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News Analysis (27 May, 2019)

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ASEAN+3

China has started pushing for a free trade pact between **ASEAN + 3 (which includes the ten-member ASEAN, China, Japan and South Korea)** at the East Asia Summit. This would effectively mean that the, among the **16 countries negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**, all **except India, Australia and New Zealand** would get included in the proposed pact.

- **RCEP** is a proposed **free trade agreement** among 16 nations (**ten-member ASEAN and Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand**).
- The ASEAN+3 proposal is intended to **put pressure on India to give China concessions similar to those given by other countries at the RCEP negotiations**.
- Also, such a proposal is a message to India that China is ready to ignore India if India remains non-flexible at the RCEP negotiations.
- The move may also result in Australia and New Zealand putting more pressure on India to be more flexible in the RCEP negotiations, as they would not want to be excluded from the proposed pact.
- Earlier, it was Japan which was insistent on India's participation in the negotiations for a regional bloc as it believed that the country could act as a balancing factor and block China's efforts to increase its influence over the region. However, if China reaches some kind of understanding with Japan on the matter, it could be a rough road ahead for India.
- **RCEP members have proposed that over 90% traded items should have zero tariffs** but India is hesitant about falling in line. **India is especially apprehensive about Chinese goods swamping its market**, forcing domestic producers to cut production or shut down.
- If finalised, the RCEP will result in the largest free trade bloc in the world accounting for 25% of global GDP and 30% of world trade.

Fire Safety

Fire incident at a coaching centre in Surat has resulted in the death of 22 students.

Facts

- As per **National Crime Records Bureau** figures, **17,700 Indians died – 48 people** every day – due to fire accidents in 2015. Of those who died, **62% were women**.
- **Maharashtra and Gujarat**, the two most highly urbanised states, account for about **30% of the country's fire accident deaths**, hence there is a **direct correlation between the deaths due to fire-related accidents and population density associated with urbanisation**.
- According to **India Risk Surveys 2018**, outbreak of fire poses risks to business continuity and operations and **ranks India at 3rd position in fire incidents**, especially in Northern and Western regions of India.

Causes of Fire Accidents in India

- **Violation of safety norms and lack of standardisation and regulation** is a major cause of fire accidents, as large scale construction of false roofs in commercial buildings and multiplexes is against the national building construction code.
- **High rise buildings are more prone to fire accidents** as they lack adequate in-built fire protection systems that makes salvaging operations difficult.
- **Poorly stored goods**, even though they are not flammable, helps to spread fire and hinder fire fighters gain access to the seat of the fire or **reduce the effectiveness of sprinkler systems**.
- **Unclear provisions of fire safety audit** in terms of scope, objective, methodology and periodicity of a fire safety audit.

Fire Safety Audit aims at assessing fire safety standards of an organisation, occupancy or building for compliance with the **National Building Code of India**, relevant Indian standards and the legislations enacted by state governments and local bodies, on fire prevention, fire protection and life safety measures.

Lack of adequate resources, preparedness and poor fire services fail to ensure fire safety cover to the population.

- Based on a **2011 study, 65 percent deficiency was reported in fire stations**.
- According to Ministry of Home Affairs, in 144 towns with population over 1 lakh, there is a **huge deficiency of fire fighting infrastructure**.
- **78 percent of the budget allocated** to buying fire safety equipment and rescue vehicles went **unused across the state between 2010 and 2015**.

Fire service is a **state subject** and has been included **as municipal function in the XII schedule of the Constitution. The municipal corporations and local bodies** are responsible for providing fire services in many states.

- **Lack of awareness about the safety arrangements** before purchasing or hiring a flat in an apartment or before starting an institution.
- **Faulty Wiring:** PUF (polyurethane foam) used for plastic insulation carries a **high risk of accidental fire** as most of the times it is exposed to electrical wiring which on becoming heated due to overloading or short circuit catches fire immediately.

Preventive Measures

- **Modernisation of Fire safety equipment:** the government should provide financial support and assistance in augmenting and modernising the fire departments
 - **Proper designing of electrical fittings** and regular maintenance of wiring (at least once in a year).
 - **Building awareness** among citizens about fire prevention and protection measures by organising fire fighting workshop once in six months in localities/mohallas/schools with the involvement of local councillors/elected representatives.
 - **Fire service departments should audit critical fire prone installations** (like high rise buildings, multiplexes in congested areas) periodically (once in six months) and take appropriate actions against erring establishments.
 - **Proper demarcation of entry and exit points** in crowded buildings, **installation of fire fighting equipment** and their regular maintenance, periodic renewal of **No-objection certificates** by building owners in order to ensure fire preparedness.
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EQUIP Project

In accordance with the decision of the Prime Minister for **finalizing a five-year vision plan for each Ministry**, the **Department of Higher Education of HRD Ministry** has finalized and released a **five-year vision plan** named **Education Quality Upgradation and Inclusion Programme (EQUIP)**.

