

Current Events (10-16)

QS World University Rankings 2023:

The 19th edition of QS (Quacquarelli Symonds), one of the most widely used international university rankings, has been issued. The International Rating Expert Group has approved it as the only international ranking (IREG).

- QS uses six indicators to compile the ranking: Academic reputation (AR), employer reputation (ER), citations per faculty (CPF), faculty/student ratio, international faculty ratio and international student ratio.
- The latest edition features 41 Indian universities with IISc as the top most ranker in India with a rank of 155.

World Investment Report:

- It is an annual report published by UNCTAD.
- Despite a 30% drop in foreign direct investment (FDI) into India, India remains placed seventh.
- The US is in first place, followed by China and Hong Kong.
- Only India showed a decrease in inflows among the top ten host economies.
- Outward FDI from India, on the other hand, increased by 43% to \$15.5 billion in 2021.

About FDI (Foreign Direct Investment):

- Union Government in 2013 constituted a committee to clearly define the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and Foreign Institutional Investment (FII).
- At present, if an investor has a stake of 10 % or less in a company, the investment is treated as FII. If an investor has a stake of more than 10 per cent, it is treated as foreign direct investment.

About United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD):

- It is a permanent intergovernmental organisation that was formed in 1964 by the United Nations General Assembly and is part of the UN Secretariat.

IAEA board passes resolution criticizing Iran:

- The Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency has endorsed a resolution urging Iran to fully cooperate with UN inspectors investigating three undeclared locations.
- The UK, France, Germany, and the United States filed the resolution to the IAEA, which was endorsed by 30 nations.
- The measure was opposed by only Russia and China. The resolution was denounced by Iran.

2015 Agreement b/w P5 + 1 and Iran/Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA):

- Iran will reduce its installed centrifuge to 1/3rd and scale down its uranium stock. Excess stockpile of nuclear parts would be kept with the IAEA.
- Turn its nuclear facility in Fordow in R&D for 15 years.
- UN embargo on weapons to Iran for 5 years.
- UN inspector will be allowed to enter Iran nuclear sites including military ones.

- USA has Pulled out of the deal. While Russia and China have denounced the move; France, Germany and UK have made it clear that they remain committed to the agreement and will push to enhance trade links with Iran.
- Now, Iran has warned to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) if the European Nations refer the dispute over its atomic programme to the United Nation Security Council.

Analysis:

- This agreement has showed that diplomacy can achieve much more than the military.
- Now the major problem is the demand of Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the turkey to get same rights for retaining enriched uranium as that of Iran.
- Also Saudi helped pakistan in getting nuclear weapon and so pakistan will help it back now.
- The quantity was decided such that if Iran breaks the deal, it should take, not less than a year, for Iran to enrich its uranium to a weapon level.

UNSC resolution, 2231, includes what is known as a “snapback” provisions that could reinstate those sanctions if other parties to the agreement complained that Iran was cheating.

Implications for India:

- It will help India to further its ties with the Iran and its BoT deficit with west Asia. Which is currently hard as Indian have go through financial scrutiny, even for a normal transaction but India will also get competition from the Europeans, Americans and Chinese.
- Access to Afghanistan by Chabahar port as India sees a great potential in gas-rich Central Asia. However, because Pakistan denies India transit rights to Afghanistan, India lacks direct access to the region.

Bond Yields:

- The Reserve Bank of India has raised interest rates to combat inflation, which is forecasted to continue over 7% until at least September.
- Bond yields, on the other hand, have increased to their highest levels in three years as a result of this.

Bond Yield = Coupon Amount/Price

Par Tapi Narmada project:

- The Astol project, which will offer tap water to 4.50 lakh people in 174 tribal villages and 1,028 hamlets on the hills of Gujarat's Valsad district, is crucial.
- The tribes in the region have been resisting the central government's Par-Tapi-Narmada river connection project.

About Pari-Tapi-Narmada

- The Par-Tapi-Narmada river connection project in south Gujarat was cancelled following widespread opposition from tribal people in the region's three districts.

About the Project:

- Envisioned under the 1980 National Perspective Plan.
- The project proposes to transfer river water from the surplus regions of the Western Ghats to the deficit regions of Saurashtra and Kutch.

Components of IRL project/National Perspective Plan (NPP):

Since 1980s, it is being managed by India's National Water Development Agency (NWDA) under the Ministry of Water Resources. It has three parts:

- Northern Himalayan rivers interlink.
- Southern peninsular rivers interlink.
- Intra-State rivers linking.

