

IMPORTANT NEWS

Bay of Bengal Initiative for BIMSTEC Takes Place

Inside Story of the News:

The inaugural Foreign Ministers' gathering of the **Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC)** took place in Bangkok, Thailand. India's representation was led by S Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister.

- BIMSTEC is an economic alliance established in June 1997 by means of the Bangkok Declaration.
 - Initially, BIMSTEC was founded on June 6, 1997, with four member states: Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.
 - In 1998, Nepal joined BIMSTEC as an observer state and later, in February 2004, both Nepal and Bhutan became full-fledged members of the bloc.
- BIMSTEC comprises the following member countries:
Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Nepal, and Bhutan.
- The objective of BIMSTEC is to combat the impact of globalization by fostering regional growth through collaborative efforts, leveraging regional resources, and capitalizing on geographical advantages.
- BIMSTEC is a sector-driven cooperative organization that initially encompassed six sectors:
Trade, Technology, Energy, Transport, Tourism, and Fisheries.
- India takes the lead in coordinating the activities of Transport & Communication, Tourism, Environment & Disaster Management, and Counterterrorism & Transnational Crime within BIMSTEC.
- The seven countries surrounding the Bay of Bengal are home to approximately 22% of the world's population, and together, they boast a combined GDP nearing \$2.7 trillion.
- In conjunction with the BRICS summit held in Goa, India organized an outreach summit involving the leaders of BIMSTEC countries.

12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) Meeting Takes Place

Inside Story of the News:

During **the 12th Mekong-Ganga Cooperation (MGC) meeting in Bangkok**, External Affairs Minister **S. Jaishankar**, together with his Laotian counterpart, co-chaired the event. In his address at the summit, **EAM emphasized the significance of peace and prosperity in the Mekong region**, as it is crucial in fulfilling India's vision for security and growth, embracing all nations in the area, under its Act East policy.

- MGC is a collaborative initiative among six countries, focusing on cooperation in various areas such as tourism, culture, education, as well as transport and communications.
- The inauguration of MGC took place in 2000 in Vientiane, Lao PDR. The member countries of MGC include India and five ASEAN nations, namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

- The MGC initiative seeks to promote stronger connections among the people living in the major river basins of both the Ganga and the Mekong, recognizing them as rivers of great civilizational importance.
- The MGC also serves as evidence of the long-standing cultural and commercial ties that have existed among the member countries throughout the centuries.
- The MGC meetings are held annually, with co-chairmanship rotating between India and one of the five Mekong countries.
- The primary goals of the MGC include fostering stronger relations and deeper understanding among member countries to promote friendship, solidarity, and cooperation. It also aims to facilitate smooth inter-state movement and transit, streamline the transportation of goods and people within the region, develop essential infrastructural facilities in the Ganga-Mekong basin areas, and encourage active participation in poverty eradication efforts.
- The Mekong-Ganga Cooperation is closely linked to the realization of India's Act East policy, which involves achieving economic integration with the Southeast region, fostering development in the Northeast, and advancing cooperation within the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).
- India's "Act East Policy," aimed at enhancing economic cooperation with Southeast and East Asian nations, places significant importance on the Mekong region. To achieve this goal, India has prioritized economic engagement with MGC countries through initiatives such as the Initiative for ASEAN Integration and Narrowing the Development Gap. The focus is on developing seamless physical and digital connectivity, as well as capacity building in the region.

NITI Aayog Released 2nd Edition of MPI

Inside Story of the News:

The **second edition** of the Multidimensional Poverty Index titled "**National Multidimensional Poverty Index: A Progress Review 2023 (Based on NFHS-5)**" has been released by NITI Aayog.

