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Koothandavar festival at Koovagam in Tamil Nadu (GS Paper I: A&C)



- Koovagam, a tiny village 30 km from Villupuram, is a popular destination for transgender celebrations, drawing spectators from all over India.
- In the Tamil month of *Chithirai* (mid-April to mid-May), the 18-day Koothandavar festival takes place, with evocative ceremonies on the last two days.
- Approximately 50,000 people congregate for the celebration, a time when local enterprises flourish. Residents of the village who work in big cities come back to run small businesses such as flower shops, bangle shops, boutiques, and food stalls.
- Some engage in making the ***thaali* (sacred yellow thread)** as it is the major part of the festival.
- In a Tamil version of the Mahabharata, a character called Aravan offered himself as sacrifice for the Pandavas' triumph in war.
- It is said he had a boon of marriage before his sacrifice but no woman wanted to marry him as it would mean widowhood.
- Eventually, it is said Lord Krishna married Aravan after taking the form of Mohini. Lore has it that Lord Krishna grieved for Aravan as a widow.
- In Koovagam, the rituals trace the legend. Transgender women dress as brides on the 17th day, and the priests of Koothandavar temple tie *thaali* for them.
- On the last day, parts of the Koothandavar idol is brought from various parts of Tamil Nadu and assembled before being taken on a chariot.
- Transgender women gather and perform the ***kummi* dance as the chariot moves**. The crowds then travel a couple of kilometres the *Natham*, where the priests break the transgender women's bangles and cut the *thaali*.
- Lord Koothandavar, their spouse, has passed away, and they weep in sorrow. The transgender women rub off the *kungumam* (red turmeric marks on the forehead) and dress in a white sari.
- One transgender woman compared her personal life to the annual event in Koovagam. "Our lives are safe and cheerful one day, and then they turn disastrous the next. It is hanging by a thread," she said.

Will R&AW's overseas operations affect ties? (5 May) (GS Paper II: International Relations, GS Paper III: Internal Security)

- India's external intelligence agency R&AW, also known as Research and Analysis Wing, made headlines this week.
- Reports emerged from various countries, including the **U.S., Canada, Australia, and Pakistan**.
- The reports alleged that R&AW targeted and killed **Indian-origin Khalistani separatist operatives globally**.
- The agency was purportedly spearheading these actions.

What are the charges?

- Allegations have been made against India's external intelligence agency R&AW regarding targeting and killing **Indian-origin Khalistani separatist operatives worldwide**.
- The charges are yet to be proven in court and involve investigations in multiple countries.
- The Washington Post reported allegations that **R&AW's former chief Samant Goel** approved an assassination operation against Khalistani activist lawyer **Gurpatwant Singh Pannun**, who is **on India's most-wanted UAPA terror list**.
- A security official named **Vikram Yadav**, believed to be associated with R&AW, was mentioned, with U.S. officials discussing whether to indict him for ordering a hitman.
- Message transcripts indicated inquiries about ordering a hit on a Khalistani activist in Canada before the killing of Canadian **Hardeep Singh Nijjar** in June 2023.
- The **Royal Canadian Mounted Police** arrested and charged three Indian nationals for conspiring in Nijjar's killing and are investigating links to Indian government officials.
- Canadian Prime **Minister Justin Trudeau's statement** suggesting a link to Indian agencies led to diplomatic tensions between Canada and India, resulting in expulsions of diplomats.
- **Australia's ABC reported in 2020 that R&AW operatives were expelled for espionage activities and surveillance of Khalistani separatists**.
- Pakistan's Foreign Ministry reiterated allegations against R&AW agents orchestrating extra-judicial killings on its soil.
- Allegations resurfaced in the U.K. regarding Indian intelligence agents trailing and threatening Khalistani separatist leader Avtar Singh Khanda, who died in June last year.

How has New Delhi reacted?

- The **Ministry of External Affairs has consistently denied that extra-judicial killings** are government policy, dismissing the allegations as unwarranted and unsubstantiated.
- However, discrepancies arise in the government's responses to allegations from different countries:
 - India remained silent on allegations from Australia.
 - It responded with angry denials and punitive measures against Canada.
 - A **"high-level inquiry"** was set up in response to the U.S. indictment.
- Indian leaders, including Prime Minister Modi, have openly acknowledged and endorsed operations targeting terrorists inside Pakistan.
- Indian operations against Khalistani sympathizers have a history, with instances like a **German court sentencing an Indian couple for spying on Khalistani and Kashmiri activists in 2019**.
- **Indian officials question why countries like the U.S., Canada, the U.K., and Australia don't take action against vocal Khalistani activists accused of inciting attacks on diplomatic missions and threatening Indian diplomats**.
- They reference Canada's past refusal to act against **Khalistani activist Talwinder Singh Parmar, who orchestrated the 1985 Air India bombing, one of the worst terror attacks in which 329 were killed**. Parmar was later killed in a gunfight with Punjab police in India.

