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

**1. Implications of China's mega-dam project**

**Context:** The ambitious plan to build a mega-hydropower dam across the Brahmaputra at the Great Bend region of the Medog county in the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) in China, has been in the drawing boards of Chinese hydrocracy for decades. The clearest signalling to this effect happened in 2020 when this project was included in China's 14thFive-Year Plan. Its approval was granted on December 25, 2024. India, Bhutan and Bangladesh will have serious downstream implications of this 60 GW hyper-dam built upstream by China. These dams across the Himalayas aim at territorialising river systems, breaking their natural life cycles. This affects agro-pastoral communities, biodiversity, living biota in rivers and wetland systems.

**Key points**

- **Overview:** China has approved the construction of the world's largest hydropower project on the Yarlung Tsangpo river in Tibet, with a capacity of 60,000 MW, three times that of the Three Gorges Dam. India has consistently expressed concerns to China about such projects, emphasizing the need for transparency and consultation to protect downstream states' interests.
- **Yarlung Tsangpo Project:** The Yarlung Tsangpo hydropower project is set to be the world's largest hydropower project, planned at the "Great Bend" of the river in Medog county, Tibet, where it makes a U-turn before entering Arunachal Pradesh. The project is part of China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025).

*Location and Planning Stage* - According to experts, the project's location has been strategically chosen. Recent activities, including funding allocation, construction of smaller dams, and changes in upstream land use, suggest the project is in an advanced planning phase, with visible construction expected soon.

*China's Goals for the Yarlung Tsangpo Project* - China aims to use the Yarlung Tsangpo project to reduce reliance on conventional energy sources and achieve net carbon neutrality by 2060.

*Scale of China's Dams and Environmental Concerns* - China's recent dams, including the Three Gorges Dam, highlight the massive scale of its hydropower ambitions. However, these projects have raised significant environmental concerns. The Three Gorges Dam, for instance, has altered gravity anomaly maps due to the immense weight of stored water, caused severe ecological impacts, and even triggered earthquakes.

- **Specific concerns for India:** Impact on Water Flow to India - The proposed dam could significantly affect water flow from China to India, a lower riparian state, as most of the water in the Brahmaputra system originates in Tibet. Any alteration in water flow could disrupt agriculture and water availability in India.

*Interruption of Silt and Biodiversity* - Large dams often block the flow of silt, essential for agriculture, and cause changes in river flow, adversely affecting local biodiversity. These disruptions could have long-term ecological and agricultural consequences for the region.

- **Coordination mechanism on transboundary rivers:** India and China have several agreements for cooperation on transboundary rivers-
  - *Umbrella MoU (2013)* - Covers overall cooperation on transboundary rivers and has no expiry date. However, no activity is currently being undertaken under this agreement.
  - *Brahmaputra MoU* - Signed for data sharing and renewable every five years. It lapsed in 2023, and its renewal is under process via diplomatic channels.
  - *Sutlej MoU* - Initiated after the 2004 Parechu Lake incident but does not provide year-round data. This MoU is also pending renewal.

- **Way forward:** *Limited Scope of Understanding* - India and China have a narrow and limited understanding when it comes to transboundary river issues. China has been unwilling to agree to any commitments that could address India's concerns comprehensively.

*China's Standard Response* - China often claims its hydropower projects are run-of-the-river, implying minimal water impounding and limited downstream impact. However, India views these assertions sceptically.

*India's Need for Public Challenges* - India must challenge China's statements, including the recent claim that the Tsangpo mega dam would have no downstream impacts. Without publicly countering such narratives, these projects could become faits accomplis, creating long-term challenges for India.

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

### 2. Why 1987 anti-conversion law in Arunachal could now be enforced

**Context:** The Arunachal Pradesh government is working to bring a 1987 law against 'forceful' conversion out of cold storage by framing rules for its implementation, 46 years after it was enacted. The law, enacted by the then Union Territory of Arunachal Pradesh's first legislative assembly, prohibits religious conversion "by use of force or inducement or by fraudulent means". The law is getting revived to address the rising concerns over cultural preservation and religious conversions.

