliament is easy and it would help in understanding the real causes of farm distress, and the policies which could best help to tackle it.
- The second demand is of a one-time loan waiver. It is well known that loan waivers will not solve the problems of farmers because:
 - it is the better ones in the peasantry which will benefit the most from this move.
 - these loan waivers will hit public investments in agriculture adversely and may even worsen farm distress in due course. It is a vicious circle.
- The third demand, of setting higher MSPs and making them legally binding, is strange because:
 - an MSP formula based on just cost, be it A2+FL or C2, ignoring its demand side, is patently inefficient. It will cost the nation heavily in due course.
 - making it legally binding will turn out to be anti-farmer as private trade will exit for fear of being jailed, and market prices will collapse even further and the government does not have the paraphernalia to procure, store, and distribute 23 commodities for which MSPs are announced.
 - It is not that higher MSPs cannot be given, but then government should just focus on 2-3 commodities and be ready to hold massive stocks, way beyond its buffer stock norms, as is the case with wheat and rice today. All this will amount to large inefficiency in the system.

Way forward

- India needs large reforms in its agri-markets, from reforming APMC markets to abolishing the Essential Commodities Act and rolling back all export restrictions.
- Encouraging contract farming, allowing private agri-markets in competition with APMC markets, capping commissions and fees to not more than 2 per cent for any commodity at any place in India, opening and expanding futures trading, negotiable warehouse receipt system, e-NAM with due system of assaying, grading, delivery and dispute settlement mechanisms, are some of the necessary steps needed urgently.
- Once this is done, major investments need to follow in improving the functioning of markets and building efficient value chains, especially of perishables. This can be done through the PPP mode, creating millions of jobs. But it needs sustained and focused efforts, steered by a strong minister as was done in the case of GST reforms.
- The time is also coming to think of a sustained income support for farmers.
- The small and marginal farmers often depend more on the money lenders, where the interest rates range from 24 to 48 per cent. What is needed is financial inclusion of these small and marginal farmers in institutional credit at reasonable interest rates and not outright loan waivers.
- PM's AASHA (Annadata Aay Sanrakshan Abhiyan) tried to give support through three sub-schemes — the Price Support Scheme, Price Deficiency Payment (PDP) and Private Procurement & Stockist Scheme. However, none of the states has implemented the scheme. The states must implement it.

Conclusion

Time, patience and vision to do all this is needed. If we go for quick fix of loan waivers, farmers will be back on the roads after another five years, asking for another loan waiver.

ANCHORED IN HUMAN RIGHTS

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

Instead of surveillance technologies, help TB patients by providing rights-based interventions.

Introduction

Decades of global neglect have resulted in tuberculosis (TB) becoming the leading cause of adult deaths in most of the global south — it kills nearly two million people a year. This is shocking given that TB is curable and preventable.

Signs of change

- A plan in India is to implant microchips in people in order to track them and ensure they complete TB treatment.
- There are also technological tweaks to the Directly Observed Treatment, short course (DOTS) strategy, which requires patients to report every day to a health authority, who watches them swallow their tablets.
- Now, governments use, or plan to soon use, a strategy of video, tablets, phones and drones to carry the old DOTS strategy into the technology era.

The human rights approach

- We can only beat TB using an approach anchored in human rights.
- Such an approach focusses on creating health systems that foster trust, partnership and dignity.
- This approach regards people with TB not as subjects to be controlled but as people to be partnered with.
- It assumes that people with TB have dignity, intelligence and empathy that motivate them to act in the best interests of themselves and their communities when empowered to do so.

Way forward

- International institutions, donors and countries need to focus and collaborate on the urgent production and distribution of affordable generics of bedaquiline and delamanid.
- Companies should be pressurised to drop their exorbitant prices so that vast majority of people are no longer excluded from accessing the drugs.
- Employ and deploy community health-care workers. In sufficient numbers equipped with proper training and dignified conditions of employment they would lead the response by bringing care to those furthest from the reach of traditional health-care systems. S

- Community-based structures such as “clinic committees” ensure accountability while also fostering partnership and trust between communities and their health-care systems. Grassroots civil society and community-based organisations also ensure accountability. Such organisations are indispensable and would thrive on comparatively small amounts of funding.

Conclusion

People with TB do not need to be watched, they need to be heard. The shiny allure of surveillance technology threatens to distract us from the real work of the TB response; work that involves partnering with communities to employ human-rights based strategies to beat TB.

CHROME IAS

IS IT TIME TO ABOLISH THE DEATH PENALTY?

Relevance: GS 2

Why has this issue cropped up?

This year India introduced the death penalty for those who rape minors. Following the gang rape of a young woman in Delhi in December 2012, amendments were made to the Indian Penal Code adding the death penalty for certain categories of rapes and repeat offenders.

