Today's Prelims Topics

Vembanad Lake

Context
Climate change and pollution from slaughterhouses and shrimp peeling sheds are choking the ecosystem of the Vembanad lake.

About Vembanad lake
- It is located in **Kerala** bounded by the districts of **Alappuzha, Kottayam and Ernakulam.**
- It is the **2nd largest wetland** in India and was declared a **Ramsar site in 2002. (1st - Sunderbans)**
- A Ramsar Site is a wetland that has been declared an ecological area of international importance under the **Ramsar Convention on Wetlands, also known as the 'Convention of Wetlands'.**
- The lake has its source in **4 rivers: Meenachil, Achankovil, Pampa and Manimala.**
- Vembanad is the **longest lake in India (96.5 km) & largest lake of Kerala.**
- The famous **Nehru Trophy Boat Race** is held in Vembanad lake.
- Kumarakom Bird Sanctuary is located on the east coast of the lake.
- **Kuttanad, the rice bowl of Kerala,** is located in the southern portion of the lake.
- **Local names of the lake:** Vembanad Kayal, Vembanad Kol, Punnamada Lake etc.
- **Threats to the lake:**
  ○ **Pollution:** The lake is affected by microplastic pollution from sewage canals, rivers and run-off. It also receives nutrient discharge from urban settlements and pesticide residue from rice polders.
  ○ **Land reclamation:** The lake has lost 37% of its original area due to land reclamation.
  ○ **Coconut husk retting:** Coconut husk retting deteriorates the water quality.
  ○ **Tourism:** Resorts and residences discharge their waste into the river, and many houseboats do not have bio-toilets.

Facts
- Largest freshwater lake in India – Wular Lake, Jammu and Kashmir
- Largest Saline water lake in India – Chilka Lake, Orissa
- Highest lake in India (Altitude) – Cholamu Lake, Sikkim
- Longest Lake in India – Vembanad Lake, Kerala
- Largest Artificial Lake in India – Govind Vallabh Pant Sagar (Rihand Dam)

Source:
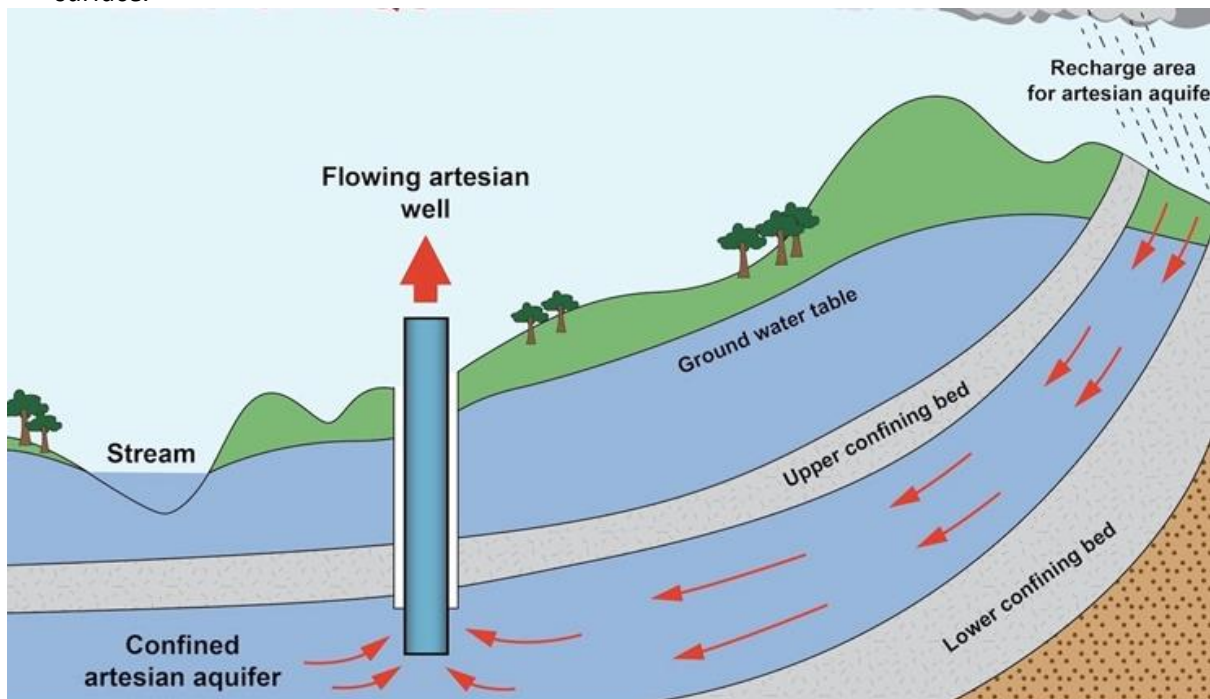- **The Hindu - Troubled Waters**

Artesian Well

Context

Recently, Taranagar village in Jaisalmer, Rajasthan, experienced a unique phenomenon as large amounts of water gushed from underground. A Senior Hydro-Geologist attributed this to an **artesian condition.**

About Artesian Well

- It is a well that **brings groundwater to the surface without pumping** because of pressure from an aquifer. (Artesian Aquifer)
- Artesian aquifer refers to **water stored under pressure between impermeable layers of rock and sediment.**
- The water is "confined" and does not require external force to emerge, unlike regular tube wells or wells.
- Underground water in an artesian aquifer is surrounded by **poorly permeable rocks that create high pressure.** A rupture, such as drilling, causes the pressurized water to flow upward to the surface.

