



News Analysis (24 Dec, 2020)

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PCA Ruling on Retrospective Taxation

Why in News

Recently, the **Permanent Court of Arbitration** (PCA) has ruled that the **Indian government was wrong in applying a retrospective tax on energy giant Cairn Plc.**

The verdict comes barely three months after **India lost arbitration to Vodafone Plc** over the retrospective tax legislation amendment.

Key Points

- **Background:**
 - In **2006-07**, **Cairn UK transferred shares** of Cairn India Holdings to Cairn India on which **Income Tax authorities** slapped a **tax demand of Rs. 24,500 crore** as it contended that Cairn UK had made capital gains.
Owing to different interpretations of capital gains, the **company refused to pay the tax**, which prompted **cases being filed at the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal** (ITAT) and the **Delhi High Court**.
 - In **2012**, Indian government's budget **retrospectively amended the tax code**, giving itself the power to go after **mergers and acquisitions (M&A) deals all the way back to 1962** if the underlying asset was in India.
 - In **2015**, Cairn Energy Plc **commenced international arbitration** proceedings against the Indian government.

- **PCA Ruling:**
 - The **Indian government must pay roughly Rs. 8,000 crore in damages** to Cairn.
 - Cairn Tax Issue was **not just a tax-related issue but an investment-related dispute**, and therefore the issue comes under its jurisdiction.
 - The Indian government's **retrospective demand was in breach of the guarantee of fair and equitable treatment**.
 - The Centre had **failed to uphold its obligations under the UK-India Bilateral Investment Treaty** and international laws in seeking tax payments from the company for its business reorganisation in the country.
- **India's Stand:**
 - The government **will study the award and all its aspects** carefully in consultation with its counsel.
 - After such consultations, the government will **consider all options and make a decision on the further course of action**, including legal remedies before appropriate fora.

Retrospective Taxation

- It **allows a country to pass a rule on taxing certain products, items or services** and deals and charge companies from a time behind the date on which the law is passed.
- Countries **use this route to correct any anomalies in their taxation policies** that have, in the past, allowed companies to take advantage of such loopholes.
- Retrospective Taxation **hurts companies that had knowingly or unknowingly interpreted the tax rules differently**.
- Apart from India, many countries including the **USA, the UK, the Netherlands, Canada, Belgium, Australia and Italy** have retrospectively taxed companies.

Permanent Court of Arbitration

- It was **established in 1899** and is **headquartered in The Hague, Netherlands**.
- **Purpose:** It is an **intergovernmental organization** dedicated to serve the international community in the field of dispute resolution and to facilitate arbitration and other forms of dispute resolution between States.
- It has a **three-part organizational structure** consisting of:
 - **Administrative Council** - to oversee its policies and budgets,
 - **Members of the Court** - a panel of independent potential arbitrators, and
 - **International Bureau** - its Secretariat, headed by the Secretary-General.
- **Funds:** It has a **Financial Assistance Fund** which aims at helping developing countries meet part of the costs involved in international arbitration or other means of dispute settlement offered by the PCA.

Way Forward

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- An investment-friendly business environment would increase economic activity and help raise more revenue over time for the government. It is to be hoped that tax officials' desire to deny their defeat and to try and hang on to legally untenable revenue finds an unsympathetic hearing from politicians in the finance ministry.
 - India needs to craft meaningful and clear dispute resolution mechanisms in cross-border transactions to prevent the disputes from going to international courts, and save the cost and time expenditure. Improving the arbitration ecosystem will have a positive impact on the **ease of doing business**.

Source: IE

Electoral Bonds and Right to Information

Why in News

The **Central Information Commission (CIC)**, the lead body for implementing the **Right to Information Act 2005**, has ruled that the **disclosure of identity of electoral bond scheme donors** will not serve any larger public interest and will **violate provisions of the Act itself**.

- The **electoral bond scheme** allows citizens and corporates to buy monetary instruments from the State Bank of India (SBI) and donate them to political parties, who can redeem them for money.
- According to the Association for Democratic Reforms, political parties have received a total of 12,452 **electoral bonds worth Rs. 6210.39 crore** till January 2020.

Key Points

- The Commission observed that the **disclosure** of names of donors and the donees may be **in contravention of** provisions contained in **section 8(1)(e)(j) of the RTI Act**.
The said section **exempts a public authority to give a citizen information available to a person in his fiduciary relationship**, unless the competent authority is satisfied that the larger public interest warrants the disclosure of such information.
 - A fiduciary is a person who holds a **legal or ethical relationship of trust** with one or more other parties (person or group of persons).
 - The information related to electoral bonds issued to political parties is held by SBI in a fiduciary capacity.
- **Earlier** in January 2020, CIC had **directed the Centre to reveal the names of electoral bond scheme donors** who wanted their identities to remain confidential.

- **Concerns:**
 - **Anonymity:**
 - Neither the donor nor the political party is obligated to reveal whom the donation comes from.