- The second edition of the National Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) report has been compiled using data from the latest National Family Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) conducted during the period of 2019-21.
- The inaugural edition of the MPI was published in 2021, with its first report being based on data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-4 conducted during the reference period of 2015-16.
- Since 2010, the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) has been utilized by the United Nations Development Programme in its flagship Human Development Report, making it the most extensively employed non-monetary poverty index worldwide.
- The MPI aims to assess poverty across multiple dimensions, complementing the conventional poverty statistics that rely on per capita consumption expenditure.
- The Index is calculated using the **Alkire-Foster (AF) methodology**.
- It has three equally weighted dimensions – **Health, Education**, and **Standard of living**.
- These three dimensions are depicted by a set of 12 indicators, **encompassing nutrition, child and adolescent mortality, maternal health, years of schooling, school attendance, cooking fuel, sanitation, drinking water, electricity, housing, assets, and bank accounts**.

Key Highlights:

- During the period from 2015-16 to 2019-21, India witnessed a significant decrease in the number of individuals living in multidimensional poverty, with approximately 13.5 crore people successfully moving out of this condition.
- Between 2015-16 and 2019-21, the percentage of India's population living in multidimensional poverty decreased from 24.85% to 14.96%, signifying a substantial reduction of 9.89 percentage points.
- From 2015-16 to 2019-21, poverty in rural areas of India experienced the most rapid decline, with the poverty rate dropping from 32.59% to 19.28%. Similarly, in urban areas, the poverty rate decreased from 8.65% to 5.27% during the same period.
- The progress at the state level is as follows:
 - Among all states, Uttar Pradesh recorded the most significant decline in the number of MPI (Multidimensional Poverty Index) poor individuals, with 3.43 crore (34.3 million) people breaking free from multidimensional poverty.
 - The states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Rajasthan also made remarkable strides in reducing multidimensional poverty.
 - Bihar achieved the most rapid reduction in MPI value in absolute terms, with the proportion of multidimensional poor decreasing from 51.89% to 33.76% in 2019-21. Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh followed closely behind in their progress.

Indian Passport has seen Improvement in Henley Passport Index 2023

Inside Story of the News:

In the most recent Henley Passport Index for 2023, the Indian passport has made significant progress by rising seven places to secure the **80th rank**, a notable improvement from its **87th position in 2022**. This advancement grants its holders **visa-free access to 57 countries**.

- The Henley Passport Index is an extensive ranking system that evaluates passports from all over the world, considering the number of travel destinations their holders can access without needing a prior visa.
- This index includes 199 different passports, providing access to a total of 227 travel destinations.
- **Henley & Partners**, a global citizenship and residence advisory firm, is responsible for compiling and publishing this index.
- As of the 2023 Ranking, Singapore currently holds the title for the most powerful passport in the world, providing its citizens with visa-free access to an impressive 192 travel destinations out of a total of 227 worldwide.
- Germany, Italy, and Spain jointly hold the second position on the index.
- During the last decade, the United States has witnessed a consistent decline on the index, slipping two positions to secure the eighth spot.
- In 2014, India held the 76th rank, allowing visa-free access to 52 countries for Indian passport holders. However, its performance has shown variations over the years and has not followed a consistent trend.

- In subsequent years, India's ranking changed as follows:
 - 88th in 2015 (visa-free access to 51 countries)
 - 85th in 2016, 87th in 2017
 - 81st in 2018, 82nd in 2019 and 2020
 - 81st in 2021
- Henley & Partners additionally conducted exclusive new research, leading to the creation of the **Henley Openness Index**.
- The Henley Openness Index gauges the number of nations to which a country permits visa-free access.
- In this ranking, India secured the 94th position out of 97 countries, providing visa-free access to only four nations.
- The top 20 'most open' countries primarily consist of small island nations and African states, except for Cambodia.
 - A total of 12 countries exhibits exceptional openness by granting visa-free or visa-on-arrival entry to all 198 passports in the world (excluding their own).
 - The countries that fall under this category are Burundi, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Guinea-Bissau, Maldives, Micronesia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Samoa, Seychelles, Timor-Leste, and Tuvalu.
- Afghanistan, North Korea, Papua New Guinea, and Turkmenistan were positioned at the bottom of the Henley Openness Index, as they do not allow visa-free access for any passport holders.

