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Discussed 'peace formula' with India: Ukraine Foreign Minister (GS Paper II: IR)

- India and Ukraine engaged in discussions regarding a "peace formula" for the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.
- **Dmytro Kuleba, the Foreign Minister of Ukraine**, visited India for a two-day trip and met with External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar.
- Kuleba described the conflict between Russia and Ukraine as a "full-scale war" and emphasized the need for enhancing India-Ukraine relations with new projects.
- Discussions between Kuleba and Jaishankar focused on bilateral relations, regional situations, and global security, with specific attention given to the peace formula and its implementation.
- **Kuleba urged India to take a more proactive role in the upcoming peace process in Switzerland.**

'Momentum in ties'

- India has maintained communication with both Ukraine and Russia, as well as other stakeholders, since the beginning of the crisis.

'Global Peace Summit'

- Mr. Kuleba's mention of the peace formula has drawn attention as a 'Global Peace Summit' aiming to resolve the conflict is expected to convene in Switzerland soon.
- He previously urged India to participate in the summit along with other major countries.
- **However, the prospects of the summit suffered a setback when Russian Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, Maria Zakharova, dismissed the possibility of Moscow's participation.**

- **Zakharova referred to President Zelensky's peace formula as "alchemy,"** indicating skepticism towards it.
- **Zelensky presented a 10-point peace plan during the 2022 G-20 summit, calling for the complete withdrawal of Russian forces from the 1991 borders,** which was immediately rejected by Moscow.
- **Russia feels that Zelensky's peace formula does not address Russian concerns.**
- The Swiss-backed peace process is expected to facilitate finding a solution between the two positions.
- However, the **precise timing of the Swiss-hosted event is uncertain,** with diplomatic sources indicating ongoing discussions at various levels to make it happen.

'Comprehensive talks'

- The Indian side did not provide details about the Ukrainian peace formula mentioned by Mr. Kuleba.
- Instead, they indicated that the discussion on Friday involved a comprehensive dialogue regarding the ongoing conflict and efforts to attain a peaceful resolution.
- Mr. Kuleba mentioned **an agreement to restore the level of cooperation between India and Ukraine to what it was before the full-scale war.**

Government extends validity of FCRA registration of NGOs till June 30 (GS Paper II: Governance)

Registrations of many NGOs are up for renewal since September 29, 2020. The registration, mandatory to receive foreign funds, is renewed every five years

- The **Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) extended the validity of Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) registration for NGOs** and associations until June 30.
- Registrations of many NGOs were due for renewal since September 29, 2020.
- **FCRA registration is required for NGOs to receive foreign funds and is renewed every five years.**
- The **Ministry has extended the validity of NGO registrations at least nine times since 2020 due to delays in processing applications.**
- An order from the MHA stated that the validity of registration certificates for entities extended until March 31 will now be extended until June 30, 2024, or until the renewal application is processed, whichever comes earlier.
- The **order specifies that if an application for renewal of FCRA registration is refused, the validity of the certificate will be considered expired from the date of refusal.**
- In such cases, the **association or NGO will not be eligible to receive or utilize foreign contributions.**
- FCRA entities with registration expiring between April 1 and June 30, 2024, and those who applied for renewal before the expiry, will have their validity extended until June 30 or until the renewal application is processed, whichever comes earlier.
- **Nearly 6,000 NGOs had their FCRA registration ceased from operating starting January 1, 2022, either because their renewal applications were refused by the MHA or they did not apply for renewal.**
- **As of the latest data, there are 16,412 FCRA-registered NGOs, down from over 22,000 on December 31, 2021.**

Notify norms to make movies accessible to disabled persons: HC (GS Paper II: Vulnerable Section)

- The Delhi High Court has given the Indian government until July 15 to issue guidelines for making films accessible to people with hearing and visual disabilities.
- The **court emphasized that accessibility is a legal right and that private parties must also take reasonable measures to enhance accessibility for individuals with disabilities.**
- The **Information and Broadcasting Ministry has drafted guidelines for accessibility standards in cinema halls for people with hearing and visual disabilities**, which are being finalized.
- The court directed the Ministry to finalize and notify the guidelines by July 15, 2024.
- These guidelines are expected to make accessibility features mandatory and provide a reasonable compliance period for all stakeholders.
- The Delhi High Court's order was prompted by a petition filed by four individuals with visual and hearing disabilities.
- The petitioners requested directions for making films accessible to people with disabilities, highlighting the lack of accessibility despite the existence of **the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPWD) Act.**
- They pointed out that the RPWD Act, which was enacted over five years ago, recognizes various rights for persons with disabilities, yet most films released in India do not cater to them.
- In October 2019, the **Ministry issued directives to the film producers' association and the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) to incorporate audio description, subtitles, and closed captions in all films to improve accessibility.**

Bonds, big money and an imperfect democracy (GS Paper II: Election)

In a well-functioning democracy, fighting an election would need neither extravagant funding nor electoral bonds to be bought in secrecy

- The electoral bonds scheme, aimed at curbing black money in elections, was declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of India.
- Despite its intentions, the scheme failed to stop the flow of illegal funds into politics.
- Elections in India continue to be financed with increasing amounts of illegal money, undermining the democratic process.

Gap between the professed and the actual

- The gap between professed intentions and actual outcomes highlights a deeper issue in Indian politics.
- Indian politics has become formalistic, with elected leaders serving the interests of their financiers rather than their constituents.
- This disconnect between professed ideals and actual practices weakens democracy.
- Government policies often serve vested interests rather than the broader population, exacerbating inequalities.

