2024

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

Daily Current Affairs from *The Hindu, The Indian Express & The Assam Tribune*

28th Dec 2024

CONTENT LIST

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

1. 22% rise in enrolment after smart classroom initiative

Context: Introduction of smart classrooms under the Smart Cities Mission (SCM) has led to a 22% increase in overall enrolment as per data reported by 19 cities between 2015-16 and 2023-24, says a study by the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore. According to a study 71 cities have developed 9,433 smart classrooms in 2,398 government schools. The highest number of smart classroom projects are in Karnataka (80), followed by Rajasthan (53). Tamil Nadu has 23 and Delhi 12. West Bengal, with just two, is among the States at the bottom of the table, apart from this, 41 cities have developed digital libraries with a total of 7,809 seat.

Smart Cities Mission (SCM)

- **About:** It is a Centrally Sponsored Scheme, launched in June 2015 to transform 100 cities to provide the necessary core infrastructure and clean and sustainable environment to enable a decent quality of life to their citizens through the application of "Smart Solutions". It aimed to improve the quality of life for citizens through sustainable and inclusive development.

- **Smart City:** A Smart City is a concept that refers to the use of technology, data, and innovative solutions to improve the efficiency, sustainability, and quality of life in urban areas.
    - *Core Infrastructure Elements* - Adequate water supply, Assured electricity supply, Sanitation, including solid waste management, Efficient urban mobility and public transport, Affordable housing, especially for the poor, etc.
- **Area-based Development:** *Redevelopment (City Renewal)* - Renewal of existing urban areas to improve infrastructure and amenities. E.g. Bhendi Bazar, Mumbai.
  Retrofitting (City Improvement) - Upgrading infrastructure in existing areas to make them more efficient and sustainable. E.g. Local Area Development (Ahmedabad).
  Greenfield Projects (City Extension) - Development of new urban areas with a focus on sustainability and smart technologies. E.g. New Town, Kolkata, Naya Raipur, GIFT City (Gujarat International Finance Tec-City).
- **Pan-City Solutions:** Implementation of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) solutions across various sectors such as e-governance, waste management, water management, energy management, urban mobility, and skill development.
- **Financing of Smart Cities:** The SCM receives Rs. 48,000 crores over 5 years from the Central Government, averaging Rs. 100 crore per city per year. States and Urban Local Bodies (ULB) are required to contribute an equal amount, resulting in a total of nearly Rs. 1 lakh crore for Smart Cities development.
- **Challenges Faced:** *Inadequate Funding and Its Utilisation* - While 74 cities have received 100% of their central share, 26 cities are yet to get the full funding due to the slow progress of projects.
  Sustainability Concerns - There are doubts about the long-term sustainability of the smart city projects, as many of them focus on technology-driven solutions rather than addressing the fundamental issues of urban planning and governance.
  Delay in Project Completion - Despite the extension of the deadline, a significant number of projects (around 10%) are still incomplete, indicating delays in execution. This can be attributed to factors such as inadequate planning, lack of technical expertise, and issues in land acquisition and clearances.
- **Way forward:** *Effective Governance and Implementation* - Appointing CEOs with fixed tenures ensures continuity and attracts qualified professionals. Stakeholder representation, including experts and Member of Parliaments (MPs), fosters inclusive decision-making.
  Data Security and Upgradation - Establish robust digital infrastructure protection to counter cyber threats and safeguard data privacy.
  Building Capacity and Funding - Strengthen Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) in smaller cities through capacity building programs. Central government assistance can be crucial for organisational restructuring and skill development.
  Ensuring Project Completion - The Ministry's role should extend beyond fund allocation. Active monitoring and providing expertise for timely project execution are essential.

Q. With a brief background of quality of urban life in India, introduce the objectives and strategy of the 'Smart City Programme.' (প্ৰশ্নঃ ভাৰতৰ নগৰীয়া জীৱনৰ মানদণ্ডৰ এক সংক্ষিপ্ত পটভূমিৰ সৈতে, 'স্মাৰ্ট চিটি কাৰ্যসূচী' ৰ উদ্দেশ্য আৰু কৌশলৰ পৰিচয় দিয়ক।)

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

2. PM CARES fund received Rs. 912 crore contribution in year after Covid pandemic

Context: The PM Citizen Assistance & Relief in Emergency Situations Fund received Rs. 912 crores in contributions during the financial year 2022-23 as donations continued to pour in even after the covid pandemic. The PM CARES fund received Rs. 909.64 crore as voluntary contributions and Rs. 2.57 crore as foreign contributions during 2022-23, the latest year for which audited accounts are available in public domain. The PM CARES fund was registered as a Public Charitable Trust under the Registration Act, 1908 in New Delhi on March 27, 2020, three days after the lock down in the country in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Key points