Why Did Water Emerge in the Desert?
- **Geological Context in Jaisalmer:** In the desert, water is stored beneath layers of sandstone. When the top layer is punctured, the underground pressure forces water to flow upwards.
- **Global Examples:** Similar phenomena have been recorded in desert regions of **Australia and Africa.**

Source:
- **Indian Express - Artesian Well**

Suspension of Mining Operations in Bageshwar, Uttarakhand

Context

The Uttarakhand High Court has suspended all mining operations in Bageshwar district, citing environmental, socio-economic and safety concerns.

More in News

- The decision was based on alarming findings submitted by court-appointed commissioners regarding **soapstone mining** in the area.
- Mining activities have caused significant damage to dwelling houses, increasing the risk of landslides.
- The area is home to diverse flora, including oak, cedar and cypress trees & wildlife including leopards, wild boars and foxes.

About Soapstone

- It is a metamorphic rock primarily made up of talc along with varying amounts of **chlorite, pyroxenes, micas, carbonates and other minerals.**
- **Properties:**
  - Soft texture (can be scratched with a fingernail due to high talc content).
  - Heat-resistant and non-porous.
  - It is durable, inert and has a soapy feel.
- **Uses:**
  - **Industrial applications:** Talcum powder, ceramics, cosmetics and paints.
  - **Thermal applications:** Linings in stoves, fireplaces and laboratory countertops due to heat resistance.
- **Largest producer of soapstone in India:** Rajasthan
- **Major Deposits:** Rajasthan (Udaipur & Bhilwara), Uttarakhand (Bageshwar & Almora)

Source:
- **Indian Express - landslide risks in Bageshwar**

Lokpal disposes of corruption complaint against former CJI

Context

Lokpal, disposed of a complaint against former Chief Justice of India (CJI) DY Chandrachud on grounds of being **"barred by jurisdiction."** The order also clarified why the Lokpal cannot investigate sitting judges of the Supreme Court or the CJI.

About Lokpal

- It is a **statutory body** established under the **Lokpal and Lokayuktas Act 2013** to inquire and investigate allegations of corruption against **public functionaries**.
- **Composition:**
  - **Chairperson** (Retd./Serving Chief Justice of India/ Judge of the Supreme Court or an eminent person who fulfils the eligibility specified in the act)
  - Maximum of **8 Members out of whom 50% are Judicial Members.**
  - At least 50% of Lokpal members should belong to **SC/ ST, OBC, Minorities** and **Women**.
  - **Tenure: 5 years** or until they attain the age of 70 years, whichever is earlier.
- **Appointment of Lokpal:** The President appoints the Chairperson and the Members on the recommendations of a **Selection Committee consisting of**:
  - **Chairperson:** Prime Minister as Chairperson
  - **Members:** Speaker of Lok Sabha, Leader of Opposition Lok Sabha, Chief Justice of India, one eminent jurist to be nominated by the President on the recommendation of the Chairperson and the members of the Selection Committee.
- **Lokpal (Amendment) Act 2016:** Allows the leader of the largest opposition party in the Lok Sabha, in the absence of a recognized Leader of Opposition, to be a member of the selection committee.

Jurisdiction (Under Section-14 of the Lokpal Act)

- Prime Minister, Ministers, Members of Parliament and group A, B, C, and D of government employees.
- **Examination of Applicability to Judges and CJIs:**
  - Judges, including those of the Supreme Court, are "public servants" as per Section 2(c) of the Prevention of Corruption (PC) Act, 1988.
  - However, the Supreme Court is not a "body established by an Act of Parliament" but by Article 124 of the Constitution of India.
- **Interpretation of Section 14(1)(f):**
  - Section 14(1)(f) applies to entities established by an Act of Parliament or controlled/financed by the central government.
  - **Lokpal clarified that:**
    - The Supreme Court does not qualify as such a body.
    - Judges and the CJI are not controlled or financed by the central government.

Facts
- **Retd. Justice Pinaki Chandra Ghose** (2019-2022) was the **1st Lokpal of India. (Present - AM Khanwilkar)**
- **M. C. Setalvad (1950-1963),** India's first Attorney General was the first to put forth the idea of the institution of Lokpal in 1962 in the All India Lawyer's Conference.
- Lokpal **cannot take suo motu cognizance** of any case and proceed ahead with investigation. It can only go ahead if someone files a complaint.

