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SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

WEIGHING IN ON THE NATIONAL RESEARCH FOUNDATION BILL

CONTEXT: India's Union Cabinet approved NRF Bill 2023 to strengthen research ecosystem, replacing SERB Act 2008.

BACKGROUND: The Indian scientific community is excited as the Union Cabinet approved the NRF Bill 2023 to establish an apex body for research and innovation across universities. The Bill aims to strengthen the research ecosystem while repealing the SERB Act 2008, which had similar functions under the Department of Science and Technology.

THE FINER POINTS: The Kasturirangan Committee proposed the independent NRF for research, adopted in NEP 2020. Existing institutions like DST, DAE, DBT, etc., will continue funding research independently. No mention of SERB's abolition in the policy document, leading the scientific community to assume its continuity under DST.

The idea of multiple funding agencies is backed by leading research nations. The NRF will coordinate with other agencies and academies to ensure synergy in research funding. Its establishment aims to strengthen the research ecosystem in India while existing institutions retain their autonomy in funding research projects.

THE FINANCIAL OUTLAY: The Kasturirangan Committee proposed NRF with an annual grant of ₹20,000 crore to boost research in India. However, NEP 2020 did not specify the financial commitment. The NRF will receive ₹10,000 crore for five years, with ₹36,000 crore to be raised from private sources. This amounts to only ₹2,800 crore annually, just 14% of the committee's recommendation.

SERB will be integrated into the NRF, which has been instrumental in promoting competitive research. The budget for SERB fluctuated, and its activities will continue under the NRF. However, there are concerns that the NRF's budget may not match the previous combined allocations, leading to potential reductions in research funding.

GREATER RELEVANCE NOW: The New Education Policy highlights research's critical role, linking it to economic prosperity in the past and present. A robust research ecosystem is emphasized due to global challenges and technological opportunities. India's rich tradition of research is acknowledged, but its aspirations need adequate financial backing as proposed by the Kasturirangan Committee.

WORLD HEPATITIS DAY, JULY 28

CONTEXT: World Hepatitis Day - 5 major forms: A, B, C, D, and E, primarily affecting the liver.

World Hepatitis Day

- World Hepatitis Day aims to raise awareness about viral hepatitis, prevent transmission, and promote access to testing and treatment for millions affected worldwide.
- Hepatitis is a major global health concern, causing liver inflammation and potentially leading to severe liver diseases such as cirrhosis and liver cancer.
- Vaccination, practicing safe sex, avoiding sharing needles, and getting tested are vital in preventing hepatitis infections and improving public health outcomes.

Hepatitis

Hepatitis is a group of viral infections that cause inflammation of the liver. It can be acute or chronic, with various transmission routes, and may lead to severe liver damage, cirrhosis, or

even liver failure if left untreated

- Hepatitis A:** A highly contagious virus transmitted through contaminated food or water, causing acute liver infection. Preventable with vaccination and proper hygiene.
- Hepatitis B:** A blood-borne virus transmitted through unprotected sex, contaminated needles, or from mother to child during childbirth. Can lead to chronic liver disease and cancer.
- Hepatitis C:** Also blood-borne, commonly spread through shared needles or unsafe medical practices. Chronic infection can lead to liver cirrhosis and cancer.
- Hepatitis D:** A rare virus that only occurs in conjunction with hepatitis B infection. It worsens the outcome of hepatitis B and increases the risk of severe liver disease.
- Hepatitis E:** Transmitted through contaminated water, this virus causes acute hepatitis and is particularly dangerous for pregnant women, with higher mortality rates.

ECOLOGY

THE HORNETS' NESTS IN THE FOREST AMENDMENT BILL

CONTEXT: Lok Sabha passed the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill 2023, with concerns over its disconnection from the Preamble's goals.

BACKGROUND: The Lok Sabha passed the Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill 2023, despite public objections. The Bill's Preamble pledges positive goals, but its operative part

contradicts it by excluding forest categories and facilitating forest destruction.

THE PROBLEM AREAS: The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill 2023 deviates from the original law's protectionist stance, causing concern among experts. It narrows the definition of forests, excludes significant forest areas, and permits activities previously regulated. The amendment could impact around 28% of India's forest cover, including ecologically significant regions like the Aravalli Hills.

The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill excludes ecologically fragile regions near international borders from forest clearances. It introduces exemptions for construction projects like zoos and eco-tourism facilities, granting unrestricted powers to the Union government for 'any desired use,' raising concerns over

potential resource exploitation without environmental scrutiny.

