NATIONAL SOCIAL ISSUES- WOMEN, POPULATION, URBANISATION, EMPOWERMENT ETC

ISRO launches Samwad with Students on New Year Day

As part of the enhanced outreach programme of Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO), a new platform named "Samwad with Students" (SwS) was launched in Bengaluru.

SwS Initiative:

- ISRO aims to engage youngsters across India to capture their scientific temperament.
- The new conversation mission will inspire students cutting across schools and colleges.
- The first SwS event saw 40 wards and 10 teachers from select schools interact with ISRO Chairman Dr K Sivan at the Anthariksh Bhavan.

Women's Wall in Kerala

Kerala government had on January 1st organised the Women's Wall or Vanitha Mathil to "protect renaissance values.Around thirty lakh women formed a human chain across the National Highway from Kasargod to Thiruvananthapuram, around 620-kilometre long, extending their support to the state government's resolve to implement the Supreme Court's verdict allowing women of all ages access to Sabarimala and to protect the secular and progressive values of Kerala.

Organised by the government and supported by various social organisations having links with the renaissance movement, the Women's Wall is an attempt by the government to defend the state from communal forces.

No new Engineering Colleges from 2020

A government committee, headed by IIT-Hyderabad chairman B V R Mohan Reddy has advised the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) to stop setting up new colleges from 2020 and review the creation of new capacity every two years after that.

Mohan Reddy Committee Recommendations

- The panel in its report has suggested that no additional seats should be approved in traditional engineering areas such as mechanical, electrical, civil and electronics.
- It suggested that institutes should be encouraged to convert current capacity in traditional disciplines to emerging new technologies.
- This recommendation has been justified on the ground that current capacity utilization in traditional disciplines is just 40% as opposed to 60% seat occupancy in branches such as computer science, aerospace engineering and mechatronics.
- The committee has urged the AICTE to introduce UG engineering programmes exclusively for artificial intelligence, blockchain, robotics, quantum computing, data sciences, cybersecurity and 3D printing and design.
- As for approving additional seats in existing institutions, the committee has suggested that the AICTE should only give approvals based on the capacity utilization of concerned institute.

Reasons behind this move:

- A study in Dec. 2017 has found there were no takers for 51 per cent of the 15.5 lakh B.E/B.Tech seats in 3,291 engineering colleges in 2016-17.
- The investigation found glaring gaps in regulation, including alleged corruption; poor infrastructure, labs and faculty; non-existent linkages with industry; and absence of a technical ecosystem to nurture the classroom.
- All this, it found, accounted for low employability of graduates.
- A few weeks later, the AICTE had announced its decision to reduce the intake in courses with poor admissions by half from the academic year 2018-19, a move aimed at addressing the mismatch.
- Following this, the total number of B.Tech and M.Tech seats this year, across all AICTE-approved institutes, dropped by 1.67 lakh – the sharpest fall in five years and almost double of what was witnessed in 2017-18.

INDIAN HERITAGE AND CULTURE, HISTORY

Bhima Koregaon anniversary

January 1st, 2018 marks the 201st anniversary of the Bhima Koregaon battle. This battle was fought in Bhima Koregaon, a district in Pune with a strong historical Dalit connection, between the Peshwa forces and the British on January 1, 1818. The British army, which comprised mainly of Dalit soldiers, fought the upper caste-dominated Peshwa army. The British troops defeated the Peshwa army.

Outcomes of the battle:

The victory was seen as a win against caste-based discrimination and oppression. Peshwas were notorious for their oppression and persecution of Mahar dalits. The victory in the battle over Peshwas gave dalits a moral victory a victory against caste-based discrimination and oppression and sense of identity.

However, the divide and rule policy of the British created multiple fissures in Indian society which is even visible today in the way of excessive caste and religious discrimination which needs to be checked keeping in mind the tenets of the Constitution.

PM modi visited Andaman Islands

PM Modi has recently renamed three islands in Andaman & Nicobar. The three islands — Ross Island, Neil Island and Havelock Island — will now be called Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Island, Shaheed Dweep and Swaraj Dweep.

He also hoisted a 150-feet-high national flag at Port Blair to mark the 75th anniversary of freedom fighter Subhash Chandra Bose's declaration of the formation of the Azad Hind government in 1943.

