

ECONOMY

Revisiting Draft e-Commerce Rules

Amid criticism from industries and some sections of government, the Department of Consumer Affairs is learnt to be revisiting some provisions pertaining to draft e-commerce rules, 2021. Earlier, the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food, and Public Distribution notified and made effective the provisions of the Consumer Protection (E-Commerce) Rules, 2020 under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. Further, the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT) has issued orders appointing an advisory committee for its Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC) project that is aimed at curbing “digital monopolies”.

Key Points

Key Provisions of Draft e-Commerce Rules 2021:

- **Mandatory Registration:** There is a need for mandatory registration for e-commerce entities with the Department of Promotion for Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT), Ministry of Commerce and Industry. E-commerce entity means persons who own, operate or manage a digital or electronic facility or platform for electronic commerce.
- **Limiting Flash Sales:** Conventional e-commerce flash sales are not banned. Only specific flash sales or back-to-back sales which limit customer choice, increase prices and prevent a level playing field are not allowed.
- **Compliance Officer:** The e-commerce sites are also directed to ensure appointment of Chief Compliance Officer (CCO) and a nodal contact person for 24x7 coordination with law enforcement agencies.
- **Restricting Related Parties:** To tackle growing concerns of preferential treatment, the new rules propose to ensure none of the related parties are allowed to use any consumer information (from the online platform) for ‘unfair advantage’.
- **Clause of Country of Origin:** The entities will also have to identify goods based on their country of origin and provide a filter mechanism at a pre-purchase stage for customers. They will also have to offer alternatives to these imported goods to provide a “fair opportunity” to domestic sellers.
- **Reporting Cybersecurity Issues:** All e-commerce entities must provide information within 72 hours on any request made by an authorised government agency, probing any breach of the law including cybersecurity issues.

Major Issues Pertaining to Draft Rules:

- **Definition of ‘Related Party’:** The draft rules state that “none of an e-commerce entity’s ‘related parties can be enlisted as a seller for sale to consumers directly.”
 1. This “broad definition” of ‘related party’ can potentially include all entities such as those involved in logistics, any joint ventures, etc.
 2. Due to this, it will be difficult not only for foreign players like Amazon and Flipkart, but even homegrown companies to have their various brands such as 1mg, Netmeds, Urban Ladder, etc. sell on their super-apps.
- **Issue over Fall-back Liability:** Industry players have argued that on the one hand the FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) policy prohibits companies such as Amazon and Flipkart from having control over the inventory sold on their platforms. On the other hand, the rules introduced the concept of fall-back liability, which makes the e-commerce firms liable in case a seller on their platform fails to deliver goods or services due to negligent conduct, which causes loss to the customer.
- **Overreaching Jurisdiction:** The NITI Aayog has raised concerns that many of the provisions in draft rules were “beyond the realm” of consumer protection. This creates a perception of “overreach” by the Consumer Affairs Department.
- **Case of Tight Regulation:** Some of the proposed provisions like having a compliance officer, adherence to law enforcement requests, etc., follow in the footsteps of the Information Technology (Intermediary) Rules, 2021.
 1. These IT rules are facing legal challenges in several High courts.
 2. Thus, the rules reflect the increasing Government’s will to exercise greater oversight over all online platforms.

INTERNATIONAL RELATION

China’s New Sea-Road-Rail Link to Indian Ocean

Recently, a new sea-road-rail link providing Chengdu (China) with access to the Indian Ocean via Yangon (Myanmar) was opened. The trade corridor is China's first to link western China with the Indian Ocean.

Key Points

About New Trade Corridor:

- The new trade corridor passage connects the logistics lines of Singapore, Myanmar and China, and is currently the most convenient land and sea channel linking the Indian Ocean with southwest China.
- China also has plans to develop another port in Kyaukphyu in the Rakhine state, Myanmar including a proposed railway line from Yunnan (China) directly to the port, but the progress there has been stalled by unrest in Myanmar.
- China plans to develop this region in Myanmar as a 'border economic cooperation zone' under the Belt and Road Initiative.
- It is expected to become the lifeblood of international trade for China, while providing a source of income for Myanmar.
- This trade corridor is another direct Chinese outlet to the Indian ocean. The first one being at the Gwadar port in Pakistan.
- This trade route is also China's alternative to the "Malacca Dilemma". Malacca Dilemma is a word coined in 2003, by the then Chinese President Hu Jintao. This refers to China's fear of a maritime blockade at the Straits of Malacca. Since most of China's oil imports pass through the Straits of Malacca, a maritime blockade here could paralyze China's economy.