- The **ten Expert Groups** drawn from senior academicians, administrators and industrialists, have suggested more than 50 initiatives that would transform the higher education sector completely. The Groups have set the **following ten goals for higher education sector**:
 - **Strategies for expanding access:** Double the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education and resolve the geographically and socially skewed access to higher education institutions in India.
 - **Towards global best teaching/learning process:** Upgrade the quality of

- education to global standards.
 - **Promoting Excellence:** Position at least 50 Indian institutions among the top-1000 global universities.
 - **Governance reforms:** Introduce governance reforms in higher education for well-administered campuses
 - **Assessment, Accreditation & Ranking systems:** Accreditation of all institutions as an assurance of quality.
 - **Promotion of research & innovation:** Promote Research & Innovation ecosystems for positioning India in the Top-3 countries in the world in matters of knowledge creation.
 - **Employability & entrepreneurship:** Double the employability of the students passing out of higher education.
 - **Using Technology for better reach:** Harness education technology for expanding the reach and improving pedagogy.
 - **Internationalization:** Promote India as a global study destination.
 - **Financing higher education:** Achieve a quantum increase in investment in higher education.
- It is proposed to put together an action plan to give a multi-pronged boost to the higher education system in India. It is to be implemented between 2019-2024.
 - It is described as the implementation plan for the **National Education Policy**. It is meant to bridge the gap between policy and implementation.
 - **Financing:** The project will need to rely on extra-budgetary resources from the marketplace apart from **Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA)**.

Higher Education Financing Agency

- Higher Education Financing Agency (HEFA) was **incorporated in 2017** as a joint venture of **MHRD and Canara Bank** with agreed equity participation in the ratio of **91% and 9% respectively**.
 - Its objective is to finance the **creation of capital assets in premier educational institutions in India**.
 - It is registered under **Section 8 [Not-for-profit] under the Companies Act 2013** as a Union Govt company and as **Non-deposit taking NBFC-ND with RBI**.
 - Recently, HEFA's scope has been **expanded to cover school education, educational institutes under the Ministry of Health, etc**.
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Green Projects in Limbo

India has set an ambitious target of installing **175 GW of renewable energy capacity by the year 2022**, which includes 100 GW from solar, 60 GW from wind, 10 GW from bio-power and 5 GW from small hydro-power.

Present Status

- Wind and solar power capacity additions are hardly on the path to meeting the targets.
- Lack of government's interest in developing solar heating segment and offshore wind sector.
- Lack of focus on emerging areas such as ocean and geothermal energy.
- Biomass and small hydro being moribund.

Reasons

- **Over-emphasis on keeping tariffs low:** In different bids, wind and solar tariffs fell to a low of ₹2.44 a kWh. Many feel that such a low tariff is unviable and, quoted by bidders only in a rush to grab projects. Also, some bids have been cancelled just because the government lowers tariffs than quoted.
- **Slow Capacity Addition:** The Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) has brought down tariffs of wind and solar power at a big cost- slow capacity addition. Since 2014, India has added 28,000 MW of solar power and 14,500 MW of wind power, though at present it has 30,600 MW of solar power capacity and 35,600 MW of wind power capacity.
- **Sector specific problems:** The solar energy sector faces uncertainties in terms of safeguard duties, GST rates and a falling rupee whereas wind installations have been crippled by land problems in Gujarat, the State that most of the developers flocked to.
- **Problem faced by the industries in the field:** Industries contend with rampant corruption or extortionate prices while securing right-of-way in all States. Also, the State government-owned utilities delaying paying their dues to the energy companies.

Suggestions

- To avoid flocking to the windiest sites like in Gujarat, the government **needs to bring in State-wise or even sub-station-wise tenders**, so that the setting up of projects could be more spread out.
- There could be a **closed tender**, where the bidder who offers the best price bags the project, as opposed to the current method of holding auctions, in which bidders try to outbid each other.
- The government can **set a fixed tariff which would come down annually** so that the energy companies earn more in the initial years and could pay off their debts.
- **Ocean energy (from waves, tides and currents)** can provide steady, 24×7 power. Government needs to develop it.