- Vested interests are often portrayed as being in the national interest, sidelining the needs of marginalized communities.
- For instance, if poverty, unemployment, ill health and poor educational standards persist, these are said to be natural and are left to market forces.
- Concessions granted to businesses to provide services through the market exacerbate disparities and make essential services unaffordable for the poor.
- Inadequate public services further marginalize vulnerable communities, as seen in the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) showing low literacy and numeracy rates (40% of children in the age group of 14 to 18 years are unable to read, write or do the level of math of standard two) among children.
- Education does not receive high priority due to a top-down model of development where resources are preempted by the elite.
- Businesses, not satisfied with the gains that they make legally, resort to making them illegally using undeclared incomes which constitute the black economy.
- Illegality in income generation is systematic and systemic, often involving policymakers and executives.
- Weak accountability among government personnel undermines democracy and reinforces a feudal mindset of bowing before authority rather than challenging it.
- This weak accountability is evident in institutions meant to uphold democracy, further hollowing out the democratic process.

Money and the election

- **During elections, voters often base their decisions on factors like caste, community, and region rather than a candidate's performance.**
- Political parties strategize their campaigns by targeting specific demographic groups and cultivating **vote banks** based on these factors.
- Just before elections, constituents are often bribed by political parties to secure their votes.
- Campaigning efforts involve hiring paid workers to mobilize crowds for rallies and meetings, providing transportation and food to attendees.
- Large-scale rallies require substantial funding for posters, cutouts, hiring muscle men, and keeping the media satisfied.
- **The actual expenditure for election campaigns far exceeds the permitted limit set by election authorities, which is typically around ₹95 lakh for a parliamentary constituency.**
- Estimates suggest that campaigns for a big parliamentary constituency may **require up to ₹50 crore**, resulting in a significant gap between permitted and actual expenditure.
- To cover these costs, candidates and political parties often rely on illegal funds, highlighting the pervasive influence of illicit money in Indian elections.
- The electoral bonds scheme was introduced to provide political parties with legitimate funds and reduce their dependence on illegal sources.
- However, criticism arose due to the scheme's opacity, as it concealed the identity of donors and the reasons behind their contributions.
- **Critics argued that the scheme facilitated bribery in white, allowing businesses and the wealthy to exert greater influence over politics.**
- Electoral bonds could only be issued to political parties, leaving individuals still reliant on illegal funds.
- **Political parties could utilize the funds for various purposes beyond elections, such as setting up offices or undermining Opposition-led governments.**

- The **removal of the 7.5% profit limit allowed for unlimited contributions, including from loss-making firms.**
- **Shell companies could be used to make donations, potentially enabling foreign entities to influence Indian politics.**
- **Despite the requirement to encash bonds within 15 days, they could be traded for 14 days, obscuring the trail of funds and the identity of donors.**
- Many donors were unaware that their identities would be revealed if the electoral bonds scheme was declared unconstitutional.
- **Experienced donors concealed their tracks by using shell companies or making cash donations, ensuring their names remained undisclosed.**
- Contributions through black money remain the primary source of funding for political parties, despite the existence of the electoral bonds scheme.

Cronyism uncovered

- Electoral bonds only served as an additional avenue for political party funding, forming a fraction of their total funding requirement.
- Recent data reveals the nature of Indian politics and elections, showing that funds were given to political parties for various reasons:
 - For favors from policymakers.
 - To avoid prosecution for wrongdoing.
 - As an investment for the future, even for political parties not in power.
- Donations for favors could lead to preferential treatment in policy implementation, such as obtaining environmental clearances or securing contracts.
- In the second category, businesses may donate to political parties out of fear of facing repercussions or harassment from agencies like the Enforcement Directorate.
- **Complex rules and regulations make it easy for businesses to inadvertently violate laws, leading to potential prosecution.**
- **Some businesses may make donations solely to avoid harassment or pressure, even if they have not engaged in any wrongdoing.**
- Data from the State Bank of India indicates instances of quid pro quo associated with certain donations, suggesting a link between political contributions and policy manipulation.
- Further analysis of the data could reveal the **money trail and expose criminal activities.**
- **In a well-functioning democracy with accountable political leadership, elections would not require significant funding or the secrecy of electoral bonds.**
- The **electoral bonds scheme underscores the growing weaknesses in Indian democracy**, as it appears to have been designed to weaken the opposition and undermine democracy itself.

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MAINS PRACTICE QUESTION: GS PAPER II: Polity Election

Question: The electoral bonds scheme underscores the growing weaknesses in Indian democracy. Analyse. (250 Words/15 Marks)

ANSWER APPROACH:

- Introduce the answer with the intended benefits of the Electoral Bond Scheme.
- Then bring the inherited weaknesses of the Electoral Bond Scheme.
- Further link impact of those weaknesses on Indian democracy.

- Conclude with the needed electoral reforms in Indian electoral system.

ANSWER:

The electoral bonds scheme, intended to provide legitimate funding to political parties, failed to address concerns regarding transparency. The anonymity of donors and their motives, whether legitimate or illegal, remained shrouded, undermining the accountability of political parties to the electorate. The electoral bonds scheme, touted as a solution to curb the influence of black money in Indian elections, has ultimately highlighted the deep-seated weaknesses in the country's democratic framework.

