

Current Affair (07 January, 2022)

(1) Increased Election Expenditure Limit

News :- Recently, the expenditure limit for candidates for Lok Sabha constituencies was increased from Rs 54 lakh-Rs 70 lakh (depending on states) to Rs 70 lakh-Rs 95 lakh, by the Election Commission of India (ECI).

Further, the spending limit for Assembly constituencies was hiked from Rs 20 lakh-Rs 28 lakh to Rs 28 lakh- Rs 40 lakh (depending on states).

In 2020, the ECI had formed a committee in 2020 to study the election spending limit.

Key Points

About:

The enhanced amount of Rs 40 lakh would apply in Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Punjab and ₹28 lakh in Goa and Manipur.

Apart from a 10% increase in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the last major revision in spending limits for candidates was carried out in 2014.

The committee found that there has been an increase in the number of electors and Cost Inflation Index since 2014 substantially.

Cost Inflation Index

It is used to estimate the increase in the prices of goods and assets year-by-year due to inflation.

It is calculated to match the prices to the inflation rate. In simple words, an increase in the inflation rate over time will lead to a rise in the prices.

Cost Inflation Index = 75% of the average rise in the Consumer Price Index (urban) for the immediately preceding year.

Consumer Price Index compares the current price of a basket of goods and services (which represent the economy) with the cost of the same basket of goods and services in the previous year to calculate the increase in prices.

The Central Government specifies CII by notifying in the official gazette.

Election Expenditure Limit:

It is the amount an election candidate can legally spend for their election campaign and has to account for, which includes expenses on public meetings, rallies, advertisements, posters, banners, vehicles and advertisements.

Under Section 77 of the Representation of the People Act (RPA), 1951, every candidate shall keep a separate and correct account of all expenditure incurred between the date on which they have been nominated and the date of declaration of the result.

All candidates are required to submit their expenditure statement to the ECI within 30 days of the completion of the elections.

An incorrect account or expenditure beyond the cap can lead to disqualification of the candidate by the ECI for up to three years, under Section 10A of RPA, 1951.

The limit prescribed by the ECI is meant for legitimate expenditure because a lot of money in elections is spent for illegitimate purposes.

It has often been argued that these limits are unrealistic as the actual expenditure incurred by the candidate is much higher.

In December 2019, a private member's bill was introduced in the Parliament which intended to do away with the cap on election spending by candidates.

The move was taken on the grounds that the ceiling on election expenses ends up being counterproductive by encouraging candidates to under-report their expenditure.

There is no cap on a political party's expenditure, which is often exploited by candidates of the party.

However, all registered political parties have to submit a statement of their election expenditure to the ECI within 90 days of the completion of the elections.

Recommendations on State Funding

Indrajit Gupta Committee (1998): It suggested that state funding would ensure a level playing field for poorer political parties and argued that such a move would be in public interest.

It also recommended that state funds should only be given to recognised national and State parties and funding should be given in the form of free facilities provided to these parties and their candidates.

Law Commission Report (1999): It stated that a state funding of elections is 'desirable' provided that political parties are prohibited from taking funds from other sources.

National Commission to Review the Working of the Constitution (2000): It did not support the idea but mentioned that an appropriate framework for the regulation of political parties needs to be implemented before state funding is considered.

Way Forward

State Funding of Elections: In this system, the states bear the election expenditure of political parties contesting the Election.

This can bring transparency in the funding process as public finance can limit the influence of interested donors' money and thereby help curb corruption.

(2) Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, 2013

News :- Recently, a petition has been filed in the Supreme Court challenging guidelines issued by the Bombay High Court in cases under the Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, 2013.

The provision that challenged pertains to blanket bar on parties and advocates from sharing records, including orders and judgments, with the media.

The guidelines were formed by Justice G.S. Patel of the Bombay High Court ostensibly to protect the identities of the parties in a case under the POSH Act.

Key Points

Arguments of the Petitioner:

Against Spirit of Article 19: The petitioner argued that a blanket bar is against the freedom of speech and expression enshrined under Article 19.

