

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

By



SOURCES



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3. Citing cost, time overrun, Uttarkashi project said no to separate rescue tunnel - Indian Express
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Important News Articles

GS II

1. 'Religious character' of a place of worship can be decided only in a trial, says Allahabad HC - The Hindu

Relevance: Structure, organization and functioning of the Executive and the Judiciary—Ministries and Departments of the Government; pressure groups and formal/informal associations and their role in the Polity.

News:

- Allahabad High Court in the Gyanvapi case order that the **Places of Worship Act, 1991 is not an “absolute bar” on litigants**
- They can **approach courts to define the “religious character** of any place of worship

Prelims Takeaway

- Places of Worship Act, 1991
- Gyanvapi mosque
- Religious Character

Observations of the court

Undefined "Religious Character"

- The High Court emphasised that the **1991 Act lacks a definition for the term "religious character.**
- It clarified that a **place of worship cannot simultaneously have dual religious characters** and that the determination of religious character should be based on trial evidence.

Mandate of the 1991 Act

- the 1991 Act mandates **retaining the religious identity of a place of worship** as of August 15, 1947
- The court referred to **sub-section (3) (d) of Section 4** to argue that if the "conversion" occurred much before the Act's commencement, silence or acquiescence would not bar legal action.

Gyanvapi Case Details

- In the Gyanvapi case, Hindu plaintiffs claim that the **Gyanvapi mosque site belonged to a temple** since Satyuga and was **demolished in 1669**, preceding the 1991 Act.
- They argue that **erecting a mosque afterward** does not change the temple's religious character.

Pending Supreme Court Petitions

- Despite the High Court ruling, several petitions challenging the 1991 Act's provisions are pending in the Supreme Court.

Recent Developments

- In August, **the Supreme Court allowed** the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct a **non-invasive investigation** of the Gyanvapi mosque premises.
- In December, **the Court did not stay an Allahabad High Court order** for a court-monitored survey of the Shahi Idgah near the Krishna Janmabhoomi temple in Mathura.

2. Netanyahu calls Modi to discuss maritime threat in Red Sea - The Hindu

Relevance: Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

News:

- The Indian and Israeli Prime Minister held a telephone discussion on the escalating **threats to maritime security in the Red Sea** following the actions of Houthi militants of Yemen.

Prelims Takeaway

- Bab al-Mandab Strait
- Red Sea

Issue over the Red Sea

- The conversation came soon after the **Pentagon announced an international mission to counter the growing number of attacks** against Israel-bound international traffic.
- The **situation in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait has been worrying** shipping companies after several attacks by Houthi rebels on container ships.
- These incidents have prompted several major international companies to hold ships from venturing in the strait that separates Yemen from eastern Africa.
- The United States has called upon the UN Security Council to act against Houthi militants.

Red Sea

- It is **saline** bodies of water
- An inlet of the **Indian Ocean** between Africa and Asia.
- **Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea and Djibouti** are bordering countries
- It is connected to the Indian ocean in the south through the **Bab el Mandeb strait and the Gulf of Aden**.
- In the north are the Sinai Peninsula, the Gulf of Aqaba, and the Gulf of Suez (leading to the Suez Canal).
- Occupies a part of **Great Rift Valley** (Afro-Arabian Rift Valley).

Bab al-Mandab Strait

- It is a strait that connects the **Red Sea (northwest)** with the **Gulf of Aden and the Indian Ocean** (southeast).
- It is located between Arabia (northeast) and Africa (southwest).
- It is one of the world's most important seaborne commodity shipping routes, primarily for crude oil and petroleum.
- **Yemen** borders it on the Arabian Peninsula, and **Djibouti and Eritrea** border it on the African coast.



GS III

3. Citing cost, time overrun, Uttarkashi project said no to separate rescue tunnel - Indian Express

Relevance: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.