- **Continued Reliance on Illegal Funds:** Despite the introduction of electoral bonds, political parties continued to rely heavily on illegal funds for their electoral campaigns. This perpetuated the cycle of corruption and compromised the integrity of the electoral process.
- **Gap between Professed and Actual Democracy:** Indian politics, characterized by the dominance of vested interests and the disconnect between political rhetoric and reality, underscores a fundamental gap between the professed ideals of democracy and their implementation.
- Elected leaders often prioritize the interests of their financiers over those of the electorate, eroding the essence of democratic governance.
- **Influence of Money in Elections:** The electoral process in India has increasingly become a battleground where financial resources dictate electoral outcomes. Parties resort to mobilizing funds through illegal means to conduct extensive campaigns, thereby skewing the electoral landscape in favor of the affluent and powerful.
- **Lack of Accountability:** Weak accountability mechanisms within the political system enable the perpetuation of corrupt practices, including the misuse of electoral funds. The absence of stringent regulations and enforcement measures allows political actors to operate with impunity, undermining the trust of citizens in democratic institutions.
- **Cronyism and Policy Manipulation:** The nexus between political funding and policymaking exposes the prevalence of crony capitalism, where businesses seek favors from policymakers in exchange for financial contributions.
- This undermines the democratic principles of fairness, impartiality, and public interest governance.
- **Erosion of Opposition and Democratic Values:** The electoral bonds scheme, by perpetuating the dominance of established political parties and undermining the role of opposition voices, has contributed to the erosion of democratic values and pluralism.
- It has further entrenched the concentration of power and weakened the democratic fabric of the nation.

Thus, the electoral bonds scheme, far from addressing the underlying weaknesses in Indian democracy, has exacerbated them by perpetuating the influence of black money, undermining transparency, and eroding public trust. To strengthen democracy, there is an urgent need for comprehensive electoral reforms that prioritize transparency, accountability, and equitable political participation. Only through such measures can India reclaim the true essence of democratic governance and ensure that the voices of its citizens are heard and respected in the political process.

A balancing act: on the fiscal deficit target (GS Paper III: Fiscal Deficit)

The year's fiscal deficit target seems achievable despite a spike in February

- The fiscal deficit of the Centre, which is the difference between its revenue and expenditure, has increased sharply.
- It rose from about ₹11 lakh crore in January to ₹15 lakh crore by the end of February.
- This represents a significant jump from 63.6% of the revised target of ₹17.3 lakh crore to 86.5% within just 29 days.
- In comparison, last year's trajectory was smoother: the deficit target was ₹17.55 lakh crore, reaching 67.6% of the target by January and 82.6% by February.
- Eventually, last year's fiscal deficit was ₹17.33 lakh crore, almost similar to this year's goal.
- One reason for the February deficit increase is the Centre transferring around ₹2.15 lakh crore to States, compared to ₹1.4 lakh crore the previous year.
- Another factor is the significant increase in capital expenditure from ₹47,600 crore in January to ₹84,400 crore in February, more than four times the capex outlay of February 2023.
- To meet the government's target of ₹10 lakh crore, capital expenditure will need to further rise to ₹1.4 lakh crore in March.
- However, the implementation of the Model Code of Conduct for the Lok Sabha polls midway through March may temper this expenditure.

Fiscal Deficit

- **Definition:** The fiscal deficit measures the shortfall when the government's total expenditure exceeds its total revenues (excluding money from borrowings). It indicates the amount the government needs to borrow to meet its expenses.
- **Calculation:**
 - **Fiscal Deficit = Total Expenditure – (Total Receipts excluding borrowings)**
- **Significance:** A high fiscal deficit signals potential issues for macroeconomic stability. It can lead to:
 - Inflationary pressures
 - Rise in interest rates
 - Crowding out of private investment
 - Increased debt burden for future generations

The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003:

- Lays down targets for reducing the fiscal deficit and eliminating the revenue deficit.
- Mandates transparency and accountability in fiscal matters.
- **Recent Amendment:** The FRBM Amendment Act, 2023 extended the deadline for achieving a fiscal deficit target of 3% of GDP to the financial year 2029-30.

Key Provisions of the FRBM Act

- **Fiscal Deficit Targets:** The central government aims to reduce the fiscal deficit to a level below 4.5% of GDP by the financial year 2025-26 (and further below 3% by 2029-30).
- **Revenue Deficit Targets:** Aims to reduce and eventually eliminate the revenue deficit to ensure the government is not borrowing to fund its **current or operational expenditures**.
- **Debt Targets:** Sets targets for the reduction of public debt as a proportion of GDP.
- **Fiscal Responsibility Principles:** Promotes transparency, accountability, and prudent fiscal management
- **Escape Clauses:** Allows for deviations from the targets under exceptional circumstances like national security, war, natural calamities, etc.

- Last year, the fiscal deficit stood at 6.4% of GDP, while this year's original target was 5.9%, revised to 5.8% in the interim Budget.
- The government aims to narrow the deficit to 4.5% of GDP by 2025-26, with a target of 5.1% for 2024-25.
- This trajectory might need adjustment in the full Budget after the general election, depending on the new government's priorities and the economy's state.