Yes, it should be abolished because:

- How does killing a person who has killed a person show that killing is wrong?
- Most of the civilised world has abolished it.
- No study has shown that the death penalty deters murder more than life imprisonment.
- The death penalty is error-ridden. The Supreme Court has admitted that it has erred in 25% of the cases of death penalty.
- The death penalty unfairly targets the poor and marginalised.
- The death penalty is impossible to administer fairly or rationally.
- Punishment should not imitate crime. We do not rape rapists, or maim and disfigure those who have done this to others. Why do we have to kill killers?
- Nobody wants to undergo the trauma of administering the death penalty — not the higher courts and not the hapless prison staff who have to see a human being die gasping at the end of a rope.
- Governments kill prisoners to show that they are tough on crime. There is nothing muscular or tough about killing a man who is at your mercy.
- In 2007, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for a moratorium on the administration of the death penalty by the 59 countries that still retained it.
- Delays in the criminal justice system disproportionately affect those who suffer the tyranny of the uncertainty of their life.
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No, it should not be abolished because:

- Life can only be seen to be protected if those who take it away are proportionately punished.
- Its constitutionality has not only been upheld in India but also in the bastion of liberal democracy that is the U.S.
- India's neighbourhood is not peaceful. Every day vested interests attempt to destabilise our nation from across every border it shares. It is this peculiar nature of India's polity that must inform any debate for abolition.
- A punishment cannot be judged by its impact on criminals but by its impact on those who are still innocent.
- This punishment is a reflection of societal mores. It determines that there are certain acts which the society so essentially abhors that they justify the taking of the most crucial of rights – the right to life.
- The punishment is not arbitrary as courts have made sure that caution is exercised in giving the punishment. They have restricted it to only rarest of rare case. In the last 13 years, only four people have been executed.

Way forward

- For deterrence to work, the severity of the punishment has to coexist with the certainty and swiftness of the punishment.
- Death must only be imposed where the alternative option is unquestionably foreclosed.

Conclusion

Political will in India is still bound by populism. However, the constitutionality of the death penalty will continue to be challenged and, sooner or later, the Supreme Court will have to answer whether absence of political will is sufficient ground to override the right to life.

FARMING IN A WARMING WORLD

Relevance: GS 3

Theme of the article

Efforts to make agriculture climate-resilient must be scaled up and consolidated.

Why has this issue cropped up?

The Sixth Assessment Report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) establishes that the world has become 1°C warmer because of human activities, causing greater frequency of extremes and obstruction to the normal functioning of ecosystems.

Indian agriculture amid increasing warming

- India, with its diverse agro-climatic settings, is one of the most vulnerable countries.
- Its agriculture ecosystem, distinguished by high monsoon dependence, and with 85% small and marginal landholdings, is highly sensitive to weather abnormalities.
- There has been less than normal rainfall during the last four years, with 2014 and 2015 declared as drought years.
- Even the recent monsoon season ended with a rainfall deficit of 9%, which was just short of drought conditions.
- Research is also confirming an escalation in heat waves, in turn affecting crops, aquatic systems and livestock.
- The Economic Survey 2017-18 has estimated farm income losses between 15% and 18% on average, which could rise to 20%-25% for unirrigated areas without any policy interventions.

Steps needed

The above projections underline the need for strategic change in dealing with climate change in agriculture.

- There is a need to foster the process of climate adaptation in agriculture, which involves reshaping responses across both the micro- and macro-level decision-making culture.
- At the micro-level, traditional wisdom, religious epics and various age-old notions about weather variations still guide farmers' responses, which could be less effective. Corroborating these with climate assessments and effective extension and promoting climate resilient technologies will enhance their pragmatism.
- Climate exposure can be reduced through agronomic management practices such as inter and multiple cropping and crop-rotation; shift to non-farm activities; insurance covers; up-scaling techniques such as solar pumps, drip irrigation and sprinklers.

- There is an urgent need to educate farmers, reorient Krishi Vigyan Kendras and other grass-root organisations with specific and more funds about climate change and risk-coping measures.
- Climate adaptation actions in agriculture are closely intertwined with rural developmental interventions, calling for a holistic new paradigm. At the macro-level, climate adaptations are to be mainstreamed in the current developmental framework
- Mainstreaming adaptation into the policy apparatus has the potential to improve the resilience of several development outcomes.
- Expansion of extension facilities, improving irrigation efficiency, promotion of satellite-enabled agriculture risk management, creating micro-level agro-advisories, providing customised real time data, and capacity building of stakeholders are some initiatives towards building greater resilience in agriculture.
- Interventions such as the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, Soil Health Card, Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana, National Agriculture Market, or e-NAM, and other rural development programmes are positive interventions that can address the vulnerability of farmers and rural households.
- There are also exclusive climate and adaptation schemes being operationalised, such as the National Innovations on Climate Resilient Agriculture (NICRA), the National Mission for Sustainable Agriculture (NMSA), the National Adaptation Fund, and the State Action Plan on Climate Change (SAPCC).
- It is desirable to have a cultural change wherein some of the components under these schemes can be converged with major rural developmental programmes, which will further enhance their effectiveness at the grass-root level.
- The SAPCC is an important platform for adaptation planning but it needs to evolve further in terms of climate-oriented regional analysis to capture micro-level sensitivity and constraints.
- Moreover, convergence of climate actions with ongoing efforts and several Central schemes with similar mandates is a must.
- Greater expertise and consultations are required for a systematic prioritisation of actions and fiscal prudence for building climate resilient agriculture.