#### Key points

- **Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act:** The Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, enacted in 1978, prohibits religious conversion through force, inducement, or fraudulent means. Violators face up to two years of imprisonment or a fine of ₹10,000. The Act mandates reporting all conversions to the Deputy Commissioner of the district. Despite its enactment, the Act remained dormant for 46 years due to the lack of implementation rules.
- **Introduction of the Act:** The Act aimed to protect the diverse indigenous faiths and cultures of Arunachal Pradesh's ethnic communities, such as the Monpas, Sherdukpens, and Tani tribes, from perceived threats posed by religious conversions. The steady growth of Christianity, from 0.79% of the population in 1971 to 4.32% in 1981, sparked debates on proselytization and its impact on indigenous practices, leading to demands for legal safeguards.
- **Dormancy of the Act:** Opposition from Christian groups like the Arunachal Christian Forum, which view the Act as discriminatory and prone to misuse, has hindered its implementation. Christianity, now the state's largest religion, comprising 30.26% of the population in 2011, has grown significantly, creating vocal resistance to the Act. Political reluctance to alienate these groups further stalled the framing of rules.
- **Implications for revival:** In 2022, a PIL filed in the Gauhati High Court highlighted the state government's failure to frame rules for the Act. The court's recent directive to finalize draft rules within six months has reignited discussions. Proponents, like the Indigenous Faiths and Cultural Society of Arunachal Pradesh (IFCSAP), argue that the Act is vital to preserve indigenous traditions and counter the rising conversion rates.
- **Concerns and Diverging Views:** Critics, particularly Christian organizations, see the Act as a tool for curbing religious freedom and fostering discrimination. In contrast, advocates view it as essential for cultural preservation. The involvement of the RSS and its affiliates in institutionalizing indigenous faiths adds complexity, as their activities are seen as supportive of traditional practices without direct conversion efforts.
- **Anti-Conversion Laws:** These laws, often referred to as Freedom of Religion Acts, mandate that religious conversions should occur only through personal conviction rather than by force, allurements, or deceit. Key features of Anti-Conversion Laws include-
  - *Prohibition on Forced Conversions* - These laws specifically prohibit converting someone through coercion, fraud, undue influence, or financial incentives.
  - *Notification Requirements* - In some states, individuals intending to convert must inform district authorities in advance.
  - *Punitive Measures* - Penalties for violating these laws vary by state and may include fines and imprisonment.

- **Conclusion:** The revival of the Arunachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act underscores tensions between safeguarding cultural identity and ensuring religious freedom. Its implementation will require careful balancing to address diverse perspectives and uphold constitutional rights.

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

#### 3. Four-lane Banihal bypass opens in J&K's Ramban

**Context:** Union Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari on Sunday described the completion of the Banihal bypass which has a stretch of 2.35 km in Jammu and Kashmir's Ramban district as a milestone in strengthening "national security logistics" and enhancing "tourism prospects of the region". NH-44 is a major highway in India. The longest in the country, it stretches from Srinagar in the north to Kanniyakumari in the south. The Travel time on the 290-km long Jammu–Srinagar National Highway, which is part of NH-44, has reduced from nine hours to around six hours after significant upgrades such as tunnels.

#### Key points

- **Overview:** In a major move aimed at enhancing India's infrastructure, the government has given the green light to eight national high-speed road corridor projects.
- **High-Speed Road Corridor Projects:** These projects, spanning a total length of 936 kilometres, involve an investment of ₹50,655 crore. The initiative is expected to significantly improve logistics efficiency and connectivity across the country, as well as generate substantial employment opportunities. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) approved these projects, which are set to play a crucial role in India's economic growth and infrastructure development.
- **Employment Generation and Economic Impact:** The implementation of these eight high-speed road corridor projects is projected to create approximately 4.42 crore mandays of direct and indirect employment. This massive employment boost is not only crucial for job creation but also for stimulating local economies. The infrastructure development is expected to have a multiplier effect on the economy, with every rupee invested expected to generate a return of about 2.5 to 3.0 times on GDP. This investment in infrastructure is seen as foundational for the country's economic prosperity and essential for improving the quality of life of its citizens.
- **Other Approved Projects:** *Agra-Gwalior National High-Speed Corridor* - Length: 88 km, Cost: ₹4,613 crore. This fully access-controlled 6-lane corridor will enhance connectivity between Agra and Gwalior, supplementing the existing 4-lane National Highway.  
*Northern Guwahati Bypass and Widening/Improvement of Existing Guwahati Bypass* - Length: 121 km, Cost: ₹5,729 crore. This project includes the construction of a major bridge over the Brahmaputra River and will improve connectivity in Assam.  
*Ayodhya Ring Road* - Length: 68 km, Cost: ₹3,935 crore. This access-controlled ring road is designed to alleviate congestion in Ayodhya, particularly around National Highways passing through the city.
- **Strategic Importance of the Corridor-Based Approach:** The government has adopted a corridor-based approach to highway infrastructure development, focusing on consistent standards, user convenience, and logistics efficiency. This is a shift from the previous project-based development approach, which primarily addressed local congestion.
- **Conclusion:** The new approach has led to the identification of a 50,000 km network of High-Speed Highway Corridors, aimed at supporting India's transformation into a \$30+ trillion economy by 2047. This strategic shift is expected to create a more integrated and efficient transportation network across the country, facilitating economic growth and regional development.

#### 4. Beyond India's space frontiers

**Context:** India was traditionally a government-controlled market for all things space, with ISRO handling manufacturing requirements through state-owned firms like Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) and Antrix Corporation, as well as private companies like Godrej Aerospace, Ananth Technologies, and Larsen & Toubro. It was only in 2020 that the Central Government took a decisive step to open the Indian space market to private players. Although some private startups were operational beforehand, the scope of their operations was limited. With the government's nod, the formation of IN-SPACe paved the way for a revolution in the private space sector.