About Gwadar Port:

- Gwadar is being developed as part of the CPEC to the far western Xinjiang region.
- Gwadar has long been touted as the site for a Chinese base suitable for People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) operations.
- China pursues a "strategic strongpoint" concept whereby strategically sited foreign ports containing terminals and commercial zones operated by Chinese firms can be used by its military.
- Such "strongpoints" offer the potential for China to form a network of supply, logistics and intelligence hubs along the perimeter of the Indian Ocean. This is referred to as the String of Pearls theory.
- Gwadar is important to China for three reasons:
 1. One is establishing direct transport links to the Indian Ocean via the CPEC.
 2. The second factor is that Gwadar helps anchor or stabilise western China, a region where China feels vulnerable to Islamic agitation.
 3. Further, Gwadar is just 400 km from the important Hormuz Strait (linking Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian sea), through which 40% of Chinese imported oil flows.

Implications for India:

- China's economic stakes in the Bay of Bengal and this new trade corridor signifies a larger maritime presence and naval engagement in the region which in turn reinforces the string of pearls policy by China.
- Apart from this trade corridor and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), China is also planning the China-Nepal Economic Corridor (CNEC) which will link Tibet to Nepal.
 1. The endpoints of the project will touch the boundaries of the Gangetic plain.
 2. Thus three corridors signify the economic as well as strategic rise of China in the Indian subcontinent.

Counter Steps Already Taken by India:

1. Supply Chain Resilience Initiative
2. Chabahar Port in Iran's East.
3. Act East Policy
4. Malabar Exercise
5. Quad Initiative
6. Developing North-Eastern India
7. Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative

ENVIRONMENT & BIODIVERSITY

Sand and Dust Storms Risk Assessment in Asia and the Pacific

According to a new United Nations (UN) report, more than 500 million people in India and more than 80% of the entire populations of Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and the Islamic

Republic of Iran are exposed to medium and high levels of poor air quality due to sand and dust storms. The risk of impacts from sand and dust storms is projected to increase in the 2030s due to more extreme drought conditions in parts of Western Australia, south-eastern Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan.

Key Points

Sand and Dust Storms:

• **About:**

1. Sand and dust storms are common meteorological hazards in arid and semi-arid regions.
2. They are usually caused by thunderstorms – or strong pressure gradients associated with cyclones – which increase wind speed over a wide area.
3. Some 40% of aerosols in the troposphere (the lowest layer of Earth’s atmosphere) are dust particles from wind erosion.

• **Main Sources:**

1. The main sources of these mineral dusts are the arid regions of Northern Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Central Asia and China.
2. Comparatively, Australia, America and South Africa make minor, but still important, contributions.

Impacts:

• **Negative:**

1. Impact on Power Plants:

- ✓ They can interfere with energy infrastructure, adversely affecting electricity transmission lines and causing power outages.
- ✓ India, China and Pakistan witnessed 1,584 gigawatt-hours (gWh), 679 gWh and 555 gWh of energy loss, respectively.
- ✓ These losses amounted to over Rs. 782 crore for India per year.

2. Affect Source of Freshwater:

- ✓ Very high dust deposition also occurs in the Himalaya-Hindu Kush mountain range and the Tibetan Plateau, the so-called ‘third pole’ that are the sources for fresh water for more than 1.3 billion people in Asia.

3. Increases Melting of Ice: The deposition of dust on glaciers induces a warming effect, increasing the melting of ice, with direct and indirect impacts on society through numerous issues, including food security, energy production, agriculture, water stress and flood regimes.

4. On Farmland: Dust deposition impacted large portions of farmland in Turkmenistan, Pakistan and Uzbekistan. Much of this dust is characterised by high salt content, making it toxic for plants. It reduces yield, posing a significant threat to the production of irrigated cotton and other crops.

5. On Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): They directly affect 11 of the 17 United Nations-mandated Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): Ending poverty in all forms, Ending hunger, Good health and well-being, Affordable and clean energy, Decent work and economic growth, Climate action, etc.

• **Positive:**

1. They can increase the nutrient content in the areas of deposition and benefit vegetation.
2. Dust deposited on water bodies can alter their chemical characteristics, triggering both positive as well as adverse outcomes.
3. Dust particles that carry iron can enrich parts of oceans, improving the phytoplankton balance and impacting marine food webs.

Suggestions:

- Their impacts are complex, and thus, they represent an important emerging issue for policy-makers in the Asia-Pacific region.
- Member States need to strategize their joint actions, considering gaining a deeper understanding of the socio-economic impact of sand and dust storms, establishing a coordinated monitoring and early warning system with an impact-based focus, and coordinating actions in most at-risk and exposed geographical areas to mitigate the risks.

