

INDIAN HERITAGE AND CULTURE, HISTORY**Thrissur Pooram:**

- Known as the festival of festivals, Thrissur Pooram has a tradition of more than 200 years. This spectacular event was started by Sakthan Thampuran, the erstwhile ruler of Kochi. Held on the Moolam asterism in the Malayalam month of Medam (April-May), festival related events take place at the Vadakkumnathan temple situated in the heart of Thrissur town and the adjoining Thekkinkadu ground.
- The pooram festival mainly happens between two groups representing the geographic divisions of Paramekkavu and Thiruvambadi. They will compete in their respective presentations of richly caparisoned elephants, traditional orchestra called panchavadyam, the swift and rhythmic changing of brightly coloured and sequined parasols called kudamattom and the dazzling fireworks in the early morning hours are the festival highlights.

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS- BILATERAL, GROUPINGS, ORGANISATIONS**Strait of Hormuz — the world's most important oil artery**

- The Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping route linking Middle East oil producers to markets in Asia, Europe, North America and beyond, has been at the heart of regional tensions for decades.
- Recently two Saudi oil tankers were among vessels targeted in a “sabotage attack” off the coast of the UAE, condemning it as an attempt to undermine the security of global crude supplies.
- Iran's foreign ministry called the incidents “worrisome and dreadful” and asked for an investigation.

Strait of Hormuz

- The Strait of Hormuz is a strait between the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.
- It provides the only sea passage from the Persian Gulf to the open ocean and is one of the world's most strategically important choke points.
- The waterway separates Iran and Oman, linking the Gulf to the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea.
- The Strait is 21 miles (33 km) wide at its narrowest point, but the shipping lane is just two miles (three km) wide in either direction.

Why does it matter?

- The US Energy Information Administration estimated that 18.5 million barrels per day (bpd) of seaborne oil passed through the waterway in 2016.
- That was about 30 per cent of crude and other oil liquids traded by sea in 2016.
- With global oil consumption standing at about 100 million bpd, that means almost a fifth passes through the Strait.
- Most crude exported from Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Kuwait and Iraq — all members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries are shipped through the waterway.
- It is also the route used for nearly all the liquefied natural gas (LNG) produced by the world's biggest LNG exporter, Qatar.

Why always in turmoil?

- During the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, the two sides sought to disrupt each other's oil exports in what was known as the Tanker War.
- The US Fifth Fleet, based in Bahrain, is tasked with protecting the commercial ships in the area.
- The fleet ensures that the critical waterway remains open, provocative Iranian military maneuvers are likely in the immediate offing as is a nuclear restart.
- Iran agreed to rein in its nuclear programme in return for an easing of sanctions under a 2015 deal with the United States and five other global powers.
- Washington pulled out of the pact in 2018. Western powers fear Iran wants to make nuclear weapons. Tehran denies this.
- The UAE and Saudi Arabia have sought to find other routes to bypass the Strait, including building more oil pipelines.

Have there been incidents in the strait before?

- In January 2012, Iran threatened to block the Strait in retaliation for US and European sanctions that targeted its oil revenues in an attempt to stop Tehran's nuclear programme.
- In May 2015, Iranian ships fired shots at a Singapore-flagged tanker which it said damaged an Iranian oil platform, causing the vessel to flee. It also seized a container ship in the Strait.
- In July 2018, Iranian President hinted Iran could disrupt oil flows through the Strait in response to US calls to reduce Iran's oil exports to zero.
- A Revolutionary Guards commander also said Iran would block all exports through the Strait if Iranian exports were stopped.
- The US in turn declared the guards a terrorist organization.

INDIAN ECONOMY**CPI inflation**

Retail inflation rose to a six-month high of 2.92 per cent in April due to a spike in food prices, according to data the Central Statistics Office. CPI inflation in April is the highest since October 2018 when the rate was 3.38 per cent.