#### National Geospatial Policy, 2022

- **About:** It is a citizen-centric policy that seeks to strengthen the Geospatial sector to support national development, economic prosperity and a thriving information economy.
- **Vision and goals:** To make India a World Leader in Global Geospatial space with the best in the class ecosystem for innovation. To develop a coherent national framework in the country and leverage it to move towards a digital economy and improve services to citizens. To develop Geospatial infrastructures, Geospatial skill and knowledge, standards, Geospatial businesses. To promote innovation and strengthen the national and sub-national arrangements for generation and management of Geospatial information.
- **Year 2025:** Put in place an enabling policy and legal framework that supports liberalisation of the Geospatial sector and democratisation of data for enhanced commercialization with Value Added Services.
- **National Digital Twins of India's major cities and towns by 2035:** The digital twin is a virtual replica of a physical asset, process or service that lies at the core of the new digital revolution. This facilitates policymakers to understand how infrastructure will function in different situations such as increase of population or during natural disasters.
- **Significance of the policy:** To make geospatial technology and data as agents of transformation for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- **Institutional framework:** A Geospatial Data Promotion and Development Committee (GDPDC, will be a 17-member body) at the national level shall be the apex body for formulating and implementing strategies related to promotion of the Geospatial sector.

#### Key points

- **India Lags far behind in Space Economy:** The global space economy is currently valued at about USD 360 billion. Despite being one among a few spacefaring nations in the world, India accounts for only about 2% of the space economy.
- **Private Sector's Role:** The NGEs (this includes the private sector) are "allowed to undertake end-to-end activities in the space sector through establishment and operation of space objects, ground-based assets and related services, such as communication, remote sensing, navigation, etc". In short, the entire gamut of space activities is now open to the private sector. Security agencies can task NGEs for procuring tailor-made solutions to address specific requirements.

## 5. Zoos put on alert as Avian flu kills 3 tigers, 1 leopard in rescue centre

**Context:** Three Tigers and a leopard have died on December 30 after being diagnosed with Avian influenza, prompting the Union government to sound an alert for zoos across the country. This incident is a rare case of the highly contagious H5N1 virus affecting rescued wildlife in India. The Central Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying has directed zoos to comply with the action plan on prevention, control and containment. The Wildlife Research & Training Centre (WRTC) at Gorewada stated that Avian influenza in wild carnivores is typically linked to the consumption of infected prey. Another advisory panel NISHAD emphasized on preventive measures like avoiding Raw poultry and unverified meat sources in addition to biosecurity practices.

### Key points

- **Overview:** Maharashtra reported India's first case of avian influenza (H5N1) among animals. Three tigers and one leopard have succumbed to the virus at a Nagpur rescue centre in late December 2024. This marks the first instance of bird flu crossing the species barrier in India.
- **Government Response and Guidelines:** The Union Animal Husbandry Ministry issued a circular urging all States to quarantine infected or symptomatic tigers and other feline species to prevent transmission to humans and other animals. The ministry plans to release detailed guidelines within a week.
- **Investigation and Containment Efforts:** Post-mortem samples from the affected animals tested positive for avian influenza at the National Institute of High Security Animal Diseases (NIHSAD), Bhopal. A National Joint Outbreak Response Team has been deployed to implement containment measures, while human contacts are being screened as a precaution.
- **Enhanced Biosecurity Protocols:** The Ministry directed - Temporary closure of affected establishments to the public. Strengthening biosecurity measures and restricting personnel movement between infected and healthy areas. Thorough disinfection of affected areas and collection of samples for strain identification.
- **Protection for Zoo Staff:** Zoo staff are required to use personal protective equipment (PPE), including gloves, masks, and suits. Regular health screenings and hygiene education for zoo personnel have also been mandated.
- **Call for a One-Health Approach:** The Ministry emphasized a "One-Health" approach, integrating efforts across human health, animal health, and wildlife sectors to comprehensively address the issue. Immediate attention is needed to mitigate risks to both animal and human health.
- **Avian influenza (H5N1):** H5N1 is a type of influenza virus that causes a highly infectious, severe respiratory disease in birds called avian influenza (or "bird flu"). Basically, it is a subtype of the influenza A virus. Human cases of H5N1 avian influenza occur occasionally, but it is difficult to transmit the infection from person to person.
  - *Evolution and Global Spread of H5N1* - The highly pathogenic H5N1 virus originated from a goose farm outbreak in Guangdong, China, in 1996. A new version of the virus emerged in Europe in 2020 and rapidly spread to Africa, Asia, North America (2021), South America (2022), and mainland Antarctica (2024), causing widespread illness and death among birds.
  - *Spread Among Mammals* - 95% mortality among Southern elephant seal pups along the Patagonia coastline (2023), marking the first major elephant seal mortality in half a century.