Conclusion

Efforts to make agriculture climate-resilient must be scaled up and consolidated.

THE SPECTRE OF DEPORTATION

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

The outcome of the NRC exercise has implications for India's ties with Bangladesh.

Why has this issue cropped up?

The last date for filing claims and objections for Assam's National Register of Citizens (NRC) has been extended by the Supreme Court to December 31, from December 15.

Introduction

The exercise of compiling the NRC has sparked a debate around its political, economic and humanitarian consequences, and its implications for India's relationship with its neighbours, particularly Bangladesh.

How India can lose from the NRC exercise ?

- According to the latest available Bangladesh government estimates of 2009, more than 500,000 Indians were working in Bangladesh.
- More recently, Bangladesh was reported to be among the highest source of remittances to India, behind the United Arab Emirates, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the U.K.
- Many Indian citizens are securing coveted employment opportunities in Bangladesh through multinational companies, non-governmental organisations, and trading activities.
- Most of the Indians are employed in advantageous jobs in Bangladesh while Bangladeshis in India are largely employed in low-paying jobs.

Is Bangladesh in a position to accept people who get deported due to NRC?

Bangladesh, already stretched in terms of resources and manpower to host Rohingya refugees, would not be acceding to a request of taking back Bengali-speaking Muslims in case deportation is initiated.

Is India's 'neighbourhood first policy' being pursued?

The present government came to power with proclamation of a 'Neighbourhood First' policy. However, the reality seems different which has had its consequences:

- Nepal, once a time-tested ally, has tilted towards China since the 2015 Nepal blockade barring the entry of fuel, medicine and other vital supplies and holding the state to a literal siege. Nepal now has been given access to four Chinese ports ending India's monopoly to its trading routes.

- The India-Bhutan relationship has also been strained ever since India temporarily withdrew subsidies on cooking gas and kerosene in 2013, constraining bilateral ties. Bhutan has, for instance, stepped out of India's diplomatic influence, as evidenced by its withdrawal from the Bangladesh-Bhutan-India-Nepal (BBIN) motor vehicles agreement.
- The India-China power play has also cast its shadow over Sri Lanka and the Maldives in the last few years.

Bangladesh: A trusted neighbour and ally of India

- Against the backdrop of China making inroads into South Asia and India's backyard, Bangladesh has so far been the most trusted ally of India.
- On the security front, it has cooperated in India's crackdown on insurgents.
- Annual bilateral trade is set to cross the \$9 billion mark, making it India's biggest trading partner in South Asia.
- In addition, Bangladesh has facilitated connectivity with the Northeast by allowing the use of Chittagong and Mongla ports.

Conclusion

The NRC issue threatens to disturb the equilibrium in India-Bangladesh ties.. Previous similar exercises have not been effective and only resulted in alienating individuals from their natural rights.

MAKING EVERY CITIZEN AN AUDITOR

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

Various steps need to be taken to strengthen social audits.

Significance of social audits

- Social audits show how people's participation in the planning, execution and monitoring of public programmes leads to better outcomes.
- They have strengthened the role of the gram sabha.

Origin and evolution of social audits

- Social audits were first mandated by law in 2005 under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).
- Subsequently, Parliament, the Supreme Court and many Central ministries mandated them in other areas as well.
- Social audit units (SAUs) have been established in 26 States .
- More than 5,000 full-time staff have been appointed.
- A 30-day rigorous training programme has been designed, and more than 4,200 people have been trained.

Shortcoming in the social audits programme

- The governing bodies of most social audit units (SAUs) are not independent.
- Some SAUs have to obtain sanction from the implementation agency before spending funds.
- More than half the States have not followed the open process specified in the standards for the appointment of the SAU's director.
- Some States have conducted very few audits and a few have not conducted any.
- Several states do not have adequate staff to cover all the panchayats even once a year.
- The action taken by the State governments in response to the social audit findings has been extremely poor.
- Adequate disciplinary action against people responsible for the irregularities are not being taken.

The way forward

- Social audits of the National Food Security Act (NFSA) have failed to take off due to lack of funds. Like the Rural Development Ministry, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and

Public Distribution should give funds to the SAUs and ask them to facilitate the social audits of the NFSA.