News:

- The recent incident in the Silkyara-Barkot tunnel in Uttarkashi district may not have arisen had the **project not ruled out the option of a separate escape tunnel**, according to **environmental impact assessment (EIA) report**

Prelims Takeaway

- Char Dham Project
- Silkyara tunnel

Key Highlights of the reports

Rejected Safety Measures

- The EIA report dismissed the option of a "separation wall" with "egress openings" for emergency escape.
- During construction, the design was altered for better space utilization and traffic safety, placing a divider in the middle.
- A tunnelling expert argues that only a **separate evacuation tunnel** could have helped in a total blockage situation.
- The project rejected the idea of a separate evacuation tunnel due to **concerns about cost, time overrun, and low traffic volume.**

Char Dham Project and Environmental Clearance

- The Silkyara-Barkot tunnel is part of the Char Dham project **exempted from environmental clearance for linear projects under 100 km.**
- The **High Powered Committee (HPC)** was formed in August 2019 to guide the EIA process.
- In September 2020, 37 rapid EIA reports were submitted, including one **rejecting the twin-tunnel option chosen by the Silkyara tunnel.**

4. RBI tightens norms for lenders investing in AIFs - Indian Express/ RBI tightens norms for AIF investments - The Hindu

Relevance: Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization, of resources, growth, development and employment.

News:

- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) directed **banks, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) and other lenders not to invest** in any scheme of alternative investment funds (AIFs)
- It is limited to the AIFs which have downstream investments in a debtor company.

Prelims Takeaway

- Non-banking financial companies (NBFCs)
- Alternative investment funds (AIFs)

Directives of RBI

- Objective :** Aimed at **curbing evergreening** of stressed loans,
- An AIF means any **fund established or incorporated in India** which is a privately pooled investment vehicle
 - It collects funds from sophisticated investors, whether Indian or foreign, for investing it in accordance with a defined investment policy for the benefit of its investors.
 - Regulated entities (REs) make investments in units of AIFs as part of their regular investment operations.

- RBI, however, said that **certain transactions of REs** involving AIFs raise regulatory concerns.
- These transactions entail **substitution of direct loan exposure of REs** to borrowers, with indirect exposure through investments in units of AIFs," the RBI said in a notification.

Evergreening of loans

- It is a process whereby a **lender tries to revive a loan that is on the verge of default or in default** by extending more loans to the same borrower.
- As of December 19, there were **1,220 AIFs registered** with the Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI).

Downstream investments

- It means the actual investment by the AIF in a company using the funds they have raised from AIF investors.
- The need to make 100 per cent provision on such outstanding debt is **likely to be a big deterrent to such irregularities** in transactions

5. 'Exchange rate flexibility is a key shock absorber for India' - Indian Express

Relevance: Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization, of resources, growth, development and employment.

News:

- IMF directors agree that **India's exchange rate flexibility** should be the primary defence against external shocks, with foreign exchange interventions.
- The IMF has reclassified **India's de facto exchange rate regime to a "stabilised arrangement"** from "floating" for December 2022 to October 2023.

Prelims Takeaway

- International Monetary Fund
- Reserve Bank of India

Key Points

- There is a divergence of views between the **authorities and IMF staff regarding the exchange rate stability.**

India's Economic Overview

- India's foreign exchange reserves reached \$606.8 billion, **reflecting increased capital inflows.**
- The IMF's Article IV consultation with India concludes that **the economy has shown robust growth**, with employment surpassing pre-pandemic levels.
- The formalisation of the economy has progressed, and the financial sector remains **strong and largely unaffected by global financial stress in early 2023.**

Current Account Deficit and Fiscal Concerns

- The **current account deficit for FY 2022-23** widened due to post-pandemic recovery and external shocks.
- The budget deficit has eased, **public debt remains elevated, and fiscal buffers need rebuilding.**

Economic Projections and Monetary Policy

- Growth is expected to remain strong, with real GDP projected to grow at 6.3% in FY24 and FY25.

Structural Reforms and Inclusive Growth

- **Comprehensive structural reforms** are suggested to leverage India's favourable demographics, promoting job-rich, inclusive, and greener growth.