In 2019, the **Supreme Court** held that all political parties who had received donations through electoral bonds must submit details to the Election Commission of India.
 - This undercuts a fundamental constitutional principle, the **freedom of political information**, which is an integral element of **Article 19(1) (a) of the Constitution**.
 - **Black Money:**

Elimination of a cap of 7.5% on corporate donations, elimination of requirement to reveal political contributions in profit and loss statements and also the elimination of the provision that a corporation must be three years in existence, **undercuts the intent of the scheme**.

Any **troubled, dying company** can donate an unlimited amount anonymously to a political party giving them a convenient channel for business to round-trip their cash parked in tax havens for a favour or advantage granted in return for something.
 - **Defeating Transparency:**

It defeats the fundamental principle of transparency in political finance because it **conceals from public scrutiny the identity of the corporates and moneybags**.
 - **Asymmetric Opacity:**
 - The **government is always in a position to know who the donor is** because the bonds are purchased through the SBI.
 - This asymmetry of information **threatens to colour the process in favour of whichever political party is ruling** at the time.

Electoral Bond

- Electoral Bond is a financial instrument for making donations to **political parties**.
- The bonds are **issued in multiples** of Rs. 1,000, Rs. 10,000, Rs. 1 lakh, Rs. 10 lakh and Rs. 1 crore **without any maximum limit**.
- **State Bank of India** is authorised to issue and encash these bonds, which are **valid for fifteen days from the date of issuance**.
- These bonds are **redeemable in the designated account of a registered political party**.

- The bonds are available for purchase by **any person (who is a citizen of India or incorporated or established in India)** for a period of ten days each in the months of January, April, July and October as may be specified by the Central Government.
 - A person being an individual can buy bonds, either **singly or jointly** with other individuals.
 - Donor's name is **not mentioned** on the bond.

Central Information Commission

- **Formation:**

It was established by the Central Government in 2005, under the provisions of the Right to Information Act (2005). It is **not a constitutional body**.
- **Composition:**

It shall consist of the **Chief Information Commissioner (CIC)** and such number of **Central Information Commissioners not exceeding 10** as may be deemed necessary.
- **Appointment:**

They are appointed by the **President** on the recommendation of a committee consisting of the **Prime Minister as Chairperson**, the **Leader of Opposition** in the Lok Sabha and a **Union Cabinet Minister** nominated by the Prime Minister.
- **Tenure:**
 - The Chief Information Commissioner and an Information Commissioner shall hold office for **such a term as prescribed by the Central Government or until they attain the age of 65 years**, whichever is earlier.
 - They are **not eligible for reappointment**.
- **Power and Functions of CIC:**
 - It is the duty of the Commission to **receive and inquire into a complaint** from any person regarding information request under RTI, 2005.
 - The Commission can order an inquiry into any matter if there are reasonable grounds (**suo-moto power**).
 - While inquiring, the Commission has the powers of a **civil court** in respect of **summoning, requiring documents** etc.

Source: IE

Updating Census Registers

Why in News

Recently, the **Registrar General of India (RGI)** has written to all State coordinators to update the **census register**.

A **census** is the procedure of **systematically enumerating, and acquiring and recording information** about the members of a given population.

Key Points

- **The Order:** RGI has written to all State coordinators to **update names of an area, locality, colony or a building in the “charge register”**.
- **Charge register:** The charge register shows the distribution of work among enumerators and marks the **House Listing Blocks (HLB)** to be visited by each official.
 - **HLB is a primary unit** of collection of data.
 - **Use of Charge Register:**
 - It is an important census document that will **help enumerators to collect details during the first phase of census house listing and housing census and National Population Register (NPR)**.
 - The register will also be **used for the field work relating to the updating of NPR** since the same functionaries will be engaged.
- **Implication:**

The census exercise was **suspended indefinitely** owing to the **Covid-19 pandemic**. The communication from RGI may be an indication that the **census exercise may take off in the near future**.

Registrar General of India

- The Census Organisation was set up on an **ad-hoc basis for each Census till the 1951 Census**.
- The Government of India, in **1949 established an organisation** in the Ministry of Home Affairs under **Registrar General and ex-Officio Census Commissioner, India** to develop systematic collection of statistics on the size of population, its growth, etc.
- Later, this office was also entrusted with the responsibility of implementation of **Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969** in the country.

- It **arranges, conducts and analyses the results of the demographic surveys** of India including **Census of India** and **Linguistic Survey of India**.
 - **Census of India:** It provides information on size, distribution and socio-economic, demographic and other characteristics of the country's population.
 - The decennial Census of India has been **conducted 15 times, as of 2011**.
 - While it has been **undertaken every 10 years**, beginning in 1872 under British Viceroy Lord Mayo, **the first complete census was taken in 1881**.
 - **Post-1949, it has been conducted by the Registrar General and Census Commissioner of India** under the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
 - **Linguistic Survey of India:** The primary objective of the present Linguistic Survey of India is to present an updated linguistic scenario.
 - It is conducted **along with the decennial Census exercise**.
 - It also provides necessary inputs to the social/educational planners in respective States for their planning to attain the envisaged goals.
 - First linguistic survey of India was published by **George Abraham Grierson in 1928**.
- The **position** of Registrar is usually **held by a civil servant** holding the rank of Joint Secretary.

