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GS 1: ART & CULTURE, HISTORY, INDIAN SOCIETY AND GEOGRAPHY

1. The historic tea horse road, connecting India & China through Tibet

Context: The Tea Horse Road, an ancient trade network connecting China, Tibet, and India, played a key role in commerce and cultural exchange for centuries. While less famous than the Silk Road, this route facilitated the movement of tea, horses, and other valuable commodities across some of the world's most challenging terrains. On February 25, 2025, China's Ambassador to India, Xu Feihong, highlighted the historical significance of the Tea Horse Road, emphasizing its role in strengthening India-China ties through history.

Key points

- **Overview:** The Tea Horse Road, an ancient trade network connecting China, Tibet, and India, played a key role in commerce and cultural exchange for centuries.
- **Origins of the Tea Horse Road:** The Tea Horse Road traces its origins to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), when trade between Southwest China, Tibet, and India first flourished. Buddhist monk Yijing (635-713 CE) documented early trade exchanges, mentioning the movement of goods such as sugar, textiles, and rice noodles from China, while horses, Tibetan gold, saffron, and medicinal herbs were exported.
- **Key Features of the Route:**
 - Length* - Over 2,000 km.
 - Key Cities* - Passed through Dali, Lijiang (Yunnan Province), and Lhasa (Tibet).
 - Elevation* - Reached up to 10,000 feet in the Himalayas.
 - Challenges* - Harsh terrain, extreme weather, and high altitudes made the journey perilous for traders.
- **Revival & its significance:** In recent years, China has promoted tourism along the ancient trade route, highlighting its historical importance. According to UNESCO, Lijiang was an important distribution centre for trade between Sichuan, Yunnan, and Tibet, where it intersected with southern Silk Road routes. Today, the city serves as a testament to the Tea Horse Road's enduring legacy.
- **The Road's Role in Modern History:**
 - Expansion of Trade in the Early 20th Century* - With the fall of the Qing Dynasty in 1912, the Tea Horse Road became even more vital. Yunnan's tea industry expanded as China integrated into the global market.
 - World War II and the Road's Strategic Importance* - During World War II, when Japan controlled much of China's coastline, the Tea Horse Road served as an alternative supply route for transporting goods and military supplies to China's resistance forces.
 - Decline After the Founding of the People's Republic of China (1949)* - Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the importance of the Tea Horse Road declined. However, some remnants remain, particularly in regions like Lijiang, which became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1997 due to its historical significance in trade.
- **Conclusion:** The Tea Horse Road was more than just a trade route; it was a lifeline connecting China, Tibet, and India for centuries. While its significance has diminished in modern times, it remains a historical and cultural symbol of international exchange. Today, efforts to preserve its legacy through tourism and research highlight its role in shaping the economic and cultural landscapes of the regions it once traversed. The renewed focus on this historic route serves as a reminder of the deep historical ties between India and China.

2. Treaty of Yandabo and fate of Assam

Context: In 1826, a treaty was signed in a small village named Yandabo between the British and the Burmese kingdom that sealed the fate of Assam and the Ahom kingdom. The Ahoms, who ruled Assam continuously for 600 years and defeated the mighty Mughals 17 times, came under British rule for the next 121 years until the independence of India in 1947. On February 24, 1826, the Treaty of Yandabo was formally signed by General Campbell on behalf of the British and Governor Maha Min Hla Kyaw Htin on behalf of the Burmese. Under its terms, Burma ceded Assam, Manipur, Tripura, Arakan, and the Tenasserim coast south of the Salween River.

Key Events Leading to the Yandabo Treaty

- **Expansionist Ambitions of Burma:** By the early 19th century, the Konbaung Dynasty in Burma, under King Bagyidaw, had expanded aggressively into neighboring regions, including Manipur, Arakan, and Assam. The Burmese annexation of Assam in 1821 led to conflict with the Ahom Kingdom, which had historical ties with British India.
- **Triggering of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824):** Tensions escalated when Burmese forces began to assert influence over Chittagong and Sylhet in British-controlled Bengal, violating British territory. The situation became critical when Burmese troops attacked British posts in Assam and Chittagong in 1824.
- **Military Campaigns and British Victory:** British forces led by generals like Sir Archibald Campbell and General Cotton launched a successful campaign in Rangoon and Arakan, inflicting heavy losses on the Burmese army. The British navy's ability to blockade Burmese ports and control the coastline further weakened Burma's defence capabilities.
- **Burmese Appeal for Peace:** By early 1826, the Burmese court, under increasing pressure from mounting losses, requested a ceasefire. The British forces were already within reach of Yandabo, a village near Ava, and the Burmese were in no position to continue the war. Facing potential collapse, King Bagyidaw authorized peace talks.
- **Signing of the Treaty of Yandabo:** On 24th February 1826, the Treaty of Yandabo was signed, concluding the war. The terms of the treaty were heavily favorable to the British. Burma agreed to -
 - Cede Assam, Manipur, Arakan, and the Tenasserim coast to the British.
 - Pay an indemnity of one million pounds.
 - Accept a British Resident at Ava and refrain from interfering in Assam and Manipur.
- **Impact of the Yandaboo Treaty:** The treaty dramatically reshaped the political map of Northeast India and Southeast Asia, bringing Assam under British control and marking the beginning of British influence in Burma. In conclusion, the Treaty of Yandabo was a turning point in the region's history, ending the First Anglo-Burmese War and beginning a new era of British expansion in Northeast India and Southeast Asia.

