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

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1. Telecom tribunal reforms to handle data protection pleas

Context: In January 2025, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) released the draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025 under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023. However, the draft has faced criticism, especially regarding the Union government's power to appoint members to the Data Protection Board (DPB). Since the DPB has quasi-judicial functions, many are concerned that government control over appointments could affect its independence and the separation of powers.

Key points

- **Overview:** The Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal must implement reforms as data protection becomes increasingly important in India's digital governance framework.
- **Need for a specialist:** Telecom Disputes Settlement and Appellate Tribunal (TDSAT) needs a technical member with data protection expertise to handle sector-specific matters effectively. Section 14C of the TRAI Act, 1997 states that a TDSAT member must have served as a Government Secretary (or equivalent) for at least two years or have expertise in technology, telecom, industry, commerce, or administration.
- **Upgrade Digital Infrastructure:** The TDSAT must modernize its technology to meet the requirements of the Act. The draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules, 2025 mandate that appeals be filed digitally.
- **Website Functionality:** The website should be improved for; Better navigation and ease of use, Increased access to details on pending and completed cases, Efficient digital filing systems to handle appeals smoothly.
- **Implement an Effective Case Management System:** The TRAI Annual Report 2023 mentions a "legal cases management system" introduced by TDSAT. However, there is no clarity on its implementation status or impact on case backlog.
- **Reforms Needed in TDSAT:**
 - Appoint a Technical Member for Data Protection* - A specialist in data protection should be added to ensure proper handling of privacy-related cases.
 - Increase Capacity to Dispose of Appeals* - More benches and resources are needed to speed up appeal resolution.
 - Strengthen Accountability Through Annual Reports* - TDSAT should publish yearly reports with details on number of appeals filed; allowed; or dismissed, pending appeals and their status, key legal issues involved in each appeal.
- **Conclusion:** This information should be given for each type of case, such as telecom, broadcasting, and data protection. Since data protection is becoming more important in India's digital governance, TDSAT's ability to handle these cases well will be crucial for upholding the law and safeguarding individual rights.

2. A delimitation red flag — the lessons from J&K, Assam

Context: As discussions on the delimitation of legislative constituencies intensify, various concerns and possible solutions have been raised. One practical proposal is to maintain the current number of parliamentary seats while increasing the number of Assembly seats in states with growing populations. This approach is more democratic, as Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) serve as the primary representatives for their constituents, addressing local issues, whereas Members of Parliament (MPs) primarily focus on national policy matters.

Key points

- **Overview:** Risk associated with delimitation is the communal division of electoral constituencies.
- **Power Imbalance and Strengthening Zonal Councils:** *Southern states fear an imbalance of power due to delimitation* - Redistribute Rajya Sabha seats equally among the five geographic zones (Northern, Central, Eastern, Western, and Southern).
Zonal Councils are inactive - Most zonal councils have not met since 2023, except the Western Zonal Council (Feb 2025). The Southern Zonal Council last met in 2022, despite a planned meeting in Chennai (Jan 2025).
Actual Role of Zonal Councils - In practice, they address a variety of issues, from Aadhaar to governance, making their role more significant.
Need for Structural Changes - Zonal Councils should be independent of the Home Ministry to function effectively.
- **Case of Jammu and Kashmir:** *Recent State-Level Delimitations* - Two state-level delimitations Jammu & Kashmir (2022) and Assam (2023) highlights concern for the 2026 delimitation process.
Disproportionate Seat Allocation - Jammu gained six new seats, while the Valley received only one, creating an imbalance in vote weight (Jammu votes carried 1.2 times the weight of Valley votes).
Communal Seat Distribution - All six newly created constituencies—Jasrota, Ramgarh, Ramnagar, Vaishno Devi, Padder-Nagseni, and Doda West—were Hindu-majority.
Demographic Manipulation - Muslim-majority Kishtwar was altered into a Hindu-majority constituency by merging parts of the former Inderwal constituency.
- **Case of Assam:** *District Mergers* - Assam cabinet merged 4 districts back into their original ones, reducing total districts from 35 to 31.
Frozen Assembly Seats - Number of Assembly seats remained unchanged despite redistricting.
Loss of Muslim-Majority Seats - 10 Muslim-majority seats were removed, including South Salmara, Barpeta (2), Darrang, Nagaon, Dibrugarh, Sibsagar, Jorhat, Hailakandi, Karimganj.
Increase in Hindu & Tribal Seats - Hindu and tribal seats increased, altering demographic balance.
- **Consequences of polarisation:** *Minority Populations in Opposition States* - Many Opposition-ruled States have large minority populations, mostly Muslim.
Risk - No guarantee that non-communal voting will continue; communal demarcation could polarize voters even in the South.
- **Conclusion:** The imbalance in power between large northern states and the rest, resulting from population-based delimitation, is a serious concern. However, an equally pressing issue is the communal division of electoral constituencies, which poses another threat to national unity. Population-based delimitation could further reduce the influence of more developed states, deepening the divide between them and less developed regions.