Depleting Groundwater

Water depletion in Haryana over the years has led to 60 dark zones in the State, which include 21 critical ones in 10 districts.

Reasons for Depletion

- **Increased demand:** for water for domestic, industrial and agricultural needs and limited surface water resources lead to the over-exploitation of groundwater resources.
- **Limited storage facilities:** owing to the hard rock terrain, along with the added disadvantage of lack of rainfall, especially in north-central Indian states.
- **Green Revolution:** enabled water-intensive crops to be grown in drought-prone/ water deficit regions, leading to over-extraction of groundwater.
- **Frequent pumping:** of water from the ground without waiting for its replenishment leads to quick depletion.
- **Subsidies:** on electricity and high MSP for water-intensive crops are also leading reasons for depletion.

Dark zone: The dark zone is an area where groundwater depletion exceeds the rate of recharging.

The report of the **Central Ground Water Board (CGWB)** shows that 1,034 of 6584 assessed blocks in the country are over-exploited, and these blocks are usually referred to as 'dark zones'.

Government has taken various measures

- **Discouraging sowing:** of water-intensive crops like rice sowing from the upcoming season. Planting of the water-guzzling rice (paddy) crop, threatens to deplete the groundwater.
- **Haryana Government has launched a pilot project** intending to diversify non-basmati paddy to maize and pulse in seven blocks of Yamunanagar, Ambala, Karnal, Kurukshetra, Kaithal, Jind and Sonapat district.
 - Sowing of maize and 'tuar' pulse would be promoted by giving incentives to farmers.
 - Under the new scheme, identified farmers will be provided seed free of cost and given financial assistance for Rs. 2000 per acre in two parts.
 - The maize crop insurance premium of Rs. 766 per hectare will also be borne by the government. Also, maize production will be procured by government agencies at MSP.
- **Atal Bhujal Yojana:** Central government has decided to implement an Rs. 6000 crore plan to manage the available water resources efficiently, and boost the recharge mechanism, by involving the community.

- The **World Bank** is funding half this initiative, with the rest of the funds coming from the government, via budgetary support.
- The scheme will focus on recharging groundwater sources and propagate the efficient use of water, involving people at the local level.

Farmers Concern

- Farmers have various concerns like:
 - There is no dependable mechanism of government procurement for crops on MSP in the State.
 - Problems like delay in setting up of procurement centres.
 - Exploitation at the hands of commission agents (arthiyas), who most of the times buy the produce from farmers below MSP.
- Farmers have asked the government to first come out with a mechanism to procure alternative crops at the Minimum Support Price (MSP).

Solutions

- There is a need to develop a mechanism to purchase the **alternative crop** at MSP. The State government should enact a law, which guarantees that the produce of farmers is purchased at MSP.
- The **people's participation** needs to be ensured in replenishing groundwater level.
- The subsidies on the electricity for an agricultural purpose need to be rationalized and efficient water use practices need to be developed and promoted among farmers.

Important Facts For Prelims (27th May 2019)

Seawater from Ice Age Discovered

Recently, scientists for the first time have discovered the remnants of 20,000-year-old seawater dating back to the Ice Age, tucked inside rock formations in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

- Researchers made the discovery on a month long scientific mission exploring the limestone deposits that form the Maldives.
- Earlier, scientists had to reconstruct seawater from the last Ice Age from indirect clues, like fossil corals and chemical signatures from sediments on the seafloor.
- Scientists are interested in reconstructing the last Ice Age because the patterns that drove its circulation, climate and weather were very different from today.
- Understanding these patterns could shed light on how the planet's climate will react in the future.

Appointment of Prime Minister of India

Exercising powers vested in him under **Article 75 (1)** of the Constitution of India, the President, Shri Ram Nath Kovind, today appointed Shri Narendra Modi to the office of Prime Minister of India.

Article 75 in The Constitution of India 1949

- The Prime Minister shall be **appointed by the President** and the **other Ministers** shall be appointed **by the President on the advice of the Prime Minister**.
 - The Minister shall hold office **during the pleasure** of the President
 - The Council of Ministers shall be **collectively responsible to the House of the People**.
 - Before a Minister enters upon his office, the **President shall administer to him the oaths of office and of secrecy** according to the forms set out for the purpose in the Third Schedule.
 - A **Minister** who for any period of **six consecutive months** is not a member of either House of Parliament shall at the expiration of that period **cease to be a Minister**.
 - The **salaries and allowances of Ministers** shall be such as **Parliament may** from time to time by law determine and, until Parliament so determines, shall be as specified in the Second Schedule.
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