3. The RTI is now the 'right to deny information'

Context: The Right to Information (RTI) Act was introduced with the objective of enhancing transparency and empowering citizens by granting them access to government-held information. It was perceived to uphold democratic principles by ensuring accountability and reducing corruption. However, despite its initial promise, the Act has encountered numerous challenges, resulting in a diminished impact. Therefore, it is important to examine the trajectory of the RTI Act, the systemic issues that have weakened its implementation, and the legal interpretations that have further restricted citizens' access to information.

Key points

- **Initial phase of the RTI act:** The RTI Act was seen as a landmark piece of legislation that recognized citizens as the true rulers of the nation. By codifying the fundamental right to information, the Act provided an effective tool for public oversight, allowing people to monitor the functioning of the government.
- **Issues and Interpretations:** *Bureaucratic Resistance and Systemic Erosion* - One of the earliest challenges to the RTI Act was the reluctance of government officials to relinquish control over information. Recognising that the Act effectively transferred power from public servants to citizens, the government attempted to weaken the law through amendments.
Judicial Interpretations Restricting RTI - A significant shift in the interpretation of the RTI Act occurred with the Supreme Court's ruling in *Central Board of Secondary Education vs Aditya Bandopadhyay* (2011). The judgment challenged the strict interpretation of Section 8, which outlines exemptions to the right to information.
Girish Ramchandra Deshpande vs Central Information Commissioner (2012) - The erosion of the RTI Act continued with the Supreme Court's decision in *Girish Ramchandra Deshpande vs Central Information Commissioner* (2012).
- **Implications of a Weakening RTI Act:** *Reduced Government Accountability and Transparency* - One of the core objectives of the RTI Act was to make the government more transparent and accountable to the public.
Increase in Corruption and Misuse of Public Funds - A strong RTI framework acts as a deterrent against corruption by ensuring that public officials are aware that their actions are subject to scrutiny.
Hindrance to Investigative Journalism and Public Awareness - The RTI Act has been a critical tool for journalists and researchers who rely on access to government data to investigate issues of public interest.
- **Way ahead:** To safeguard the integrity of the RTI Act, active citizen participation is essential. Public awareness and media discourse must highlight attempts to dilute the Act and push for reforms that restore its effectiveness. Additionally, the legal framework must be reviewed to ensure that exemptions under Section 8 are interpreted in a manner that prioritizes public interest over bureaucratic convenience.
- **Conclusion:** While the RTI Act was initially seen as a powerful tool to uphold transparency and democracy, its effectiveness has been steadily eroded by bureaucratic resistance, judicial restrictions, and legislative amendments. However, the responsibility to preserve the essence of the RTI Act lies with the citizens and media, who must actively defend their fundamental right to information.

4. Fencing out interfaith relationships in the new India

Context: On January 27, 2025, Uttarakhand became the first Indian state to implement the Uniform Civil Code (UCC). While its proponents claim that it aims to promote gender justice, uniformity, and administrative efficiency, its broader implications suggest a legal framework that places personal relationships under state surveillance. Amid these developments, it is crucial to explore how the UCC, in conjunction with anti-conversion laws, curtails personal freedoms, strengthens patriarchal control, and institutionalizes segregation in contemporary India.

Key points

- **Challenges Faced by the Interfaith Relationships:** Interfaith marriages in India already face immense social and legal challenges. A 2014 survey of over 70,000 respondents revealed that fewer than 10% of urban Indians had a family member who married outside their caste, and only 5% reported interfaith marriages within their families. Existing laws such as the Special Marriage Act, 1954, require a 30-day public notice period, making interfaith couples vulnerable to scrutiny and harassment.
- **Surveillance & Criminalization of Live-in Relationships:** The UCC extends state control beyond formal marriages, reaching into informal relationships. It mandates that live-in relationships be registered with district authorities, requiring couples to submit a 16-page application along with identity proofs.
- **Implications:**
 - Empowering Religious Institutions in a Secular State* - By requiring religious certification for marriage or conversion, the UCC formalises the authority of religious leaders over personal relationships.
 - Enhancing Familial Control Over Women* - The legal requirement to notify families of live-in relationships places women at heightened risk of coercion, honour-based violence, and forced separation. Patriarchal narratives often depict women in interfaith relationships as victims of manipulation, further limiting their agency.
 - Legitimising Vigilantism* - Extremists' groups now have legal avenues to monitor and intervene in interfaith relationships. Public notices and family notifications allow these groups to track and harass couples, often under the pretence of upholding tradition.
- **Conclusion:** The implementation of the UCC in Uttarakhand, alongside existing anti-conversion laws, represents an unprecedented level of state interference in personal relationships. By bureaucratising interfaith unions, strengthening religious authority, curtailing women's freedoms, and legitimizing vigilantism, these laws erode individual rights and deepen communal divisions. If similar policies are adopted in other states, India risks institutionalising social segregation, undermining the very principles of democracy and personal liberty.

