

NATIONAL SOCIAL ISSUES- WOMEN, POPULATION, URBANISATION, EMPOWERMENT ETC**National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP)**

The Rural Development Ministry has proposed to bring in the following changes in monthly pensions under the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP):

- For the elderly poor, disabled and widows pensions are to be increased from the current Rs. 200 to Rs. 800.
- For those above the age of 80, the proposal is to increase the pension from Rs. 500 to Rs.1,200 a month.

The Ministry has submitted the proposal, which would have an additional annual cost implication of Rs. 18,000 crore, to the Finance Ministry to be considered for inclusion in the interim Budget to be presented on February 1.

About National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP):

- The NSAP is a Centrally Sponsored Scheme under the Ministry of Rural Development. It came into effect from 15th August, 1995.
- It represents a significant step towards the fulfillment of the DPSP in Article 41 of the Constitution. In particular, Article 41 of the Constitution of India directs the State to provide public assistance to its citizens in case of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement and in other cases of undeserved want within the limit of its economic capacity and development.
- It aims to provide financial assistance to the elderly, widows and persons with disabilities in the form of social pensions.
- Coverage: It currently covers more than three crore people who are below the poverty line (BPL), including about 80 lakh widows, 10 lakh disabled and 2.2 crore elderly.

Presently NSAP comprises of five schemes, namely:

- Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS).
- Indira Gandhi National Widow Pension Scheme (IGNWPS).
- Indira Gandhi National Disability Pension Scheme (IGNDPS).
- National Family Benefit Scheme (NFBS).
- Annapurna Scheme

INDIAN HERITAGE AND CULTURE, HISTORY**Pravasi Bhartiya Divas 2019:**

The 15th annual Pravasi Bhartiya Divas (PBD) is being held in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. Usually celebrated on or around 9th January, the grand scale of arrangements that went behind this year's celebrations pushed the event to January 21-23.

- Chief Guest: The Prime Minister of Mauritius, Pravind Jugnath.
- Theme: "Role of Indian Diaspora in building New India".
- The first chapter of Pravasi Bhartiya Divas was held in 2003 to recognise the contributions of NRIs in academic and professional fields across the world.
- The reason 9th January is usually set aside for celebrating Pravasi Bhartiya Divas is that Mahatma Gandhi returned from South Africa on this day in 1915.

Significance: These conventions provide a platform to the overseas Indian community to engage with the government and Indian communities in India for mutually beneficial activities. These conventions are also very useful in networking among the overseas Indian community residing in various parts of the world and enable them to share their experiences in various fields.

Arunachal govt declares Pakke Hornbill Fest as 'state festival'

The government of Arunachal Pradesh has declared the Pakke Paga Hornbill Festival (PPHF)—the state's only conservation festival, as a "state festival".

Pakke Paga Hornbill Festival (PPHF)

The first-ever PPHF was held on January 16–18, 2015. The organizers had a number of objectives:

- to recognise the role played by the resident Nyishi tribe in conserving hornbills in the Pakke Tiger Reserve (PTR),
- to devise alternative sources of income for a region that relies on hunting and logging, and
- to tell the rest of the country about the wonders of the PTR and its surrounding areas.

As part of the festival, visitors are treated to cultural programmes, food stalls, plays, sightseeing, river and village walks, bird-watching, screenings of short films as well as local tribal sports and dances.

About Great Indian Hornbill

- The great hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*) also known as the great Indian hornbill or great pied hornbill, is one of the larger members of the hornbill family.
- The great hornbill is long-lived, living for nearly 50 years in captivity.
- It is predominantly fruit eating, but is an opportunist and preys on small mammals, reptiles and birds.
- Its impressive size and colour have made it important in many tribal cultures and rituals.
- IUCN status: Vulnerable (uplisted from Near Threatened in 2018).
It is also listed in Appendix I of CITES.

CONSTITUTION AND POLITY

10th Schedule of the Constitution

The Punjab Assembly has issued notice to Sukhpal Singh Khaira, Former rebel AAP leader and MLA from Bholath, for disqualification under the 10th Schedule of the Constitution. Mr. Khaira had resigned from the party on January 6, but did not resign as legislator. Later, he floated a new political outfit.