- Social audit units should have an independent governing body and adequate staff.
- Rules must be framed so that implementation agencies are mandated to play a supportive role in the social audit process and take prompt action on the findings.
- A real time management information system should track the calendar, the social audit findings and the action taken, and reports on these should be made publicly available.
- Social audit processes need mentoring and support as they expand into newer programmes.
- CAG as an institution could partner with local citizens and state audit societies to train them, build capacities and issue advisories on framing of guidelines, developing criteria, methodology and reporting for audit.

Conclusion

As efforts are being made to extend social audits to new areas, it is important to look at how well they are actually implemented based on parameters specified in the auditing standards jointly pioneered by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) and the Ministry of Rural Development.

RESTORING THE BALANCE

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

India must remain invested in strengthening democratic institutions in the Maldives.

Why has this article surfaced?

Recently, Maldivian President visited India which seems to have brought a tumultuous phase in India-Maldives ties to a close.

Points of engagement between India and Maldives

- Maldives President called India the island nation's "closest friend" and "reaffirmed his government's 'India-First' Policy", committing to working together closely with India.
- India, for its part, announced a financial assistance package of \$1.4 billion for the Maldives in the form of budgetary support, currency swap agreements and concessional lines of credit.
- Both have agreed to ensure that they would keep other's security interests in mind as they consolidate cooperation in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- They have agreed to strengthen maritime security cooperation in the IOR through coordinated patrol and aerial surveillance.
- In an attempt to boost trade ties, India welcomed the expanding opportunities for Indian companies to invest in the Maldives.
- Areas such fisheries development, tourism, transportation, connectivity, health, education, information technology, new and renewable energy and communications were earmarked for enhancing bilateral cooperation.

The China factor

- It is important from New Delhi's perspective that the new Maldives President Mr. Solih succeeds in the Maldives.
- Under Mr. Yameen, the Maldives had veered too close to China for India's comfort, welcoming Chinese money for major infrastructure projects and signing a controversial free trade agreement (FTA). India's entreaties for political moderation and closer security ties were summarily ignored.
- China's role in the Maldivian economy is under the scanner today amid growing concerns about the money the Maldives owes to China for infrastructure projects undertaken by Chinese construction companies. It is now estimated that China's loans to the Maldives total at least \$1.3 billion, or a quarter of the island nation's gross domestic product.
- Faced with this crisis, the new Maldivian government is looking to India for more budgetary support to help meet its development goals and is also planning to revise the FTA with China.

- Malé has also made it clear that while the neighbourhood will clearly be a priority for the Solih government, China will continue to play an important role as an economic partner. So China is not going to disappear from the Maldivian foreign policy matrix. Nor should India expect it to.
- However, the logic of geography dictates that India's role will be critical in determining the trajectory of political developments in the Maldives.

Mature handling of the Maldives crisis

- India's patient handling of the Maldives crisis over the last few years has positioned it well.
- By coordinating its response with other like-minded regional and extra-regional players, India increased the costs for Mr. Yameen.

India's significance for Maldives

- Maldives would need the support of India as its challenges remain acute.
- The institutional fabric of the country has been battered under Mr. Yameen's assault even as the threat of Islamist extremism has grown in potency.
- Governance will continue to be challenging as the forces which came together to bring down Mr. Yameen may not be cohesive enough in running the nation and strengthening its democratic foundations.

Conclusion

India should not be deterred by temporary setbacks. Instead of perpetually viewing the dynamics from a China-centric perspective, it must keep its eyes firmly on the long term. The more invested New Delhi is in strengthening democratic institutions in its neighbourhood, the better returns it will get in its foreign policy.

RBI's INDEPENDENCE

Relevance: GS 3

Introduction

A pushback is underway, globally, against the tenet of central bank independence.

Argument in favour of independence

Independent central banks are better at controlling inflation. Shielded from the pressures of day-to-day politics, they can take a longer term view and make unpopular decisions.

Argument against independence

Economies with independent central banks don't always do better in financial crises. The reason is that, as central banks have turned to new tools such as bondbuying, they have taken on more of the roles (of) lawmakers and government spending.

The dilemma

- The debate on central banks' independence comes down to a larger dilemma in democracies. That is, how much to leave to dispassionate experts who can take cold, hard decisions, rather than to popularly elected governments that are susceptible to short term pressures?
- Do governments take populist, economically unsound decisions? Of course, they do from time to time. But equally, are unaccountable, unelected technical experts infallible? Sadly, they are not. More on this below.

The recent global trends

- The recent years have seen a pushback against central banks' independence.
- A major turning point was the global economic crisis of 2008. The US Federal Reserve was accused of having kept interest rates too low and causing the crisis.
- Globally, though central banks' formal operational independence is still rather new – for instance, the Bank of England only got it in 1997 – there are already reverses. In 2013 the Bank of Japan agreed to coordinate policy with the government, and other nations are trying to follow suit.
- In recent years India's RBI has been accused of repeatedly getting its inflation forecast wrong and keeping interest rates too high, thus starving a growing economy of much needed liquidity.

Are bureaucrat governors antithetical to RBI's independence?