- **The government aimed to stimulate growth post-COVID-19 through public capital expenditure, but hopes for private investment are clouded by factors like high inflation, a poor monsoon, and uneven consumption demand.**
- Despite planned expenditure revisions in February, **critical ministries like Agriculture, Rural Development, and Consumer Affairs had over ₹1.03 lakh crore remaining for March.**
- **Some ministries may miss their spending targets, potentially leading to a positive surprise on the full-year deficit.**
- While tightening spending is good for the economy, consistently missing spending goals compromises intended outcomes and suggests a need for better planning to borrow less in the future.

Flight from fatigue: On the DGCA and flight duty time limitation norms (GS Paper II: Regulatory Authority)

- The Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) planned to introduce changes to flight duty time limitations (FDTL) regulations in January.
- These changes aimed to **address the issue of fatigue among pilots in a professional and scientific manner.**
- The proposed rules included dictating **more rest time for pilots, redefining night duty, and requiring airlines to file regular fatigue reports.**
- The rules were supposed to be implemented by June 1.
- However, many Indian airlines, primarily those in private ownership, opposed the changes.
- Recently, the DGCA quietly signed a revised **Civil Aviation Requirements (CAR) document**, allowing airlines to continue operating under the old regulations until their respective compliance schemes are approved.
- **This move suggests that airline economics took precedence over safety concerns.**
- The airline federation argued that **implementing the new norms would require hiring 15% to 25% more pilots over ten months and could lead to a 20% increase in flight cancellations during peak summer.**
- Aviation experts believe that by lowering safety standards, pilots will continue to face issues related to fatigue.
- In the early 1950s, the **International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)** established guidelines to limit flight and duty hours for safety.
- These guidelines aimed to **ensure that fatigue didn't endanger flight operations.**
- Over time, the management of fatigue in the aviation industry evolved, particularly in international operations.
- One such evolution is the adoption of **Fatigue Risk Management Systems (FRMS), which use scientific principles and aviation scheduling to manage fatigue.**
- The DGCA (Directorate General of Civil Aviation) in India is also planning to implement FRMS.
- The **Indian aviation market is experiencing high growth, leading to increased flying domestically and internationally.**
- This growth has led to stress on flight crew well-being, especially with the rise of ultra-long haul flights and the induction of more widebody aircraft.
- The DGCA should demonstrate independence by enforcing regulatory norms while ensuring alignment with the highest safety standards for both flight crew and passengers.

International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)

- A specialized agency of the United Nations: ICAO works with its 193 member states and industry to reach consensus on international civil aviation **Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs)** and policies to support a safe, efficient, secure, economically sustainable, and environmentally responsible civil aviation sector.

Key Facts

- **Headquarters:** Montreal, Canada
- **Founded:** 1944 (by the Convention on International Civil Aviation, also known as the Chicago Convention)
- **Membership:** 193 member states
- **Secretary-General:** Juan Carlos Salazar Gómez



Key Functions

- **Develops Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs):** ICAO creates the technical guidelines, policies, and specifications that underpin the global aviation system.
- **Audits:** Conducts regular **safety, security, and environmental audits** of member states to ensure global standards are met.
- **Promotes Cooperation:** ICAO fosters collaboration among member states to achieve common goals in international aviation.
- **Capacity Building and Assistance:** Provides technical assistance and training to member states to strengthen their aviation sectors and ensure compliance with global standards.
- **Data Sharing and Analysis:** Facilitates the exchange of aviation information to promote data-driven decision-making in the industry.

Governance

- **Assembly:** Meets every three years. All member states are represented. They set policy, approve the budget, and elect the ICAO Council.
- **Council:** Made up of 36 member states elected by the Assembly. It's the governing body that gives continuing direction to the work of ICAO.

Focus Areas

- Safety
- Security and Facilitation
- Air Navigation Capacity and Efficiency
- Economic Development of Air Transport
- Environmental Protection
- Technical Cooperation

Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA)

- The DGCA is the **statutory body responsible for regulating air transport services to/from/within India and for enforcing civil air regulations, air safety, and airworthiness standards**
- **Established Under: The Aircraft Act of 1934** and reports to the Ministry of Civil Aviation, Government of India.

Key Functions

- **Licensing:** Issues **licenses and approvals for pilots, aircraft maintenance engineers, flight operations personnel, air traffic controllers, and aerodromes.**

- **Regulation:** Develops and enforces regulations, standards, and procedures related to civil aviation safety, security, and efficiency
- **Surveillance and Inspections:** Conducts audits, inspections, and surveillance activities to ensure compliance with DGCA regulations.
- **Investigations:** Investigates aviation accidents and incidents to identify causes and recommend safety measures.
- **Research and Development:** Promotes research to improve aviation safety and efficiency.
- **International Cooperation:** Collaborates with international aviation bodies (like ICAO) for best practices and aligning with global standards.

Key Facts

- **Headquarters:** New Delhi, India
- **Director General:** Arun Kumar (as of 2023)
- **Regional Offices:** DGCA has offices in various cities across India, including Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bangalore, and others.

The human-dog relationship, conflict and coexistence (GS Paper III: Environment)

- There's a frequent occurrence of distressing stories involving conflicts between humans and street dogs.
- These stories often involve attacks on people, particularly children, by street dogs, or instances of mistreatment of dogs by humans.
- Common phrases like "the dog menace" or "man's best friend" dominate discussions on this topic and grab public and media attention.
- However, there's a lack of attention given to more complex and nuanced perspectives that consider the socio-ecological dynamics of human-dog interactions.
- **To address this, we should resist reactionary impulses and instead draw upon the wealth of research in ecology, public health, canine behavior, and urban dynamics.**
- By doing so, we can develop a more sophisticated and integrated understanding of these issues.