Source:
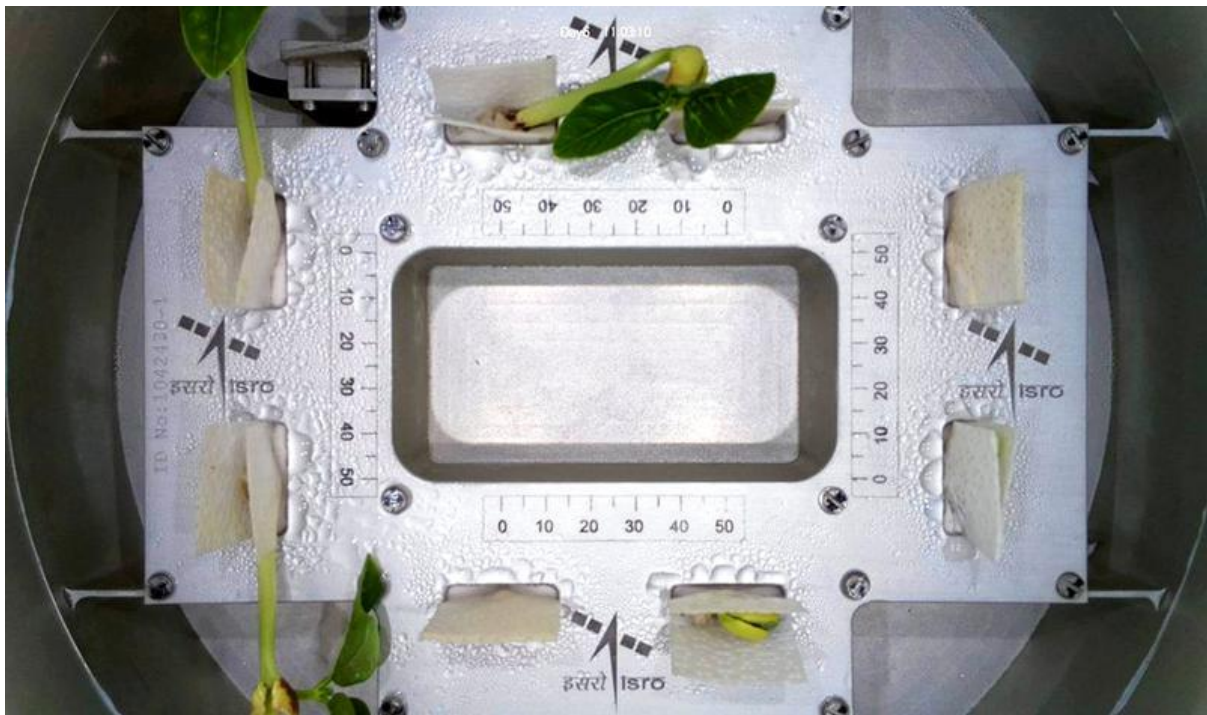- **Indian Express - lokpal dismisses complaint against CJI**

Leaves flutter in space

Context

A batch of cowpea seeds which were taken into orbit by an Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) mission and which recently sprouted has unveiled their first leaves.

About Cowpea Seed Germination

- **CROPS Payload: Compact Research Module for Plant Studies**
  - Developed by **Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre (VSSC).**
  - Designed to study plant growth in microgravity as part of extraterrestrial agricultural research.
  - Fully automated system to germinate seeds and sustain them until the two-leaf stage.
- 8 cowpea seeds were placed in a closed-box environment with **active thermal regulation.**
- Cowpea is a **leguminous crop** having long trailing vines. It is locally called **Lobia.**
- Seeds germinated within **4 days & 3 seedlings have sprouted leaves.**
- This marks a significant achievement in space agriculture, paving the way for **future extraterrestrial cultivation.**

Source:
- **The Hindu - Leaves flutter in space**
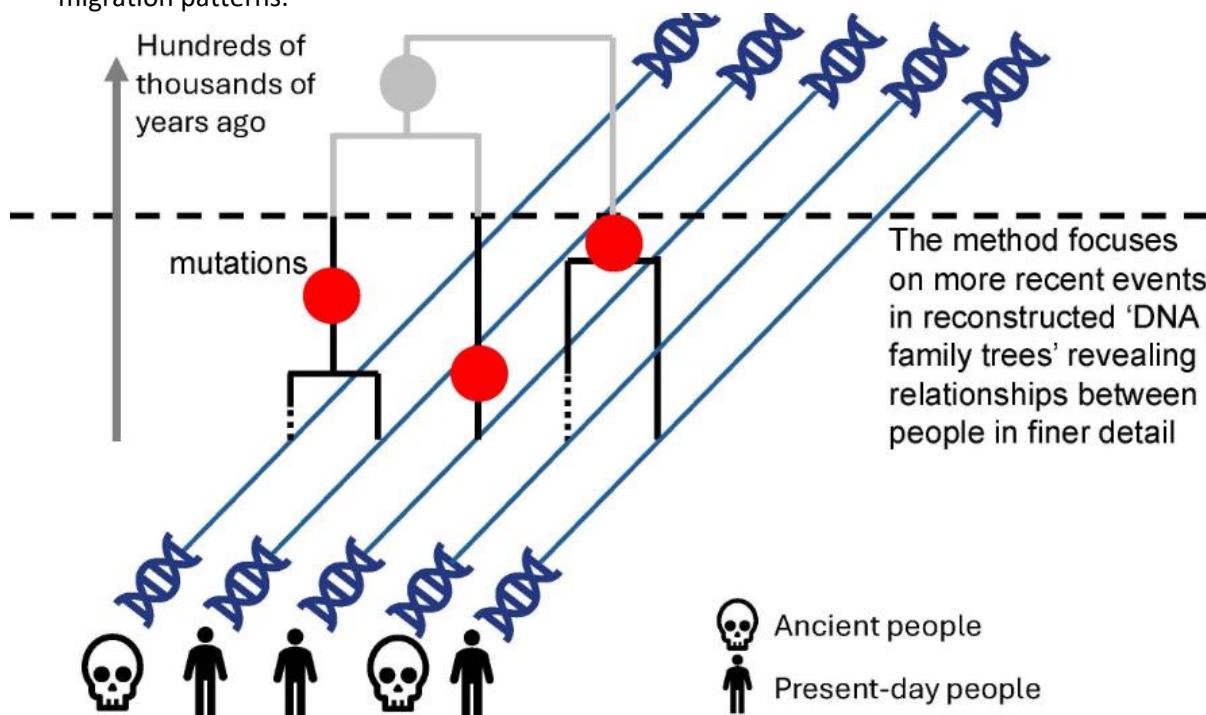- **Indian Express - ISRO Coe pea seeds**

Twigstats

Context
A cutting-edge tool named Twigstats is developed by an international research collaboration to trace individual-level ancestry.