- The assumption that former bureaucrats are sure to be pliant RBI governors is not borne out from experience, with both YV Reddy and D Subbarao having been widely respected.
- In fact, Stiglitz went so far as to say that the last US recession might have been avoided if Reddy had been the Fed chairman.

Conclusion

RBI governor needs to find a balance between taking tough, unpopular decisions – with or without government backing – while also keeping an open mind towards urgent, short to medium term economic imperatives.

CHROME IAS

TOWARDS A GENETIC PANOPTICON

Relevance: GS 3

Theme of the article

The DNA Bill will give the state untrammelled access to deeply personal and penetrating material.

Why has this issue cropped up?

The DNA Technology (Use and Application) Regulation Bill, 2018 is to be presented for consideration by the Rajya Sabha.

Problems with the draft Bill

- It disregards the serious ethical dilemmas that are attendant to the creation of a national DNA database.
- It virtually treats DNA as infallible, and as a solution to the many problems that ail the criminal justice system.
- Any infringement of civil liberties, caused by an almost indiscriminate collection of DNA, is seen as a legitimate trade-off made in the interests of ensuring superior justice delivery.
- The proposed law is not only vague on how it intends to maintain this DNA Bank, but it also conflates its objectives by allowing the collection of DNA evidence not only in aid of criminal investigations but also to aid the determination of civil disputes.
- Given that in India, even illegally obtained evidence is admissible in a court of law, so long as the relevance and genuineness of such material can be established, the Bill's failure to place sufficient checks on the use of DNA evidence collected in breach of the law makes the process altogether more frightening.

Why do we need a DNA law?

- The genes encoded in deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), which can be collected from blood, hair, skin cells and other such bodily substances, have undoubtedly proven to be an important tool in forensic science.
- Much like fingerprints, a person's DNA profile is unique (except in the case of identical twins) and can, therefore, help in establishing the identity of, say, a suspect.
- That only a small amount of genetic material is needed to create such a profile makes the form of evidence especially appealing to criminal investigators.
- Across the world, the use of DNA evidence has helped exonerate a number of innocent people from wrongful conviction, and has also helped find the guilty party in complex investigations.
- Thus, we need a law to help regulate the manner and circumstances in which the state may be entitled to collect biological material from a person.

- The requirement for such a law is only accentuated by an amendment made to the Code of Criminal Procedure in 2005, which expressly authorises investigating officers of a crime to collect a DNA sample from an accused with the help of a medical practitioner.
- A range of privacy protections that are absent in the Bill.

State's coercive power

While consent is not required before bodily substances are drawn from a person accused and arrested for an offence punishable with either death or imprisonment for a term exceeding seven years, in all other cases a person refusing to part with genetic material can be compelled to do so if a Magistrate has reasonable cause to believe that such evidence would help establish a person's guilt. Therefore, there's no end to the state's power in coercing a person to part with her DNA.

Right to privacy

- In August 2017, the Supreme Court in Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India declared that the Constitution recognises a fundamental right to privacy, it also explicated the various facets of this right. Significantly, it ruled that any meaningful right to privacy would include protection over the physical body.
- A 2012 report filed by a group of experts on privacy, led by Justice A.P. Shah, found explicitly that a person's basic liberties stand violated by a compelled extraction of DNA from her body.
- The state must show that there exists a legitimate reason for extracting DNA evidence, and that the extent and scope of such extraction does not disproportionately contravene a person's right to privacy.

Conclusion

To enact the law in its present form would only add a new, menacing weapon to the state's rapidly expanding surveillance mechanism. We cannot allow the benefits of science and technology to be privileged over the grave risks in allowing the government untrammelled access to deeply personal and penetrating material.

ISLAND HOPPING

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

After repairing ties with the Maldives, New Delhi should strengthen its Indian Ocean outreach.

Why has this issue cropped up?

Recently, the President of the Maldives, visited India on his first visit abroad.

Maldives under Yameen

The five-year-long tenure of his predecessor, Abdulla Yameen, was marked by a serious deterioration in ties with India, as Mr. Yameen steadily took his nation towards authoritarianism and into a close embrace with China.

Maldives under Solih

- Solih has assured New Delhi that the Maldives is pivoting to the 'India First' policy.
- Solih's government has adopted a different vision — one anchored in decentralised and people-centric governance. India seems to enjoy a special place in his worldview. He stressed that it is "our closest neighbour".
- Solih's visit reflects a fine balance between the interests of both countries.

India's - Maldives deals during Solih's visit

- To help the Maldives address its budget deficit and development challenges, India has worked out a generous \$1.4 billion assistance package.
- Besides, India has offered visa facilitation that will allow Maldivians to visit India easily (with reciprocal facilities for Indian visitors to the Maldives)
- India has also offered support to the Maldives as it seeks to rejoin the Commonwealth and its entry into the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA).
- The visit resulted in the conclusion of four agreements relating to cooperation for information technology, culture, agri-business, and visa arrangements.
- The new government has also given assurances to be fully sensitive to India's security and strategic concerns, in the light of reports that China has gained access to one or more islands for military purposes
- On the valid ground that the security interests of both countries are "interlinked", India and the Maldives have agreed to be mindful of "each other's concerns and aspirations for the stability of the region".
- The two governments now plan "to enhance maritime security" in the Indian Ocean Region.