The petition said a well-informed citizenry governs itself better.

Right to free speech can be curbed only if it interferes with the administration of justice.

Any injunction on the right of the people to know true and accurate facts is an encroachment on their right to information.

Suppression of Women's Voices: It can serve as a tool for powerful men to continue sexually harassing women and thereafter suppressing their voices on social media and in the news media.

In matters of social justice and women empowerment, public discourse plays a crucial role in shaping the nature of legal entitlements that are delivered to women.

The order may have a "ripple effect" and deter survivors from approaching courts as well as setting a dangerous precedent for trial cases.

Against Principle of Open Court: The legitimise undue protection to sexual offenders in gross violation of principles of open court and fundamental rights of survivors.

An open court serves an educational purpose.

The court becomes a platform for citizens to know how the practical application of the law impacts upon their rights.

Protection of Women Against Sexual Harassment Act, 2013

Background: The Supreme Court in a landmark judgement in the Vishakha and others v State of Rajasthan 1997 case gave 'Vishakha guidelines'.

These guidelines formed the basis for the The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 ("Sexual Harassment Act").

Mechanism: The Act defines sexual harassment at the workplace and creates a mechanism for redressal of complaints.

Every employer is required to constitute an Internal Complaints Committee at each office or branch with 10 or more employees.

The Complaints Committees have the powers of civil courts for gathering evidence.

The Complaints Committees are required to provide for conciliation before initiating an inquiry if requested by the complainant.

Penal Provisions: Penalties have been prescribed for employers. Non-compliance with the provisions of the Act shall be punishable with a fine.

Repeated violations may lead to higher penalties and cancellation of license or registration to conduct business.

Responsibility of Administration: The State Government will notify the District Officer in every district, who will constitute a Local Complaints Committee (LCC) so as to enable women in the unorganised sector or small establishments to work in an environment free of sexual harassment.

Note: SHe-Box

The Ministry of Women & Child Development has launched Sexual Harassment electronic Box (SHe-Box).

It is an effort to provide a single window access to every woman, irrespective of her work status, whether working in organised or unorganised, private or public sector, to facilitate the registration of complaint related to sexual harassment.

Any woman facing sexual harassment at the workplace can register their complaint through this portal. Once a complaint is submitted to the 'SHe-Box', it will be directly sent to the concerned authority having jurisdiction to take action into the matter.

Way Forward

There is a need to implement JS Verma Committee recommendations on Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act:

Employment Tribunal: Setting up of an employment tribunal instead of an internal complaints committee (ICC) in the Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act.

Power to Form Own Procedure: To ensure speedy disposal of complaints, the committee proposed that the tribunal should not function as a civil court but may choose its own procedure to deal with each complaint.

Expanding Scope of Act: Domestic workers should be included within the purview of the Act.

The Committee said any "unwelcome behavior" should be seen from the subjective perception of the complainant, thus broadening the scope of the definition of sexual harassment.

Responsibility of Employer: The Verma panel said an employer should be held liable if: he or she facilitated sexual harassment.

permitted an environment where sexual misconduct becomes widespread and systematic.

Where the employer fails to disclose the company's policy on sexual harassment and ways in which workers can file a complaint.

When the employer fails to forward a complaint to the tribunal

The company would also be liable to pay compensation to the complainant.

The panel opposed penalizing women for false complaints as it can potentially nullify the objective of the law.

The Verma panel also said that the time-limit of three months to file a complaint should be done away with and a complainant should not be transferred without her consent.

(3) Unrest in Kazakhstan

News :- Recently, a sharp and sudden spike in fuel prices triggered a national crisis in Kazakhstan, with the government officially stepping down following days of violent protests across the country.

Russian-led forces have also arrived in Kazakhstan at the request of the country's authoritarian president, amid a violent crackdown on anti-government protests.

Earlier, the Defence Minister of India held bilateral talks with the Defence Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan in New Delhi.