2. Crocodilian Species in India

Recently, Odisha's Kendrapara district has earned the distinction of being the only district in India where all three species of crocodiles, salt-water, gharial and mugger, are found.

Key Points

Mugger or Marsh Crocodile:

- **Description:**An egg-laying and hole-nesting species, also known to be dangerous.
- **Habitat:**Mainly restricted to the Indian subcontinent where it may be found in a number of freshwater habitat types and also in coastal saltwater lagoons and estuaries.It is already extinct in Bhutan and Myanmar.
- **Threats:**Habitat destruction, fragmentation, and transformation, fishing activities and use of crocodile parts for medicinal purposes.
- **Protection Status:**
 1. IUCN List of Threatened Species: Vulnerable
 2. CITES: Appendix I
 3. Wildlife Protection Act, 1972: Schedule I

Estuarine or Saltwater Crocodile:

- **Description:**Considered as the Earth's largest living crocodile species, infamous globally as a known maneater.
- **Habitat:**Found in Odisha's Bhitarkanika National Park, the Sundarbans in West Bengal and the Andamans and Nicobar Islands.Also found across Southeast Asia and northern Australia.
- **Threats:**Illegal hunting, habitat loss, and antipathy toward the species because of its reputation as a maneater.
- **Protection Status:**
 1. IUCN List of Threatened Species: Least Concern
 2. CITES : Appendix I (except the populations of Australia, Indonesia and Papua New Guinea, which are included in Appendix II).
 3. Wildlife Protection Act, 1972 : Schedule I

Gharial:

- **Description:**
 1. Sometimes called gavials, are a type of Asian crocodylian distinguished by their long, thin snouts which resembles a pot (ghara in Hindi).
 2. The population of Gharials is a good indicator of clean river water.
 3. Known to be a relatively harmless, fish-eating species.
- **Habitat:**
 1. Mostly found in fresh waters of the himalayan rivers.
 2. The Chambal river in the northern slopes of the Vindhya mountains (Madhya Pradesh) is known as the primary habitat of gharials.
 3. Other himalayan rivers like Ghagra, Gandak river, Girwa river, Ramganga river and the Sone river are secondary habitats.
- **Threats:**Illegal sand mining, poaching, increased river pollution, dam construction, massive-scale fishing operations and Floods.
- **Protection Status:**
 1. IUCN List of Threatened Species: Critically Endangered
 2. CITES: Appendix I
 3. Wildlife Protection Act, 1972: Schedule I

Conservation Efforts:

- Odisha has announced a cash award of Rs. 1,000 to conserve gharials in Mahanadi River Basin.
- The Crocodile Conservation Project was launched in 1975 in different States.

IMPORTANT FACTS FOR PRELIM

Covid-19 Endemicity

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) India seems to be entering some stage of Covid-19 endemicity where there is low- to moderate-level transmission.

Key Points

Endemicity:

- An endemic disease is a disease that is always present in a certain population or a given geographical region.
- Some examples of endemics include chicken pox and malaria, where there are a predictable number of cases every year in certain parts of the world.

Endemic vs Epidemic vs Pandemic:

- Endemic diseases are often confused with epidemics. However, an epidemic refers to an outbreak of a disease. An epidemic occurs when a disease is spreading through one or more populations. In contrast, the endemic disease is one that is constantly present in a group or geographic area.
- Pandemics are worldwide epidemics. A pandemic affects more people and takes more lives than an epidemic. Under certain circumstances, an epidemic can lead to a disease becoming endemic.

Reason for Covid's Endemicity:

- Only those pathogens can be eradicated that don't have animals (another species) as a reservoir. Smallpox and polio are human virus examples, rinderpest is a cattle virus.
- It means if there is a virus/pathogen that is present in some animal reservoir then it can transmit again once the level of immunity wanes in the population against the disease caused by it.
- In the case of coronavirus disease, it will continue to circulate as it is present in the animal reservoir.

Implications:

- **On Immunity:** If enough people are vaccinated or have been exposed to the infection, then the virus will cause symptomatic infection but not disease.
- **On Future Cases:** As long as the new variant does not come with much more transmissibility than Delta variant, it is more likely that there will be a steady level of cases, with some regions, especially of low prior seroprevalence and low vaccination rates, seeing spikes.

2. Program for International Student Assessment: OECD

The field trial of PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) is scheduled to be held from September, 2021.