About Twigstats
● Twigstats is a new method developed by researchers **to study the genetic history of populations.**
● It helps scientists trace the ancestry of ancient people and understand how they moved and mixed with other groups.
● It combines genetic data, archaeological findings and historical context to refine our understanding of ancient and medieval population dynamics.
● It has been tested on ancient DNA samples from Europe, especially from the **Viking Age** to study migration patterns.

Challenges in Genetic Ancestry Studies
● **Similarity Across Populations:** Populations across geographical regions often appear statistically similar, making ancestry tracing difficult.
● **Limitations of Ancient DNA (aDNA) - Sample Size**: Ancient samples are fewer and of lower sequencing quality compared to medieval or modern genomes.
● **Traditional Methods**: **SNP Analysis (Single Nucleotide Polymorphisms)**:
  ○ Effective but limited to high-quality DNA samples.
  ○ Struggles to resolve histories of closely related populations.
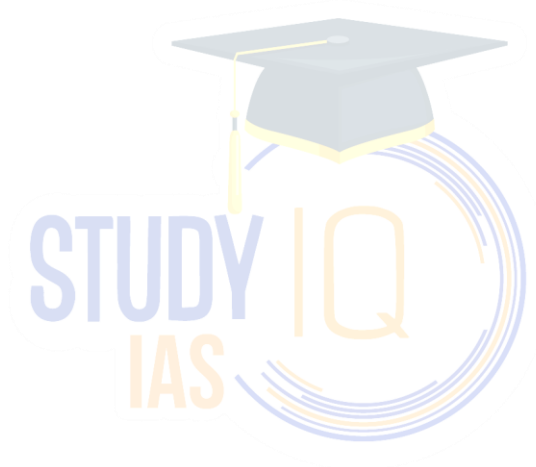
Innovations/ Advantages of Twigstats
● **Advanced Techniques:**
  ○ It uses **haplotypes (shared DNA segments) and rare variants** alongside SNPs.
  ○ Incorporates **genealogical tree inference** for detailed insights into ancestry, population structure, and demographic transitions.

- **Reduced Errors:**
    - Twigstats improves the accuracy of genetic studies by reducing errors and increasing the statistical power of existing methods.
    - The method can analyze large sets of ancient DNA samples and create detailed maps of population movement and ancestry.

Source:
- [The Hindu - Twigstats: new tool](#)

$1 million prize for deciphering Indus Valley Script

Context

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister has announced a **$1 million prize** for deciphering the script of the Indus Valley Civilisation.

About Indus Valley Script

- It is a collection of symbols created by the Indus Valley Civilization. It is one of the oldest writing systems in the Indian subcontinent. It is also known as **Harappan Script.**
- **Script: Boustrophedon,** it is written right to left in one line and then left to right in the next line.
- **Time period:** It was used from about 2,500 BC to about 1,900 BC.
- **Language:** It is unknown, and there are no known bilingual inscriptions to help decipher it.
- The script has been found on many objects, including pottery, seals, bronze and copper tables, bronze tools, bones, and clay tablets.
- **Symbols:** About 400 symbols are known.

(Clockwise from the top left) The Pashupati seal of Mohenjodaro; a seal bearing the very common unicorn motif; the mould of a seal showing a man fighting two tigers; the mould of a seal showing an elephant in movement. All the seals have symbols from the Indus script inscribed on top. *Wikimedia Commons*

Indus Valley Civilisation
- **Timeline:** Existed from **3300 to 1300 BCE.**
- It spanned over **800,000 sq km** across modern-day Pakistan and parts of northwestern India.
- It was discovered by **John Marshall in 1924.**
- **Major sites:** Harappa, Lothal, Dholavira, **Rakhigarhi (largest site in Indian Subcontinent)**, Kalibangan etc.

Major Challenges in Deciphering the Indus Script

- **Lack of Multilingual Inscriptions**
  - Multilingual inscriptions are necessary for decipherment as they enable comparisons with known scripts.
  - Despite robust trade links with Mesopotamia, **no multilingual inscriptions** from the Indus Valley have been found, unlike the Mesopotamian **cuneiform script**.
- **Unknown Script and Language**
  - According to **Andrew Robinson**, undeciphered scripts fall into three categories:
    1. Unknown script writing a **known language**.
    2. Known script writing in an unknown **language**.
    3. **Unknown script writing an unknown language** (most challenging).

- ○ The **Indus script** falls in the third category, with no certainty about the language it represents, making phonetic interpretation difficult.
- ● **Limited Artefacts and Contextual Evidence**
  - ○ Only **3,500 seals** have been identified, each with an average of **five characters**.
  - ○ Insufficient material evidence makes analysis challenging compared.
  - ○ Many Indus sites remain **undiscovered or underexplored**, limiting insights into the civilisation's context.
- ● **Limited Knowledge of the Civilisation**
  - ○ Compared to Mesopotamia and Egypt, far less is known about the social, cultural and economic systems of the **Indus Valley Civilisation**.
  - ○ Artefacts like the **Pashupati Seal** and seals with **unicorn motifs** provide clues but insufficient evidence.
- ● **Archaeological Gaps**
  - ○ Many sites may still be buried or uninvestigated.
  - ○ Greater **archaeological efforts** are needed to uncover material evidence for further research.