NWDA has prepared number of reports on all the three components. However, various governments have shelved the idea for a number of reasons.

Why this is a good idea?

- India receives most of its rain during monsoon season. Maximum of which, occurs in northern and eastern part of India. It can be distributed to other parts as well.
- Protection from monsoon fails, then perennial river could feed other rivers.
- Prevention of floods. For example Ganga Basin, Brahmaputra basin sees floods almost every year.
- Commercial importance, as it can be used as inland waterways.
- New occupation for people living in and around these canals like fishing.

However, some people are opposing this project due to the following reasons:

- Huge amount of distortion in the existing environment including mass deforestation, which will impact rain and which in turn will affect the whole cycle of life.
- Usually rivers change their course and direction in about 100 years and if this happens after interlinking, then the project will not be feasible for a longer run.
- Decrease amount of fresh water entering the seas and thus a serious threat to the marine life system and ecological disaster.
- Creation of Canals and Reservoirs will submerge huge amount of area leading to displacement of people.
- Money required is huge and loans from the foreign sources which would increase the burden on the government and country will fall in a debt trap.

Environmental Performance Index 2022:

- Yale Center for Environmental Law and Policy and Columbia University prepared this index.

About the Environmental Performance Index:

- The EPI provides a data-driven overview of the global situation of sustainability.
- It rates 180 nations based on **40 performance indicators** such as climate change, public health, biodiversity, and so on.
- It includes a scorecard that identifies **environmental leaders and laggards**, as well as practical advice for countries seeking to move toward a more sustainable future.

Performance of India and other countries:

- The report ranked India at the bottom along with Bangladesh and Pakistan in a list of 180 countries.

- The US has been ranked at 43rd and the biggest current emitter China has been ranked at 160th position.
- Top 5 countries: Denmark, UK, Finland, Malta and Sweden have been ranked at the top five positions due to their better performance.

Why India is placed at the bottom?

- The report claimed that India prioritised economic growth over environment.
- It has markedly poor air quality and quickly rising greenhouse gas emissions.

Why India rejected the report?

- As per Indian government, while rejecting the report argued that it does not consider per capita emissions and different socio-economic conditions across countries.

Draft EIA 2020:

The key points of dispute raised by UN Special Rapporteurs (independent experts working on behalf of the United Nations) are:

- It categorizes the projects and activities into 3 categories A, B1, B2. However, it excludes any project of "Strategic Nature" like Waterways, NHs etc.
- It shortens the period of public consultation hearings to 40 days maximum and also reduces the time available to public to submit their responses on any application seeking environmental clearance from 30 to 20 days.
- It also allows the declaration of some areas as "ecologically sensitive areas" without a public hearing or environmental clearance, and several "red" and "orange" classified toxic industries could now operate as close as 0-5 km from a Protected Area.
- The increased validity of the environment clearances for mining projects (50 years versus 30 years currently) and river valley projects (15 years versus 10 years currently).
- The most devastating blow to the EIA regime is the creation of an ex-post-facto clearance. Under this, when an EIA clearance is not sought or not granted, and the construction of the project had already taken place, then the project proponent can enter an assessment procedure to determine fines for the violations. [Violates Precautionary Principle]

PFMS (Public Financial Management System):

The Single Nodal Agency (SNA) Dashboard of PFMS (Public Financial Management System) was recently launched by the Union Ministry of Finance.

About SNA:

- It is a substantial overhaul of the way money for Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS) are issued, dispersed, and managed that began in 2021.
- Each state is obliged to identify and designate a SNA for each scheme under this system.
- All monies for that State in a specific plan have now been credited to this bank account, and all expenditures incurred by all other Implementing Agencies involved have been deducted from this account.

Public Financial Management System (PFMS)/Central Plan Scheme Monitoring System (CPSMS):

- It tracks fund disbursement in real time and ensures that state treasuries are integrated with the Centre to ensure money is sent as and when required (just in time approach).
- It provides real-time information regarding all government schemes, and on resource availability and utilisation across schemes.
- The government has set a target to integrate PFMS with all state treasuries to implement Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) for welfare and scholarship schemes.
- It is administered by the Department of Expenditure and implemented by the Controller General of Accounts.

State Food Safety Index:

- On World Food Safety Day, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) issued the 4th State Food Safety Index (SFSI).
- It aims to assess states' performance across five food safety metrics.