Key Points

About:

- It is a competency-based test designed to assess the ability of the 15-year-old candidates that measures their reading, mathematics, and science literacy every three years to apply their knowledge to real-life situations.
- It is an international survey coordinated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and was first conducted in 2000.

India's Participation:

- India has participated in the PISA test only once before, in 2009. In this round of PISA, where students from Himachal Pradesh and Tamil Nadu sat for the test, India ranked 72nd out of 73 countries, outranking only Kyrgyzstan.
- Since then, India has strayed away from the test until now, for students from Chandigarh will be sitting for the test in 2022. Originally the main PISA survey was scheduled for 2021, but was postponed by one year owing to the pandemic.

Significance for India:

- Learnings from participation in PISA will help to introduce competency-based examination reforms in the school system and help move away from rote learning. The CBSE and NCERT will be part of the process and activities leading to the actual test.
- It would lead to recognition and acceptability of Indian students and prepare them for the global economy in the 21st century.

Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

- It was formed in 1961. It has 38 member countries. India is not a member but one of the key partners of the organisation.
- It is an international organisation, having a goal to shape policies that foster prosperity, equality, opportunity and well-being for all.
- It is headquartered at Paris, France.
- The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) Secretariat is located at OECD headquarters.

3. World Heritage Institute of Training and Research – Asia Pacific

Recently, the World Heritage Institute of Training and Research – Asia Pacific (WHITR-AP) has recognised CEPT (Centre for Environmental Planning and Technology, Gujarat) University's

programme in conservation and regeneration as a commended case of Global Innovation on World Heritage Education.

The World Heritage Education Programme was initiated as a United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) special project in 1994. It gives young people a chance to voice their concerns and to become involved in the protection of common cultural and natural heritage.

Key Points**About:**

- The WHITER-AP is a non-profit organization specialized in the area of heritage conservation.
- It is an institute under the auspices of UNESCO, it is the first one established in the developing countries.
- It is an autonomous institution at the service of member states and associate members of UNESCO.

Mission: To strengthen implementation of the World Heritage Convention 1972 in the Asia and the Pacific region.

World Heritage Convention:

- It is one of the most important global conservation instruments which was created in 1972. Its mission is to identify and protect the world's natural and cultural heritage considered to be of Outstanding Universal Value.
- It sets out the duties of States Parties in identifying potential sites and their role in protecting and preserving them. By signing the Convention, each country pledges to conserve not only the World Heritage sites situated on its territory, but also to protect its national heritage.
- The Convention is governed by the World Heritage Committee supported by the UNESCO World Heritage Centre, the secretariat for the Convention, and three technical advisory bodies to the Committee:
 1. International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN)
 2. International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS)
 3. International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration Cultural Property (ICCROM)
- India is a signatory to the convention and has 40 world heritage sites, which includes 32 cultural, 7 natural and one mixed property. Ramappa Temple in Telangana was the 39th and Dholavira in Gujarat was India's 40th world heritage site.

UNESCO

About: It seeks to build peace through international cooperation in Education, the Sciences and Culture. It was founded in 1945 and is located in Paris, France.

Major Initiatives:

1. Man and Biosphere Programme
2. World Heritage Programme
3. Global Geopark Network
4. Network of Creative Cities
5. Atlas of World Languages in Danger

DAILY ANSWER WRITING PRACTICE

Qns. Assess the potential ramifications of Taliban returning to power in Afghanistan. India needs a carefully calibrated yet a humane strategy towards Afghanistan and it can leverage its non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council to great effect in this regard. Comment. (250 words)

Ans:

Introduction

The Islamist rebel group Taliban who took control of Kabul after a lightning sweep across the country controlling almost 90% of territory are yet to announce a government. Afghanistan today is in a condition that is far worse than what existed when the Russians withdrew in the 1990s.

Body**Concerns with the current situation**

- Some political commentators seem to believe that after the initial success of the Taliban and the collapse of the Afghan state, the natural political dynamics of the region would assert itself.
- After two decades of active involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan, and spending over a trillion dollars in the process to defeat terrorism and the al Qaeda, the U.S. has left Afghanistan in a worse situation than when it entered.