Source:

- ● [Indian Express - $1 million prize](#)

UGC revises guidelines for appointment of V-Cs

Context

The University Grants Commission has released the **draft** UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment and Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities etc.) Regulations, 2025

Key Changes and Provisions

- **Vice-Chancellor Appointment Process:**
  - **Clearer Process:**
    - A **Search-cum-Selection Committee** will appoint Vice-Chancellors (V-Cs).
    - The **Chancellor/Visitor** (Governors in many states) will constitute this three-member committee.
  - **Committee Composition**:
    - **Chairperson**: A nominee of the Chancellor/Visitor.
    - **Members**: A nominee of the UGC Chairman and a representative of the university's apex body (Syndicate, Senate, Executive Council, etc.).
  - **Appointment Criteria:** V-C candidates must possess **high academic qualifications and leadership capabilities**.
  - **Who is eligible?**
    - Professors with at least **10 years of experience** in higher education institutions.
    - Individuals at senior levels in **industry**, **public administration**, **public policy**, or **public sector undertakings (PSUs)** with a **proven track record of significant scholarly contributions**.
  - **Expanded Pool of Candidates:** Opens up V-C positions to industry experts and public sector veterans.
- **Flexibility in Faculty Appointments:**
  - **NET/SET Flexibility**: Candidates qualifying in **NET/SET** can teach subjects other than their undergraduate/postgraduate degrees if aligned with their Ph.D. specialization.
- **Elimination of Academic Performance Indicators (API):** The **API system** brought in 2018 regulations, which relied on **quantitative metrics** like journal publications, has been removed. It is replaced with **holistic evaluation** of "Notable Contributions" across **nine categories**.
- **Contract Teacher Appointments:** Removes the **10% cap** on contract-based faculty appointments set in 2018.

University Grants Commission (UGC)
- UGC was set up by the Department of Higher Education, Ministry of Education as a statutory body under the **UGC Act 1956.**
- **Function:** To coordinate, determine and maintain the standards of university education in India.
  - It grants India's universities recognition and makes financial contributions to accredited institutions and universities.

Source:
- **The Hindu - UGC revises guidelines for appointment of V-Cs**
- **Indian Express - UGC eases hiring contract teachers**

News in Shorts

Gangasagar Mela

- Recently the CM of West Bengal **demanded National Mela status for Gangasagar mela.**
- It is a **Hindu festival and pilgrimage** that takes **place annually on Makar Sankranti.**
- **Location:** Sagar Island in West Bengal.
  - It is the **westernmost island** of the Ganga-Brahmaputra delta. It lies at the **mouth of the Hugli (Hooghly) River.**
- It is the **2nd-largest gathering of people** in the world after **Kumbh.**
- It has been mentioned in **Ramayana and Mahabharata**, putting its existence as early as **400 BCE.**
- The pilgrims, after taking a dip in Ganga, visit the temple of **Kapil Muni.**

Kapil Muni
- He was a Vedic sage. He is considered the **original proponent of the Samkhya system of Indian philosophy.** He also wrote **Samkhya-Sutra.**
- He lived around the **6th or 7th century C.E.** & is believed to be an **incarnation of Vishnu.**
- Kapil Muni is known for teaching **bhakti yoga** and is recognized not only in Hinduism but also in Buddhism.
- Buddhist sources say that Kapila was a well-known philosopher whose **students** built the **city of Kapilavastu.**

Source:
- [The Hindu - Mamata says Centre backs Kumbh Mela but not Gangasagar](#)

India's First Organic Fisheries Cluster

- The Union Minister for Fisheries has launched the First-of-its-kind initiative in India to promote organic fisheries and aquaculture under Pradhan Mantri Matsya Sampada Yojana (PMMSY) **Soreng District, Sikkim.**
- It aligns with Sikkim's status as an organic farming pioneer.
- It will focus on **eco-conscious** markets for premium organic fish products.
- **Existing Clusters in India**:
  - **Pearl Cluster**: Hazaribagh, Jharkhand.
  - **Ornamental Fisheries Cluster**: Madurai, Tamil Nadu.
  - **Seaweed Cluster**: Lakshadweep.
  - **Tuna Cluster**: Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

Source:
- [PIB - India's First Organic Fisheries Cluster in Sikkim](#)

National Mission on Edible Oils - Oil Palm (NMEO-OP)

- **NMEO-OP** is a **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** with a special focus on the North east region and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- **Aim:** To boost oil palm production in India.
  - India is the **world's largest importer of palm oil.**
- **Area Expansion:** Aims to increase oil palm cultivation by 6.5 lakh hectares by 2025-26, reaching a total of 10 lakh hectares.
- **Production Target:** Increase Crude Palm Oil (CPO) production to 11.20 lakh tonnes by 2025-26 and 28 lakh tonnes by 2029-30.