Key Points

Reason for the Unrest:

Angry Kazakhs first took to the streets after fuel prices doubled in the oil-rich Central Asian nation when the government lifted price caps for Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), commonly used in vehicles.

The protests began in the oil city of Zhanaozen, where at least 16 oil workers protesting against poor working conditions were killed by the police in 2011.

Demonstrations broke out and quickly turned violent in cities and towns across the country, in what is being called the biggest wave of protests in Kazakhstan's history.

Kazakhstan has been a largely stable autocracy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, protests of this scale haven't been seen since the 1980s.

Autocracy is a system of government of a country in which one person has complete power.

Protesters demanded the resignation of the government and lowering of LPG prices.

They have argued that the jump in prices would cause a steep increase in food prices and deepen the income inequality that has plagued the nation for decades.

Just last year (2021), inflation in the country was closing in on 9% year-on-year, the highest it has been in over five years.

Demand for Democracy:

Cheaper fuel is only the tip of the iceberg. There has been a growing discontent among ordinary Kazakhs, both over rising income inequality, which has only worsened due to the coronavirus pandemic, and the lack of democracy.

While the country has been able to attract millions of dollars worth of foreign investments by appearing politically stable, its authoritarian government has been widely criticised over the years for violating fundamental freedoms.

Significance of the Protests:

For the World:

Sandwiched between Russia and China, Kazakhstan is the world's largest landlocked country, bigger than the whole of Western Europe, though with a population of just 19 million.

It has vast mineral resources, with 3% of global oil reserves and important coal and gas sectors.

It is the top global producer of uranium, which jumped in price by 8% after the unrest.

The country is also the world's second-largest miner of bitcoin.

A mainly Muslim republic with a large Russian minority, it has largely escaped the civil strife seen in other parts of Central Asia.

The latest demonstrations matter because the country has been regarded until now as a pillar of political and economic stability in an unstable region, even as that stability has come at the price of a repressive government that stifles dissent.

For Russia:

The protests are also significant as Kazakhstan has been aligned with Russia, whose president views the country — a body double of sorts for Russia in terms of its economic and political systems — as part of Russia's sphere of influence.

The intervention by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, a Russian version of North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), is the first time that its protection clause has been invoked, a move that could potentially have sweeping consequences for geopolitics in the region.

This is the third uprising against an authoritarian, Russia-aligned nation, following pro-democracy protests in Ukraine in 2014 and in Belarus in 2020.

The chaos threatens to undermine Russia's sway in the region at a time when Russia is trying to assert its economic and geopolitical power in countries like Ukraine and Belarus.

The countries of the former Soviet Union are also watching the protests closely, and the events in Kazakhstan could help energise opposition forces elsewhere.

For US:

Kazakhstan also matters to the US, as it has become a significant country for American energy concerns, with Exxon Mobil and Chevron having invested tens of billions of dollars in western Kazakhstan, the region where the unrest began this month.

The United States government has long been less critical of post-Soviet authoritarianism in Kazakhstan than in Russia and Belarus.

Government's Reaction:

It called the protesters "a band of terrorists," declared Kazakhstan under attack and asked the Russian-led military alliance to intervene.

The government has also tried to quell the demonstrations by instituting a state of emergency and blocking social networking sites and chat apps.

Public protests without permits were already illegal. It also initially conceded to a few of the demonstrators' demands, dismissing the cabinet and announcing the possible dissolution of Parliament, which would result in new elections. But its moves have so far failed to tame discontent.

Global Stand:

The United Nations(UN), US, UK, and France have called on all sides to refrain from violence.

India is closely monitoring the situation in Kazakhstan and will facilitate the return of Indians.

Way Forward

The US and other major nations of the world need to tell the Kazakh authorities to stop throttling the internet and to avoid violence.

In the long-term, the United Nations (UN) must press the Kazakhs to hold legitimately free and fair elections or else they will see more and more protest activity.

(4) Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs: India-Spain

News :- Recently, the Union Cabinet has approved an Agreement between India and Spain on Cooperation and Mutual Assistance in Customs Matters.