Human-dog interactions

- Citizen-based research in various parts of India by ROH-Indies (University of Edinburgh) reveals that **most interactions between people and dogs are ordinary, such as casual feeding, occasional petting, or ignoring.**
- While serious conflicts should not be minimized, it's important to recognize that extreme incidents like mauling are not indicative of the entire human-dog relationship.
- **Dogs, like all animals, including humans, have motivations that aren't always clear to us.**
- **It's essential to treat dogs as individuals with unique backgrounds and environments, rather than viewing them as a homogeneous group that is either good or bad.**
- **The tragic death of a prominent businessman in Ahmedabad sparked a surge in anti-dog sentiment in media and public discourse.**
- It started with claims that dogs attacked him, leading to his fall, but later information revealed his affection for dogs.

- This incident underscores the importance of understanding the complexity of human-dog interactions in India to prevent similar conflicts in the future.

Findings from a research study

- Mass culling is seldom effective and can worsen conflicts, especially in places like India with intricate social and ecological conditions.
- Research published in the journal Nature in 2019 highlights the pitfalls of eradication efforts, suggesting they **can lead to unpredictable ecological changes**.
- In the **United Kingdom, successful elimination of street dogs led to foxes occupying** the ecological niches once filled by dogs, causing new problems.
- Foxes and other animals occupying these niches are now considered pests, raising concerns about attacks on children.
- The study emphasizes the need **for tailored responses to different issues associated with dogs, such as rabies, bites, public feeding, and nuisance, rather than one-size-fits-all solutions like mass culling**.

Local context, relevant actions

- Addressing complex conflicts between humans and dogs requires a nuanced understanding of underlying drivers.
- Rather than relying on simple solutions, **interventions should be tailored to local contexts**.
- Key actions include ensuring **access to post-exposure treatment and anti-rabies vaccination for people**.
- Prevention of relocation or removal of local dogs is crucial to avoid triggering conflict with new arrivals.
- Maintaining neutered, vaccinated, and socialized street dog populations in their localities can reduce conflict incidents.
- **Improved solid waste management helps control issues associated with garbage dumps, which are often flashpoints for conflict**.
- **Public education programs** are essential to teach both adults and children how to safely interact with dogs, promoting coexistence.
- Cities and villages are habitats where various species coexist.
- This coexistence doesn't always involve harmony or dominance.
- Human-dog conflict should be **viewed as a civic issue alongside other challenges of living and sharing spaces safely**.
- It's essential to address conflicts in a holistic manner, considering the broader context of urban and rural living.

Identity, statehood and the conundrum of citizenship in West Bengal (GS Paper II: Citizenship)

- Sadananda Biswas, 68, hails from West Bengal's North 24 Parganas district but recalls his childhood in Faridpur district, Bangladesh.
- He remembers his house being set on fire in Bangladesh, compelling his family to flee with only the clothes on their backs.
- Sadananda belongs to the Matua sect, which was founded by Harichand Thakur in Orakandi, Bangladesh, in the mid-19th century to challenge Brahminical Hinduism.

- Millions of Matuas migrated to India, both before and after the 1971 war that led to the creation of Bangladesh.
- Wearing garlands of wooden beads, symbolizing holiness, Sadananda stands outside the All-India Matua Mahasangha office in Thakurnagar town, Bongaon, after traveling about 35 kilometers from his village, Baghjhola, in Baduria.
- He is preparing for the annual Matua mela, attended by about 20 lakh people last year, where Matuas offer prayers at the temple of Harichand Thakur and Shantidevi, bathe in a nearby pond, and engage in religious chanting and singing for days.
- Despite having citizenship documents, Sadananda supports the Citizenship (Amendment) Rules.
- **He believes these rules are necessary to prevent Muslims from immigrating to India.**
- Sadananda explains that he and others fled Bangladesh due to persecution and doesn't want Muslims to follow them to India.

Hindu or Matua?

- While they identify as Matuas, there's ambiguity about whether they consider themselves Hindu or Matua. Manoj states that he is a Matua first, following the teachings of Harichand Thakur.

Applying for citizenship

- The Citizenship (Amendment) Rules outline the necessary documents for the application process, including a sworn affidavit and an eligibility certificate from a locally reputed community institution.
- Manoj emphasizes the need to simplify the form-filling process, particularly for individuals who have faced religious persecution and may not have the necessary documents.
- Sadananda mentions that there are families from Bangladesh residing in Baghjhola for decades who are unsure about the application process through the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) portal.

Reaching out to the Matuas

- The Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) Rules have sparked debate and confusion in West Bengal's political circles.
- Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee expressed concerns that applying through the portal would render Matuas refugees, jeopardizing their properties, jobs, and children's education.
- BJP MP Shantanu Thakur emphasized the necessity of the CAA to prevent Hindu refugees from facing a fate similar to the Rohingya if they don't apply.
- The Matuas' significance in BJP's CAA politics is highlighted by PM Modi inaugurating his 2019 campaign in Thakurnagar.
- Local priests may issue eligibility certificates under the CAA, and some believe membership cards from Matua Mahasangha could suffice.

Fear and apprehension

- Krishna Thakur expresses concern that the CAA is exacerbating religious divisions rather than addressing citizenship issues.
- Mir Abdul Hashem, a trader, believes the CAA targets Muslims and aims to instill fear and panic among them.