- It is not possible to discern any reduction in terrorism or the demise of any of the better known terror groups, such as the al Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS), or for that matter, of lesser known terror outfits.
- As a matter of fact, there has been a resurgence in al Qaeda activities. The IS, after some earlier setbacks, is again regrouping and currently poses a real threat to areas abutting, and including, Afghanistan.
- Radicalised Islamist terrorism and the forces of 'doctrinaire theocracy' have, if anything, thus become stronger. The collapse of the Afghan state will ignite many old threats.
- Compared to the situation when the U.S. left Vietnam in 1975, which was also seen by many as a kind of 'retreat', the Afghan 'misadventure' has been a disaster.
- Under the leadership of the Communist Party, Vietnam was able to emerge as a vibrant nation with a thriving economy.
- Under the Taliban regime, Afghanistan cannot hope for any such outcome. It would remain the 'sick man of Asia' for generations to come, a standing folly to perils of outside intervention in the affairs of another nation.

What the Taliban Takeover means for India?

- The Taliban takeover of Afghanistan has significant ramifications for South Asia, beginning with the rush of refugees. Pakistan may soon see at its western borders.
- But few countries in the region have as much at stake in Afghanistan's future as India, its fifth-largest aid donor and one of the most effective.
- India now finds many of its critical investments in human and physical infrastructure in Afghanistan in jeopardy as the Taliban take control.
- Worse still, the crisis following the U.S. withdrawal leaves India's foreign-policy and security interests at considerable risk on two fronts.
- A new Taliban government will likely foster safe havens for anti-Indian terrorist organizations and other groups that could sow chaos in Indian-administered Kashmir.
- Meanwhile, China's willingness to work with the Taliban could expand its footprint in the region.
- In the last two decades, India had become one of Afghanistan's most significant donors, providing scholarships to Afghan students, offering food assistance, and helping restore the country's war-ravaged power grid.
- But based on its past experience with a Taliban government, India's security establishment now faces serious fears about its interests in the country.
- Despite the Taliban's public assurances, Afghanistan could once again emerge as a regional terrorist haven.
- When they previously held power, the Taliban gave free rein to a host of anti-Indian terrorist organizations within Afghanistan, most notably Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) and Lashkar-e-Taiba.
- Safe havens allowed these organizations to regroup, train, and then wreak havoc in Indian-administered Kashmir, the site of a long-running insurgency.

Situation not in favour of India

- India may be the outlier among Afghanistan's neighbours for a variety of reasons, including its warm relations with the Karzai and the Ghani regimes in the past two decades.
- For India, the virtual retreat of the U.S. from this part of Asia; the growing China-Russia-Pakistan nexus across the region; and an Iran under a hardliner like Ebrahim Raisi, all work to its disadvantage.

India's Stand

- With the Taliban now in control in Kabul, External Affairs Minister said that New Delhi is "very carefully" following the developments in Afghanistan and India's focus is on ensuring the security and safe return of Indian nationals still in the war-torn country.
- External Affairs Ministry, while addressing reporters at the UN Security Council stakeout after chairing an open-debate on peacekeeping under India's current UNSC Presidency, said, "that (situation in Afghanistan) is really what has been very much the focus of our engagements here."
- At the moment we are, like everybody else, very carefully following developments in Afghanistan.

- India's focus is on ensuring the security in Afghanistan and the safe return of Indian nationals who are there.

Way forward

- India could implement the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 to protect the minorities in Afghanistan.
- As and when the situation stabilises medical visas, visas for students who have already secured admission can be considered.

Conclusion

If the 21st century was expected to become the century of progress, the situation in Afghanistan represents a severe setback to all such hopes and expectations. The aftershock of the takeover of Afghanistan by the Taliban can be expected to continue for long.

DAILY QUIZ

Q1. The wagon tragedy or Bellary train tragedy is associated with which of the following?

- a. Battle of Jamrud
- b. Afghan–Sikh war
- c. Jallianwala Bagh Massacre
- d. Mappila Rebellion**

Q2. Consider the following statements about PM-KUSUM Scheme:

1. It is aimed at ensuring energy security for farmers in India.
2. It is an initiative of the Ministry of Power, Government of India.

Which of the given above statements is/are correct?

- a. 1 only**
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Q3. Consider the following statements about Montreal Protocol:

1. It is the landmark multilateral environmental agreement that regulates the production and consumption Persistent organic pollutants (POPs).
2. It is to date the only UN treaty ever that has been ratified every country on Earth.

Which of the given above statements is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only**
- c. Both 1 and 2
- d. Neither 1 nor 2

Q4. Hazara is an ethnic group from

- a. Sudan
- b. Iran
- c. Afghanistan**
- d. China

Q5. Who among the following was the first to rise the slogan “Abua raj seter jana, maharani raj tundu jana” (Let the kingdom of the queen be ended and our kingdom be established)?

- a. Ishan Chandra Roy
- b. Digambar Biswas
- c. Birsa Munda**
- d. Madari Pasi