Key Points

About:

It is a legal framework for sharing of information between the Customs authorities of the two countries.

It helps in the proper administration of Customs laws and detection and investigation of Customs offences and the facilitation of legitimate trade

Provisions:

The correct assessment of customs duties, especially information pertaining to the determination of the customs value, tariff classification and the origin of the goods.

Customs offence concerning illicit movement of the following:

Arms, ammunition, explosives and explosive devices.

Works of art and antiques, which are of significant historical, cultural or archaeological value.

Toxic materials and other substances dangerous to the environment and public health.

Goods subject to substantial customs duties or taxes.

New means and methods employed for committing Customs offences against Customs legislation.

Significance:

It will help in making available, reliable, quick and cost-effective information and intelligence for the prevention and investigation of Customs offences and apprehending of Customs offenders.

India Spain Relations

About:

Relations between India and Spain have been cordial since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1956. The first resident Ambassador of India was appointed in 1965.

The first state visit to Spain by an Indian head of state was paid by the then President in April, 2009.

The 11th round of the JCEC (Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation) meeting was held in Madrid in January 2018.

In order to give an impetus to trade and investment relations, India-Spain Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation (JCEC) was set up under the 1972 Trade and Economic Cooperation Agreement and has since met ten times.

Economic and Commercial Relations:

Spain is India's 7th largest trading partner in the European Union.

Bilateral trade in 2018 (Jan - Dec) stood at USD 6.31 billion, growing by 8.68% over a similar period a year ago.

India's exports grew by 8.49 % and stood at USD 4.74 billion while imports grew by 8.49 % and stood at USD 1.571.39 billion.

Indian exports to Spain include organic chemicals, textiles and garments, iron and steel products, automotive components, marine products and leather goods.

Spain is the 15th largest investor in India with cumulative FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) stock of USD 1.43 billion (in January 2000), mostly in infrastructure, renewable energy, auto components, water desalination and single brand retail.

Cultural and Academic Relations:

Cultural exchange is an important component of India-Spain bilateral relations. Casa de la India (Homestead) was founded in 2003 as a platform for the promotion of India and Spain and Indo-Spanish relationships in the field of culture, education, cooperation and enterprise.

ICCR (Indian Council for Cultural Relations) sponsored exhibitions 'Religions of India' and 'Streams of India' were also hosted in different Spanish cities in 2015.

The first International Day of Yoga (21st June, 2015) witnessed participation by over 1200 Yoga enthusiasts in a mega Master Class in the iconic Plaza de Colón followed by a Conference on Yoga.

The ICCR and Casa de la India and with support of the Embassy of India, launched an Indo-Spanish theatre co-production titled 'Flamenco India'.

Indian Diaspora:

The Indian community forms a very small percentage of the immigrant population of Spain.

Among the Asian communities, the Indian Diaspora is the third largest group, after Chinese and Pakistanis.

The earliest Indian settlers were Sindhis who came from the subcontinent at the end of the 19th century and settled in the Canary Islands.

According to Spanish statistics, the resident Indian population in Spain has gone up from 9000 in 2001 to 34761 as of 2015.

Bilateral Agreements:

Agreement on Trade and Economic Cooperation (1972)

Agreement on Cultural Cooperation (1982).

Civil Aviation Agreement (1986).

Double Taxation Avoidance Agreement (1993).

Bilateral Investment Protection and Promotion Agreement (1997).

Extradition Treaty (2002)

MoU on Institutionalisation of Political Dialogue (2006)

Way Forward

In order to continue building relations of greater trust and cooperation on the basis of which Spain and India can become closer allies in the international context, both governments should continue to commit to a more ambitious and imaginative strategy focused on the political, commercial and cultural aspects that offer the prospect of generating comparative advantages.

Cooperation in the tourist sector with Spain offering leading expertise to its Indian counterparts and enhancing the role of the migrant population of both countries, especially the well-established Indian community in Spain, are two additional key dimensions of the bilateral partnership.