National Population Register (NPR)

- NPR is a register of the **usual residents of the country**. It is prepared at the local (village and sub-town), sub-district, district, state and national levels under provisions of the **Citizenship Act, 1955** and the **Citizenship (Registration of Citizens and Issue of National Identity Cards) Rules, 2003**.
- It is **mandatory** for every **“usual resident of India”** to register in the NPR.
- The data for the NPR was **first collected in 2010** along with the house listing phase of Census 2011.
- In **2015, this data was further updated** by conducting a **door-to-door** survey.

Source: TH

Digital Lending

Why in News

Recently, the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** cautioned individuals and small businesses against falling prey to the growing number of **unauthorised digital lending platforms and mobile applications** on promises of getting loans in quick and hassle-free manner.

Key Points

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- **Digital Lending:**
 - It consists of lending **through web platforms or mobile apps**, by taking advantage of technology for authentication and credit assessment.
 - **India's digital lending market has seen a significant rise** over the years. The digital lending value increased from USD 33 billion in FY15 to USD 150 billion in FY20 and is expected to hit the USD 350-billion mark by FY23.
 - **Banks** have launched their **own independent digital lending platforms** to tap in the digital lending market by leveraging existing capabilities in traditional lending.
 - **Significance of Digital Lending:**
 - **Financial Inclusion:** It helps in meeting the huge unmet credit need, particularly in the microenterprise and low-income consumer segment in India.
 - **Reduce Borrowing from informal channels:** It helps in reducing informal borrowings as it **simplifies the process of borrowing**.
 - Indians continue to borrow from family and friends, and moneylenders, sometimes at unreasonably high interest rates, primarily because these loans are more flexible and convenient.
 - **Time Saving:** It decreases time spent on working loan applications in-branch. Digital lending platforms have also been known to **cut overhead costs by 30-50%**.
 - **Issues with Digital Lending Platforms:**

Growing number of **unauthorised digital lending platforms** and mobile applications as:

 - They charge **excessive rates of interest** and **additional hidden charges**.
 - They adopt **unacceptable and high-handed recovery** methods.
 - They **misuse agreements to access data on mobile phones** of borrowers.
 - **Steps Taken by RBI:**
 - **Non-Banking Financial Companies (NBFCs)** and **banks** need to **state the names of online platforms** they are working with.
 - RBI has also **mandated that digital lending platforms which are used on behalf of Banks and NBFCs should disclose the name of the Bank(s) or NBFC(s)** upfront to the customers.
 - The central bank had also **asked lending apps to issue a sanction letter to the borrower on the letter head of the bank/ NBFC concerned** before the execution of the loan agreement.
 - Legitimate public **lending activities can be undertaken by banks, NBFCs registered with the RBI** and other entities who are regulated by state governments under statutory provisions.

- **India's Digital Ecosystem:**
 - Banks have partnered with **Fintechs** to serve their customers better.
 - Government of India has taken many initiatives such as **Unified Payments Interface, Jan dhan yojana, Aadhaar enabled Payment System**, etc. to promote digital environment in the country especially after demonetization.

Way Forward

- India is on the verge of a **digital lending revolution and making sure that this lending is done responsibly** can ensure the fruits of this revolution are realized.
- As several players have access to sensitive consumer data, **there must be clear guidelines around, for example, the type of data that can be held, the length of time data can be held for, and restrictions on the use of data.**
- Digital lenders should proactively develop and commit to a **code of conduct that outlines the principles of integrity, transparency and consumer protection**, with clear standards of disclosure and grievance redressal.
- **An agency can be created that tracks all digital loans and consumer/lender credit history.**
- Apart from establishing technological safeguards, **educating and training customers to spread awareness about digital lending is also important.**

Source: TH

GST Revenue Gap: NIPFP

Why in News

According to the **National Institute for Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP)**, the revenue shortfall for the **Goods and Services Tax (GST) compensation** payable to States in 2020-21 could be about Rs. 1.95 lakh crore in the best-case scenario.

The amount is **significantly lower than the Rs. 2.35 lakh crore estimated by the GST Council.**

Key Points

- **GST Compensation:**

- According to the **Goods and Services Tax (Compensation to States) Act 2017**, states will receive GST compensation during the transition period of GST (first five years of GST introduction), **if State GST** (SGST collection including receipts of Integrated GST settlement on account of SGST) **revenue falls short of the projected revenue collection.**

The projection of state revenue in GST is **based on revenue that is subsumed in GST** (also known as revenue under protection in GST) **in the base year 2015-16 and 14% annual growth rate** (year-on-year) in the revenue under protection during the GST transition period.

