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## News

### **Population bill, a political rhetoric -**

- In the Rajya Sabha, a private member introduced a bill to curb the growing population in India.
- The bill came a week after the Economic Survey 2018-19 said that the country is witnessing a sharp decline in population growth.
- The Population Regulation Bill, 2019, seeks to bar adults with more than two children from contesting elections and denies them benefits under government schemes.
- It also said government employees must give an undertaking that they would not procreate more than twice.
- The Economic Survey highlights that Indian population is reaching the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman, which is required to stabilise the population growth.
- Instead of arm-twisting our population to go for population control, we should ask the government to take steps that fulfil the unmet need for contraceptives.

### **States divert forests, tigers move too -**

Overall tiger population in the country may have improved from 1,411 in 2006 to 2,967 in 2018, its numbers have dipped in five states (Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Jharkhand and West Bengal), suggests the recently released *Status of Tiger in India*, 2018. Of these, four diverted large amounts of forests for mining.

## One tool to track it all

MGNREGA employs at any point in time over 100 million people across the country.

### **A measure of rural distress -**

- By default, it mirrors the state of distress at the village and district levels. But its use as an index to gauge real-time rural distress has only just been recognised and spoken about at the national level.

- Since MGNREGA data is updated daily, it could be used to highlight a problem in real time. A map can be devised out of the data which can be a great device in a country that has no other mechanism to gauge rural distress.
- Geo-tagging of works under MGNREGA and online monitoring of workers already provide a platform to flash alerts in real time for areas under distress.
- Once the government notices a rise in MGNREGA numbers, it can launch a probe to find the cause and provide relief.

## **Nowhere to flow**

Water in the country's three major rivers - the Indus, the Brahmaputra and the Ganga - has plummeted drastically. The Ganga basin, the country's largest river basin, is degraded as forest areas are rapidly transforming into agricultural and urban lands.

### **Background -**

- The country's first five-year plan (1951-56) stressed on the importance of soil conservation and protecting soil from floods and erosion.
- It proposed the establishment of Central and state soil conservation boards.
- It also advised the states to enact their own legislations on soil conservation. But both the Central and state governments ignored all the suggestions.
- In 1956, the River Board Act was framed. Every state was to have a river board to regulate and develop inter-state river basins and valleys. They were supposed to advise the Union government on development opportunities, coordinate development activities and resolve disputes, while promoting basin development projects.
- More than 60 years later, not a single river board has emerged as a river basin development body.

### **National Water Policy, 2013 -**

In 2013, the Ministry of Water Resources formulated the National Water Policy, calling for better governance, planning and development of water resources. The objective was to protect the rivers and waterbodies by identifying and protecting the flood plains, removing encroachments, checking illegal sand mining and pollution and improving the maintenance of water infrastructure.

### **Flaw in the policy -**

- There is a fundamental flaw in the policy as it treats preservation of natural water sources and water infrastructure in the same manner.

- On the one hand, the policy advocates that water resource planning should be done at the basic level, and on the other, it says we need to have a national perspective while planning.
- It also states that local bodies like panchayats, municipalities and corporations and water user associations should be involved in project planning and implementation. But the policy does not clarify how it should be done.

### **New initiative -**

- The re-elected Narendra Modi government launched the Ministry of Jal Shakti by integrating all the water-related ministries—the Ministry of Water Resources, River Development and Ganga Rejuvenation and Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation—along with the National River Conservation Directorate.
- The Prime Minister’s vision on water conservation gives good hope but the country needs to protect its catchments and the channels that feed them. For this, strict laws and their implementation are of utmost significance.

## **Road to ruin**

Expressing concern about the degrading state of the environment, the Chief Justice of Bombay High Court has quashed the coastal regulation zone clearances granted to the city’s civic body and ordered the construction to stop.

### **Details -**

The US \$1.7 billion Mumbai coastal road project is one of the most expensive infrastructure development projects stretching 35.6 km and connecting the entire western coast of Mumbai city. The project aims to create 90 hectares of land by reclaiming the inter-tidal western coast of the city’s shoreline.

### **Countering the arguments -**

The Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MOEFCC) gave environmental clearance in 2017 saying -

1. The proposed project will reduce commuting time by 70 per cent and fuel saving per day of about 34 per cent. It says it will also reduce carbon footprint by 1,826 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) per annum. But the truth is that the vehicles plying on them mainly consume non-renewable fossil fuels, and are a major contributor to greenhouse gases, especially CO<sub>2</sub>.

2. MOEFCC claims the project will not have any adverse impacts on the tidal behaviour. But scientists say dumping of rocks on the inter-tidal space will increase daily high tides by up to 1.5 m, which will be detrimental to the survival of local fisherfolk.
3. MOEFCC says the project will be carried out strictly in accordance with the provisions of the Environment Protection Act, 1972, and shall render the coastal ecology of the area, including flora and fauna, in its original state after completion of the project. In truth, the damage to all inter-tidal fauna and flora will be permanent where tidal waters will be blocked for reclamation of land. It cannot be replenished.