What India hopes to gain from the 'new' Maldives?

- The expectation in Delhi is that the Indian Navy and Coast Guard will now be able to secure better cooperation from the Maldives for coordinated patrolling, aerial surveillance and capacity building.
- Besides, intelligence agencies hope to revert to nurturing better collaboration in combating terrorism and other non-traditional security challenges. This is significant, considering that radicalisation is a live issue there.
- The trade and investment facet of the bilateral relationship is of a modest nature, given the country's small population. The annual value of bilateral trade is \$200 million. India Inc., therefore, hopes to increase its presence in the Maldivian market.

The China factor

- The deliberations in Delhi took place as China's footprint in South Asia has increased in recent years.
- There is a growing realisation that, owing to Beijing's strategic objectives, economic capability and assertive diplomacy, it is not feasible for India to supplant China in neighbouring countries.
- But India has its own advantages, assets and friends. The intention is to leverage them fully, deriving benefit from the neighbours' essential thirst for maintaining balance in their external relations.

What lies ahead for India in South Asia ?

The change in the Maldives has been followed by a re-assertion of democratic impulses in Sri Lanka, as symbolised by the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as the Prime Minister. India enjoys close relations with Mauritius and the Seychelles. A new grouping of India, the Maldives, Sri Lanka, Mauritius and the Seychelles, focussed on maritime security and economic development, looks attainable in the short term.

Conclusion

India should accord equal importance to its two key goals: address its neighbours' concerns on security challenges; and harness enticing opportunities for the Blue Economy.

IF YOU WANT TO HELP FARMERS

Relevance: GS 3

Why has this issue cropped up?

The talk of the season on the farm front seems to be loan waivers. Farmer leaders are asking for it and those looking for power are ready to oblige. Newly elected chief ministers of Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan have all announced loan waivers within their promised time of 10 days.

The statistics of loan waiver

- The total outstanding credit to agriculture currently is likely to be around Rs 12-13 lakh crore.
- If all of this is waived off it will simply blow up the budget. It is not feasible.
- So, several restrictions will be put, such as limiting it to short-term crop loans only, maximum limit of say Rs 2 lakh per farmer, and, only from nationalised banks and PACs.
- Despite these restrictions, the total bill is not likely to settle below Rs 4 lakh crore, and may even touch around Rs 5 lakh crore.

Will loan waiver help small farmers?

- The loan waiver is only a temporary relief, that too tilted towards larger farmers.
- Institutional credit comprises about 64 per cent of total credit taken by all farmers, the remaining 36 per cent coming from non-institutional sources
- Further, it is the large farmers who take a larger proportion of their credit from institutional sources (about 80 per cent)
- The marginal farmers with holdings of less than one hectare, who constitute 68.5 per cent of the peasantry, actually take more than half of their loans from non-institutional sources at interest rates that range from 24-36 per cent, and sometimes even higher.

Can there be a better method to support farmers ?

- The alternative is to think of a structured and stable income/investment support policy for farmers.
- An improvised version of Telangana's Rythu Bandhu scheme could serve as a starting point. Under this scheme, the government can give Rs 10,000/ha as investment support to cultivators. Payments under this scheme could be inversely related to the holding size, making it more pro-small holders.
- Farms can be geo-tagged to ensure that only those farmers get benefits who are cultivating land.
- Land records will have to be upgraded to include tenants. Government records still show only 10 per cent of tenancy in the country while ground realities are very different.

- The Centre should also include fertiliser subsidy into this and encourage states to transfer their power subsidy through this platform based on per hectare basis. Such a policy can reach the largest number of farmers, be more equitable, the least market distorting, and predictable.

Conclusion

Striking the right balance between consumers and farmers is the need of the hour.

CHROME IAS

BEING A GOOD NEIGHBOUR

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

India must shed its zero-sum style foreign policy-making, and work towards South Asian integration.

The South Asia problem

- South Asia is one of the world's least integrated regions, and India is one of the world's least regionally-integrated major powers.
- There are structural impediments (posed by both India and its neighbours) in fostering regional integration, the most significant handicap is India's ideational disinclination towards its neighbourhood.
- Successive regimes have considered the neighbourhood as an irritant and challenge, not an opportunity.
- Seldom have India's policies displayed a sense of belonging to the region or a desire to work with the neighbourhood for greater integration and cooperation.
- Today, we have become even more transactional, impatient and small-minded towards our neighbourhood which has, as a result, restricted our space for manoeuvre in the regional geopolitical scheme of things.
- India's neighbourhood policy is at a critical juncture: while its past policies have ensured a steady decline in its influence and goodwill in the region, the persistent absence of a coherent and well-planned regional policy will most definitely ensure that it eventually slips out of India's sphere of influence.