- GST compensation is paid using funds specifically collected as **compensation cess.**

Compensation cess is **levied on products considered to be sin or luxury goods.**

- **Findings of NIPFP:**

- The **revenue gap in state GST collection** is expected to **vary between 2.85 lakh crore to Rs. 3.27 lakh crore.** **GST compensation cess** collection in 2020-21 is expected to **vary between Rs. 82,242 crore to Rs. 90,386 crore.**

Therefore, **revenue to the tune of Rs. 1.95 lakh to Rs. 2.45 lakh crore** may require in providing full GST compensation to states in 2020-21.

- **Maximum revenue gaps** are expected for **Goa, Punjab, Chhattisgarh, Kerala and Chhattisgarh.**

- **Step Taken by the Government:**

- Recently, the **Ministry of Finance** has released the eighth weekly instalment of Rs. 6,000 crore to the states to meet the GST compensation shortfall, taking the total amount released so far under this window to Rs. 48,000 crore.
- The **Central government borrows the funds under a special window and passes it on to states** in a back-to-back loan arrangement.

The interest rate for the latest loan instalment was 4.19%, while the average rate for the entire borrowing so far is at 4.7%.

National Institute for Public Finance and Policy

- **Formation:** NIPFP is an **autonomous body** set up jointly by the Ministry of Finance, the erstwhile Planning Commission, and several state governments. It was founded in 1976. It is registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860.

- **Functions:**

- It undertakes research, policy advocacy and capacity building in areas related to public economics.
- One of the major mandates of the institute is to **assist the Central, State and Local governments** in formulating and reforming public policies by providing an analytical base.

- **Funding:** It receives **an annual grant from the Ministry of Finance and various State governments**. However, it **maintains an independent non-government character**.
- **Governing Body:**
 - It includes the Revenue Secretary, Economic Affairs Secretary and the Chief Economic Advisor from the **Ministry of Finance** and representatives from **NITI Aayog, Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** and three state governments.
 - It also includes three distinguished economists, members of sponsoring agencies and other invitees.
 - It is **involved in appointing the Chairman and the Director**.
 - The usual **tenure of a chairman is four years**, which can be extended.
 - At present, **Dr. Urjit Patel**, former Governor of the RBI, is the Chairman.
- **Location:** New Delhi.

Source: TH

Changes in PMS-SC

Why in News

Recently, the **Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA)** has approved changes in the **Post Matric Scholarship to students belonging to Scheduled Castes (PMS-SC)**.

- Government is committed to give a big push and further impetus to this effort so that the **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education of SCs would reach up to the national standards within the 5 year period**.
 - GER is the number of students enrolled in a given level of education, regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the official school-age population corresponding to the same level of education.
 - The current GER in higher education is **26.3%**.
- The Central Assistance which was around **Rs. 1100 crore annually during 2017-18 to 2019-20 would be increased more than 5 times** to be around **Rs. 6000 crore annually during 2020-21 to 2025-26**.

Key Points

- **Post Matric Scholarship for Scheduled Castes:**

- It is a **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** and **implemented through State Government and UT administration.**
- It provides **financial assistance to the SC students studying at post matriculation or post-secondary stage** to enable them to complete their education.
- These scholarships are **available for studies in India only** and are awarded by the government of the State/Union Territory to which the applicant actually belongs i.e. **permanently settled.**
- The **focus** of the scheme is on enrolling the poorest students, timely payments, comprehensive accountability, continuous monitoring and total transparency.
- **Income Ceiling:** Scholarships are paid to the students whose parents/guardians' income from all sources **does not exceed Rs. 2,50,000 per annum.**

- **New Changes:**
 - **Enrolment Campaign:**
 - Launching a campaign to **enrol the students from the poorest households passing the 10th standard**, in the higher education courses of their choice.
 - It is estimated that **1.36 crore poorest students are currently not continuing their education beyond 10th standard**, who would be brought into the higher education system in the next 5 years.
 - **Secure Online Platform:**
 - An online platform with robust **cybersecurity** measures that would assure transparency, accountability, efficiency, and timely delivery of the assistance without any delays.
 - States will **undertake fool-proof verification** of the eligibility, caste status, Aadhar identification and bank account details on the online portal.
 - **Direct Benefit Transfer:**
 - Unlike earlier, when funding was passed through state governments, financial assistance will be transferred by the **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)** mode and preferably using the **Aadhaar Enabled Payment System**.
 - Students will receive the Centre's share as soon as the state transfers its share as per fixed time schedule.
 - **New Funding Pattern:**
 - The Cabinet has approved a **total investment of Rs. 59,048 crore** with a new funding pattern of **60-40 for the Centre and States**.
 - Starting from 2021-22, the Central share would be released after ensuring that the concerned State Government has released their share.
 - This **replaces the existing committed liability system** and brings greater involvement of the Central government in this crucial scheme.
 - **Committed liabilities** are payments anticipated during a financial year for contracts concluded in previous years.
 - **Strong Monitoring Mechanisms:**
 - The scheme will be further strengthened through the conduct of social audits, annual third party evaluation, and half-yearly self-audited reports from each institution.