- He questions the timing of the Rules' announcement before elections in West Bengal, where Muslims comprise 27.01% of the population.
- Bibhas Chandra Saha, a retired government employee, is anxious about lacking documents to apply for citizenship under the CAA.
- Saha entered India in 1964 and fears his documentation may not suffice.
- He sees applying for citizenship after decades as harassment and is uncertain about the process.
- Many like Saha lack clarity on whether to apply for citizenship and face confusion due to the State government's stance against the CAA.
- With no infrastructure to aid citizenship applications, confusion persists as the Lok Sabha polls approach.

After India's biggest jailbreak (GS Paper III: Internal Security)

- Ajay Kanu, 56, appears like an ordinary middle-class man in Patna, Bihar, wearing casual clothing.
- Despite his unassuming appearance, **Kanu spent 18 years in prison and was once a prominent Naxal commander, accused in 50 murder cases.**
- In 2005, Kanu orchestrated the Jehanabad jailbreak, resulting in the escape of 389 prisoners, including Maoists and criminals, leading to deaths and injuries.
- The **Jehanabad jail was severely overcrowded, with an official capacity of 140 but housing 659 inmates.**
- Central Bihar, including districts like Jehanabad, Gaya, Aurangabad, Bhojpur, and Arwal, faced law and order challenges due to caste massacres and compromised security.
- Naxals in Bihar employed guerrilla warfare tactics, including attacking police vehicles and extorting money from private companies.
- By the late 2000s, Naxals shifted their operations to neighboring Jharkhand districts.
- **In 2005, Bihar reported 13.4% of all crimes against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, with Patna recording the highest cases of murder, robbery, and dacoity among cities.**

Breaking out

- On November 13, 2005, the first bomb exploded near the jail in Jehanabad, Bihar, signaling the start of a Maoist attack.
- Around 1,000 armed Maoists besieged the jail for over two hours, using bombs, bullets, and landmines to create chaos.
- Kanu recalls the jail being opened during the attack, allowing prisoners, including himself, to walk out freely.
- **Kanu reportedly used an AK-47 to kill two commanders of the Ranvir Sena, an upper-caste militia group.**

Ranvir Sena,

- **Formation:** Founded in 1994 in Belaur village, Bhojpur district, Bihar by upper-caste Bhumihar landlords.
- **Ideology:** Anti-Left, anti-Dalit, focused on upholding the existing caste hierarchy and social order.
- **Mode of Operation:** Functioned as a private militia, carrying out acts of violence against marginalized communities and their perceived supporters.

- **Key Massacres:** Bathani Tola (1996), Laxmanpur Bathe (1997), Shankar Bigha (1999), and many others resulting in hundreds of deaths.
- **Banned:** Declared a terrorist organization and banned by the Bihar government in 1995.

Current Status

- **Decreased Large-Scale Operations:** The Ranvir Sena's ability to conduct major massacres as in the 1990s has been significantly diminished due to state action, arrests of leaders, and factionalism.
- **Potential for Localized Violence:** Concerns persist that remnants of the group or splinter factions may still be involved in localized violence and intimidation, particularly related to land disputes and caste tensions. News reports occasionally link sporadic incidents to the Ranvir Sena name.
- **Socio-Economic Context:** The underlying conflicts over land rights, caste oppression, and access to resources haven't fully been resolved in Bihar. This social climate could foster some continuity or resurgence of groups like the Ranvir Sena, albeit likely in a less organized form.

- Kanu believes it's the duty of revolutionaries to free their cadre, even if it means storming a jail.

The formative years

- Kanu is from Chauhar village, Arwal district, Bihar, belonging to the Extremely Backward Classes (EBC) category, which forms 36.01% of Bihar's population.
- **He aims to work for the development of the 110 castes under this category.**
- Kanu sold part of his agricultural land to finance his children's education. His son is studying a technology-related course in a polytechnic, while his daughter aspires to become a nurse.
- After the jailbreak, the police demolished Kanu's house in the village. He now resides in a modest house on the outskirts of Patna with his wife, Sharda Devi.
- Kanu's father, Phagu Prasad, influenced his leftist ideologies, sharing stories about Bhagat Singh, Mao Tse-tung, Che Guevara, and the Russian Revolution.
- **Graduating in History from Jehanabad's Swami Sahjanand College, Kanu excelled in sports and was involved in student politics, initially with the ABVP (student wing of the RSS).**
- He became disillusioned with right-wing ideologies due to perceived divisionary politics.

The journey into Maoism

- Kanu faced personal tragedies, including the killings of his brother, cousin, and father in separate disputes, leading to his involvement in underground Maoist meetings.
- His father's death pushed him towards Maoist ideologies, believing in the resilience of ideas despite the death of individuals.
- Kanu quickly rose through Maoist ranks due to his understanding of ideology, physical prowess, and ability to learn about weapons.
- He became a member of the central committee of the Maoists and later an area commander, operating in States like Andhra Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand, and Chhattisgarh.
- **Kanu's fight was against oppressors, particularly landlords and zamindars, while Maoists targeted able-bodied men, unlike the Ranvir Sena which spared no one.**
- The police announced a reward of ₹3 lakh for his capture, and he was eventually arrested on August 28, 2002, from Patna's Bailey road.