DISENFRANCHISING FOREST PEOPLE: The Bill fails to address other relevant forest laws, like the Forest Rights Act, 2006. Exclusion and ease of forest area diversion may lead to forest people's institutions being bypassed, impacting equity and participation. Nepal's success in increasing forest cover through community involvement serves as a lesson for India.

EXCLUSIONS THAT RAISE EYEBROWS: The Forest (Conservation) Amendment Bill fails to address flaws in forest clearances and instead excludes certain sectors. Fast-tracking strategic projects is essential, but blanket exemptions from regulatory laws are not the solution. India's natural ecosystems are crucial and require proper assessment for development projects to avoid environmental destruction.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

STAPLED VISAS FOR ARUNACHAL ATHLETES UNACCEPTABLE: INDIA

Background: India now says that the Modi-Xi engagement in Bali last November was not just a courtesy call.

External Affairs Ministry slams China's move, says it will respond suitably; New Delhi agrees with Beijing's statement that Modi, Xi discussed bilateral ties during G-20 summit in Bali last November

Terming China's decision to revive the practice of "stapled visas" for Indian sportspersons from Arunachal Pradesh "unacceptable", India on Thursday lodged a strong protest and said that it would respond suitably, after Beijing refused to give normal visas to three Wushu players.

The athletes were part of the 12-member team bound for the World University Games in Chengdu on Wednesday night. The team was held back after the government realised that the three athletes belonging to Arunachal Pradesh had been given "stapled visas", which denotes China's contention that the Indian State is a disputed territory.

What is the Stapled Visa and why is it issued?

If the stapled visa is issued to someone, the immigration Officer does not stamp on the passport of the passenger/applicant. Rather an additional paper is attached to the passport of the passenger. The attached additional paper have the full detail of the trip like purpose and duration of the trip in the destination country. So instead of passport this paper is stamped by the officials called Stapled Visa.

Generally, when you go abroad, immigration officer put a stamp on your passport so that it can be known that why are you visiting that country. But in case of Stapled Visa, the stamp is put on an additional paper instead of the passport of the traveller. This additional paper contains all the detail related to the trip of the Stapled Visa holder. So this additional paper is known as Stapled Visa.

Which countries issue stapled visa?

Stapled Visa is issued by many countries. These countries are; Cuba, Iran, Syria and North Korea. These countries used to issue Stapled Visa to the citizens of China

and Vietnam, but after a mutual agreement between these countries this process is stopped.

China still issues stapled visa to the citizens of two Indian states i.e. Arunachal Pradesh and Jammu & Kashmir but China does not apply this policy to the residents of other states of India. Since China considers Arunachal Pradesh as part of Tibet and China has confiscated the territory of Tibet that is why China considers Arunachal Pradesh as a part of its country. China considers Arunachal Pradesh as its part, but people living in Arunachal Pradesh are not considered as the Chinese citizens. That is the reason China issues Stapled Visa to citizens of Arunachal Pradesh.

According to China, citizens of Arunachal Pradesh do not require a visa to travel to their own country i.e. China, but the area of Arunachal Pradesh comes under Indian possession, hence Stapled Visa or Nathi Visa issued for Arunachal people.

Why it is called Stapled Visa?

The main reason to say "Stapled Visa" is simply that the paper which is attached separately with a passport is stapled with the help of "stapler". That is why it is called Stapled visa.

Implications of issuance of Stapled Visa:

1. It is rule in the Stapled Visa that when an Stapled Visa holder passenger (such as Arunachal resident) wants to return to his home country after completing his work in China, then his stapled visa, entry and exit pass are torn off. The passport of the person traveling does not record any details of this trip which creates a security challenge for the administration of a country like India.

News of the new rift came even as the External Affairs Ministry admitted that Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping had discussed how to improve bilateral relations when they met in Bali in November 2022, something that the government had not revealed so far.

"It has come to our notice that stapled visas have been issued to some of our citizens representing the country in an international sporting event in China. This is unacceptable and we

have lodged a strong protest with the Chinese side reiterating our position. India reserves the right to a suitable response to this action," Ministry spokesperson Arindam Bagchi said.

China's decision to give stapled visas to the athletes is a reversion to its actions in 2011-2013, when it began to issue stapled visas to Indians from Jammu and Kashmir (then including Ladakh) and Arunachal Pradesh. Mr. Bagchi also clarified that Mr. Modi and Mr. Xi's talks when they met in Bali eight months ago were not merely an "exchange of courtesies". The clarification came after China's Ministry for Foreign Affairs said on Tuesday

that the two leaders had "reached an important consensus" in Bali on stabilising India-China relations.