Source: PIB

Catch the Rain: National Water Mission

Why in News

Recently, the **National Water Mission** (NWM), **Ministry of Jal Shakti** in collaboration with **Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan** (NYKS), **Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports** have launched the ‘**Catch the Rain**’ Awareness Generation Campaign.

Key Points

- **Tag line: Catch the rain, where it falls, when it falls.**
- **Aims:**
 - To nudge all stake-holders to create **Rain Water Harvesting Structures** (RWHS) suitable for the climatic conditions and subsoil strata to store rainwater.
 - To **engage people at the grassroots through effective campaigning and Information, Education and Communication (IEC) activities** for implementation of the campaign.
- **Activities:**
 - **Drives** to make water harvesting pits, rooftop RWHS and check dams.
 - **Removal of encroachments and desilting of tanks** to increase their storage capacity.
 - **Removal of obstructions** in the channels which bring water from the catchment areas.
 - **Repairs to traditional WHS** like step-wells and using defunct bore-wells and old wells to put the water back to aquifers.
 - As a preparatory phase of **Jal Shakti Abhiyan** (JSA) II, NYKS will undertake an **awareness campaign** through various IEC activities, to cover 623 districts from December 2020 to March 2021.
 - IEC activities will include conducting education and motivational programs, mass awareness campaigns, environment building including wall writing, etc.
 - States have been requested to **open Rain Centers in each district**, which will act as a **technical guidance centre** to all in the district.
- **Significance:**
 - Emphasized focus on water conservation and rainwater harvesting will make **youngsters understand the importance of water.**
 - **Highest priority to the issue of water conservation** will lead to the adoption of an integrated approach towards water management.
 - The idea of “No or only limited will water to flow out of the compound” will help in **improving soil moisture and rising groundwater table.**
 - In urban areas it will **reduce water gushing onto roads**, damaging them and will prevent urban flooding.

Steps Taken for Water Conservation

- **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act:**
Aims to improve groundwater harvesting, build water conservation and storage mechanisms and has enabled the government to introduce water conservation as a project under the Act.
- **Jal Kranti Abhiyan:**
 - Active efforts to revolutionise villages and cities through block-level water conservation schemes.
 - For example, the **Jal Gram Scheme** under it aimed at developing two model villages in water-starved areas for water conservation and preservation.
- **National Water Mission:**
Aims to conserve water, minimise wastage and ensure more equitable distribution both across and within states through integrated water resources development and management.
- **NITI Aayog's Composite Water Management Index:**
Aims to achieve effective utilization of water.
- **Jal Shakti Ministry and Jal Jeevan Mission:**
 - Jal Shakti Ministry was formed to tackle water issues holistically.
 - Jal Jeevan mission aims to provide piped water to all rural households by 2024.
- **Atal Bhujal Yojana:**
Central sector scheme for sustainable management of groundwater with community participation through the formation of **Water User Associations**, water budgeting, preparation and implementation of Gram-panchayat-wise water security plans, etc.
- **Jal Shakti Abhiyan:**
Launched in July 2019 as a campaign for water conservation and water security in the country.
- **National Water Awards:**
 - Organised by the **Department of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation**, Ministry of Jal Shakti.
 - Focus on the good work and efforts made by individuals and organisations across the country, and the government's vision for the path to **Jal Samridh Bharat**.

Source: PIB

Aquifer Mapping & Management

Why in News

A Memorandum of Agreement (MoA) has been recently signed between **Central Ground Water Board (CGWB)**, **Ministry of Jal Shakti** and **Council Of Scientific And Industrial Research–National Geophysical Research Institute**, for use of

advanced heliborne geophysical survey (through helicopter) and other scientific studies under the **Aquifer Mapping Programme**.

Geophysical data is used to provide information on the **physical properties** of the **Earth's surface and subsurface**. As a result, geophysical data can **help locate hydrocarbons, minerals, aggregate, and other natural resources**.

For example **groundwater mapping, mineral mapping**.

Key Points

Objectives of the study:

- High resolution aquifer mapping using **heliborne geophysical studies**, including identification of sites for artificial recharge.

The main advantages of the **Heliborne geophysical survey** is that it is fast, highly data dense, precise and economical.

- Create **3D** Geophysical model, geophysical **thematic maps** at **horizontal and vertical plains**.
- **Aquifer Geometry** of principal aquifer with demarcation of de-saturated and saturated aquifers.

The rocks in which groundwater is stored are called aquifers. They are typically made up of **gravel, sand, sandstone or limestone**.