Concerns: Rating agency Crisil expects retail inflation to rise by 60 basis points to 4 per cent this fiscal from 3.4 per cent in 2018-19. Within CPI inflation, food inflation is expected to rise in the current year, as last two months witnessed rise in prices of many farm commodities, mainly due to drought in large parts of western and southern India, coupled with an early and harsher-than-usual summer.

Impact on interest rates: Despite rising CPI inflation, analysts expect the Reserve Bank of India to cut repo rate – the rate at which it lends short-term funds to banks – as inflation remains within the RBI's target of 4 per cent even as growth of the Indian economy has been slowing down.

Consumer Price Index (CPI)

- The Consumer Price Index (CPI) is a measure that examines the weighted average of prices of a basket of consumer goods and services, such as transportation, food and medical care. It is calculated by taking price changes for each item in the predetermined basket of goods and averaging them.
- Changes in the CPI are used to assess price changes associated with the cost of living; the CPI is one of the most frequently used statistics for identifying periods of inflation or deflation.
- The CPI measures the average change in prices over time that consumers pay for a basket of goods and services, commonly known as inflation. Essentially it attempts to quantify the aggregate price level in an economy and thus measure the purchasing power of a country's unit of currency. The weighted average of the prices of goods and services that approximates an individual's consumption patterns is used to calculate CPI.

Fund for rural agricultural start-ups

NABARD has announced Rs 700-crore venture capital fund for rural agricultural start-ups.

Key facts:

- This project was launched by Nabventures, an auxiliary unit of NABARD.
- NABARD proposed amount of Rs 500 crore with an option to retain over-subscriptions of Rs 200 crore.
- NABARD has given an anchor commitment for the fund, which will be investing across startups engaged in agriculture, food and rural development space.

Significance and benefits of the fund: The fund will have a high impact as it will provide a boost to investment ecosystem in the core areas of agriculture, food and improvement of rural livelihoods.

NABARD:

- It is an apex development and specialized bank established on 12 July 1982 by an act by the parliament of India.
- Its main focus is to uplift rural India by increasing the credit flow for elevation of agriculture & rural non farm sector.

- It was established based on the recommendations of the Committee set up by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) under the chairmanship of Shri B. Shivaraman.
- It replaced the Agricultural Credit Department (ACD) and Rural Planning and Credit Cell (RPCC) of Reserve Bank of India, and Agricultural Refinance and Development Corporation (ARDC).
- It has been accredited with “matters concerning policy, planning and operations in the field of credit for agriculture and other economic activities in rural areas in India”.
- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) recently sold its entire stakes in the National Bank for Agriculture & Rural Development (NABARD) and National Housing Bank. The decision to divest its entire stake was taken based on the recommendations of the second Narasimham Committee. The government now holds a 100 per cent stake in both NHB and NABARD.

ISSUES RELATED TO INTERNAL SECURITY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

Unlawful activities (Prevention) Act

The Central Government has extended the ban on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for another five years under sub-sections (1) and (3) of section 3 of the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (37 of 1967) with immediate effect.

What necessitated this?

The notification states that the LTTE’s continued violent and disruptive activities are prejudicial to the integrity and sovereignty of India; and it continues to adopt a strong anti-India posture as also continues to pose a grave threat to the security of Indian nationals.

About the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA):

- This law is aimed at effective prevention of unlawful activities associations in India.
- Its main objective is to make powers available for dealing with activities directed against the integrity and sovereignty of India.
- The Act makes it a crime to support any secessionist movement or to support claims by a foreign power to what India claims as its territory.
- The UAPA, framed in 1967, has been amended twice since: first in 2008 and then in 2012.

The law is contested for few draconian provisions:

- The Act introduces a vague definition of terrorism to encompass a wide range of non-violent political activity, including political protest.
- It empowers the government to declare an organisation as ‘terrorist’ and ban it. Mere membership of such a proscribed organisation itself becomes a criminal offence.
- It allows detention without a chargesheet for up to 180 days and police custody can be up to 30 days.
- It creates a strong presumption against bail and anticipatory bail is out of the question. It creates a presumption of guilt for terrorism offences merely based on the evidence allegedly seized.
- It authorises the creation of special courts, with wide discretion to hold in-camera proceedings (closed-door hearings) and use secret witnesses but contains no sunset clause and provisions for mandatory periodic review.