- Kanu claims he was tortured for 24 hours by the police and later transferred to Jehanabad jail.
- **In jail, he organized fellow inmates, demanded better living conditions, food, and spoke out against corruption by jail officials, earning respect and fear from both inmates and officials.**
- **Kanu conducted hunger strikes to press for his demands, resulting in improved facilities such as better food, living conditions, access to telephone, television, and medical care for inmates.**

Before and after the jailbreak

- Despite his release, Kanu still expresses anger and thoughts of returning to armed struggle upon hearing news of injustice.
- **Kanu's story was adapted into a web series titled "Jehanabad - Of Love & War," but he found the final product unsatisfactory.**
- Although approached by major political parties, Kanu has no interest in joining politics and instead wants to focus on education.
- He currently works as a small-time contractor and plans to reopen his coaching institute, aiming to concentrate on education and leave his past behind.

Water woes in Kuttanad wetland (GS Paper III: Disaster Management)

- The water from canals and lakes in the region is unfit for consumption, forcing residents to buy drinking water from distant sources.
- **Residents spend significant amounts of money, between ₹1,000 to ₹3,000 per month, on purchasing drinking water due to irregular public water supply.**
- Plastic water tanks along the roadside indicate the severity of the water scarcity.
- **Kuttanad's wetland system, famous for paddy cultivation below sea level, faces challenges from changing weather patterns and intrusion of saline water from the sea.**
- Fluctuating weather patterns and drought exacerbate the drinking water problem caused by water pollution and high salinity in the region.

Waiting for water

- In Kuttanad, country boats and goods carriers transport water **across Vembanad Lake** due to water scarcity.
- Packaged drinking water is in high demand, as seen at Hotel Deepus in Mankombu village.
- The 2018 floods destroyed many water sources like ponds, wells, and rainwater harvesting pits in Kuttanad taluk.
- Recurring floods worsen the situation, contributing to the lack of usable water sources.
- **Kuttanad receives significant rainfall annually, yet faces water scarcity due to insufficient quality water sources and poor waste management.**
- Thomas suggests reviving natural water bodies and implementing a **dual water supply system with separate sources for drinking and other purposes to address the crisis.**

People parched

- In upper Kuttanad in Kottayam and Pathanamthitta, scenes of water scarcity in mid-summer are unusual but increasingly prevalent.

- Prasad, who runs a petty shop near a footbridge, notes that the recent heatwave has worsened the situation.

The load on agriculture

- The local economy in upper Kuttanad, including fishing, agriculture, livestock, and toddy tapping, has been adversely affected by the drought.
- K.G. Padmakumar, Director of the International Research and Training Centre for Below Sea Level Farming in Kuttanad, notes that falling water levels in Vembanad Lake are an early indication of failing wells.
- To address the water crisis, experts recommend extensive rainwater harvesting systems. Organizations like MSSRF and ATREE have installed hundreds of units in the region, benefiting numerous households.
- Rainwater harvesting systems are seen as ideal for Kuttanad's landscape, easy to maintain, and helpful during floods.

GeM may offer works contracts' (GS Paper III: Digital Market)

- The **Government eMarketplace (GeM)** is an online platform used for public procurement of goods and services.
- GeM intends to seek approval from the Centre to enable work contracts for construction and building projects to be bid out through the platform.
- The goal is to establish a transparent monitoring mechanism to assess the progress of such contracts.
- This initiative is part of a broader reboot of the GeM platform, which currently facilitates critical defense procurements, services like aircraft chartering, and printing of election-related material.
- P. K. Singh, the chief executive officer of GeM, announced the planned upgrade, which includes revamping the online interface.
- The revamped interface will adopt an open Application Programming Interface (API) architecture.
- This API architecture will enable individual departments, States, and local bodies to create customized micro-procurement portals.
- These portals will have multi-lingual interfaces and flexibilities to accommodate local rules and regulations.
- A service procurement order from the State Bank of India valued at around ₹400 crore was placed through the GeM platform.
- This order helped push the total gross merchandise value of procurements conducted through GeM this year beyond ₹4 lakh crore.
- This amount is double the value recorded in the previous fiscal year, which was ₹2.01 lakh crore in 2022-23.
- GeM CEO, Mr. Singh, highlighted the challenges in the tendering process for work contracts, citing time-consuming procedures and delays.
- Currently, tendering processes often attract only local contractors and face delays in execution.
- If GeM is permitted for such projects, contractors from any part of India can bid for work in any other part of the country.

- The progress of projects can be monitored online, and milestone-linked payments can be released electronically.
- This streamlined process saves contractors from the need to pursue officials for payments and can include post-contract management features.

PRELIMS PRACTICE QUESTIONS:

Question 1: Consider the following statements about the Fiscal Deficit in India:

1. It is the difference between the government's total revenue and its capital expenditure.
2. A high fiscal deficit can lead to inflationary pressures.
3. The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003 sets a target for eliminating the fiscal deficit by 2025.

Which of the statements given above are incorrect?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) All of the above

Question 2: With reference to the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003, which of the following statements is NOT correct?

- (a) It mandates the government to ensure transparency and accountability in fiscal matters.
- (b) It sets a target for reducing the revenue deficit of the government.
- (c) It allows the government to borrow unlimited funds to meet its expenditure.
- (d) It provides for escape clauses under exceptional circumstances.

Question 3: The primary legislation under which the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is established is:

- (a) The Aircraft (Amendment) Act, 2020
- (b) The Airports Authority of India Act, 1994
- (c) The Bureau of Civil Aviation Security Act, 1984
- (d) The Aircraft Act, 1934

Question 4: Which of the following activities does NOT fall under the regulatory purview of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA)?