- Spatial and depth wise distribution of **paleochannel network** if any and its linkage with the aquifer system.

A palaeochannel, or paleochannel, is a remnant of an **inactive river or stream channel** that has been filled or buried by younger sediment

- Selecting suitable sites for groundwater withdrawal and water conservation through artificial or managed aquifer recharge.
- The study is likely to generate **groundwater data** in a very short time period helping in groundwater management by preparing **site specific plans** for improving ground water levels in water stressed areas.

India and Groundwater

- India is the **largest user of groundwater** in the world, extracting groundwater to the tune of **253** billion cubic meter (bcm) per year.
 - It is about **25% of the global groundwater extraction**.
 - Out of the total of **6584** assessment units, **1034** have been categorized as '**Over-exploited**', **253** as '**Critical**', **681** as '**Semi-Critical**' and **4520** as '**Safe**'.
 - The remaining **96** assessment units have been classified as '**Saline**' due to **non-availability of fresh groundwater** due to salinity problems.

- **Availability of Water:**

- India has about **1123 billion m³** of water resources available, out of which **690 bcm** is surface water and rest **433 bcm** is groundwater.
- Out of total groundwater available, **90% of it is used for irrigation purposes** which is mainly for agricultural purposes.
- The remaining **10% accounts for domestic and industrial purposes combined.**

- **Water Crisis in India:**

- According to the **Composite Water Management Index** (CWMI) report released by the **NITI Aayog** in 2018, **21 major cities** (Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, Hyderabad and others) are racing to **reach zero groundwater levels by 2020**, affecting access for **100 million people.**

The CWMI report also states that by 2030, the country's water demand is projected to be **twice the available supply**, implying **severe water scarcity** for hundreds of millions of people and an eventual **6% loss in the country's GDP.**

- Maharashtra and nearly half the country is facing an acute water shortage. Besides **Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Rajasthan, parts of Gujarat, Punjab and Haryana** are facing a water shortage of unprecedented levels.

National Aquifer Mapping and Management program (NAQUIM)

- It is being implemented by the **Central Ground Water Board (CGWB).**
- NAQUIM envisages **mapping of aquifers** (water bearing formations), their characterization and development of Aquifer Management Plans to facilitate **sustainable management of groundwater resources.**
- NAQUIM was initiated as a part of the **Ground Water Management and Regulation Scheme** to delineate and characterize the aquifers to develop plans for ground water management.

Central Ground Water Board

It is a **subordinate office** of the **Ministry of Jal Shakti**, and is the National Apex Agency entrusted with the responsibilities of **providing scientific inputs for management, exploration, monitoring, assessment, augmentation and regulation of groundwater resources** of the country.

CSIR-National Geophysical Research Institute

- The National Geophysical Research Institute (NGRI) is a **geoscientific research organization** established in 1961 under the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR).
- **HQ:** Hyderabad

Source: PIB

e-Sewa Kendra

Why in News

Recently, an **e-Sewa Kendra** was inaugurated by the **Chief Justice of India (CJI)** at the **High Court of Tripura**.

Key Points

- **e-Seva Kendra:**
 - **e-Seva Kendras** have been **created in the High Courts and in one District Court in each State** on a pilot basis.
 - They are dedicated to serve as a **one-stop center for all legal aid and assistance** for common **litigants and advocates**.
 - It **enables litigants to obtain information with respect to case status** and to obtain copies of judgments and orders.
 - These centres also extend assistance in e-filing of cases.
 - These Kendras represent a **significant step for the common man and his right to access to justice**.

- **Other Technological Initiatives to Provide Legal Services:**

- **Tele-Law:**

- **About: Tele-Law programme** was launched by the **Ministry of Law and Justice in collaboration with the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) in 2017** to address cases at pre-litigation stage.
- **Connect Lawyers to Litigants:** It is a service that uses **video conferencing facilities and telephone services to connect lawyers to litigants who need legal advice**. This service aims to reach out to the needy especially the marginalized and disadvantaged.
- **Common Service Centres:** Under this programme, **smart technology of video conferencing, telephone/instant calling facilities available at the vast network of Common Service Centres at the Panchayat level are used** to connect the indigent, down-trodden, vulnerable, unreached groups and communities with the Panel Lawyers for seeking timely and valuable legal advice.

- **e-Courts Project:**

- The **e-Courts** project was conceptualized on the basis of the **National Policy and Action Plan for Implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the Indian Judiciary – 2005**. It is a **pan-India Project, monitored and funded by the Department of Justice, Ministry of Law and Justice**.
- **Objectives of the Project:**
 1. To provide **efficient & time-bound citizen-centric services** delivery as detailed in e-Court Project Litigant's Charter.
 2. To **develop, install & implement decision support systems** in courts.
 3. To **automate the processes** to provide transparency and accessibility of information to its stakeholders.
 4. To **enhance judicial productivity, both qualitatively & quantitatively**, to make the justice delivery system affordable, accessible, cost-effective, predictable, reliable and transparent.