6. States can borrow an extra ₹2 lakh crore this fiscal year - The Hindu/ Govt allows extra borrowing ceiling of over 60,000 crore to states for NPS - Indian Express

Relevance: Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization, of resources, growth, development and employment.

News:

Prelims Takeaway

- Finance Commission
- National Pension System (NPS)

Borrowing leeway

States may be able to borrow about ₹2.04 lakh cr. over their net borrowing limits for the year, Finance Ministry indicates

■ Govt. had allowed 22 States to borrow almost ₹61,000 crore on top of net borrowing ceilings of 3% of GSDP, as of October 27

■ Fifteenth Finance Commission mooted additional borrowing space of 0.5% of States' GSDP as performance-based incentive for power sector reforms



7. WHO tags JN.1 strain as 'variant of interest' as Covid cases rise - Indian Express

Relevance: Science and Technology- developments and their applications and effects in everyday life.

News:

- The World Health Organization (WHO) recently designated the Covid-19 sub-variant **JN.1** as a "**variant of interest**" due to its rapid spread.
- Current vaccines are reported to continue protecting against severe disease and death caused by JN.1.

Prelims Takeaway

- Variant of Interest
- JN.1 Virus
- World Health Organization (WHO)
- INSACOG

JN.1 Virus

- JN.1 cases were reported globally, including the US, European countries, Singapore, and China.
- Recently, a case of the JN.1 subvariant was identified in **Kerala** during the continuous **routine surveillance** conducted by **INSACOG**.
- The JN.1 virus is a **novel variant of Omicron subvariant BA.2.86** (called Pirola) with an additional spike protein mutation.
- It has the capability to **spread rapidly and evade immunity**, highlighting the need for continued monitoring and caution.
- **Symptoms:** fever, runny nose, sore throat, headache and mild gastrointestinal symptoms.

Classification of Variants

- **Variant of Interest**
 - Variant with a genetic capability that affects characteristics of the virus such as disease severity, immune escape, transmissibility and diagnostic escape.
 - A VOI causes a consequential volume of community transmission.
- **Variant of Concern**
 - A variant of concern translates to a rise in transmissibility, an increase in fatality and a significant decrease in effectiveness of vaccines, therapy and other health measures.
- **Variant of High Consequence**
 - Variants with clear evidence that prevention measures or medical countermeasures have significantly reduced effectiveness.

- **Variants Under Investigation (VUI)**
 - Variants considered to have epidemiological, immunological, or pathogenic properties that warrant formal investigation.

8. Taxpayers can withdraw court cases, 'approach GST Tribunals for faster rulings' - The Hindu

Relevance: Economy

News:

- The Finance Minister recently announced that taxpayers can **shift their GST-related cases** from High Courts and the Supreme Court to the upcoming **GST appellate tribunals** for quicker resolutions.

Prelims Takeaway

- GST Appellate Tribunals
- GST Council
- Tribunal Reforms Act, 2021

Concerns about GST Rates

- The Finance Minister acknowledged concerns about **glitches, difficulties** faced by taxpayers, and the **complexity of multiple tax rates**.
- She mentioned that **rationalization of rates** is part of a larger exercise undertaken by the GST Council, with a **Group of Ministers** formed for this purpose.

GST Appellate Tribunals (GSTATs)

- The **Central Goods and Service Tax Act, 2017, Section 109** mandates for the constitution of a GSTAT and its Benches.
- The GSTAT will be the **specialized appellate authority for resolving disputes under the GST laws**.
- The Central Goods and Services Tax (Second Amendment) Bill, 2023 aligns **eligibility and age norms** for members and the President of Appellate Tribunals with the Tribunal Reforms Act of 2021.

Composition

- The GST Tribunal will have **one principal bench in New Delhi**.
- Each state will have **two tribunal benches**.
 - One located in the state capital
 - Other located in key commercial centers based on state inputs.
- **North-eastern states** could opt for **one bench for 2-3 states** and an **additional bench for very far-flung areas**.
- **Members: Two technical and two judicial members each**, with equal representation from the Centre and states.
- However, all four members would not sit for hearing each case.
 - It depends on the threshold or value of dues involved.