State Food Safety Index (SFSI)

- The index was created by the FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) in 2018-19 to assess states' performance on five key food safety indicators.
- Human Resources and Institutional Data, Compliance, Food Testing - Infrastructure and Surveillance, Training & Capacity Building, and Consumer Empowerment are just a few of the aspects.
- The index will assist us in providing our inhabitants with safe and healthy meals.

Performance of various states:

- Tamil Nadu topped the State Food Safety Index followed by Gujarat and Maharashtra.
- Among Smaller States, Goa stood first, followed by Manipur and Sikkim.
- Among UTs, Jammu and Kashmir, Delhi and Chandigarh secured first, second and third ranks.

Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for the Kharif season 2022-23:

News: The Minimum Support Prices (MSP) for the Kharif season 2022-23 were recently approved by the cabinet. The rates for 14 Kharif crops have been increased, the hikes ranging from 4% to 8%.

Agricultural Price Policy in India:

- At the beginning of the sowing season for Kharif and Rabi crops, the Government announces MSP for 23 crops that the farmer are willing to sell to the FCI for PDS and buffer stock operations.
- After harvesting, the produce is purchased at MSP by FCI.
- Then, the Grains are sold at the PDS outlets (fair price shop) at issue price.
- The difference between both - MSP and fair price- is the food subsidy. Government decides the support prices based on the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP).

CACP defines production costs of crops under three categories:

- A2 is the actual paid-out expenses incurred by farmers — in cash and kind — on seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, hired labour, fuel, irrigation and other inputs from outside.

- A2+FL includes A2 cost plus an imputed value of unpaid family labour.
- C2 is the most comprehensive definition as it also accounts for the rentals or interest loans, and fixed capital assets over and above A2+FL.

Criticism of MSP:

- While the government announces MSP for 23 crops, effective MSP-linked procurement occurs mainly for wheat, rice and cotton.
- While there is no government procurement, per se, in sugarcane, a crop with assured irrigation, mills are legally obligated to buy cane from farmers at prices fixed by government - an effective MSP like engagement.
- This has resulted into buffer stocks of rice and wheat to above the required norms and on the other hand, it has caused frequent price spikes in pulses and edible oils, despite substantial imports of these commodities.
- It helps the big farmer while the majority of farmers in India are subsistence farmers, who are not even aware of the MSP.
- Food subsidy burden is increasing and needs to be rationalized so as to spend on infrastructure.

What to be done?

- Niti Aayog has suggested “Price Deficiency Payment” system, under which if the price in an APMC mandis fall below the MSP, then the farmer would be entitled to a maximum of, say 50% of the difference between the MSP and the market price via Direct Benefits Transfer (DBT).
- For example, Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana (BBY), in Madhya Pradesh for kharif crops. However, problems are that it could benefit only a fraction of production (due to only some crops are covered). Cost of BBY at the national level will be at staggering Rs1.7 trillion annually.
- Second option is Agriculture Investment Support scheme. For example, Telangana government provides financial support per acre per season for two crops a year. It would cost around 97 trillion if the government implemented it at an all-India level, assuming a payout of Rs10,000 per hectare per year.

So, a proposal of a hybrid of two schemes viz. 1.5 times MSP for cereals (C2) and PDP for pulses has been proposed by scholars. This will lead to low impact on inflation and the fiscal situation.

Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM):

News: The Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) has issued directions to ban the use of coal in industrial, domestic and other miscellaneous applications in the entire Delhi-NCR region from 1st January 2023.

Need for:

- This step is taken to bring down greenhouse gas emissions in Delhi NCR. Delhi is among the world’s most polluted capital cities.
- It will help save 1.7 million tonnes of coal annually.
- It will also help reduce pollutants including particulate matter (PM), nitrogen oxide (NOx), CO₂ and CO.

About Commission for Air Quality Management in the National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas Act 2021:

- The government has decriminalised the act of stubble burning and withdrawn the clause for possible jail time.
- However, environmental compensation fees are levied on those who are found to be engaged in stubble burning, including farmers.
- Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) was formed by dissolving the erstwhile Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority, or EPCA.

National e-Vidhan Application (NeVA) Project:

News: A delegation of MLAs from Gujarat recently visited the Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, to learn about the novel e-Vidhan system for paperless proceedings that has been recently adopted by the UP-state assembly.

E-Sansad and E-Vidhan projects:

- Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs has rolled out e-Sansad and e-Vidhan in Parliament and State Legislatures to digitize and make their functioning paperless.