The development of this relationship should also be backed by greater cooperation within the framework of the bilateral relations between the EU and India.

(5) Green Energy Corridor

News :- Recently, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs approved the scheme on Green Energy Corridor (GEC) Phase-II for Intra-State Transmission System (InSTS).

Key Points

GEC-1:

Phase 1 of the Green Energy Corridor is already under implementation in Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Rajasthan.

It is working for the grid integration and power evacuation of about 24GW of Renewable Energy.

GEC-2:

It will facilitate grid integration and power evacuation of approximately 20 GW of Renewable Energy (RE) power projects in seven States namely, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh.

The transmission systems will be created over a period of five year from Financial Year 2021-22 to 2025-26.

It is targeted to be set up with a total estimated cost of Rs. 12, 031 crores, and the Central Finance Assistance (CFA) will be 33% of the project cost.

The CFA will help in offsetting the Intra-State transmission charges and thus keep the power costs down.

Objectives:

It aims at synchronizing the electricity produced from renewable resources, such as wind and solar, with the conventional power stations in the grid.

It aims to achieve the target of 450 GW installed RE capacity by 2030.

The objective of the GEC is to evacuate approx. 20,000 MW of large-scale renewable power and improvement of the grid in implementing states.

Significance:

It will contribute to the long-term energy security of India and will promote ecologically sustainable growth by reducing carbon footprint.

It will facilitate in generating large direct and indirect employment opportunities for both the skilled and unskilled personnel.

Initiatives related to Green Energy

International Solar Alliance

One Sun, One World, One Grid (OSOWOG).

National Solar Mission.

Pradham Mantri Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthaan Mahabhiyaan (PM KUSUM)

Atal Jyoti Yojana

Suryamitra Skill Development Programme

Solar Park Scheme and Grid Connected Solar Rooftop Scheme

Rewa Solar Power Plant.

National Wind-Solar Hybrid Policy 2018.

Hydrogen Based Fuel Cells Vehicles.

(6) Reintroduction of Cheetah

News :- Recently, the Union Minister for Environment, Forests and Climate Change has launched the 'Action Plan for Introduction of Cheetah in India' under which 50 of these big cats will be introduced in the next five years.

The action plan was launched at the 19th meeting of the National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA).

NTCA is a statutory body under the Ministry of Environment, Forests and Climate Change. Last year (2021), the Supreme Court lifted its seven-year-long stay on a proposal to introduce African Cheetahs from Namibia into the Indian habitat.

Key Points

About:

‘Reintroduction’ of a species means releasing it in an area where it is capable of surviving. Reintroductions of large carnivores have increasingly been recognised as a strategy to conserve threatened species and restore ecosystem functions. The cheetah is the only large carnivore that has been eliminated, mainly by over-hunting in India in historical times. The conservation of the cheetah will revive grasslands and their biomes and habitat, much like Project Tiger has done for forests and all the species that have seen their numbers go up.

Reasons for the Extinction:

Hunting, diminishing habitat and non-availability of enough prey - black buck, gazelle and hare - led to the extinction of the cat in India (1952). The advent of climate change and growing human populations have only made these problems worse.

Reintroduction Action Plan:

With help from the Wildlife Institute of India and the Wildlife Trust of India, the ministry will be translocating around 8-12 cheetahs from South Africa, Namibia and Botswana. These countries have the world’s largest populations of the animal. The big cats will live at Kuno Palpur National Park (Madhya Pradesh) owing to its suitable habitat and adequate prey base.

Other Highlights of the NTCA Meeting:

Water Atlas:

A Water Atlas, mapping all the water bodies in the tiger-bearing areas of India has also been released. The atlas contains information about presence of such bodies in several areas, including the Shivalik Hills and Gangetic plain landscape, Central Indian Landscape and Eastern Ghats, Western Ghats landscape, North Eastern Hills and Brahmaputra flood plains and Sundarbans.

The atlas has been put together using remote-sensing data and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping.

It will provide baseline information to forest managers to shape their future conservation strategies.