Source:
- [PIB - NMEO-OP](#)

Editorial Summary

Recent Developments in the Supreme Court of India's Collegium

Context

Recent reports have highlighted significant changes in the functioning of the Supreme Court of India's Collegium, particularly regarding the process of judicial appointments.
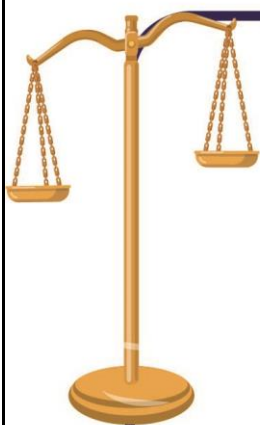
Key Changes in the Collegium's Process

- **Interviews for Judicial Candidates:** The Collegium will now conduct interviews for candidates recommended for elevation to High Courts.
- **Exclusion of Relatives from Selection:** The Collegium aims to exclude candidates whose close relatives have served or are currently serving as judges in High Courts or the Supreme Court.

Facts

- The constitutional provisions for judicial appointments in India are primarily outlined in Articles 124 and 217 of the Constitution.

Evolution of the Collegium System

- **1950:** Initially, the President appointed the Chief Justice of India (CJI) and other Supreme Court judges after consulting the CJI.
- **Early Practice:** Senior-most Supreme Court justices were typically chosen as the next CJI, although notable exceptions, such as Justice AN Ray's appointment in 1973 led to conflicts.

JUDGEMENT

- **First Judges Case (1981)- S.P. Gupta vs. Union of India:** Defined "consultation" as not requiring the government's concurrence making CJI's advice non-binding.
- **Second Judges Case (1993)- Advocates-on-Record Association vs. Union of India:** Changed the interpretation to "concurrence" making the CJI's advice binding, with the advice formulated through a collegium of senior judges.
- **Third Judges Case (1998):** Established the collegium structure for SC and HCs
  - Supreme Court: CJI and 4 senior-most judges
  - High Court: CJI and 2 senior-most judges with consultation from other senior Supreme Court judges experienced in the High Court.
- **Fourth Judges Case (2015)- Supreme Court Advocates on Record Association Case:** Declared NJAC unconstitutional emphasising the judiciary's primacy in appointments.
  - The 99th Constitutional Amendment aimed to replace the Collegium with the NJAC including the Union Law Minister, eminent individuals, the CJI and two senior Supreme Court judges.

Challenges and Concerns with the Collegium System

- **Lack of Transparency:** The Collegium operates without formal rules or structured guidelines, leading to ad hoc and inconsistent processes.
  - Decisions, including candidate selection or rejection, are rarely explained, contributing to a lack of accountability.
- **Government Interference**
  - **Stonewalling Recommendations:** The government often delays or resists Collegium proposals by withholding approvals or presidential warrants, undermining judicial autonomy.
  - **Arbitrary Rejections:** Recommendations can be returned or stalled without providing clear reasons, raising concerns about the executive's influence over appointments.
- **Absence of Binding Rules**
  - **Unenforceable Procedures:** While a "memorandum of procedure" exists, breaches of its provisions carry no legal or procedural consequences.
  - **Uncertainty in Reforms:** Changes like interviews and exclusion policies lack formal codification, leaving their continuation to the discretion of future Chief Justices.

Way Forward for Collegium System Reforms

- **Formalization of Rules and Procedures:** Codify the Collegium's processes, including criteria for selection, interviews, and exclusion policies, in a binding framework like a revised "memorandum of procedure."
  - Ensure that breaches of these rules carry enforceable consequences to uphold accountability.
- **Enhancing Transparency and Accountability:** Publish detailed reasons for all Collegium decisions, including selections, rejections, and transfers, to foster public confidence.
  - Implement a mechanism for regular performance reviews and peer assessments of judicial appointees.
- **Minimizing Executive Interference:** Establish time-bound deadlines for government responses to Collegium recommendations to prevent delays and arbitrary rejections.
  - Strengthen judicial oversight by ensuring adherence to the principles outlined in the Judges' cases.
- **Promoting Diversity and Inclusivity:** Introduce affirmative actions or guidelines to ensure representation from women, marginalized communities, and underrepresented regions in judicial appointments.
  - Encourage merit-based selections while addressing concerns of nepotism and favoritism.

Source: [The Hindu: The Collegium and changes — it may still be early days](#)

Digital Governance and Capacity Building in India

Context
- India's journey toward digital governance has been marked by significant efforts aimed at enhancing citizen services and empowering government employees.
- This transformation emphasizes the critical link between the efficiency of public service delivery and the skills of the workforce.