E-Vidhan:

- The Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs is the 'Nodal Ministry' for its implementation in all 31 States/UTs with Legislatures.
- It is a Mission Mode Project under the Digital India Programme.
- The Ministry of Public Administration provides money for e-Vidhan, while the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology provides technical assistance (MietY).
- NeVA is supported by the Central Sponsored Scheme. For the North East and hilly states, 60:40; and 90:10; and 100 percent for UTs.

Laws against Trafficking:

News: Activists from different part of the country are planning to travel to the national capital and press for the passage of the Trafficking in Persons (Prevention, Care and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2021.

Global Slavery Index:

It is published by Walk Free Foundation highlighted that Indian is home to 8 million people in modern slavery.

Stats:

The Section 357-A of Cr.P.C has provisions to compensate victims who suffers because of a crime. Yet only 82 victims of trafficking have been compensated in between 2011 to 2019. Nirbhaya fund is being used in the Victim Compensation Scheme – a national scheme to compensate survivors of rape, acid burns and trafficking among other forms of violence.

Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA) 1956:

- It lays down the legal framework for sex work in India.
- It Provide for Rescue, Protect and Rehabilitate approach. However, a case study in Kolhapur, Maharashtra showed that some of the sex workers rescued did not have

living parents, some had left home decades ago, and some had families who did not know they were engaged in sex work. The women were shunted from home to home and finally released after some years. Thus, the act of 'rescue and rehabilitation' are non-less than incarceration and trauma.

- All the sex work is assumed to be a result of trafficking.
- Adult women should produce families to be released.

So, National Commission for Women has been demanding amends to the Act, to legalise the wilful sex trade, and allow them to work with "dignity".

Trafficking of Persons (Prevention, Protection and Rehabilitation) Bill, 2018

The Bill expands the definition of trafficking to include bonded labour, begging, forced marriage, deception or coercion etc.

- Rigorous imprisonment and imprisonment for life (imprisonment for the remainder of that person's natural life) for repeat offenders.
- Establishment of a National Anti-trafficking Bureau to act as a nodal agency to deal with the crimes under the act and cooperation with authorities in foreign countries.
- State anti-trafficking officers who shall also provide relief and rehabilitation services through district units and other civil-society organisations.
- Spells out various relief and rehabilitation measure for the victims of trafficking, and seeks the formation of an inter-ministerial committee for this purpose.

Remark:

- Human Rights Watch has called it a Misguided Attempt.

Analysis:

Any social worker can 'rescue' and 'produce' a 'victim' before the District Anti-Trafficking Committees (it proposes to set up). This provision opens doors to moral policing and could lead to harassment of not just sex workers but other ordinary people.

- It again continue to combine both "prostitution" and "commercial sexual exploitation" into one, which goes completely against what activists are fighting for, namely protecting the rights of adults who stay in prostitution voluntarily.

Justice Verma Committee had specifically clarified that the Section 370 (Trafficking of persons) ought not to permit law enforcement agencies to harass sex workers who undertake activities on their free will.

FATF:

News: Pakistan is hoping for some reprieve as the international watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF) will begin meetings in Berlin ahead of its plenary session.

- In 2018, the Paris-based FATF placed Pakistan on the grey list, and the country has been working hard to get off it. It has accomplished 26 of the 27 tasks assigned to it in 2018.

About the issue:

- Pakistan in 2018 for the first time extended its Anti-Terrorism Act to include all UN-proscribed entities, including Hafiz Sayeed. FATF have reviewed Pakistan for money laundering and financing of terrorism (CFT) regime.

- Russian ambassador had said that Russia's decision will depend on the proof for Pakistan's involvement in financing terrorism, and to corner Pakistan is not Russia's Policy.
- USA brought Saudi on board, Germany and France brought GCC on board and India brought Russia on board, while China being the Vice-chair of FATF wanted to play a role of responsible power.

Now, Pakistan has to prepare an action plan of the steps it will take to conform to international norms on curbing money laundering and combating financing of terrorism. If the action plan is approved by the FATF, Pakistan will stay under the "grey list", which means its financial system will come under intense scrutiny and monitoring. If, however, there is no consensus among FATF members on the action plan, Pakistan could well find itself in the "black list", in the illustrious company of countries like North Korea, virtually cut off from the international financial system.

Web 5.0:

News: Former Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey recently announced his vision for a new decentralized web platform that is being called Web 5.0. that aims to return "ownership of data and identity to individuals".