"During the Bali G-20 summit last year we had said that at the conclusion of the dinner hosted by the Indonesian President, Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping had exchanged courtesies, and also spoke of the need to stabilise bilateral relations," Mr. Bagchi said.

He added that for India the key to resolving bilateral issues was to resolve the issues at the LAC and to "restore peace and tranquillity to these areas".

POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

CINEMATOGRAPH BILL AIMED AT CURBING PIRACY PASSED BY RS

The Rajya Sabha on Thursday passed the Cinematograph (Amendment) Bill, 2023 that introduces stringent anti-piracy provisions, expanding the scope of the law from censorship to cover copyright also.

The Bill proposes a jail term of up to three years and a fine up to 5% of a film's production cost for persons who "use any audiovisual recording device in a place licensed to exhibit films with the intention of making or transmitting ... an infringing copy of" a film, or trying to do so.

Important features of the Bill

The Cinematograph (Amendment) Bill, 2023 was introduced in Rajya Sabha on July 20, 2023. The Bill amends the Cinematograph Act, 1952. The Act constitutes the Board of Film Certification for certifying films for exhibition. Such certifications may be subject to modifications/deletions. The Board may also refuse the exhibition of a film.

Additional certificate categories: The Bill adds certain additional certificate categories based on age. Under the Act, film may be certified for exhibition:

- without restriction ('U'),
- without restriction, but subject to guidance of parents or guardians for children below 12 years of age ('UA'),
- only to adults ('A'), or
- only to members of any profession or class of persons ('S').

The Bill substitutes the UA category with the following three categories to also indicate age-appropriateness: (i) UA 7+, (ii) UA 13+, or (iii) UA 16+. The age endorsement within the UA category by the Board will inform guidance of parents or guardians, and will not be enforceable by any other persons other than parents or guardians.

Separate certificate for television/other media: Films with an 'A' or 'S' certificate will require a separate certificate for exhibition on television, or any other media prescribed by the central government. The Board may direct the applicant to carry appropriate deletions or modifications for the separate certificate.

Unauthorised recording and exhibition to be punishable: The Bill prohibits carrying out or abetting:

- I. the unauthorised recording and

- I. unauthorised exhibition of films. Attempting an unauthorised recording will also be an offence.

An unauthorised recording means making or transmitting an infringing copy of a film at a licensed place for film exhibition without the owner's authorisation.

An unauthorised exhibition means the public exhibition of an infringing copy of the film for profit: (i) at a location not licensed to exhibit films or (ii) in a manner that infringes upon the copyright law.

Certain exemptions under the Copyright Act, 1957 will also apply to the above offences. The 1957 Act allows limited use of copyrighted content without owner's authorisation in specified cases such as: (i) private or personal use, (ii) reporting of current affairs, or (iii) review or critique of that work.

The above offences will be punishable with: (i) imprisonment between three months and three years, and (ii) a fine between three lakh rupees and 5% of the audited gross production cost.

Certificates to be perpetually valid: Under the Act, the certificate issued by the Board is valid for 10 years. The Bill provides that the certificates will be perpetually valid.

Revisional powers of the central government: The Act empowers the central government to examine and make orders in relation to films that have been certified or are pending certification. The Board is required to dispose matters in conformance to the order. The Bill removes this power of the central government.

The Bill seeks to amend the Cinematograph Act, 1952, which authorises the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) to require cuts in films and clear them for exhibition in cinemas and on television.

Union Minister Anurag Thakur said, "The government will not have revisional powers [over the CBFC's decisions] even after this Bill."

The Bill introduces three age ratings for films requiring adult supervision. Such films now get a U/A rating, but this has been split into U/A 7+, U/A 13+ and U/A 16+. Films rated for adults have largely been prohibited on television, following a

2004 Bombay High Court order. Broadcasters often cut films voluntarily, and re-apply with the CBFC for a U/A rating. The Bill

formalises this practice.

It will now have to be passed by the Lok Sabha.

SC EXTENDS MISHRA'S TENURE AS ED DIRECTOR TILL SEPT. 15

CONTEXT: The Supreme Court has extended the tenure of Sanjay Kumar Mishra as the Director of the Enforcement Directorate (ED) till September 15, 2023. The court had earlier ruled that Mishra's continuation as ED Director was "invalid and illegal", but allowed him to continue till July 31, 2023, to allow for a smooth transition.

The court's decision to extend Mishra's tenure was made in "larger public interest" and in view of the ongoing review of India

by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF). The FATF is an international body that monitors countries' compliance with anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing standards.