3. Torture shadows India's justice system

Context: A recent ruling by a London high court rejected India's extradition request for Sanjay Bhandari, accused of tax evasion and money laundering. The court denied the extradition plea on the grounds that Bhandari faced a real risk of custodial torture in Indian jails. Hopefully, these proceedings will spur the government to reinforce India's claim as a professed defender of human rights by enacting a comprehensive law against torture, enabling it to ratify the United Nations Convention against Torture (UNCAT).

Key points

- **India's Position on Anti-Torture Laws:** Despite advocating against torture internationally, India has not ratified the UNCAT. India remains one of the few democratic countries that have not ratified the convention, alongside nations with poor human rights records.
- **United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT):** United Nations Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. It was adopted on December 10th, 1984, by the United Nations General Assembly.
Objective - To prevent torture and inhuman treatment worldwide.
Signatories - 83 countries.
Ratifications - 173 countries (as of 2024).
Key Provisions - Prohibits torture under any circumstances, requires states to criminalize torture, obliges states to investigate and prosecute acts of torture, prohibits extradition to countries where torture is likely.
- **Parliamentary and Legal Recommendations:** In 2010, a parliamentary committee recommended enacting a law against torture, but no action was taken. The Law Commission of India, in its 273rd Report (2017), proposed a draft law to criminalize torture.
- **Judicial Stance on Torture and Legislation:** The Supreme Court of India has declared torture as a violation of human dignity and privacy under Article 21 of the Constitution. Various judgments have reinforced the need for strong legal protections against torture. However, in 2019, the court declined to push the government to enact a specific anti-torture law. This reluctance has weakened India's legal framework in ensuring human rights protections.
- **Challenges & issues:** The failure to ratify the UNCAT has been used as a defence by fugitives facing extradition, weakening India's ability to prosecute offenders. Countries refusing extradition to India highlight the risk of custodial torture as a reason for denial. A lack of comprehensive anti-torture legislation undermines India's democratic values and its role as a defender of human rights.
- **Way ahead:** India must enact a strong anti-torture law to uphold its constitutional and international obligations. The country risks harming its democratic reputation and legal credibility if it does not address this issue. Ensuring human rights protections will strengthen India's position as a global leader and reinforce its commitment to justice.

Q. Discuss the significance of the United Nations Convention Against Torture (UNCAT) and analyse the implications of India's non-ratification, particularly in the context of recent extradition cases. (অত্যাচারৰ বিৰুদ্ধে ৰাষ্ট্ৰসংঘৰ চুক্তি (ইউ. এন. চি. এ. টি.) ৰ গুৰুত্ব আলোচনা কৰক আৰু ভাৰতৰ অনুমোদন নোহোৱাৰ প্ৰভাৱ বিশ্লেষণ কৰক, বিশেষকৈ শেহতীয়া প্ৰত্যাবৰ্তনৰ গোচৰৰ সন্দৰ্ভত।)

4. Sustainable urbanization in NE

Context: Urban development in the Northeast must prioritise sustainability, balancing progress with ecological responsibility to safeguard the region's fragile environment. Climate change remains the toughest challenge, and we are experiencing it first-hand. It was with this purpose that the Delhi- and Guwahati-based Building, Architecture, Interiors, and Construction (BAIC) met in Shillong recently. The theme of the conference – 'Urbanisation on Hills: Challenges, Opportunities, and Sustainable Strategies for Northeast India' – is both timely and appropriate, considering the glut of construction activities across the seven States.

Key points

- **Geographical Constraints:** The North-East region is characterized by hilly terrain, dense forests, and high seismic activity; surrounded by Eastern Himalayas. These geographical features complicate the construction of infrastructure and limit the availability of flat land suitable for urban expansion.
- **Inadequate Infrastructure:** Urban centres in the North-East suffer from poor infrastructure, including inadequate transportation networks, insufficient water supply, and unreliable electricity.
- **Socio-Cultural Factors:** The North-East is home to a diverse population with multiple ethnic groups, each with its own distinct culture and traditions. Urbanization efforts must be sensitive to these socio-cultural dynamics to prevent conflict and ensure social cohesion.
- **Economic Constraints:** The region's economy is largely agrarian, with limited industrialization. The lack of economic opportunities in urban areas leads to a lower rate of rural-to-urban migration compared to other parts of India.
- **Environmental Concerns:** North-East India belongs to the Indo-Myanmar biodiversity hotspot. Unplanned urban growth could lead to environmental degradation, including deforestation, loss of biodiversity, and co-extinction.
- **Satellite Townships to Address Challenges:** *Alleviation of Pressure on Existing Urban Centres* - Satellite townships can help reduce the burden on existing urban centres by decentralizing population and economic activities. This can lead to more balanced regional development and prevent overcrowding in cities like Guwahati and Imphal through township development in Amingaon and Greater Imphal.
Planned and Sustainable Development - Satellite townships offer an opportunity for planned urban development, which can incorporate modern infrastructure, efficient public services, and environmental safeguards from the outset. This is particularly important in the ecologically sensitive North-East region.
Economic Diversification - Industrial Development Hubs such as in Jagiroad with specific economic zones can help diversify the region's economy, attracting industries and services that are currently underrepresented. This could create employment opportunities and stimulate local economies, reducing reliance on agriculture.
- **Conclusion:** The idea of satellite townships holds significant potential to address the challenges of urbanization in North-East India, particularly by promoting planned, sustainable, and culturally sensitive urban development. However, the success of such initiatives will depend on careful planning, substantial investment in infrastructure, and the active involvement of local communities. With these considerations, satellite townships could indeed be a viable solution to the region's urbanization challenges.