ENVIRONMENT- CONSERVATION, BIO-DIVERSITY AND ISSUES

Herbivore census in Gujarat’s Gir forest

Every summer, the Forest Department of Gujarat conducts an Herbivore Census in Gir forest.

Herbivore Census

- The Herbivore Census covers ungulates such as spotted deer, blue bulls (nilgais), sambar, Indian gazelles (chinkaras), four-horned antelopes (choshinga) and wild boars, as well as Indian langurs and peafowl.
- This year’s exercise is of particular significance because it is the last Herbivore Census ahead of next year’s Lion Census, which is a once-in-five-years exercise.

Why it matters?

- Wild ungulates and langurs are the main prey of Asiatic lions, the endangered species whose only wild population in the world is surviving in the 22,000 sq km Greater Gir area.

- A count provides a sense of the available of the prey base for lions as well as other predators like leopards, hyenas and wolves.
- A strong prey base can reduce depredation of livestock by lions and can reduce man-animal conflict.
- In 2013-14, the last Herbivore Census before the previous Lion Census, the total count of all herbivores was 1.32 lakh, higher than the about 1.25 lakh counted in 2012-13.

Why it's done in summer

- During summer, foliage is reduced to a minimum in dry and deciduous tropical forests, which affords the best visibility for conducting a census.
- Also, wild animals concentrate around water points, which in Gir include 450 artificial ones filled by the Forest Department.
- The forest is divided into 19 routes and forest divisions for the census, with teams transacting routes thrice — morning, afternoon and evening — and depending on direct sighting.

DNA database for Indian Rhino

The Environment Ministry has embarked on a project to create DNA profiles of all rhinos in the country.

DNA Database of Indian Rhino

- By 2021, the Indian rhino could be the first wild animal species in India to have all its members DNA-sequenced.
- The project's proponents include the World Wildlife Fund for Nature-India (WWF-India) and the Centre-funded Wildlife Institute of India (WII).
- The exercise would be useful in curbing poaching and gathering evidence in wildlife crimes involving rhinos.
- There are about 2,600 rhinos in India, with over 90% of the population concentrated in Assam's Kaziranga National Park.
- Around 60 samples of tissue have been collected so far from some rhinos living outside Kaziranga.

About Indian Rhino

- The Indian rhinoceros also called the greater one-horned rhinoceros and great Indian rhinoceros is a rhinoceros native to the Indian subcontinent.
- It is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List, as populations are fragmented and restricted to less than 20,000 km².
- It once ranged across the entire northern part of the Indian Subcontinent, along the Indus, Ganges and Brahmaputra River basins, from Pakistan to the Indian-Myanmar border.
- Poaching for rhinoceros horn became the single most important reason for the decline of the Indian rhino.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY- EVERYDAY SCIENCE, SPACE, NUCLEAR, DEFENCE ETC

High-speed Expendable Aerial Target (HEAT)

DRDO conducted successful flight test of ABHYAS – High-speed Expendable Aerial Target (HEAT) from Interim Test Range, Chandipur in Odisha.

High-speed Expendable Aerial Target (HEAT)

- HEAT offers a realistic threat scenario for practice of weapon systems. It is designed for autonomous flying with the help of an autopilot.
- It is designed on an in-line small gas turbine engine and uses indigenously developed MEMS based navigation system for its navigation and guidance.
- The performance of the system was as per simulations carried out and demonstrated the capability of ABHYAS to meet the mission requirement for a cost effective HEAT.
- The flight test was tracked by various RADARS & Electro Optic Systems and proved its performance in fully autonomous way point navigation mode.

QUOTE OF THE DAY

To win the game, just remain in the game.