- **Overview:** The Central Government has recently informed the Delhi High Court that PM CARES Fund is set up as a public charitable trust and is not a public authority under RTI.
- **PM CARES Fund:** The Prime Ministers Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations Fund (PM CARES Fund) was created on 28 March 2020, following the COVID-19 pandemic in India. It was created for combating, and containment and relief efforts against the coronavirus outbreak and similar pandemic like situations in the future.
  Objectives - To aid and relief to all the affected persons in the event of any calamity, disaster, public health emergency or any other emergency of any kind that may be either natural or man-made. Creation as well as upgradation of any pharmaceutical facilities, funding a research, creation or upgradation of any necessary infrastructure, healthcare support or any other kind of support.
  Composition of the Trust - Prime Minister is the ex-officio Chairman of the PM CARES Fund. Minister of Defence, Minister of Home Affairs and Minister of Finance, Government of India are ex-officio Trustees of the Fund.
  Contributions - The fund consists entirely of voluntary contributions from individuals/organizations and does not get any budgetary support. Donations to PM CARES Fund would qualify for 80G benefits for 100% exemption under the Income Tax Act, 1961. Donations to PM CARES Fund will also qualify to be counted as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) expenditure under the Companies Act, 2013.
  Issues - Several opposition leaders and other prominent people have questioned the need for establishing a new fund when PMNRF already exists. Some have questioned the opacity surrounding the PM-CARES fund as the trust deed has not been made public. It is not known whether all members of the trust have voting rights or not.
- **Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF):** The Prime Minister's National Relief Fund (PMNRF) was established in 1948 in pursuance of an appeal by then PM Jawaharlal Nehru entirely with public contributions to mitigate the consequences of untold disasters and consequent human flights to escape misery and destitution.
- **Similarities between PMNRF and PM CARES Fund:** Parliament does not have to approve spending from the PM CARES Fund or the PMNRF. Donations to both the PMNRF and the PM CARES Fund are tax-deductible under Section 80G. Funds from PM CARES and PMNRF cannot be used without the Prime Minister's approval. Both PMNRF and PM CARES are not funded by the government. Foreign contributions are accepted by both PM CARES and PMNRF.

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

3. Not without resistance

Context: The governments stand is that the Siang Upper Multipurpose Project (SUMP) is not just any hydropower project, but an effort essential to save the river by countering the effects of China's dam building activities further upstream in Tibet. As China has approved the construction of worlds largest hydropower dam, kicking off the long-talked about project on the eastern rim of the Tibetan plateau, close to Arunachal Pradesh, that has the potential to affect millions downstream in India & Bangladesh. Authorities are pressing for a pre-feasibility report (PFR), as the belt has become a hotspot of activity and deepening fault lines.

Key points

- **Overview:** Activists are protesting the Upper Siang Hydropower Project in Arunachal.
- **About Upper Siang Multipurpose Storage Project:** The Upper Siang project is a proposed 11,000 MW hydropower project on the Siang River in Arunachal Pradesh. Initially proposed as two separate projects, it was consolidated into one larger project in 2017, to be built by the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC), featuring a 300-metre-high dam.
- **Siang river:** The Siang, originating near Mount Kailash in Tibet (Tsangpo), flows over 1,000 km eastward, enters Arunachal Pradesh as the Siang, and later becomes the Brahmaputra in Assam.
- **Strategic Importance:** The Upper Siang project is seen as a strategic move to counter China's hydel projects on the Tsangpo, particularly a 60,000 MW 'super dam' in Tibet's Medog county. This super dam's capacity is nearly 3x that of the Three Gorges Dam in China and is intended to divert water to northern China.
- **Environmental and Social Concerns:** Anti-dam organizations express concerns about the project's environmental and social impact in their memorandum.
  The memorandum highlights the threat to delicate ecosystems, wildlife habitats, and biodiversity in Arunachal Pradesh, which already hosts numerous dams.
  The activists are particularly worried about the displacement of communities, as the project could submerge over 300 villages of the Adi tribe, including the district headquarters of Yingkiong.
  Activists are also wary of the project's portrayal as a national interest endeavor and are troubled by a provision in the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act, which exempts strategic projects within 100 km from India's borders from clearance requirements.
- **Forest (Conservation) Amendment Act, 2023:** Land Under the Purview of the Act - Defines two categories of land under its purview:
  - Land declared as forest under the Indian Forest Act or any other law or notified as a forest after 25th October 1980.
  - Land converted from forest to non-forest use before 12th December 1996.

  Exemptions from the Act - Up to 0.10 hectares of forest land for connectivity purposes along roads and railways. Up to 10 hectares for security-related infrastructure. Up to 5 hectares in Left Wing Extremism Affected Districts for public utility projects.
  Permitted Activities in Forest Land - Activities like zoos, ecotourism facilities, silvi-cultural operations, and specified surveys are exempted from non-forest purposes.
  Assignment/Leasing of Forest Land - Extends the prerequisite for obtaining prior approval from the central government for the assignment of forest land to any entity, broadening the scope beyond private entities.