Capacity Building in Digital Governance
- **Importance of Capacity Building:** Digital governance signifies a fundamental shift in how government employees and service providers engage with their roles.
  - The integration of technology facilitates better communication, informed decision-making, and streamlined workflows.
  - As public expectations evolve, government employees must develop proficiency in digital platforms.
- **Key Initiatives**
  - **iGOT Karmayogi Platform (2020)**: An online training portal designed to develop skills in data analytics, public administration, and digital tools.
    - Offers personalised learning paths for continuous improvement.
  - **e-Office Initiative**: Digitises workflows, reducing paperwork and enhancing efficiency.
    - Automates file management, workflows, and grievance redress for real-time communication and transparency.
  - **Government e-Marketplace (GeM)**: Digital procurement platform enabling streamlined, transparent processes.
- **Focus Areas of Training:**
  - Familiarisation with e-governance tools, cybersecurity, and digital communication.
  - Efforts to enhance digital literacy across government employees.
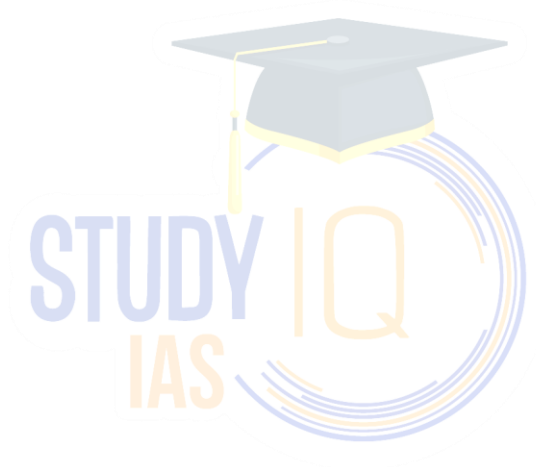
Challenges in Digital Governance
- **Resistance to Change:** Some employees resist adopting new technologies due to entrenched bureaucratic structures or lack of readiness.
  - Employees with lower digital competence require additional training and support.
- **Lack of Incentives:** Platforms like iGOT Karmayogi risk becoming attendance-based rather than outcome-focused.
  - Success should reflect employees' ability to apply new skills in job roles, not just participation numbers.
- **Digital Divide:** Limited access to high-speed Internet and digital tools in rural areas creates inequities.
  - Risks excluding employees and citizens from the benefits of digital governance.
- **Cybersecurity Concerns:** Increased online operations elevate risks of data breaches and cyberattacks.
  - Training in cybersecurity protocols is essential to safeguard sensitive information.
- **Need for Continuous Learning:** Rapid advancements in digital tools require ongoing upskilling opportunities.
  - Capacity-building programmes must stay dynamic and adaptable.

Way Forward
- **Robust Infrastructure:** Invest in improving Internet connectivity and access to digital tools, especially in rural areas.
- **Targeted and Outcome-Based Training:** Ensure programmes like iGOT Karmayogi deliver practical value by aligning training with measurable job outcomes.

- **Incentivising Skill Development:** Provide rewards for employees who excel in applying digital skills in their roles.
- **Cybersecurity Strengthening:** Regularly update cybersecurity protocols and train employees to protect against evolving threats.
- **Dynamic Capacity-Building Programmes:** Keep training modules updated with the latest technological advancements.

Source: [The Hindu: Enhancing governance the digital way](#)

Detailed Coverage

Caste- Based Census

Context

India's caste system has been a focal point of academic and historical study, revealing its profound impact on society and the socio-economic challenges faced by various communities.

About Caste Census

● A caste-based census in India is a census that collects data on the caste of each person. This data can be used to understand the social and economic status of different caste groups, and to identify and address inequalities.
● The first caste-based census was conducted by the British in 1881.
● The Indian government has not collected caste data in its census since 1931.
● After independence in 1947, the Indian government decided to stop collecting caste data in the 1951 census.
● India does publish separate data on Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) since the country's independence in 1951, other castes' data have not been included in the Census.

Importance of a Caste-Based Census

● The lack of comprehensive caste data has hindered efforts to address caste-based disparities effectively.

● The existing administrative categories—Scheduled Castes (SC), Scheduled Tribes (ST), and Other Backward Classes (OBC)—often generalize diverse groups, masking the complexities of socio-economic inequalities.
● A caste-based Census is crucial for:
   ○ **Accurate Identification:** Helps in identifying OBCs who lack verifiable data for inclusion in affirmative action policies.
   ○ **Policy Reform:** Supports demands to reassess the Supreme Court's 27% reservation cap based on demographic representation.
   ○ **Equitable Resource Allocation:** Reveals intra-community disparities, ensuring that benefits reach those who genuinely need them.

Did You **Know?**

Article 340, mandates the appointment of a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes and recommend steps that governments should take to uplift them.

Current Scenario

● **Socio-economic Disparities**: The average monthly per capita consumption expenditures (MPCE) of ST, SC, and OBC households in rural and urban areas are significantly lower than the general category.
   ○ In 2011-12, the average MPCE in rural areas for ST, SC, and OBC households was significantly lower than the general category (65%, 73%, and 84% respectively).
   ○ In urban areas in the same period, the average MPCE for ST, SC, and OBC households was also lower than the general category (68%, 63%, and 70% respectively).
● **Multidimensional Poverty**: STs, SCs, and OBCs experience higher rates of multidimensional poverty compared to the general category.
   ○ Multidimensional poverty estimates from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-4/2015-16) show higher poverty ratios among STs (44.4%), SCs (29.2%), and OBCs (24.5%) compared to Others (14.9%).

○ Estimates from the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI) indicate a similar pattern, with STs (50.6%), SCs (33.3%), and OBCs (27.2%) having higher poverty headcount ratios than Others (15.6%).
○ Muslims also face higher multidimensional poverty (31%) compared to Hindus (28%), Christians (16%), and other religious communities (15.7%).
● **Education and Employment:** Data from NSS and PLFS reveals significant disparities in education levels and employment status. The general category has a higher proportion of graduates and postgraduates, as well as formal employment, while STs, SCs, and OBCs face a higher prevalence of casual labour.