The present scenario

- Government's neighbourhood policy began exceptionally well with Mr. Modi reaching out to the regional capitals and making grand foreign policy commitments.
- But almost immediately, it seemed to lose a sense of diplomatic balance, for instance, when it tried to interfere with the Constitution-making process in Nepal and was accused of trying to influence electoral outcomes in Sri Lanka.
- While India's refugee policy went against its own traditional practices, it was found severely wanting on the Rohingya question, and seemed clueless on how to deal with the political crisis in the Maldives.
- The arrival of an India-friendly Ibrahim Mohamed Solih regime in Male has brought much cheer, and the return of Ranil Wickremesinghe as Sri Lankan Prime Minister is to India's advantage too.
- Nepal has reached out to India to put an end to the acrimony that persisted through 2015 to 2017.

- Bhutan, Myanmar and Bangladesh are also positively disposed towards India, though the relationship with Pakistan continues to be testy and directionless.

What should India do?

- India must shed its aggression and deal with tricky situations with far more diplomatic subtlety and finesse. The ability of diplomacy lies in subtly persuading the smaller neighbour to accept an argument rather than forcing it to, which is bound to backfire.
- It must be kept in mind that meddling in the domestic politics of neighbour countries is a recipe for disaster, even when invited to do so by one political faction or another. Preferring one faction or regime over another is unwise in the longer term.
- India must not fail to follow up on its promises to its neighbours. It has a terrible track record in this regard.
- There is no point in competing with China where China is at an advantage vis-à-vis India. India simply does not have the political, material or financial wherewithal to outdo China in building infrastructure. Hence India must invest where China falls short, especially at the level of institution-building and the use of soft power.
- India must invest a great deal more in soft power promotion. To begin with, India could expand the scope and work of the South Asian University (SAU).
- While reimagining its neighbourhood policy, New Delhi must also look for convergence of interests with China in the Southern Asian region spanning from Afghanistan to Nepal to Sri Lanka. There are several possible areas of convergence, including counter terrorism, regional trade and infrastructure development.
- There needs to be better regional trading arrangements.
- Several of India's border States have the capacity to engage in trading arrangements with neighbouring countries. This should be made easier by the government by way of constructing border infrastructure and easing restrictions on such border trade.
- There should be more attempts at forging multilateral arrangements, including by resurrecting the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

Conclusion

India's foreign policy planners need to reimagine the country's neighbourhood policy before it is too late. New Delhi has a real opportunity today to recalibrate its neighbourhood relations.

STRANGE DEAL

Relevance: GS 3

Theme of the article

The new e-commerce policy betrays a muddled view of online and offline retail.

Why did govt formulate new policy?

The government is keen to quell the long-brewing disquiet among offline retailers over big discount sales and the surge in e-commerce.

Is govt's new policy justified?

The govt could have waited for the recommendations of a national e-commerce policy task force set up this April.

Previous e-commerce rules

- Foreign investment up to 100% was allowed under the automatic route for e-com firms engaged in business-to-business transactions using the marketplace model — one where a firm sets up an enabling IT platform to facilitate trade between sellers and buyers.
- However, FDI was not allowed where the e-com player owned the inventory of goods to be sold, or for business-to-consumer purposes, barring a few exceptions.

New e-commerce rules

- Now, the rules have been altered for players like Amazon or Flipkart (majority-owned by Walmart) that have made significant investments in India.
- For instance, earlier a single vendor or its group firms couldn't account for over 25% of sales in a marketplace; now the rules bar sales by any entities where the e-com firm has an equity stake.
- A vendor's inventory will be deemed to be controlled by the e-com player if more than 25% of its purchases are from the latter or related firms.
- Any specialised back-end support for some sellers must now be extended to all vendors, while discounts, cash-backs and preferential subscription services have been made far trickier to implement.
- An e-commerce marketplace entity will not mandate any seller to offer a product exclusively on its platform under the new rules.

Problems with the new e-commerce policy

- New foreign direct investment norms for e-commerce players could end up scuttling investor interest in the sector that has attracted large foreign players and generated thousands of jobs.

- The fresh restrictions and the clarifications on certain operational aspects could reinforce investor complaints about India being unpredictable in terms of policies.
- The new rules don't explain what to do when a seller voluntarily opts to sell exclusively on one e-commerce portal over another.
- It's not clear how the new rules will help meet the principle enunciated in the policy note — fairness and the creation of a non-discriminatory, level playing field.

Way forward

Globally, India has been taking on protectionism, and this month the Finance Minister said free trade is essential so consumers get the best deal everywhere. The same consumer focus and non-protectionist tenets must be applied for internal trade.

Conclusion

India's retail FDI policy remains muddled — with the debate now focussing on online vs offline trade as opposed to big vs small, or a single brand vs multi-brand retail FDI regime.