- (a) Issuing licenses to pilots
- (b) Investigating aircraft accidents
- (c) Setting air traffic control standards
- (d) Regulating the fares of domestic airlines

Question 5: The headquarters of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is located in:

- (a) Mumbai
- (b) Kolkata
- (c) Bengaluru
- (d) New Delhi

Question 6: Consider the following statements about the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA):

1. FCRA registration for NGOs must be renewed every ten years.
2. NGOs cannot receive any foreign funds while their FCRA renewal application is pending.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Question 7: With reference to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), consider the following:

1. The Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for granting and renewing FCRA registration to NGOs.
2. FCRA registration can be canceled if the NGO is found to be acting against the national interest.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Question 1: Consider the following statements about the Fiscal Deficit in India:

4. It is the difference between the government's total revenue and its capital expenditure.
5. A high fiscal deficit can lead to inflationary pressures.
6. The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003 sets a target for eliminating the fiscal deficit by 2025.

Which of the statements given above are incorrect?

Answer: (c) 1 and 3 only

Explanation:

Statement 1: Incorrect. Fiscal deficit is the difference between total expenditure and total revenue (excluding borrowings) of the government. It includes both capital and revenue expenditure.

Statement 2: Correct. A high fiscal deficit can lead to increased government borrowing, which in turn can increase money supply in the economy and lead to inflation.

<p>(a) 1 and 2 only (b) 2 and 3 only (c) 1 and 3 only (d) All of the above</p>	<p>Statement 3: Incorrect. The FRBM Act aims to reduce the fiscal deficit gradually, not eliminate it entirely. The recent amendment to the Act extends the target for achieving a fiscal deficit of 3% of GDP to 2029-30. Question 2</p>
<p>Question 2: With reference to the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act, 2003, which of the following statements is NOT correct?</p> <p>(a) It mandates the government to ensure transparency and accountability in fiscal matters. (b) It sets a target for reducing the revenue deficit of the government. (c) It allows the government to borrow unlimited funds to meet its expenditure. (d) It provides for escape clauses under exceptional circumstances.</p>	<p>Answer: (c) It allows the government to borrow unlimited funds to meet its expenditure.</p> <p>Explanation:</p> <p>The FRBM Act aims to promote responsible fiscal management and reduce the government's dependence on borrowing. The Act sets targets for reducing both fiscal deficit and revenue deficit. The Act allows for deviations from the targets under exceptional circumstances like national security, war, natural calamities, etc., but these deviations need to be explained and justified.</p>
<p>Question 3: The primary legislation under which the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is established is:</p> <p>(a) The Aircraft (Amendment) Act, 2020 (b) The Airports Authority of India Act, 1994 (c) The Bureau of Civil Aviation Security Act, 1984 (d) The Aircraft Act, 1934</p>	<p>Answer: (d) The Aircraft Act, 1934</p> <p>Explanation: The Aircraft Act, 1934 is the founding legislation that established the DGCA.</p>
<p>Question 4: Which of the following activities does NOT fall under the regulatory purview of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA)?</p> <p>(a) Issuing licenses to pilots (b) Investigating aircraft accidents (c) Setting air traffic control standards (d) Regulating the fares of domestic airlines</p>	<p>Answer: (d) Regulating the fares of domestic airlines</p> <p>Explanation: While DGCA plays a vast role in aviation regulation, setting airfares does not fall within their responsibilities. There is no single entity that directly regulates the fares of domestic airlines. Instead, airline pricing operates within a broadly free-market system with some government influence. Here's the breakdown:</p> <p>How Airline Fares Work in India</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dynamic Pricing: Airlines primarily use dynamic pricing models, where fares fluctuate based on factors like demand, time of booking, route popularity, and competition. • Price Bands (Fare Caps): The Ministry of Civil Aviation, from time to time, can introduce temporary price bands. These establish a minimum and maximum range within which airlines must set their fares. This intervention is often done in response to extraordinary

circumstances, like a sudden spike in fuel prices, to protect consumers.

Why No Direct Regulator?

- **Market-Driven Approach:** India's aviation sector has been progressively deregulated. This means greater reliance on market forces to determine pricing, with an aim to promote competition and efficiency.
- **Consumer Protection:** While not a direct regulator, the government does monitor fares for anti-competitive practices or unreasonable price hikes. The Competition Commission of India can step in if the airlines are suspected of acting in ways to unfairly manipulate prices.

Question 5: The headquarters of the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA) is located in:

- (a) Mumbai
- (b) Kolkata
- (c) Bengaluru
- (d) New Delhi

Answer: (d) New Delhi

Explanation: The DGCA's headquarter is located in New Delhi, India.

Question 6: Consider the following statements about the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA):

- 3. FCRA registration for NGOs must be renewed every ten years.
- 4. NGOs cannot receive any foreign funds while their FCRA renewal application is pending.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Statement 1 is incorrect: FCRA registration is valid for five years and requires renewal.

Statement 2 is incorrect: NGOs with pending renewal applications are typically allowed to continue receiving foreign funds during the interim period.

Question 7: With reference to the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), consider the following:

- 3. The Ministry of Home Affairs is responsible for granting and renewing FCRA registration to NGOs.
- 4. FCRA registration can be canceled if the NGO is found to be acting against the national interest.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only
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- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2