Why Andaman has always been a neglected Island:

- Prime Ministers of India rarely travel to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi visited in 1984 and 1986 respectively and Manmohan Singh went there in early 2005 to review the tsunami relief operations.
- For political Delhi, the island chain was at best a remote outpost acquired by default from the departing British Raj.
- That attitude filtered down the entire system of governance in Delhi. For India's continentalist security establishment, weighed down by difficult land borders to the north and the west, the Indian Ocean is a distant domain.
- The nation's island territories — the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the east and the Lakshadweep to the west — barely figure on Delhi's mental map.

CONSTITUTION AND POLITY

Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2018

The triple talaq bill was recently passed in the Lok Sabha and is to be passed by the Rajya Sabha.

Background: The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2017 was introduced and passed in Lok Sabha. But the 2017 Bill was listed for withdrawal, due to lack of consensus in the Rajya Sabha. So an Ordinance was promulgated in September 2018 for the interim period.

The Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, 2018 now replaces the ordinance. The 2018 Bill underwent a near debate less passage in the Lok Sabha. The government rejected the Opposition's demand in the Rajya Sabha to send the Bill to a joint select committee for further scrutiny. So there is again a standoff in the Rajya Sabha for its passage.

Key changes in 2018 Bill:

- The Bill makes all declaration of talaq, including in written or electronic form, to be void (i.e. not enforceable in law) and illegal.
- Offence and penalty - The Bill makes a declaration of talaq a cognizable offence. It could attract up to 3 years imprisonment with a fine.
- The offence will be cognizable only if information relating to the offence is given by - the married woman (against whom talaq has been declared), or any person related to her by blood or marriage
- Bail - The Bill provides that the Magistrate may grant bail to the accused.The bail may be granted only after hearing the woman. The Magistrate has to be satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for granting bail.
- Compounding - The offence may be compounded by the Magistrate upon the request of the woman. The terms and conditions of the compounding of the offence will be determined by the Magistrate.
- Allowance - The woman is entitled to seek subsistence allowance from her husband for herself and for her dependent children. The amount of the allowance will be determined by the Magistrate.
- Custody - The woman is entitled to seek custody of her minor children.

GOVERNANCE- SCHEMES, E-GOVERNANCE, SERVICES ETC

Success of Saubhagya scheme in Maharastra

Maharashtra has completed the 100% electrification under the central scheme of 'Saubhagya' and has illuminated 10,93,614 homes before the stipulated deadline of December 31. Under the Saubhagya scheme, the target of 100% electrification of the state was to be achieved by December 31, 2018. However, the State Power Utility (SPU) achieved the target on December 27, 2018 itself.

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SAUBHAGYA Scheme:
- Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana – 'Saubhagya' was launched in September, 2017.
- Under Saubhagya free electricity connections to all households (both APL and poor families) in rural areas and poor families in urban areas will be provided.
- Rural Electrification Corporation (REC) has been designated as nodal agency for the Saubhagya scheme.
- The scheme aims to achieve universal household electrification in all parts of the country.
- All DISCOMs including Private Sector DISCOMs, State Power Departments and RE Cooperative Societies shall be eligible for financial assistance under the scheme in line with Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Gram Jyoti Yojana (DDUGJY).

Eligibility: The prospective beneficiary households for free electricity connections under the scheme would be identified using SECC 2011 data. However, un-electrified households not covered under SECC data would also be provided electricity connections under the scheme on payment of Rs. 500 which shall be recovered by DISCOMs in 10 instalments through electricity bill.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS- BILATERAL, GROUPINGS, ORGANISATIONS

Panda Bonds Pakistan:
For the first time in history, the Pakistan federal cabinet has approved a new financial strategy called Panda-Bonds in Pakistan. These bonds will become the new and favorable method to raise foreign exchange.

Panda Bonds:
- A Panda bond is a Chinese renminbi-denominated bond from a non-Chinese issuer, sold in the People's Republic of China. These bonds were first issued in 2005 by the International Finance Corporation and the Asian Development Bank.
- The Chinese government had been negotiating for several years about implementation details before permitting the sale of such bonds; they had been concerned about the possible effects on their currency peg.

Benefits to Pakistan : The bonds will help Pakistan's government to diversify the current investor base in capital market insurance and will also be used as a source of raising Renminbi. Furthermore, the tenor, size and pricing will be determined according to the market response at the time of issuance.

Sheikh Hasina won Election again
Bangladesh PM Sheikh Hasina has won a fourth term in the just concluded elections, which makes her the longest serving head of government that the nearly 50-year-old country has known.