Source: IE

Covid in Antarctica

Why in News

36 people at a Chilean research station in Antarctica have been found infected with the **novel coronavirus**. This is the **first instance of the virus** Antarctica.

Key Points

- Antarctica is uninhabited except for those manning the nearly **60 permanent stations** established by **several countries**, including India, for carrying out scientific research.
- Antarctica is **Earth's southernmost continent**. It contains the geographic South Pole and is situated in the **Antarctic region of the Southern Hemisphere**.
At 14,000,000 square kilometres (5,400,000 square miles), it is the **fifth-largest continent**.
- The **Indian Antarctic Programme** is a multi-disciplinary, multi-institutional programme under the control of the **National Centre for Antarctic and Ocean Research, Ministry of Earth Sciences**.
- India officially acceded to the **Antarctic Treaty System** in August **1983**.
- **Research Stations in the Antarctic:**
 - **Dakshin Gangotri:**
 - Dakshin Gangotri was the **first Indian scientific research base station** established in Antarctica, as a part of the Indian Antarctic Program.
 - It has weakened and become **just a supply base**.
 - **Maitri:**
 - Maitri is India's second **permanent research station** in Antarctica. It was built and finished in 1989.
 - Maitri is situated on the rocky mountainous region called **Schirmacher Oasis**. India also built a freshwater lake around Maitri known as **Lake Priyadarshini**.
 - **Bharti:**
 - Bharti, India's latest research station operation **since 2012**. It has been constructed to help researchers work in safety despite the harsh weather.
 - It is India's first committed research facility and is located about **3000 km east of Maitri**.
 - **Other Research Facilities:**
 - Sagar Nidhi:**
 1. In 2008, India commissioned the Sagar Nidhi, for research.
 2. An ice-class vessel, it can cut through the thin ice of 40 cm depth and is the first Indian vessel to **navigate Antarctic waters**.

Antarctic Treaty System

- Antarctic Treaty and related agreements are collectively known as the Antarctic Treaty System.
- It regulates **international relations with respect to Antarctica**.
- Antarctica is defined as all of the land and ice shelves **south of 60°S latitude**.
- Antarctic Treaty Secretariat Headquarters is in **Buenos Aires, Argentina**.

- **Antarctic treaty:**
 - Entered into force in **1961**
 - Currently has **53 parties**
 - Sets aside Antarctica as a **scientific preserve**
 - **Provisions:**
 - Antarctica shall be **used for peaceful purposes only**.
 - Freedom of scientific investigation in Antarctica and cooperation toward that end shall continue.
 - Scientific observations and results from Antarctica shall be exchanged and **made freely available**.

National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research

- National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) was established as an autonomous research and development institution of the **Ministry of Earth Sciences in 1998**.
- It is located in **Goa**.
- It is responsible for the country's research activities in the **Polar and Southern Ocean realms**.
- It is the nodal agency for planning, promotion, coordination and execution of the entire gamut of polar and southern ocean scientific research in the country as well as for the associated logistics activities.
- **Its major responsibilities include:**
 - Management and upkeep of the Indian Antarctic Research Bases "**Maitri**" and "**Bharati**", and the Indian Arctic base "**Himadri**".
 - Himadri:** India launched its **first scientific expedition to the Arctic Ocean in 2007** and opened a research base named "Himadri" at the **Svalbard, Norway** in July 2008 for carrying out studies in disciplines like Glaciology, Atmospheric sciences & Biological sciences.

Source: IE

Army Variant of MRSAM

Why in News

Recently, the maiden test of the **Medium Range Surface to Air Missile (MRSAM) for the Indian Army** has been conducted.

Key Points

- **About Army Variant of MRSAM:**
 - It is a **surface to air missile developed jointly** by **Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO)**, India and **Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI)**, Israel for use by the Indian Army.
 - It **consists of** a command and control post, multi-function radar and mobile launcher system.
- **MRSAM:**
 - It is a high response, quick reaction, **vertically launched supersonic missile**, designed to **neutralize enemy aerial threats** – missiles, aircraft, guided bombs, helicopters.
 - **Supersonic missiles** exceed the speed of sound (Mach 1) but they are not faster than Mach-3.
 - It is **used by the Army, Navy and Air Force** as different variants.
 - In **May 2019**, **Indian Navy, DRDO and IAI** conducted the maiden co-operative engagement firing of the naval version of the MRSAM.
 - It is a **land based variant of the Barak Air and Missile Defence System (AMD)**.
- **India-Israel Defence Cooperation:**
 - Israel has been **among the top four arms suppliers to India** for almost two decades now, notching **military sales worth around USD 1 billion every year**.
 - Indian armed forces are inducting the **next-generation Barak-8 surface-to-air missile systems** under three joint DRDO-IAI projects worth over Rs. 30,000 crore.
 - The Indian armed forces have inducted a wide array of Israeli weapon systems over the years, which range from **Phalcon AWACS** (airborne warning and control systems) and **Heron, Searcher-II and Harop drones to Barak anti-missile defence systems and Spyder** quick-reaction anti-aircraft missile systems.
 - The acquisitions also include a host of Israeli missiles and precision-guided munitions, from **Python and Derby** air-to-air missiles to **Crystal Maze and Spice-2000 bombs**.

