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

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1. An India-U.S. trade agreement and the test of WTO laws

Context: India and the U.S. have agreed to negotiate a Bilateral Trade Agreement (BTA) by fall 2025. This agreement must align with WTO regulations, particularly the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principle and exceptions under GATT. The U.S.-India Joint Leaders Statement, of February 13, only references a multi-sector BTA without providing specific details about its coverage. It is important to note that this agreement is not labelled as a free trade agreement (FTA).

Key points

- **Free Trade Agreements and WTO Regulations:** WTO follows the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principle, which means that countries cannot discriminate between trading partners. FTAs create exceptions to the MFN principle, but they must cover “substantially all trade” between the involved countries, as required by Article XXIV.8(b) of GATT.
- **Interim Agreements as a Legal Pathway:** WTO allows countries to sign an ‘interim agreement’ before finalizing an FTA. Under Article XXIV.5 of GATT, an interim agreement must –
 - Be necessary for the formation of an FTA.
 - Have a clear plan and timeline to establish a full FTA, typically within 10 years.
- **The ‘Enabling Clause’ Exception:** WTO allows deviations from MFN rules under the ‘enabling clause’, which grants better market access to developing countries. However, the proposed India-U.S. BTA does not fall under this exception because –
 - It involves lowering tariffs for U.S. products rather than supporting developing nations.
 - The Joint Statement confirms that India is reducing tariffs specifically to benefit U.S. interests.
- **WTO Compliance and Challenges:** The U.S. has previously pursued ‘reciprocal tariffs’, which violate WTO rules by imposing tariffs that match those imposed by other nations. WTO principles, such as special and differential treatment (S&DT), allow developing countries to have more flexibility in trade policies. Bound tariff rates at WTO limit how high tariffs can be set, and reciprocal tariffs would breach these commitments. India must uphold WTO rules and resist any trade policies that go against global trade laws.
- **Conclusion:** The proposed India-U.S. BTA negotiations present an opportunity for economic cooperation, but they must comply with WTO regulations. If structured improperly, the agreement could face legal challenges at the WTO. India must ensure that the BTA does not undermine multilateral trade principles and maintains a rules-based trading system.

Q. Why must the proposed India-U.S. Bilateral Trade Agreement follow WTO rules? How can India ensure the agreement remains legally valid? (প্রস্তাবিত India-U.S. কিয় হ 'ব লাগে? দ্বিপাক্ষিক বাণিজ্য চুক্তিয়ে বিশ্ব বাণিজ্য সংস্থার নিয়ম অনুসরণ কৰে নেকি? চুক্তিখন আইনীভাৱে বৈধ হৈ থকাটো ভাৰতে কেনেকৈ নিশ্চিত কৰিব পাৰে?)

2. Flawed food regulations fuel the obesity crisis

Context: A recent economic survey recommends imposing a 'health tax' on ultra-processed foods (UPFs) to reduce their consumption. The urgency of the problem is evident as one in four adults in India is obese, and a similar proportion is diabetic or pre-diabetic. However, weak food marketing regulations and lack of proper labelling may undermine efforts to combat obesity. In India, one in four adult men and women are obese and one in four adults are either diabetic or pre-diabetic (National Family Health Survey-5).