Education & Employment Indicators by Social Group

The table shows the Percentage distribution of persons by general education level, workers in usual status by broad status in employment, and employees in posts and services of the Central government

	ST	SC	OBC	GEN Source	Data
Percentage distribution of persons of age 7 years and above by general education level					
Literacy rate	69.6	72.4	76.9	85.9	Household Social Consumption on Education in India, NSS 75th Round (July 2017 - June 2018), NSO, MoSPI, GoI
Secondary Education	9.9	11.5	13.5	15.8	
Higher Secondary Education	6	7.7	9.4	12.8	
Graduate	3.3	4.1	5.9	12.3	
Post Graduate and above	0.7	0.9	1.2	3.4	
Percentage distribution of workers in usual status (ps+ss) by broad status in employment					
Regular wage/ Salaried	12.3	19.8	20.1	30.6	Periodic Labour Force Survey 2021-22, NSSO, MoSPI, GoI
Casual Labour	28.9	38.2	20	11.2	
Self-employed	58.8	42.1	59.9	58.2	
Percentage distribution of employees in posts and services of the Central Government					
Group A	5.9	13.0	16.6	64.6	Annual Report 2021-22, Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions, GoI
Group B	7.1	16.8	16.7	59.5	
Group C	7.8	17.7	22.8	51.7	
Total	7.7	17.5	22.1	52.7	

● **Government Employment:** The Central government, a major formal sector employer, has disparities in its workforce, with a disproportionate representation of the general category.
○ According to union government data as of January 2021:
■ The Central government employed over 18.78 lakh persons.
■ Among these employees, 52.7% belonged to the general category.
■ Within the most qualified and highest-paid cohort (Group A employees), over 64% of the employees were from the general category.

Arguments Against
● **Existing surveys are sufficient**: Opponents argue that reasonable **estimates of India's social composition** are already available through various government surveys like the **National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) and the National Family and Health Survey (NFHS).**
● **Operational challenges**: Conducting a **full-fledged caste census**, including a detailed breakdown of various jatis (sub-castes), would pose **operational challenges** as there is no official list of all castes in the country.
○ This would necessitate extensive post-census classification work, leading to potential delays in the release of General Caste tables.
● **Identity politics and social unrest**: Concerns have been raised that conducting such a census may promote identity politics, possibly overshadowing critical developmental issues such as health and education.
○ There is also the fear of a surge in demands for **higher quotas and the removal of the current 50% cap on reservations.**

- **Concerns of Reservation Quotas**: Some quarters oppose a nationwide caste census due to fears that revealing the exact OBC population share, potentially exceeding 52% as estimated by the Mandal commission, may lead to demands for expanding the 27% reservation quota for OBCs.

Arguments in Support
- **More accurate data**: Proponents of the caste census contend that data collected through surveys like **NFHS and NSSO** are estimations, whereas the Census entails an actual enumeration of every individual in the nation.
  - Moreover, the Census generates data on various aspects, including educational levels, occupations, household assets, and life expectancy, for each enumerated group.
- **Better policy making**: A caste census would provide accurate and up-to-date data on the population of different caste groups, their socio-economic status, and their needs, thereby aiding in the formulation of policies for affirmative action and redistributive justice.
  - This perspective finds support in the **Indra Sawhney judgement** of the Supreme Court, which emphasised the need for collecting such evidence every decade to identify the privileged castes and ensure that they do not avail disproportionate benefits of reservations.
- **Addressing social unrest**: Recent years have witnessed significant mobilizations by communities such as Jats, Patels, and Marathas, demanding reservations, and in some cases, these protests have turned violent.
  - The absence of scientific evidence regarding the size and relative level of deprivation of these groups compared to OBC, SC, or ST groups has been a contentious issue, further underscoring the importance of accurate caste-based data.
- **Legal Validation of Reservations**: Recent legal developments, such as the 103rd Amendment Act and a Supreme Court judgement validating reservation quotas beyond the 50% threshold, have created a natural demand for expanding OBC reservations, as the 27% figure had no basis in population estimates.
- **Precision and Fairness:** A full caste enumeration is the only way to ascertain accurate numbers and proportions of individual castes within the OBC category, which is essential to ensure reservations and benefits are distributed fairly.

Way Forward
- **Leveraging Existing Data:** Evaluating the usefulness of current caste data is an academic endeavour focused on mapping social disparities and monitoring societal shifts.
- **Data Integration:** To maximise the utility of census data, it's crucial to integrate and synchronise it with other extensive datasets, such as the NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) or NFHS (National Family Health Survey). These datasets cover areas that the Census does not, like maternal health, expanding the scope of analysis.
- **Localised Data Collection: Independent** studies should be conducted at **both the district and state levels** to gather caste and subcaste data, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of local demographics.
- **Learning from SECC:** Conducting a thorough review of the previous Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) is essential. Extracting valuable lessons from past experiences and identifying necessary improvements is crucial for a more effective census.
- **Facilitating Policy Implementation:** A comprehensive caste census can provide a holistic view of India's social fabric, shedding light on the interplay between different caste groups and their contributions to the nation's diversity. The census should go beyond merely revising exclusionary criteria for state support beneficiaries. It should serve as a tool to enhance policy implementation and foster academic reflection.

- **Conduct a Nationwide Caste Census**: Given the significant divergence in OBC population estimates, ranging from 41% to 46%, a comprehensive caste census is necessary to provide accurate data.
- **Address Concerns About Dominant Caste Groups**: Understanding the numbers and proportions of individual castes within the OBC category will help address concerns about reservations and benefits getting concentrated among certain dominant caste groups.

Source: The Hindu: Analysing the 2023 caste-based Census of Bihar