Details of the elections
- Awami League took 288 of the 300 elected seats in the 350-member JatiyaSangsad, the Bangladeshi Parliament, and as a result will get to nominate its candidates to most of the remaining seats, all of which are reserved for women.
- With just seven seats of its own, the Opposition Jatiya Oikiya Front has been wiped out.

Reason for the victory:
- Economic progress : Despite all the troubles in Bangladesh, one reason why voters have reposed their trust in her for the third consecutive term — one term was in the '90s — is because of the country's economic progress which has provided jobs and in turn contributed to what are South Asia's best social indicators.
- Weak opposition: The main opposition leader Khalida Zia is in jail

Importance of the Victory for India
- As a friend of Hasina, Delhi is clearly happy at the election outcome.
- PM Modi was the first foreign leader to call and congratulate her on the victory.
- Ties between the two countries have never been better, leading Modi to describe it as the "golden era" in bilateral relations.
- India has made trade concessions to Bangladesh, invested more money in the country, and is in the midst of several infrastructure and connectivity projects.
- The Hasina government has shut down camps of terrorist groups operating in India's Northeast from safe havens in Bangladesh. The only outstanding issue between the two is the Teesta river waters sharing agreement. India has rightly stayed out of the internal tumult over the last five years or more.

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INDIAN ECONOMY

RBI proposes loan restructuring of MSMEs

The RBI has proposed a one-time loan restructuring scheme for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs). The loan restructuring would be a big relief for troubled small businesses hit by demonetisation in late 2016 and the implementation of goods and services tax (GST) in July 2017. The features of the restructuring scheme proposed by the RBI are:

- The scheme is applicable to the stressed accounts provided the total fund and non-fund based exposure to such a borrower does not surpass Rs 25 crore.
- The scheme will be applicable to the existing loans of the MSMEs that are in default but classified as 'standard' as on January 1, 2019, without an asset classification downgrade.
- The restructuring has to be implemented by March 31, 2020.
- A provision of 5 per cent of the total outstanding loan, in addition to the money already set aside to cover potential losses, will have to be made for such borrowers.
- Each bank or non-banking financial company (NBFC) should formulate a policy which includes a framework for viability assessment of the stressed accounts and regular monitoring of the restructured accounts.
- The loan restructuring scheme would be applicable for the borrowers who are GST-registered on the date of implementation of restructuring.
- The restructuring would provide a stimulus to the economy since the MSME sector contributes significantly to job creation and employs around 12 crore people, the second largest after the agriculture sector

Norms for the manufacturing of defence items relaxed

The government has relaxed norms for the manufacturing of the defence items. As per new norms, manufacturing of items of defence aerospace and warships will now be covered by Industries (Development and Regulation) Act and will not require any licence from the Commerce and Industry Ministry.

The Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (DIPP), under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, has issued a clarification on the list of defence products requiring a compulsory licence under Industries (Development & Regulation) Act, 1951 (IDRA), and Arms Act, 1959.

The new norms together with enhancing the ease of doing business will aid in attracting investments and fasten the process of indigenisation of defence production.

ENVIRONMENT- CONSERVATION, BIO-DIVERSITY AND ISSUES

States set to roll out Parivesh

An ambitious web-based single-window system Parivesh (Pro-Active and Responsive facilitation by Interactive, Virtuous and Environmental Single-window Hub) for environmental clearances will be rolled-out at state levels by January 15. Parivesh provides for an automated system for submission, clearance and monitoring. Parivesh is expected to bring an end to the clearance nightmare for entrepreneurs. Parivesh has already been implemented at the Central level.

Parivesh: Parivesh is a web-based workflow application which has been developed for online submission and monitoring of the proposals submitted by the proponents for seeking Environment, Forest, Wildlife and CRZ Clearances from Central, State and district level authorities. Parivesh automates the entire tracking of proposals which includes online submission of a new proposal, editing/updating the details of proposals and displays status of the proposals at each stage of the workflow.

Benefits of the Parivesh

- Parivesh empowers the proponent to track real-time pendency of their proposals or applications. The system will show a bar chart about the delay at each level of clearance.
- The sharp reduction in the time taken for issuance of Terms of Reference (TOR) for a project is the biggest benefit of the scheme.
- Parivesh removes manual intervention and puts the proposals on the first-come-first-serve basis for agenda. Also barring a few special and specific mentions of a project, the minutes of a meeting will be auto-generated by the system and made available on the same day. This enhances the transparency of the system.
- Parivesh provides for an amalgamation of various objectives of government like Digital India initiated by the Prime Minister and capturing the essence of Minimum Government and Maximum Governance

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