Significance

- Expedite the **process of adjudication**
- **Provide tax certainty** especially in recurring litigative issues.
- Help in **bolstering business sentiments** and **ease of doing business** in the country.

Editorials, Gists and Explainers

1. Tax 'HFSS' foods, view it as a public health imperative - The Hindu

Relevance: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

Context:

- The consumption of **High Fat Sugar Salt (HFSS) foods** is a major risk factor for **health issues** such as obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure.

Key Facts

- World Bank Data, 2019**
 - 70% of overweight and obese people globally reside in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, with a 55% rise in rural areas.
- Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) burden in India has increased from 38% in 1990 to 65% in 2019.
- The global burden of diseases study shows that annually, 1.2 million deaths in India can be attributed to dietary risks alone.

Economic Impact and Dietary Shift in India

- The economic impact of overweight and obesity in India was estimated at \$23 billion in 2017 and is projected to rise to \$480 billion by 2060.
- The ultra-processed food sector in India experienced a 13.4% CAGR between 2011 and 2021.
- Sales of snacks and soft drinks in India exceeded \$30 billion in the past year, indicating a concerning dietary trend.

Global Practices and Need for HFSS Tax

- Globally, many countries have implemented taxes on High Fat Sugar Salt (HFSS) foods to combat obesity.
 - 16 countries including Denmark, France, Hungary, Mexico, South Africa, the UK, and the US have dedicated taxes.
- India's Kerala state introduced a 'fat tax' in 2016, later incorporated into the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in 2017.

Market Failures and Externalities

- Market failures associated with HFSS consumption contribute to negative externalities (societal costs) and internalities (consumer harm due to limited understanding).
- HFSS taxation can address societal burdens by curbing detrimental consumption habits, leading to reduced healthcare expenditures.

Designing Effective HFSS Tax

- HFSS tax should not be viewed primarily as a revenue-raising tool.
- It is a means to incentivize industry reformulation towards healthier alternatives.
- Differentiated tax rates based on nutritional quality can encourage product reformulation and make healthier choices more affordable.
- Current GST rates on ultra-processed foods in India do not align adequately with nutritional content.

Public Health Imperative

- HFSS taxation in India is not just an economic concern but a public health imperative.
- Well-designed taxes can act as a deterrent, promote healthier choices, prompt reformulation, improve public health and reduce the burden on the healthcare system.

Comprehensive Approach

- The HFSS taxation should be combined with measures like **promoting nutrition literacy** and **effective food labelling**.
- This is to create a **more potent tool** to combat the rising epidemic of overweight and obesity, fostering a **sustainable and equitable food system**.

2. India's ethanol conundrum - The Hindu

Relevance: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation

Context:

- India's **20% ethanol blending target by 2025** is facing obstacles.
- Reasons:** Low sugar stocks and an impending shortfall in sugarcane production.

Shift Towards Grains-Based Ethanol

- The government is considering a transition towards grains-based ethanol to meet the target, particularly focusing on maize.
- The authorization of NAFED and NCCF to procure maize for ethanol distilleries signals an emphasis on this transition.

Crude and Food Prices Connection

- Ethanol production globally relies on feedstocks like sugarcane (Brazil) and corn (the US).
- A historical connection exists between crude oil and food prices, especially with the use of corn for ethanol production.
- High crude prices drive up ethanol and corn prices, impacting global food prices and contributing to the 2006-14 global food crisis.
- At low crude prices, ethanol blending is not competitive; it is a slow process driven by heavy subsidies.

Challenges and Food-Fuel Conflict

- Using grains like corn for ethanol directly diverts grain from food or livestock feed, creating a food-fuel conflict.
- India's move towards maize-based ethanol may pose challenges for the economy, particularly in terms of potential food inflation.