Key points

- **Overview:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi has called for action to tackle obesity in India. The 2025 Economic Survey recommends a 'health tax' on ultra-processed foods to reduce their consumption.
- **Challenges in Implementing Food Regulations:** Since 2017, multiple ministries and the food safety authority have failed to implement planned labelling and advertising regulations. Regulations remain unclear, leading to excessive marketing of unhealthy UPFs.
- **Problems with the Indian Nutrition Rating System:** The food safety authority proposed a 'health star' rating system in 2022, modelled after an unsuccessful international framework. This system rates food from half a star (least healthy) to five stars (healthiest), but it has flaws –
 - It allows unhealthy foods to appear healthier than they are.
 - High-fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) foods receive misleading ratings.
 - A sugary soft drink or a highly processed breakfast cereal may get two or three stars, creating a false sense of healthiness.
- **Inadequate Advertising Regulations:** India has four laws to curb misleading food advertisements, but they remain ineffective. Regulations lack clear definitions and thresholds for HFSS or UPFs. The Consumer Protection Act classifies misleading advertisements as those hiding important product information.
- **Way ahead:** The economic survey suggests stricter labelling and advertising controls. Key actions to improve regulations include –
 - Scrapping the flawed health star rating system and adopting clear warning labels.
 - Defining sugar, salt, and fat limits for HFSS foods based on established health guidelines.
 - Closing advertising loopholes by amending or creating a new unified law to regulate UPF promotions.
 - Launching public awareness campaigns in multiple languages about the risks of UPFs.
- **Conclusion:** The rising obesity crisis in India is not due to individual failure but weak policies. Without strict food regulations, the goal of controlling obesity by 2025 may not be achieved. A strong regulatory framework is essential to protect public health, especially for children, over corporate profits. Urgent action is needed to ensure the vision of a healthier nation becomes a reality.

3. Why Mauritius matters

Context: Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Mauritius on March 11-12, 2025, marks a significant milestone in the enduring relationship between the two nations. His participation as the guest of honour at Mauritius' Independence Day celebrations highlights the deep historical and strategic ties binding India and the island nation. This visit, occurring amidst global geopolitical uncertainties, provides an opportunity for India to reaffirm its commitment to Mauritius' prosperity, security, and development.

Key points

- **Historical Bond Between India and Mauritius:** India and Mauritius share a relationship rooted in history, culture, and kinship. Mauritius has a substantial Indian-origin population, with nearly 70% of its citizens tracing their ancestry to Indian indentured labourers brought by colonial rulers to work on sugar plantations.
- **Diplomatic and Political Stability:** Regardless of the party in power, India-Mauritius relations have remained stable and positive. The recent election of Navinchandra Ramgoolam as Prime Minister presents an opportunity for further strengthening bilateral cooperation. For Indian diplomats, maintaining strong relationships across all segments of Mauritian society is crucial.
- **Economic and Trade Cooperation:** Economic cooperation between India and Mauritius has grown significantly in recent years, with bilateral trade reaching \$554 million in 2022-23. Mauritius serves as a gateway to Africa, benefiting from its membership in the African Union and preferential trade agreements with African nations.
- **Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (DTAA):** One of the most significant aspects of India-Mauritius economic ties is the DTAA, which has positioned Mauritius as a major channel for foreign investment into India. This agreement has also contributed to Mauritius' emergence as a prominent international financial centre.
- **India's Strategic Initiatives in Mauritius:**
 - Coastal Radar Stations* - India has established a network of coastal radar stations in Mauritius to monitor activities in the vast exclusive economic zone (EEZ).
 - Upgrading Agaléga Island* - India has significantly redeveloped the Mauritian island of Agaléga, transforming it into a crucial joint surveillance and naval facility.
 - Information Sharing Through IFC-IOR* - Mauritius has been granted access to India's Information Fusion Centre for the Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), based in Gurugram.
 - Oceanographic Surveys* - The Indian Navy's oceanographic survey ship, INS Sarvekshak, recently completed a survey of 25,000 square kilometres of Mauritius' ocean territory.
- **Geopolitical Context of India-Mauritius Maritime Ties:** India's maritime cooperation with Mauritius takes on added significance in the context of China's expanding footprint in the Indian Ocean. By deepening its security ties with Mauritius, India is ensuring that the Indian Ocean remains a stable and secure region, free from external influences that could disrupt the balance of power. The India-Mauritius partnership serves as a counterbalance to China's presence and reinforces India's role as the primary security provider in the region.
- **Conclusion:** The historical, cultural, economic, and strategic ties between the two nations provide a strong foundation for continued collaboration. As the world navigates uncertain geopolitical waters, the India-Mauritius relationship remains an anchor of stability and mutual growth.