5. From Bihar to the World

Context: Makhnas are a significant agricultural product of Bihar for 85% of the worlds production. In the past decade, its cultivation has undergone a remarkable transformation, shifting from the traditional pond-based farming system. As a result, the area under cultivation has expanded to over 35,000 hectares, and production has more than doubled, currently at over 56,000 tonnes. The announcement of the creation of the Makhana Board in Union Budget 2025-26 marks a pivotal moment for the sector.

Key points

- **Makhana Board (Union Budget 2025-26):** Enhance domestic and global identity. Provide training, resources, and financial aid for modern techniques. Focus on production, processing, and marketing.
Key Features - Subsidies for adopting modern tools/equipment. R&D for high-yielding varieties and improved farming practices.
- **Geographical Indication (GI) Tag:** Mithila Makhana GI tag ensures authenticity, quality, and origin, boosting global appeal.
- **National Institute of Food Technology:** To advance food processing capabilities, reducing reliance on raw makhana exports.
- **Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs):** 1,000+ FPOs established in Bihar to strengthen farmers' bargaining power and provide end-to-end support (resources, knowledge sharing, market access).
- **Growth Projections and Economic Impact:** *Cultivation Area* - Expand to 70,000 hectares (from 35,000).
Production - Seed production to double in 3 years. Popped makhana output to rise from 23,000 MT to 78,000 MT.
Economic Value - Farmer-level value to increase from ₹550 crore to ₹3,900 crore. Market value to increase from ₹2,000 crore to ₹13,260 crore.
- **Employment Generation:** *Farm-level engagement* - Increase from 20,000 to 50,000 families.
Post-production jobs - Increase from 5 lakh to 7 lakh individuals.
- **Existing Challenges:** *Low Processing Capacity* - Reliance on raw exports limits profitability.
Market Access - Limited global reach despite GI tag.
Labor-Intensive Practices - Traditional methods hinder scalability.
- **Way ahead:** *Modernization* - Adoption of field-based farming and mechanization.
Infrastructure Development - Darbhanga, Purnea (upcoming), and Patna's greenfield airport to boost exports.
Export Promotion - Targeting markets in the US, Europe, and Middle East.
- **Conclusion:** The Makhana Board and allied initiatives mark a transformative phase for Bihar's agricultural economy. The sector's success will hinge on seamless execution of policies, infrastructure upgrades, and fostering innovation.

6. Controlling riverbank erosion

Context: Severe riverbank erosion has plagued the Brahmaputra Valley for years, unleashing widespread devastation across Assam. Each year, this unyielding force of Nature claims numerous lives, engulfs vast tracts of land, and reduces homes and fertile fields to ruin. Its ferocity escalates in the wake of major earthquakes and worsens annually with the flood season. The width of the Brahmaputra continues to expand due to constant riverbank erosion, and new sandbars, or chars, are formed in an ongoing process. Additionally, a significant amount of silt is deposited in the riverbed, raising it over time and contributing to the severity of annual floods.

Key points

- **Major Reasons:** Flood is the most crucial reason for riverbank erosion. Deforestation also causes Riverbank Erosion. Key factors causing the river to be extremely unstable at many reaches are 'aggradation' (raising of the riverbed due to sediment deposition), intense 'braiding' and large water discharge.
- **Implications and Concerns:** The recurring incidents of riverbank erosion have doubled the safety concerns of people. Apart from the loss of cropped areas, they fear that their residential areas might cave in. Protection of riverbanks from erosion is a problem in flood-prone areas and involves a huge expenditure.
- **Initiatives:** The grass vetiver, whose scientific name is *Chrysopogon Zizanioides*, has been planted on the embankment of the Mundeswari River in the Hooghly district experimentally under the MGNREGA programme. The XVth Finance Commission had recommended the creation of a National Disaster Risk Management Fund (NDRMF) and State Disaster Risk Management Fund (SDRMF) comprising a Mitigation Fund at the National and State-levels (NDMF/SDMF), and a Response Fund at the National and State level (NDRF/SDRF) for the award period from 2021-22 to 2022-26.
- **Way Forward:** There is a need to develop suitable norms for mitigation measures to prevent erosion and for both the Union and the State Governments to develop a policy to deal with the extensive displacement of people caused by coastal and river erosion. The phase-wise solution is required for the mitigation of erosion by including a combination of measures including strategic dredging, and protection of erodible bank materials with anchored bulkhead or tie-back sheet piles, spurs, toe and bank revetments.