Anti-defection law:

- The Tenth Schedule was inserted in the Constitution in 1985 by the 52nd Amendment Act. It lays down the process by which legislators may be disqualified on grounds of defection by the Presiding Officer of a legislature based on a petition by any other member of the House.
- The decision on question as to disqualification on ground of defection is referred to the Chairman or the Speaker of such House, and his decision is final.
- The law applies to both Parliament and state assemblies.

Disqualification:

If a member of a house belonging to a political party:

- Voluntarily gives up the membership of his political party, or
- Votes, or does not vote in the legislature, contrary to the directions of his political party. However, if the member has taken prior permission, or is condoned by the party within 15 days from such voting or abstention, the member shall not be disqualified.
- If an independent candidate joins a political party after the election.
- If a nominated member joins a party six months after he becomes a member of the legislature.

Exceptions under the law:

Legislators may change their party without the risk of disqualification in certain circumstances. The law allows a party to merge with or into another party provided that at least two-thirds of its legislators are in favour of the merger. In such a scenario, neither the members who decide to merge, nor the ones who stay with the original party will face disqualification.

Decision of the Presiding Officer is subject to judicial review:

The law initially stated that the decision of the Presiding Officer is not subject to judicial review. This condition was struck down by the Supreme Court in 1992, thereby allowing appeals against the Presiding Officer's decision in the High Court and Supreme Court. However, it held that there may not be any judicial intervention until the Presiding Officer gives his order.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS AND BILATERAL RELATIONS

Arab Economic and Social Development Summit

Arab leaders and officials have urged the international community to support nations hosting Syrian refugees and take steps to minimise the impact of the refugee crisis. The call was made in the Beirut Declaration at the Arab Economic and Social Development Summit that concluded in the Lebanese capital recently.

Significance of the declaration:

- This is the first time Arab countries have reached a consensus on encouraging Syrian refugees to return to their country.
- The declaration said, the refugee crisis in Arab countries is the worst humanitarian problem since World War II. It points out that the crisis leads to an economic slowdown, increases the

expenditure and deficit, imposes burdens on public sectors and infrastructure and poses risks to the society.

Arab Economic and Social Development summits: They are summits of the Arab League, held at the head of state level to address issues of economic and social development among member-states.

Arab League:

- The Arab League is a regional organization of Arab countries in and around North Africa, the Horn of Africa and Arabia.
- It was formed in Cairo on 22 March 1945 with six members: Kingdom of Egypt, Kingdom of Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Currently, the League has 22 members, but Syria's participation has been suspended since November 2011, as a consequence of government repression during the Syrian Civil War.
- The League's main goal is to "draw closer the relations between member States and coordinate collaboration between them, to safeguard their independence and sovereignty, and to consider in a general way the affairs and interests of the Arab countries". World Integrated Medicine Forum 2019

ENVIRONMENT- CONSERVATION, BIO-DIVERSITY AND ISSUES

Groundwater 'time bomb' is ticking

Future generations may face an environmental "time bomb" as the world's groundwater systems take decades to respond to the present day impact of climate change, scientists have warned. As per the findings by an international team of researchers, groundwater reserves are already under pressure as the global population explodes and crop production rises in lockstep. But the extreme weather events such as drought and record rainfall — both made worse by our heating planet — could have another long-lasting impact on how quickly reserves replenish.

Why is the crisis described as a time bomb?

Researchers found that only half of all groundwater supplies are likely to fully replenish or rebalance within the next 100 years — potentially leading to shortages in drier areas. This could be described as an environmental time bomb because any climate change impacts on recharge occurring now, will only fully impact the baseflow to rivers and wetlands a long time later.

The process through which rainwater is filtered through bedrock and accumulated underground can take centuries and varies greatly by region. As climate change delivers longer droughts and bigger superstorms, the extremes of rainfall become more pronounced, impacting groundwater reserves for generations to come. In arid areas took far longer — several thousand years in some cases — to respond to alterations in climate than reserves in more humid parts.