Differential Pricing

- India introduced differential pricing in 2017-18, incentivizing the use of cane juice for ethanol, leading to challenges in sugar stocks.
- A corrective step was taken with a Ministry of Consumer Affairs order banning the use of cane juice for ethanol production.
- According to government estimates, to meet the EBP target by 2025, India needs 16.5 million tonnes of grains annually.

Way Forward

- The government faces a delicate **food-fuel trade-off**, choosing between intensifying hunger and reducing fossil fuel use.
- Options include **reconsidering** the **ethanol blending target** or **investing more** in public infrastructure, urban design and renewables.

3. NEW LESSONS, NEW QUESTIONS - Indian Express

Relevance: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health, Education, Human Resources.

Context:

- The **Right to Free and Compulsory Education (2009)** ensures elementary schooling for **6-14 year children**.
- This led to a **decrease** in percentage of 6-14 years out of school children to **2.8% by 2018**.

Enrollment Data and Contrary Trends

- Covid-19 led to prolonged school closures, raising concerns about learning loss and potential dropouts, especially among older children.
- Enrollment data during the Covid years contradicted fears of increased dropouts.
- ASER 2020-21 showed a minor increase in out-of-school numbers, primarily among 6-10 year olds.
- Proportion of 6-14-year olds not enrolled fell to 1.6% in 2022, the lowest in the decade since RTE implementation.
- Out-of-school proportion for 15-16 year olds declined from 16.1% in 2010 to 7.5% in 2022.

Changes during Covid Years

- The pandemic saw an increase in smartphone penetration in rural India, rising from 36% in 2018 to 74.8% in 2022.
- Access to digital devices became crucial for education and livelihoods, with schools sharing resources via WhatsApp.
- The World Development Report talks about the emerging "digital dividend" from the rapid expansion of digital technologies
- More children completing elementary education and transitioning to secondary school sets the stage for both the "demographic" and "digital" dividends.

ASER 2022 Focus on Rural Youth (14-18 years)

- ASER 2022 focuses on rural youth to understand their activities, educational pursuits, aspirations and digital literacy.
- Insights into study and work choices, aspirations and digital engagement can guide policy planning.

Role of EdTech and Digital Literacy

- The significance of EdTech in delivering educational resources and targeted instruction to students is increasing.
- To ensure the effectiveness of these initiatives, there is a call for reliable evidence on the digital literacy of youth.
- Understanding digital activities and capabilities can inform better planning at the policy level.

Conclusion

- Supporting youth aspirations is crucial for the **quality of the labour force** to meet developmental needs.
- Ensuring youth are well-supported to achieve aspirations contributes to their productive participation in the economy.

Quick Look

1. Open Market Sale Scheme

- The FCI from time to time sells surplus food grains from the central pool, especially wheat and rice, in the open market at pre-determined prices.
- FCI does this through e-auctions where open market bidders can buy specified quantities.
- States are allowed to procure food grains through the OMSS without participating in the auctions.
 - This is for their needs beyond what they get from the central pool to distribute to NFSA (National Food Security Act) beneficiaries.
- Purpose
 - To dispose off surplus stocks of food grains held by FCI
 - To regulate the prices in the open market.
- Process of sale
 - FCI conducts weekly auctions on the National Commodity and Derivatives Exchange Limited (NCDEX) platform.

2. Swarved Mahamandir

- The Prime Minister recently inaugurated the world's largest meditation centre, Swarved Mahamandir, in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh.
- The temple is named after the Swarved, a spiritual literature written by Sadguru Shri Sadafal Deoji Maharaj, the creator of Vihangam Yoga.
- The temple propagates Swarveda teachings, with a focus on Brahma Vidya.
 - Brahma Vidya is a body of knowledge that enables spiritual seekers to sustain a state of perfect Zen, a state of unyielding constancy in peace and happiness.
- It is a seven-floor superstructure with a beautiful design with 125-petal lotus domes.
- The ceiling and doors with intricate carvings are made of teakwood.
- The pink sandstone decor surrounds the temple walls, and there is an exquisite garden with medicinal herbs.
- Verses of the Swarveda have been carved upon the walls of the Mahamandir.