GS 3: ECONOMY, ECOLOGY, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY, DEFENCE, SECURITY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

4. Rules that still manacle the captive elephant

Context: In India, where elephants are revered as sacred symbols of wisdom and strength, privately held captive elephants live a stark contradiction. Reflecting on this grim reality, the Kerala High Court recently likened the lives of these captive animals to an "eternal Treblinka". Elephants used for religious purposes, entertainment and tourism are subjected to much cruelty and forced to behave in unnatural ways. These social animals are subjected to isolation and abusive training methods to break their spirit. Although elephants have the highest protection under the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972, they have been at the forefront of practices that seek to capture them from the wild for a life in captivity.

Key points

- **Overview:** The Union Environment Ministry has notified a set of rules called the Captive Elephant (Transfer or Transport) Rules, 2024. Elephants, classified as Schedule I species under the Wildlife Protection Act, of 1972 enjoy special protection, but certain provisions allow for their translocation under specific circumstances.
- **Existing Regulations on Elephant Transfer:** *Legal Framework* - The Wildlife Protection Act, of 1972 prohibits the capture or trade of elephants, whether wild or captive, without appropriate authorization.
  Special Provisions - While strict regulations govern elephant transfer, exceptions exist for educational, scientific, or religious purposes, subject to approval from wildlife authorities.
  Amendment - The Wildlife (Protection) Amendment Bill, 2022 expanded the scope of elephant transfers, raising concerns among activists about potential exploitation and illegal trafficking.

Captive Elephant Transfer Rules, 2024

- **Circumstances for the Transfer of Captive Elephants:** *Incapability of the owner* - When the owner is incapable of adequately ensuring the elephant's welfare.
  Superior Care - If it is determined that the elephant will receive superior care in the new environment compared to its current situation.
  Improvised maintenance - The Chief Wildlife Warden may find it necessary to transfer the elephant for its improved maintenance based on the specific circumstances of the case.
- **Transfer Within the State:** *Veterinarian Check* - Prior to any transfer within the state, a veterinarian must confirm the elephant's health status.
  New habitat verification - The suitability of both the current and prospective habitats must be assessed by the Deputy Conservator of Forests.
- **Transfer Outside the State:** *Genetic Profile Registration* - Additionally, the elephant's genetic profile must be registered with the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC) before the transfer.
- **Requirements for Elephant Transfer:** *Accompanying the Master* - The elephant must be accompanied by a mahout and an elephant assistant. Adequate provisions for feeding and watering must be arranged during transport.
  Fitness Certificate - A health certificate issued by a veterinary practitioner confirming fitness for transport is obligatory.

GS 3: ECONOMY, ECOLOGY, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY, DEFENCE, SECURITY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

5. Architect of modern India

Context: Former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh died at the age of 92 on 26th December 2024 at AIIMS Delhi. To honour him, the central government has declared 7 days of national mourning. He was born on September 26, 1932, Punjab, undivided India. A man of profound integrity and an unassuming demeanour, Dr Singh served as India's 14th Prime Minister from 2004 to 2014. However, his influence extended well before his tenure in the highest office. In one of the most significant decisions of the 20th century, he championed the liberalisation of India's economy, dismantling the Nehruvian economic model that had, until then, placed restrictive barriers to growth.

Key points

- **Liberalization:** *New Trade Policy* - A new trade policy was introduced to boost exports by simplifying the licensing process and linking non-essential imports to exports.
  Tradeable Exim scrips - Export subsidies were removed, and tradeable exim scrips were introduced for exporters based on the value of their exports.
  Trade Monopoly - The provisions of the Monopolies and Restrictive Trade Practices Act were relaxed to facilitate business restructuring and mergers.
- **Privatization:** *FDI* - Automatic approval for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) up to 51% was introduced, compared to the previous cap of 40%.
  Public sector monopoly - Public sector monopoly was restricted to sectors critical for national security.
- **Globalization:** *Open Economy* - The focus was on integrating India's economy with the global market and encouraging international trade and investment.
  Rupee Devaluation - Massive devaluation of the rupee and new trade policies made Indian exports more competitive globally.
  Reduce Tariff Barriers - Trade liberalisation through reduced import tariffs and dismantling non-tariff barriers.
- **Effect of Reforms on the Indian Economy:** *Growth Rate of National Income* - The national income growth rate increased from 5% in 1990-91 to about 9.3% in 2007-08 and 8.2% in 2023-24.
  Composition of National Income - In 1990-91, the manufacturing sector contributed 26% of GDP, which grew to 30% of Gross Value Added (GVA) by FY 2024. The service sector's contribution increased from 44% in 1991-92 to over 50% by FY 2024.
  Savings and Investments - The rate of investment, measured as gross domestic capital formation, increased from 26% in 1990-91 to 31% in 2015-16 and 30.2% in FY 2023.
  Foreign Trade - The export sector became a significant contributor to national income and a major earner of foreign exchange.
  Foreign Exchange Reserves - The balance of payments improved significantly, leading to a rapid increase in foreign exchange reserves from $1.1 billion in June 1991 to an all-time high of $681.69 billion in August 2024.
  Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) - India allowed 100% FDI in most sectors except for a few such as lottery, chit funds, and atomic energy. FDI inflow rose from $1.3 billion in 1990-91 to $70.97 billion in FY 2022-23.