PLAN BEFORE MAKING A BID

Relevance: GS 2

Theme of the article

The Indian Olympic Association must consider several issues if it wishes to host the 2032.

Why has this issue cropped up?

India has expressed interest to host the 2032 Summer Olympic Games, apart from the 2026 Summer Youth Olympic Games and the 2030 Asian Games.

Hosting Olympics is a difficult task

The Olympic Games have been designed to leave an indelible mark on host cities, with long-term benefits. However, the Games have proven to be more of a liability than an asset. They have daunted countries even from submitting complete bids.

The changing bidding process to host Olympics

- Till now, Olympic bids were made keeping in mind a single city as the venue for the Games.
- Today, it is almost impossible to find a metropolitan city which can sustain the enormous influx of people and build the infrastructure required to host the Games. In view of this concern, multi-city bids are now welcomed.

Suggestions for Indian Olympic Association

The Indian Olympic Association must consider several issues if it wishes to host the Games.

- First, to be considered a sporting powerhouse, India must leave a mark at the 2020 Olympic Games to convince the world that it takes sports seriously.
- Second, India has hosted only a handful of multisport events, with none really matching up to the grandeur and scale of the Olympic Games. Hosting multisport events in the coming years may prove to be key in cementing its prowess to pull off the mighty event.
- Third, typically, the Olympic Games are funded through public and private money. Designing a long-term investment plan will ensure high participation from the private sector, reducing the burden on government funds.
- Fourth, the government should make the most of this opportunity to tackle issues of the environment, waste management, public health, and sanitation, to ensure clean and safe facilities for the Olympic athletes.
- Fifth, any government would like the prestige of having hosted an Olympic Games during its tenure. Working together with a stable democratic polity would prove to be a huge attraction for participating countries.
- Finally, identifying locations for hosting the games early on will help create facilities that have a longer life span and would also help reduce costs.

Conclusion

Creating an Olympic bid with an outlook of primarily channelising development efforts for the country will prove to be a win-win situation. It is only when we view the Games as a long-term development enabler that it can be made a sustainable proposition.

CHROME IAS

LIFELINES BEYOND FARM LOAN WAIVERS

Relevance: GS 3

Theme of the article

In addition to reforming the credit system, agriculture should be made profitable.

Why has this issue cropped up?

Rural agrarian distress is firmly at the centre of the national discourse today, triggered by the continuous farmer agitations in the past two years.

Loan waivers becoming a norm

- A farm loan waiver was among the first steps taken by the three new governments in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, and has understandably set off a debate about its usefulness.
- Since 2014, there have been similar moves in Telangana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Punjab.

The need of loan waivers

- The political system is essentially responding to a cry of distress by addressing the direct point of pain.
- It is their mounting debt burden that is pushing farmers to despair and suicides.
- The NSSO Survey shows that 52% of farming households are indebted, with rates as high as 89-92% in some States.
- A loan waiver is an acknowledgment that farmers have been pushed into debt due to the systemic failures of the government.

Major reasons for farm debt

- lack of compensation during drought and disasters,
- the failures of the crop insurance scheme, and
- the deficit due to prices falling below the announced Minimum Support Prices

Questions that loan waivers raise

- How can one ensure that its benefit reaches small and marginal cultivators who are the ones who really require relief?
- And how does one guarantee that the same situation is not replayed five years later?

Loan waivers are not a solution

Repeated loan waivers used every few years are not in the interest of farmers. Immediate relief should be accompanied by a long-term systemic solution to indebtedness.

The plight of marginal farmers

- A study showed that 75% of farmer suicides in Telangana are by tenant farmers.
- The Reserve Bank of India did issue guidelines in 2014 for extending loans to Bhoomi Heen Kisan (landless farmers) and for a debt-swapping scheme to convert informal loans of farmers into bank loans, but they have remained on paper

Finding long term solutions

- Need of a functional institutional credit system which is accessible and accountable to all cultivators. This should cover not only land-owning farmers but also sharecroppers, tenants, adivasi and women farmers, and animal-rearers.
- Requirement of the registration of all cultivators and providing them Kisan credit cards.
- Need of protection from debt trap in bad years.
- Establishment of farmers' distress and disaster relief commissions at the national and State levels, based on the model of Kerala's Farmers' Debt Relief Commission.
- Given that agriculture is a key national enterprise, the concepts of limited liability and bankruptcy protection need to be adapted to the farming sector. This approach provides targeted protection to distressed farmers when they require it, rather than allowing debt, distress and suicides to accumulate until an election year.
- Agriculture should be made profitable by ensuring fair remunerative prices, lowering the cost of cultivation, and promoting viable farmer collectives and sustainable models of agriculture.

Conclusion

The challenge before political parties and governments is to deliver on the institutional solutions demanded by farmers. The farming community is not likely to relent if governments adopt a business-as-usual approach.