5. Heat and the Hope

Context: The India Meteorological Department predicts that March might be the hottest on record. The heat will intensify in spring and summer, this could lead to loss of human life. Our continuing vulnerability to heat is a vexing problem. Humans have known that heat can kill for thousands of years. Aristotle and other ancient Greek philosophers believed that humans could not survive in the tropics. Europeans learned from people of Africa and India to survive the heat, they learned how to adapt their food, clothing and daily activities.

Key points

- **Emergence of Urban Heat Challenges:** In early 1800s, scientists identified cities as hotter than rural areas due to human activity. By the 20th century, heatwaves became widely reported (e.g. 40°C in Calcutta in 1905, 50.6°C in Alwar in 1956).
- **Health Impacts and Vulnerable Populations:** *Early Focus* - Factory workers in hot environments (e.g. young labourers).
Mid-20th Century Shift - Recognition of elderly, poor, and those with pre-existing conditions (e.g. heart disease) as most vulnerable.
- **Mortality rates:** *India* – 1998; 1,300 deaths in Odisha at 49.5°C. 2015; 2,500 deaths nationwide. 2024; Officially 360 deaths, though independent analyses suggest 733.
Europe - Over 60,000 heat-related deaths in 2022.
- **Modern Climate Challenges:** *Climate Change as a Catalyst* - In 1980s, scientific consensus linked fossil fuels to the greenhouse effect and global warming. In 2024 temperatures reached 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.
Wet-Bulb Temperature Threat - Critical Threshold of 35°C wet-bulb temperature prevents human heat dissipation, leading to lethality.
Variability in Heat Exposure - Heat exposure varies within cities (e.g. Ahmedabad studies showing differences in apartment buildings). *Focus on localized heat resilience strategies.*
Measurement Controversies - Last year in Delhi, a faulty thermometer initially reported 52.9°C (corrected to 49.9°C), highlighting challenges in accurate record-keeping.
- **Way Forward:** *Global Cooperation* - Bold fossil fuel reduction policies to reverse greenhouse effects.
Equitable Adaptation - Ensure marginalized communities have resources to cope.
Political Will - Governments must prioritize climate resilience in policy and funding.
Public Awareness - Media and education to highlight risks and solutions.
- **Conclusion:** Humanity's historical adaptations and scientific advancements offer hope to manage heat but without urgent action, the climate change and associated heat will disproportionately affect the most vulnerable.

6. Sonic weapon

Context: Serbia's government has been accused of using illegal sonic weapons against protesters in Belgrade. Sonic weapons are designed to emit loud, often painful sounds that carry over long distances. The use of this technology for crowd-control purposes goes back to the early 1990s. Such weapons usually comprise hundreds of modern transducers – an electronic device that converts energy from one form to another – to create highly concentrated and amplified sound.

Key points

- **Sonic Weapons:** Devices that emit extremely loud sounds over long distances to disperse crowds or disorient individuals. They can deliver either audible or inaudible frequencies, causing pain or discomfort.
- **Working:** *Use of Transducers* - Hundreds of electronic transducers convert energy to produce focused sound beams.
Controlled Output - Authorities can adjust frequency, volume, and direction to target specific areas.
Directional Sound Beam - A narrow beam ensures targeted impact without spreading in all directions.
- **Types of Sonic Weapons:** *Long-Range Acoustic Device (LRAD)* - Emits sound up to 160 dB with an 8,900-meter range. Used for crowd control and voice communication in military and police operations.
Mosquito Device - Produces high-frequency sounds audible only to youth below 30 years. Deployed to deter gatherings of teenagers in public spaces.
Infrasonic Weapon - Emits very low-frequency, inaudible sound waves. Causes disorientation and discomfort; still experimental and not fully weaponized.
- **Applications of Sonic Weapons:** *Crowd Control* - Used by law enforcement to disperse large protests.
Military Use - Deployed for security alerts and communication over long distances.
Property Protection - Mosquito devices prevent loitering around sensitive locations.
- **Impact on health:** *Hearing Damage* - Prolonged exposure above 120 dB can cause permanent hearing loss.
Tinnitus - Continuous loud sound causes ringing in the ears that can last for hours or days.
Physical Symptoms - Includes headaches, nausea, sweating, vertigo, and disorientation.
Severe Injury - In extreme cases, may lead to vomiting and bleeding from the ears.
Indiscriminate Effect - Can harm not just protesters but also bystanders and enforcement personnel.