3. National Geoscience Data Repository Portal

- It is a comprehensive online platform for accessing, sharing and analysing geospatial information across India.
- It was spearheaded by the Geological Survey of India (GSI) and Bhaskaracharya Institute of Space Applications and Geoinformatics (BISAG-N).
- It represents a significant leap forward in democratising critical geoscience data, empowering stakeholders across industries and academia with unprecedented access to invaluable resources.

4. District Mineral Foundation (DMF)

- It is a trust set up as a non-profit body under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2015.
- Objective: To work in the interest and benefits of persons and areas affected by mining-related operations as prescribed by the respective State Government.
- Funding
 - Through the contributions from the holders of major or minor mineral concessions in the district, as prescribed by the Central or State Government.
 - The fund for DMF is collected at the district level.
- The operation of DMFs falls under the jurisdiction of the relevant State Government.
- The composition and functions of the District Mineral Foundation shall be such as may be prescribed by the State Government.

Prelims Track Question

Q1. Consider the following statements regarding the Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991

1. The Act prohibits legal challenges to the status quo of religious places as it existed on August 15, 1947.
2. The Act defines the term "religious character" and provides guidelines for determining the same.
3. The Act allows legal actions challenging the status of a religious place if the conversion occurred much before the commencement of the Act.

How many of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only one
- B. Only two
- C. All three
- D. None

Q2. Consider the following statements regarding the Red Sea:

1. The Red Sea is a landlocked sea situated between Asia and Europe.
2. The Suez Canal connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.
3. The Red Sea is known for its high salinity due to significant freshwater inflow from surrounding rivers.

How many of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only one
- B. Only two
- C. All three
- D. None

Q3. Consider the following statements regarding the Char Dham Project:

1. The Project aims to improve the connectivity of four pilgrimage sites in Uttarakhand, namely Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath.
2. The project has been exempted from environmental clearance for linear projects under 100 km since 2013.
3. The National Green Tribunal (NGT) ruled that the Char Dham road segments do not require statutory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).

How many of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only one
- B. Only two
- C. All three
- D. None

Q4. Consider the following statements

1. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) directed banks, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) and other lenders not to invest in any scheme of alternative investment funds (AIFs)
2. It is limited to the AIFs which have downstream investments in a debtor company.
3. An AIF means any fund established or incorporated in India which is a privately pooled investment vehicle

How many of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only one
- B. Only two
- C. All three
- D. None

Q5. Consider the following statements regarding the International Monetary Fund (IMF):

1. The primary purpose of the IMF is to promote international trade and facilitate the growth of member countries' exports.
2. The IMF provides long-term financial assistance to member countries facing structural economic challenges.
3. Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) are a reserve asset issued by the IMF to its member countries.

How many of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only one
- B. Only two
- C. All three
- D. None

Q6. Consider the following statements regarding JN.1 Virus

1. JN.1 is a novel variant of Omicron subvariant Pirola with an additional spike protein mutation.

2. The WHO recently designated the Covid-19 sub-variant JN.1 as a "variant of interest".

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only 1
B. Only 2
C. Both 1 and 2
D. Neither 1 nor 2

Q7. Consider the following statements with reference to GST Appellate Tribunals (GSTATs)

1. The GSTAT is a specialized appellate authority for resolving disputes under the GST laws.
2. The GST Tribunal will have four principal benches in New Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata.
3. The taxpayers cannot shift their GST-related cases from the Courts to the GST appellate tribunals.