### **Other concerns -**

- Several studies have identified the presence of a Deccan Plateau on which most of Mumbai's rocky shores today stand. Here, about 340 documented inter-tidal marine life species have been identified. Species like sea cucumbers, Gorgonians and corals, which receive protection under the Schedule 1 species of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.
- The city's indigenous coastal communities, known as Kolis, are completely dependent on artisanal fishing within shallows of this rich, biodiverse rocky shore.

## **Blow to federalism**

After the passage of the Right to Information (Amendment) Bill, 2019, Rajasthan is the state that has to withhold selection of its state information commissioners, even after having issued the notification, because the Centre is yet to prescribe their status, salary and term.

### **How it will affect federal structure?**

The status of information commissioners under the RTI Act, 2005, and according to the Constitution of India, will be totally denied with this amendment, which is designed to encroach upon the states' power to implement this right within their territory.

### **What is the amendment?**

The gist of the amendments is:

- a. the "five year fixed term or up to age of 65 years whichever is earlier" is removed;
- b. the status, term and salary of the chief information commissioner, which are now equal to that of the chief election commissioner, will be reduced; and,
- c. it is contemplated to give powers to the Centre to prescribe the term, salary and status of the information commissioners both at the Centre and the states from time to time.

### **Arguing with facts -**

- Section 27 of the RTI Act vests the power to frame RTI rules with the state governments also. As the State Information Commissions (SICS) are constituted and populated by the state governments by virtue of Section 15 of the RTI Act, they make RTI rules relating to fees and other matters listed in Section 27 for the SICS also. It is not proper to take over the power which was vested with state governments by the Constitutional scheme of distribution of power and also as per the RTI Act, 2005.
- Sections 15-18 of the RTI Act, 2005, which provide for the establishment and constitution of the SICS and the removal of information commissioners, are the main source of its federal nature. Recognising this legal position, the RTI Act vests the rule-making power in the heads of all the three organs of the State as “competent authorities”. Thus the rules that the Centre makes are applicable only to the executive branch of the government, the Union Territories and such other bodies.
- The salaries of information commissioners in the states are paid out of the Consolidated Fund of the state concerned, over which the Centre has no control. The amendment thus tries to wrest control over the states’ financial and executive powers.

## **The ban on Colistin**

On July 19, 2019, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW) issued a notification to prohibit the sale, manufacture and distribution of Colistin and its formulations in food producing animals, poultry, aqua farming and animal feed supplements.

In addition, it also directed the manufacturers of Colistin and its formulations to label “Not to be used in food producing animals, poultry, aqua farming and animal feed supplements” in a conspicuous manner on the package insert and promotional literature.

### **What is ‘Colistin’?**

Colistin is a “*highest priority critically important*” antibiotic for humans as per the World Health Organisation (WHO). This implies that Colistin is the last resort or one of the limited medicines available to treat serious infections like those caused by multi-drug resistant bacteria. The banning of Colistin is, therefore, an important action by the government to preserve certain important antibiotics for humans.

### **Misuse of Colistin -**

- Misuse of antibiotics like Colistin is rampant in India. In food animals, antibiotics is used as a growth promoter and for mass disease prevention. For instance, the poultry industry uses antibiotics to fatten chicken in less time and with less feed for commercial gains.

- They are routinely given to all birds in the name of disease prevention, even in the absence of any clinical signs of disease. And, this practice is being supported by some of the biggest poultry companies of the country.
- For example, Venky's—the source of chicken for leading fast-food brands in India such as KFC, McDonald's, Pizza Hut and Dominos—was found to be supplying Colistin to farmers to help fatten the chickens quickly.

### **Impact of misuse -**

Studies have found very high multi-drug resistant bacteria like *E coli* in poultry farms. The study went on to establish that the multi-drug resistant *E coli* is moving from farms to agricultural fields via the disposal of litter as manure, thereby increasing the chances of these multi-drug resistant bacteria infecting humans.

### **How to deal with it effectively?**

Fortunately, we have such a framework—Indian National Action Plan on Anti-Microbial Resistance (NAP-AMR). NAP-AMR aims to gradually eliminate critically important antibiotics for animal use. The ultimate goal is to restrict and phase out non-therapeutic use in farm animals. But the implementation of NAP-AMR has been tardy.

### **Concerns -**

- The Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries—which is responsible for implementing NAP-AMR in the animal sector—has failed to frame a law to ban the use of antibiotics as growth promoters.
- Similarly, it has failed to set up a system to track the use of antibiotics in animals. It has also failed to develop an action plan to phase out the use of other critically important antibiotics.
- MOHFW, the nodal agency for implementing NAP-AMR, is also moving too slowly. It also has very little money. In fact, there is no separate budget to implement NAP-AMR.