Will there be a diplomatic fallout?

- India's ties with countries where alleged operations have occurred, except for Pakistan and now Canada, remain strong.

- Historical tensions over the Khalistan issue have hindered bilateral visits to Canada by Indian Prime Ministers since 1973.
- Bilateral ties between India and Pakistan have been severely strained due to issues like cross-border terrorism in Jammu & Kashmir and Punjab.
- Countries like the U.S., the U.K., and Australia are trying to maintain stable ties with India while investigations into the alleged operations are ongoing.
- The U.S. government has issued statements on the Pannun case and expects accountability from India.
- U.S. officials visiting India have conveyed a three-step demand: thorough investigation, public acknowledgment of any wrongdoing, and legal accountability in Indian courts.
- The trial process in both the Pannun case in the U.S. and the Nijjar case in Canada will be crucial, and testimony from key individuals like Gupta is anticipated.
- Other countries, like the U.S. and Israel, also conduct extra-judicial operations but often cite self-defense under the UN charter.
- Informal rules in intelligence operations include avoiding operations in friendly countries, ensuring no ties to diplomatic missions, and avoiding detection.

Why is Boeing crewed space test significant? (5 May) (GS Paper III: S&T)

- On May 7 at 8:04 am IST, an Atlas V rocket will launch.
- The rocket will carry a spacecraft named Starliner, built by Boeing.
- Inside the spacecraft will be two experienced astronauts: Barry Wilmore and Sunita Williams.
- This will be Starliner's third test flight but the first with astronauts on board.
- The mission aims to send the astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS) in low-earth orbit.
- If successful, this mission will mark the first time in U.S. history that two spacecraft are capable of launching astronauts into space.

What is the Boeing Starliner?

- Starliner is a spacecraft designed to transport astronauts in space.
- It is launched into space by a rocket.
- Starliner consists of two main parts: the crew capsule and the service module.
- The crew capsule is where the astronauts stay during the journey and can survive re-entry to return to Earth.
- The service module contains essential equipment and systems for astronauts to survive in space, such as air and temperature control, water supply, and sanitation. It also includes engines and fuel for spacecraft maneuvering.
- The service module is not reusable.
- Starliner is over 4 meters wide and can accommodate up to seven astronauts.
- It is typically launched atop an Atlas V rocket, which is operated by United Launch Alliance, a joint venture between Boeing and Lockheed Martin.

When was Starliner commissioned?

- In September 2014, NASA awarded contracts to SpaceX and Boeing to fly astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS).
- Boeing's contract was valued at \$4.2 billion, while SpaceX's was \$2.6 billion.
- Boeing was expected to conduct Starliner's first crewed launch in 2017.
- Delays followed, and Starliner's first uncrewed orbital test flight occurred in December 2019.
- During this test flight, a software error caused the capsule to enter the wrong orbit, and it returned to Earth without docking with the ISS.
- In May 2022, Boeing successfully repeated the test flight, including docking with the ISS, undocking after four days, and returning to Earth.
- The upcoming test on May 7 will repeat this procedure but with astronauts on board.
- Despite the successful test in 2022, Boeing faced technical issues, and the COVID-19 pandemic further contributed to delays.
- The launch has been delayed by seven years, and Boeing overshot its budget by \$1.4 billion.

What is Starliner's purpose?

- Since being awarded NASA contracts, SpaceX has conducted 13 missions to the International Space Station (ISS) using its Dragon crew capsule.
- The Dragon crew capsule can accommodate up to seven astronauts.
- Assuming Starliner's crewed test flight is successful, SpaceX and Boeing will alternate launching astronauts to the ISS.
- Each crew's expedition to the ISS lasts up to six months.
- This arrangement will continue until the ISS is decommissioned in the next decade.
- SpaceX's Dragon capsule became operational in 2020, Russia's Soyuz rocket and capsule were the only means of ferrying astronauts to and from the ISS.
- NASA shut down its Space Shuttle program in 2011, leaving a gap until commercial crew vehicles like Dragon and Starliner became available.

What is at stake for Boeing?

- Boeing faced significant issues with its commercial airliners, particularly the 737 Max 8, since 2014.
- The 737 Max 8 was introduced in 2017 to compete with Airbus's A320neo.
- In October 2018, a Lion Air 737 Max 8 crashed shortly after take-off, killing all 189 people onboard.
- In March 2019, an Ethiopian Airlines 737 Max 8 crashed, claiming the lives of all 157 passengers and crew.
- Both crashes were linked to problems with the Max 8's Manoeuvring Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS).
- Boeing designed the MCAS to compensate for design changes from the previous model, the 737 Next Generation, but a glitch in MCAS led to the crashes.
- Boeing's decision not to require additional pilot training for the Max 8 contributed to the pilots' inability to handle the MCAS malfunction.