How many of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only one
B. Only two
C. All three
D. None

Q8. Consider the following statements

1. The World Bank report of 2019 revealed that 70% of all overweight and obese people globally reside in High-Income Countries.
2. Current GST rates on ultra-processed foods in India align with nutritional content.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only 1
B. Only 2
C. Both 1 and 2
D. Neither 1 nor 2

Q9. With reference to Biofuels, consider the following statements

1. A biofuel is only liquid in nature including bioethanol.
2. The National Biofuel Coordination Committee (NBCC) is responsible for the implementation of the National Policy on Biofuels, 2018.
3. The Government of India aims for 20% ethanol blending in petrol by 2030.

How many of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. Only one
B. Only two
C. All three
D. None

Q10. The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), seen in the news recently, is released by which of the following institutions?

- A. Ministry of Education
B. Central Board of Secondary Education
C. NITI Aayog
D. NGO Pratham

Prelims Track Answer

Ans. 1 Option B is correct

Explanation

- The Places of Worship Act, 1991, mandates that the religious character of a place of worship, as it existed on August 15, 1947, should be retained.
- This implies that the Act prohibits legal challenges to alter the status quo of religious places as it existed on the mentioned date. **Hence, statement 1 is correct**
- The Act does not define the term "religious character."
- The Allahabad High Court, in a recent ruling related to the Gyanvapi case, emphasized that the 1991 Act has not provided a specific definition for "religious character." **Hence, statement 2 is incorrect**
- The Act, in Section 4(3)(d), states that if the "conversion" of a religious place had taken place "much before" the commencement of the Act, acquiescence or silence would not bar a party from moving court.
- This means that legal actions challenging the status of a religious place are allowed if the conversion occurred well before the enactment of the Act. **Hence, statement 3 is correct**

Ans. 2 Option A is correct

Explanation

- The Red Sea is not landlocked; it is a seawater inlet of the Indian Ocean, lying between Africa and Asia.
- It is connected to the Indian Ocean through the Bab el Mandeb strait. **Hence, statement 1 is incorrect**
- The Suez Canal connects the Red Sea to the Mediterranean Sea.
- This artificial canal is a vital waterway for maritime trade, providing a shortcut between Europe and Asia. **Hence, statement 2 is correct**
- The Red Sea is known for its high salinity, but it is not due to significant freshwater inflow from surrounding rivers.

- Unlike some other seas, the Red Sea has limited freshwater input, and its high salinity is primarily a result of high evaporation rates and limited exchange with other water bodies. **Hence, statement 3 is incorrect**

Ans. 3 Option B is correct

Explanation

- The Char Dham Project aims to improve the connectivity of four pilgrimage sites in Uttarakhand: Yamunotri, Gangotri, Kedarnath, and Badrinath.
 - The project involves the construction and improvement of roads to enhance accessibility for pilgrims. **Hence, statement 1 is correct**
 - The Char Dham Project, as mentioned in the article, has been exempted from environmental clearance for linear projects under 100 km since 2013.
 - This exemption allows for expedited implementation without undergoing the usual environmental clearance process. **Hence, statement 2 is correct**
 - The National Green Tribunal (NGT) did not rule that the Char Dham road segments do not require statutory Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA).
 - In fact, the NGT initially accepted the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways' claim that the project's segments were separated by 16 bypasses, and therefore, statutory EIA was not necessary.
 - However, the Supreme Court later intervened, putting a stay on the NGT order and forming a High-Powered Committee (HPC) to guide the EIA process. **Hence, statement 3 is incorrect**
- Ans. 4 Option C is correct**
- Explanation**
- The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) directed banks, non-banking financial companies (NBFCs) and other lenders not to invest in any scheme of alternative investment funds (AIFs) **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**

- It is limited to the AIFs which have downstream investments in a debtor company. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
- Objective : Aimed at curbing evergreening of stressed loans,
- An AIF means any fund established or incorporated in India which is a privately pooled investment vehicle **Hence, statement 3 is correct.**