The court has made it clear that this is a one-time extension and that Mishra will not be eligible for any further extensions. The court has also directed the Centre to take steps to ensure that a suitable replacement for Mishra is appointed in a timely manner.

GEOGRAPHY

THE ANATOMY OF THE YAMUNA FLOODPLAINS

Yamuna flows east of Delhi, entering the city from Palla village and exiting at the Okhla barrage. The floodplains are two km wide on each side. The Delhi Development Authority designated floodplain along Yamuna's 22 km stretch in Delhi, an area of approximately 9,700 hectares — the size of 1,500 new Parliament buildings as Zone O. Zone O supports a large variety of nature-based livelihoods with a low ecological footprint. The farmland size has reduced from 4,850 hectares in 2000 to 3,330 hectares in 2020, as people were evicted, and livelihood shifted to daily wage work.

The Yamuna floodplain was designated as a protected area free from construction in the Delhi Masterplan of 1962. The Central Ground Water Authority in 2000 also notified the floodplains as 'protected' for groundwater management.

The draft Master Plan for Delhi 2041 divides Delhi into 18 zonal areas, designating Yamuna's floodplains as 'Zone O', delineated in two parts: river zone (active floodplain) and riverfront (regulated construction is allowed). The South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers and People (SANDRP) in 2020 found large parts of the Yamuna floodplains and riverbed were "grossly abused" due to lax implementation. The floodplains change from farmlands to slums, colonies, flyovers and bridges. It is also dotted with permanent structures like Ring Road, Akshardham Temple complex, Commonwealth Games Village, Player's Building

(housing the Delhi Secretariat) and the Indira Gandhi Indoor Stadium.

Who lives on these floodplains?

Most residents migrated from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Rajasthan; some bastis have existed for eight decades and others were built more recently. Farmers near Palla and Hiranki villages traditionally grow rice, wheat, and flowers on the rich silt deposited by the river.

A 2022 report found there are 56 bastis (one basti has 15 or more houses), with 9,350 households and 46,750 people. Almost half of the households (4,835) practise farming as a livelihood; others rely on daily wage work, fishing, nurseries, and animal herding.

The first major non-agriculture settlements appeared after Independence when refugees from Western Punjab fled to Delhi. They built kuccha houses on the floodplains along the Yamuna Pushta (from the ITO bridge and up to Salimgarh Fort). Over 180,000 jhuggis on the Yamuna Pushta were demolished during the 1975 Emergency, and people were resettled in the peripheries.

The 1982 Asian Games brought more than one million migrant labourers from neighbouring States, tasked with building

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flyovers, sports facilities and luxury apartments. Little to no formal housing was provided; workers eventually settled on the open plain along the western embankment after the Games. By 2004, almost 3,50,000 people lived along the Yamuna, according to estimates. They earned livelihoods as domestic help, rickshaw pullers, porters, mechanics, small vendors, factory workers in nearby trade markets such as Chandni Chowk and Sadar Bazaar.

Floodplains protect against devastating flash floods by

allowing excess water to spread out and storing that surplus. However, encroachments restrict the river to a small channel. Any intense rainfall activity (India received 26% more rainfall in July than expected) swells the river, expanding in height not in width, eventually spilling over with devastating intensity. Climate change has intensified rains in frequency and severity, and seen in the Yamuna floods, runoff water comes as a huge gushing flow in a small span of time.

ECONOMICS AND DEVELOPMENT

GOVT. MAY EXTEND PLI SCHEME TO CHEMICALS, PETROCHEMICALS

CONTEXT: The Union Government is considering extending the Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme to the chemicals and petrochemicals sector. The PLI scheme is a government incentive program that aims to boost manufacturing in India. The scheme has been successful in attracting investment in a number of sectors, including electronics, automobiles, and textiles.

The extension of the PLI scheme to chemicals and petrochemicals is expected to boost investment in these sectors and create jobs. The chemicals and petrochemicals sector is a major employer in India, and the PLI scheme is expected to create an additional 1 million jobs.

The government is also considering extending the PLI

scheme to other sectors, such as food processing and pharmaceuticals. The government is looking to boost manufacturing in India as part of its Aatmanirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) initiative.

Benefits of extending the PLI scheme:

1. Boost investment in the sector, which will create jobs and boost economic growth.
2. Help reduce India's dependence on imports of chemicals and petrochemicals.
3. Help to improve the competitiveness of the Indian chemicals and petrochemicals industry in the global market.

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