4. How a gene-edited banana may help reduce food waste

Context: As brown, over-ripe bananas are often discarded even when they are perfectly edible scientists have developed a new genetically engineered banana which has a longer shelf-life and does not get over-ripped or gets brown. It has been developed by a biotech company Tropic, and they have claimed that their fruit remains fresh and yellow for 12 hours after being peeled and is also less likely to turn brown when bumped during harvesting.

Key points

- **Overview:** Scientists made some precise changes to the existing banana genes such as the production of PPO (polyphenol oxidase), which makes them turn brown when meeting oxygen and breaks down the yellow pigment.
- **Significance:** As bananas are extremely perishable, with some estimates suggesting that as 50% of the crop goes to waste each year. Preventing bananas from browning may reduce food waste by encouraging people to eat older but edible fruit.
- **Other examples:** Vitamin A-Fortified Bananas - Scientists used CRISPR technology, a precise tool for editing genes, to change a specific gene in the banana plant. This change led to a six-fold increase in beta-carotene, a nutrient that our body converts into Vitamin A. By providing a readily available source of Vitamin A, especially in areas where access to diverse foods is limited, this biofortified banana can improve the health and well-being of millions, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.
- **GABA (Gamma-Aminobutyric Acid):** It is a neurotransmitter that helps to regulate anxiety and mood in humans. Some genetically edited foods, such as certain tomato varieties, have been enhanced to contain higher levels of GABA, aimed at providing potential health benefits like stress reduction and improved neurological health.
- **Benefits genetically edited foods:** Enhanced nutritional values such as increased vitamins. Improved agricultural yield and efficiency. Reduced need for chemical pesticides. Reduced need for chemical pesticides.
- **Future of genetically edited foods in India:** India sees significant potential in gene editing technology, especially for enhancing crop resilience and nutritional content, which could revolutionize agriculture and food security. The right to food is a necessity. Gene editing in agriculture could lead to innovations that ensure more people can exercise this right, sustainably and healthily.

5. From beginnings to best practices

Context: National Safety Week has been observed throughout the country from March 4 to 10. Initiated in 1971 by the National Safety Council (NSC) of India to commemorate its foundation day (March 4), this week features various activities aimed at raising awareness about workplace safety and encouraging organisations to adopt best practices. National Safety Week is celebrated under a specific theme each year that addresses current safety concerns and trends. This year's theme was 'Safety and well-being crucial for Viksit Bharat.'

Key points

- **National Safety Day:** The National Safety Council of India was established by the Ministry of Labour and Employment in 1966 as a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting Safety, Health, and Environment (SHE) initiatives.
Theme for 2025 - The theme for the 54th National Safety Day is: "Safety & Well-being Crucial for Viksit Bharat". This theme aligns with India's vision of becoming a developed nation by 2047 (Viksit Bharat 2047).
- **Objectives:** *Promote a Safety Culture* - Encourage individuals and organizations to adopt preventive safety measures to minimize accidents and injuries.
Increase Awareness - Educate workers and the public about workplace safety, road safety, and home safety.
Reduce Workplace Accidents - Encourage industries to implement and comply with safety regulations to create accident-free workplaces.
- **Significance:** *Industries and Workplaces* - Encourages safety training programs for employees. Promotes accident prevention measures in high-risk industries like construction, manufacturing, and mining.
General Public - Spreads awareness about road safety, fire safety, and home safety. Encourages people to take precautionary measures against natural and industrial disasters.
Government and Regulatory Bodies - Strengthens safety laws and workplace regulations. Encourages industries to implement advanced safety technologies.
- **Role of the National Safety Council:** The National Safety Council of India (NSC) plays a pivotal role in driving safety initiatives across the country. Its responsibilities include –
 - Safety training programs for industries and professionals.
 - Technical assistance in implementing occupational safety standards.
 - Research and development on workplace safety improvements.
 - Publications and guidelines on accident prevention and emergency response.
- **Conclusion:** The 54th National Safety Day on March 4, 2025, acts as a decisive reminder of the importance of safety in all aspects of life. The theme for National Safety Day 2025, "Safety & Well-being Crucial for Viksit Bharat", aligns with India's goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047, emphasizing that safety and well-being are key drivers of progress.