BOOST TO STRATEGIC TIES

Israel among top 4 arms suppliers to India (apart from Russia, US & France). Annual sales worth over \$1 billion

MISSILE DEFENCE: 3 joint DRDO-Israeli Aerospace Industries projects underway for Barak-8 surface-to-air missile systems for Navy (initial cost Rs 2,606 crore), IAF (Rs 10,076 crore) & Army (Rs 16,830 crore)

DRONES: Over 100 Israeli UAVs, from Heron & Searcher-II surveillance & precision-targeting drones to Harop 'killer' drones, inducted. Rs 3,500-crore Project Cheetah to fit Heron drones with missiles in pipeline

RADARS: Israeli radars, from Aerostat to Green Pine radars, inducted. Now, acquiring 66 air defence fire control radars for Rs 4,577 crore

AWACS: Impending deal for 2 Phalcon AWACS for over \$1.5 billion. 3 Phalcon AWACS, mounted on IL-76 aircraft, earlier inducted under \$1.1 billion deal

MISSILES & BOMBS: Inductions range from Spyder quick-reaction anti-aircraft missiles, Python & Derby air-to-air missiles to Crystal Maze PGMs and Spice-2000 bombs



Source: IE

Firefly for Great Indian Bustard

Why in News

The **Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** along with the **Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)** India has come up with a unique initiative a “**firefly bird diverter**” for **overhead power lines** in areas where **Great Indian Bustard (GIB)** populations are found in the wild.

The **Wildlife Conservation Society** is a **non-governmental organization** headquartered in New York, that aims to conserve the world's largest wild places in 14 priority regions.

Key Points



- **About:**
 - Firefly bird diverters are **flaps installed on power lines**. They work as reflectors for bird species like the GIB. Birds can **spot them from a distance of about 50 meters** and change **their path of flight to avoid collision with power lines**.
 - Smaller birds can change their direction but for larger bird species, it is difficult because of their **body weight** and other factors.
 - Since great Indian bustards are heavy birds with limited frontal vision, they find it difficult to change their course of flight swiftly even if they spot a live wire.
 - The diverters are called fireflies because they look like **fireflies from a distance, shining on power lines in the night**.
- **Background:**
 - According to a report by the MoEFCC, power lines (especially **high-voltage transmission lines**) with multiple overhead wires, are the most important current threat for GIBs in the **Thar region**, and are causing **unsustainably high mortality**.
 - The Supreme Court of India, in a recent hearing, directed that **power lines in GIB landscapes should be placed underground**.

Great Indian Bustard (GIB)

- **About:**
 - It is one of the **heaviest flying birds** in the world.
 - **Scientific Name: *Ardeotis nigriceps***
- **Habitat:**
 - Bustards generally favour **flat open landscapes** with minimal visual obstruction and disturbance, therefore adapt well in **grasslands**.
 - Its population is confined mostly to **Rajasthan and Gujarat**. Small populations occur in **Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh**.

- **Protection Status:**
 - **International Union for Conservation of Nature status: Critically Endangered**
 - **Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES): Appendix 1**
 - **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972: Schedule 1**
 - It is one of the species for the **recovery programme** under the **Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats** of the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate change.
 - The **Great Indian Bustard, Asian Elephant and Bengal Florican** have been included in **Appendix I of the UN Convention on Migratory Species** at the **13th Conference of the Parties (COP)** to the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) in Gandhinagar (Gujarat).
- **Threats:**
 - Collision/electrocution with power transmission lines,
 - Hunting (still prevalent in Pakistan),
 - Irrigation and farming technology
 - Mining
 - Wind turbines and Solar farms (photovoltaic power stations)
 - Plantation of exotic shrub/tree species in deserts and grasslands in the name of afforestation

Source: TH

Shaheen-IX

Why in News

China has recently asked India to “**objectively**” view the on-going **month-long military exercises** taking place between the **Chinese** and **Pakistani** air forces, amid **increasing tensions** with India.

Key Points

- “**Shaheen-IX**” or **Eagle-IX exercise**, is an exercise between the **Pakistan Air Force** and the **People’s Liberation Army Air Force**.
- Shaheen-IX is the **ninth in the series** which is conducted **each year in both countries on alternate basis**.
- The first such drill was held in **Pakistan in 2011**.
- **Other exercises between Pakistan and china:**
 - Sea Guardians:** Bilateral Naval exercise

- **India China exercises:**

Hand In Hand: Bilateral Army exercise

Source: TH