Ans. 5 Option A is correct

Explanation

- The primary purpose of the IMF is not to promote international trade directly but to promote international monetary cooperation and exchange rate stability.
- While the IMF's activities can indirectly support trade by contributing to global economic stability, its primary focus is on monetary and financial issues. **Hence, statement 1 is incorrect**
- The IMF provides short-term financial assistance to member countries facing balance of payments problems, not long-term assistance for structural challenges.
- The financial assistance is typically aimed at addressing immediate economic issues, such as trade deficits or currency crises. **Hence, statement 2 is incorrect**
- Special Drawing Rights (SDRs) are indeed a reserve asset issued by the IMF to its member countries.
- SDRs can be used by member countries to supplement their official reserves. The allocation of SDRs is based on each member's IMF quota. **Hence, statement 3 is correct**

Ans. 6 Option C is correct

Explanation

- The World Health Organization (WHO) recently designated the Covid-19 sub-variant JN.1 as a "variant of interest" due to its rapid spread. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**
 - Variant with a genetic capability that affects characteristics of the virus such as disease severity, immune escape, transmissibility and diagnostic escape.
 - A VOI causes a consequential volume of community transmission.

- The JN.1 virus is a novel variant of Omicron subvariant BA.2.86 (called Pirola) with an additional spike protein mutation. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- It has the capability to spread rapidly and evade immunity, highlighting the need for continued monitoring and caution.
- Symptoms: fever, runny nose, sore throat, headache and mild gastrointestinal symptoms.

Ans. 7 Option A is correct

Explanation

- The finance minister recently announced that taxpayers can shift their GST-related cases from High Courts and the Supreme Court to the upcoming GST appellate tribunals for quicker resolutions. **Hence, statement 3 is incorrect.**
- The Central Goods and Service Tax Act, 2017, Section 109 mandates for the constitution of a GSTAT and its Benches.
- The GSTAT will be the specialized appellate authority for resolving disputes under the GST laws. **Hence, statement 1 is correct.**
- The GST Tribunal will have one principal bench in New Delhi. **Hence, statement 2 is incorrect.**
- Each state will have two tribunal benches; one located in the state capital and other in key commercial centers based on state inputs.
- North-eastern states could opt for one bench for 2-3 states and an additional bench for very far-flung areas.
- Members: Two technical and two judicial members each, with equal representation from the Centre and states.

Ans. 8 Option D is correct

Explanation

- The consumption of High Fat Sugar Salt (HFSS) foods is a major risk factor for health issues such as obesity, diabetes, and high blood pressure.
- According to World Bank Data, 2019, 70% of overweight and obese people globally reside in Low- and Middle-Income Countries, with a

55% rise in rural areas. **Hence, statement 1 is incorrect.**

- The economic impact of overweight and obesity in India was estimated at \$23 billion in 2017 and is projected to rise to \$480 billion by 2060.
- Globally, many countries have implemented taxes on High Fat Sugar Salt (HFSS) foods to combat obesity.
- Differentiated tax rates based on nutritional quality can encourage product reformulation and make healthier choices more affordable.
- Current GST rates on ultra-processed foods in India do not align adequately with nutritional content. **Hence, statement 2 is incorrect.**

Ans. 9 Option A is correct

Explanation

- Any hydrocarbon fuel produced from an organic matter which may be living or once living material, in a short period of time is considered a biofuel.
- It can be Solid (Wood, manure), Liquid (Bioethanol, Biodiesel) and Gaseous (Biogas). **Hence, statement 1 is incorrect.**

- As biofuels emit less CO₂ than conventional fuels they can be blended with existing fuels as an effective way of reducing CO₂ emissions from the transport sector.
- The Government of India aims for 20% ethanol blending in petrol by 2025 (advanced from 2030). **Hence, statement 3 is incorrect.**
- The National Biofuel Coordination Committee (NBCC) is responsible for the implementation of the National Policy on Biofuels, 2018. **Hence, statement 2 is correct.**

Ans. 10 Option D is correct

Explanation

- Initiated in 2005, the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) is a biennial publication by the non-profit organization, Pratham. **Hence, option D is correct.**
- This citizen-led household survey offers nationally representative data on children's educational status and their foundational reading and arithmetic skills.

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