Web 1.0, Web 2.0 and Web 3.0:

- Web 1.0. Web 1.0 was all about reading, and getting information.
- Web 2.0 was all about reading, writing, and creating. So, users joined social platforms, and these platforms got big because of this created content.
- Web 3.0 is all about reading, writing and owning. So, builders and creators can now own a piece of their own community, through NFTs, tokens etc.

Web 5.0:

- The Block Head is being created by Dorsey's Bitcoin business team (TBH).
- Simply described, Web 5.0 is a combination of Web 2.0 and Web 3.0 that allows users to "own their identity" and "manage their data" on the Internet.
- Both Web 3.0 and Web 5.0 envision an Internet free of government or corporate restrictions, as well as the prospect of catastrophic disruptions.

Virtual Digital Assets:

The TDS on virtual digital assets will remain at 1%, according to the government. Following media reports that the TDS rate for virtual digital assets had been reduced to 0.1 percent from 1 percent as indicated previously in the budget, the Income Tax Department issued a clarification.

What is 1% TDS on crypto trade?

- From July 1, 2022, the Centre will adopt a 1% TDS on the transfer or consideration of every trade, after the 30% duty on profits originating from digital assets.
- While industry participants regard this move as one of the most divisive aspects of bitcoin taxes, the Centre says the new TDS method is used to track transactions and combat tax avoidance.

Cryptocurrency:

- Block chains are a cryptographic data Ledger, that is distributed across the network. It can also be used for transfer of any data or digital asset like cryptocurrencies without the need for central authorisation like RBI for Indian rupee, by achieving consensus among distributed nodes. The present block chain ecosystem is like the early Internet.
- A block is the “current” part of a block chain which records recent transactions, and once completed, goes into the block chain as permanent database.
- Each time a block gets completed; a new block is generated. Blocks are linked to each other (like a chain) in proper linear and chronological order.

How is it different from current payment systems?

- Block chain technology allows, instant recognition of the exact size of the block by all transacting parties in the chain since the block is simultaneously updated on all databases, and carries a digital signature that do not allow tampering with the definition of the block.
- Therefore, it creates instant trust without having to rely on a series of trustworthy banks to clear cheques.

Agnipath Scheme:

- The government has launched its new Agnipath system for recruiting soldiers in all three services.
- Around 45,000 to 50,000 troops (dubbed 'Agniveers') would be recruited annually under the new plan (for a limited time, with the majority leaving after only four years).
- Only 25% of the total yearly recruits will be able to stay under permanent commission for another 15 years.

Format of the scheme:

- Aspirants between the ages of 17.5 years and 21 years will be eligible to apply. The scheme is only applicable to personnel below officer ranks.

Recruitment:

- Twice a year through rallies.
- The recruitment will be done on “all India, all class” recruitment to the services (from any caste, region, class or religious background).
- Currently, recruitment is based on ‘regiment system’ based on region and caste bases.

Training period: 6 months + deployment for three and a half years.

Other type of recruitment in Army:

- Permanent commission means a career in the armed forces till retirement.
- Under short service commission, the Army allows 10-year service with an option of a 4-year extension.
- Under the Agnipath scheme, Agniveer recruits will serve for 4 years.

Salary and Benefits:

- Recruits will get a beginning salary of Rs 30,000, with extra perks up to Rs 40,000 towards the conclusion of the four-year service period.
- During this time, 30% of their pay will be placed away as part of a **Seva Nidhi scheme**, to which the government will contribute an equivalent amount every month, plus interest.

- At the conclusion of the four years, each soldier would get a lump sum payment of Rs 11.71 lakh, which will be tax-free.
- The first four years will not be recognised for retirement benefits for 25% of troops who are re-selected.

Benefits

- Make the armed forces much leaner and younger.
- Reduce the defence pension bill: The savings for the government in this 'Tour of Duty model' of recruitment from just one sepoy would be around 11.5 cr.
- Better creation of Tooth to Tail Ratio.
- Preference to these sepoys: Recruits will acquire skills and experience during the four-year service. The central government will likely give preference to Agniveers in regular employment after their four years stint.

Concerns regarding the scheme:

- Recruits will not get permanent jobs or promised pension and health benefits even after retirement.
- "All India, all class" recruitment to the services may lead to the erosion of the loyalty that a soldier has for his regiment.

Similar schemes in other countries:

- Voluntary tour of duty: In the USA tours are 6-9 or even 12 months' deployment depending upon the needs of the military and branch of service.
- Mandatory tour of duty (called conscription): Countries that follow the practice of conscription include Israel, Norway, North Korea, and Sweden.