- Legal disputes, compensatory payments, and order cancellations following the crashes are estimated to have cost Boeing over **\$60 billion**.
- A 2020 U.S. Congressional report criticized Boeing for cutting corners in **operationalizing the Max 8**, including withholding safety information from pilots.
- Despite being in different sectors, **Boeing consolidated commercial airline and spacecraft development in 2015 under BDS Development**, aiming to lower costs, which included the **Starliner project**.
- The May 7 test of Starliner, against this backdrop, is crucial for **Boeing and NASA**, as its success would boost confidence, but failure would add to Boeing's challenges.

What is the light test profile?

- Starliner's first crew flight test will have two experienced astronauts, Mr. Wilmore and Ms. Williams.
- The spacecraft will be launched by an Atlas V rocket.
- Starliner will transport the astronauts to the International Space Station (ISS), where they will spend eight days.
- After their mission, the capsule will return to Earth and land, likely in New Mexico.
- Mr. Wilmore mentioned that **Boeing's airplane division and the Starliner program operate separately**.
- He advised against expecting a flawless test, as it serves to identify and address any final issues before commercial operations begin.

How is Kejriwal functioning from Tihar Jail? (5 May) (GS Paper II: Polity)

- Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has been in Tihar Jail since April 1.
- He was arrested by the **Enforcement Directorate (ED)**.
- The charges against him relate to **corruption and money laundering**.
- They stem from the implementation of **Delhi government's excise policy for 2021-22**, which has since been scrapped.
- The Supreme Court cautioned the ED that it might consider granting interim bail to Mr. Kejriwal.
- The reason cited for this consideration is the upcoming Lok Sabha election in Delhi on May 25.

What is the Aam Aadmi Party's strategy?

- In December 2023, the **Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)** ran a campaign titled "**Main Bhi Kejriwal**" (I am also Kejriwal).
- The campaign questioned whether Arvind Kejriwal should continue as Chief Minister if arrested.
- Following Kejriwal's arrest, AAP decided he would remain Chief Minister and run the government from jail, citing it as the "will of the people of Delhi."

- This decision has caused a unique situation in Delhi where administrative decisions have been halted.
- For example, the **election to appoint the Mayor and Deputy Mayor of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) scheduled for April 26 was postponed.**
- Lieutenant-Governor Vinai Kumar Saxena refused to appoint a presiding officer for the election, stating it **was inappropriate without input from the Chief Minister.**

Is the Chief Minister meeting his Ministers?

- While in custody of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) from March 21 to April 1, Arvind Kejriwal sent written instructions to his Ministers regarding uninterrupted water supply and medicine.
- He also sent messages to the public to be read out by his wife, Sunita Kejriwal.
- Communication has been limited since being lodged in Tihar Jail.
- According to the Tihar Jail Manual, **interviews with prisoners must take place in the presence of a prison officer to prevent the exchange of articles.**
- Since April 1, apart from family and lawyers, **Kejriwal has met AAP general secretary Sandeep Pathak and Cabinet Ministers Atishi and Saubh Bharadwaj once, and his Punjab counterpart Bhagwant Mann twice.**
- Pathak mentioned that Kejriwal **would meet two Cabinet Ministers every week for 30 minutes each.**

How is the government being run?

- Arvind Kejriwal does not hold any portfolios under him, and there have been no cabinet meetings since his arrest.
- The **Delhi Assembly has not convened since then.**
- Individual ministers have been managing their respective departments.
- The party is currently focused on its election campaign.
- **The Lieutenant Governor deferred the MCD elections, citing "peculiar" and "unprecedented" circumstances where the serving Chief Minister cannot fulfil his constitutionally obligated functions.**
- The Constitution does not explicitly address whether a person can continue as Chief Minister while being a remand prisoner.
- **Section 8(3) of the Representation of People Act of 1951** states that an MLA or MP can be disqualified if convicted and sentenced to at least two years in prison. However, Kejriwal has not been convicted in the case yet.

When can President's Rule be imposed?

- **President's Rule can be imposed in Delhi under Article 239AB of the Constitution.**
- Delhi's power structure involves a delicate balance between the elected government and the LG appointed by the Central government.
- If Arvind Kejriwal remains in prison, hindering administrative work, the LG can recommend to the President **to invoke Article 239AB, citing "failure of constitutional machinery."**

- President's Rule under Article 239AB was implemented in Delhi once before, in 2014, after Kejriwal resigned just 49 days into his first tenure as Chief Minister.

What are the challenges going forward?

- The High Court criticized the AAP government for failing to provide educational material and other benefits to eight lakh students in MCD-run schools.
- While acknowledging that Arvind Kejriwal has the choice to remain as Chief Minister or resign, the High Court emphasized that it's essential for the holder of this position to remain accessible and present.
- The court highlighted that it's in the national and public interest to ensure that the Chief Minister is not absent or inaccessible for extended or uncertain periods of time.

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