Conservation Assured | Tiger Standards (CA|TS) Accreditation:


Fourteen tiger reserves have been accredited under CA|TS, and NTCA is working on getting other reserves evaluated for CA|TS accreditation.

CA|TS has been agreed upon as an accreditation tool by the global coalition of Tiger Range Countries (TRCs) and has been developed by tiger and protected area experts.

Cheetah

- The cheetah is one of the oldest of the big cat species, with ancestors that can be traced back more than five million years to the Miocene era.
- The cheetah is also the world’s fastest land mammal that lives in Africa and Asia.

Sr. No.	Parameter	African Cheetah	Asiatic Cheetah
1.	IUCN status	Vulnerable	Critically Endangered.
2.	CITES status	Appendix-I of the List.	Appendix-I of the List.
3.	Distribution	Around 6,500-7,000 African cheetahs present in the wild.	40-50 found only in Iran.

4.	Physical Characteristics	Bigger in size as compared to Asiatic Cheetah.	Smaller and paler than the African cheetah. Has more fur, a smaller head and a longer neck. Usually have red eyes and they have a more cat-like appearance.
5.	Image		

(7) 7 Years of UJALA Scheme

News :- Recently, the Ministry of Power has successfully completed seven years of distributing and selling LED lights under its flagship UJALA (Unnat Jyoti by Affordable LEDs for All) programme.

The initiative evolved into the world’s largest zero subsidy domestic lighting programme with more than 36.78 crore LEDs distributed across the country.

Key Points

About:

Launched in 2015 and initially labeled as the LED-based Domestic Efficient Lighting Programme (DELP), it aims to promote the efficient usage of energy for all i.e., its consumption, savings and lighting. Energy Efficiency Services Limited (EESL), a government company under the administrative control of the Ministry of Power, has been designated as the implementing agency for this programme. Every domestic household having a metered connection from their respective Electricity Distribution Company is eligible to get the LED bulbs under the Scheme.

Achievements:

UJALA succeeded in bringing down the retail price of LED (Light-Emitting Diode) bulbs from INR 300-350 per bulb to INR 70-80 per bulb. Apart from making affordable energy accessible to all, the programme also resulted in massive energy savings. As of today, 47,778 Million kWh per annum energy has been saved. Further, there has been 3,86 crore tonnes of reduction in CO2 emissions. It provides an impetus to the domestic lighting industry. It encourages Make in India as domestic manufacturing of LED bulbs has increased from 1 lakh per month to 40 million per month.

Other Initiatives Related to Energy Efficiency/Conservation

Gram Ujala: Under the initiative, LED bulbs will be distributed at a highly subsidised rate at Rs. 10 across 2,579 villages in five states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka.
Perform Achieve and Trade Scheme (PAT): It is a market based mechanism to enhance the cost effectiveness in improving the Energy Efficiency in Energy Intensive industries through certification of energy saving which can be traded.
Standards and Labeling: The scheme was launched in 2006 and is currently invoked for equipment/appliances.
Energy Conservation Building Code (ECBC): It was developed for new commercial buildings in 2007.
Street Lighting National Programme: EESL replaces the conventional street lights with LEDs at its own costs.

(8) Sea Dragon 22 Exercise

News :- Recently, the US Sea Dragon 22 exercise began along with the navies of India, Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea in the Pacific Ocean.

India, Japan, Australia and the US are also part of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), and also participate in the Malabar exercise.

Key Points

About:

Sea Dragon is a US-led multi-national exercise designed to practice and discuss Anti-submarine warfare tactics to operate together in response to traditional and non-traditional maritime security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region.

It is an annual exercise.

Significance:

The exercise assumes significance in the face of strained relations that some countries have with China and the growing forays of the PLA-Navy into the Indian ocean region.

The Indian Navy has recently inducted two more Poseidon 8I maritime reconnaissance and anti-submarine warfare aircraft, which would further boost its ability to keep an eye over the Chinese ships and submarines in the region.