Situation of groundwater in India: Today, India is the largest user of the groundwater in the world with almost 90% being used for drinking water and almost 60-70% for irrigation. Current statistics also show that nearly 50% of urban water supply comes from groundwater. India is on the threshold of a very serious groundwater crisis, which needs mitigation both in the fields and at the policy corridors of the country.

The groundwater crisis is embedded at two different levels:

- Groundwater exploitation of aquifers (where groundwater is stored) in different parts of the India and
- Groundwater contamination that find origins, both in geogenic source such as Arsenic and Fluoride along with anthropogenic sources of contamination primarily due to poor disposal of waste and wastewater.

Concern: Water scarcity, poor water quality and inadequate sanitation negatively impact food security, livelihood choices and educational opportunities for poor families across the world. Drought afflicts some of the world's poorest countries, worsening hunger and malnutrition.

There is a need to modernise the regulatory framework for accessing groundwater soon after massive expansion in mechanical pumping led to the realisation that recharge could not keep pace with use.

Methanol-blending in petrol

A study, in which methanol (M-15) was blended with petrol and used in the existing BS-IV standard cars, found that the carbon dioxide emission had reduced substantially. The study, conducted

by Pune-based Automotive Research Association of India (ARAI), also found that hydrocarbon emission reduced marginally, with a slight increase in nitrogen oxides.

The objective of the study was to evaluate emissions in real-world conditions as well as check the performance of the vehicles. The agency used 15% M-15 blend in vehicles and tested them for 3,000km. In auto rickshaws, the performance was similar, except for a marginal reduction in nitrogen oxides.

Methanol as an alternative fuel:

Methanol is a promising fuel as it is clean, cheaper than fossil fuels and a good substitute for heavy fuels. India imports methanol from Saudi Arabia and Iran at present. Across the world, methanol is emerging as a clean, sustainable transportation fuel of the future.

Why Methanol?

- Methanol can be used as an energy producing fuel, transportation fuel and cooking fuel, cutting down India's oil import bill by an estimated 20% over the next few years. Unlike CNG, using methanol as a transportation fuel would require minimal alteration in the vehicles.
- Methanol is a clean-burning fuel that produces fewer smog-causing emissions — such as sulphur oxides (SO_x), nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and particulate matter — and can improve air quality and related human health issues.
- Methanol is most commonly produced on a commercial scale from natural gas. It can also be produced from renewable sources such as biomass and recycled carbon dioxide.
- As a high-octane vehicle fuel, methanol offers excellent acceleration and power. It also improves vehicle efficiency.
- Methanol has the potential to be an enduring solution to human energy needs because the belched out CO₂ (greenhouse gas emission) both from using Methanol and while producing Methanol can be tapped back to produce Methanol.
- Thereby a seamless loop of CO₂ sequestration cycle is created to perpetually burn fuels without polluting the environment at all. CO₂ from steel plants, Thermal Power plants, Cement Plants etc. can be tapped in large quantities to produce Methanol.

Protest against proposed bird sanctuary in Manipur

The Manipur government's plan to set up a bird sanctuary at the Loktak lake in Bishnupur district has met with stiff opposition from the villagers in nearby areas.

Concern:

- Thousands of migratory birds flock to the Loktak lake, the largest freshwater lake in north-eastern India, every year but in the past few years there has been a sharp decline in the number of migratory birds coming to the lake.
- The Brow-antlered deer which are endangered is also facing the problem of poaching.

Loktak Lake

- Loktak Lake is the largest freshwater lake in Northeast India and is famous for the phumdis (heterogeneous mass of vegetation, soil and organic matter at various stages of decomposition) floating over it.
- Keibul Lamjao National Park is the only floating national park in the world on this Phumdis.
- The park is the last natural refuge of the endangered Sangai (state animal), one of three subspecies of Eld's deer.
- It was also listed under the Montreux Record on 16 June 1993, "a record of Ramsar sites where changes in ecological character have occurred, are occurring or are likely to occur."