E-Cigarettes and Vape Banned in India

Inside Story of the News:

Despite the ban imposed by the Union government in 2019, e-cigarettes are still being sold on e-commerce platforms, including to children under 18 years of age. To address this issue, the Health Ministry has introduced an online portal to facilitate the reporting of violations under the Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes.

- The Prohibition of Electronic Cigarettes (Production, Manufacture, Import, Export, Transport, Sale, Distribution, Storage, and Advertisement) Act was enacted in 2019.
- The prohibition on electronic cigarettes was implemented to safeguard the younger generation from the potential hazards of a new form of toxic addiction.
- From the date of commencement of this act, the ministry has issued directives to all producers, manufacturers, importers, exporters, distributors, advertisers, transporters (including couriers), social media websites, online shopping websites, shopkeepers/retailers, etc., explicitly instructing them not to engage in the direct or indirect production, manufacture, import, export, transport, sale, distribution, or storage of e-cigarettes, whether as a complete product or any part thereof.
- As per the provisions of the Act, the responsibility for enforcing the order has been entrusted to "authorized officers" in accordance with the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973.

PMAYG 2023: Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana Gramin

Inside Story of the News:

The Centre has reallocated 1.44 lakh houses that were initially assigned to approximately two dozen states and UTs. These states and UTs failed to approve the construction of these houses by June 30 under the PMAY-G. As an alternative, the houses have been granted as an additional allocation to Uttar Pradesh.

- The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin (PMAY-G) is an initiative by the Union Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), with a target to build 2.95 crore houses by March 2024.
- In 2014, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) identified certain gaps in the Indira Awas Yojana (initiated in 1996) which aimed to cater to the housing needs in rural areas.
- These gaps included issues such as lack of transparency in beneficiary selection, subpar construction quality of houses, inadequate monitoring, and other related shortcomings.
- To rectify the shortcomings in the rural housing program and to uphold the Government's pledge of ensuring "Housing for All" by 2022, the Indira Awas Yojana (IAY) was revamped and restructured as Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana - Gramin (PMAYG) with effect from 1st April 2016.
- The primary objective of PMAY-G is to ensure that every houseless household and those residing in kutcha and dilapidated houses receive a permanent pucca house with basic amenities by the year 2022.
- The short-term goal is to encompass 1.00 crore households living in kutcha or dilapidated houses within a span of three years, from 2016-17 to 2018-19.
- This will be achieved by constructing high-quality houses utilizing locally sourced materials, designs, and skilled masons specifically trained in ensuring top-notch workmanship.

Key Highlights of PMAY-G:

- The minimum unit size (house) has been increased from the current 20 sq.mt. to 25 sq.mt., which now includes a designated area for hygienic cooking purposes.
- The unit assistance has been raised from
 - Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 1.20 lakh for plain regions, to be shared in a 60:40 ratio between the Central and State Governments.
 - Rs. 75,000 to Rs. 1.30 lakh, to be shared in a 90:10 ratio (Central to State Government) for Northeastern and hilly states.
- Efficient convergence will be employed to ensure the provision of various essential amenities such as electricity, piped drinking water facility, rainwater harvesting, LPG gas connection through the UJJWAL scheme, solar initiatives, backyard fruit plants, poultry, goatery, dairy shed, and solid and liquid waste management, among others.

New Establishment of the Standing Committee on Statistics (SCoS)

Inside Story of the News:

The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) has recently formed the Standing Committee on Statistics (SCoS) with the objective of improving the credibility and reliability of the official data produced by the National Statistical Office (NSO).

- Under the leadership of Pronab Sen, former National Statistical Commission chief and India's first Chief Statistician, the committee's primary goal is to tackle data quality concerns and bridge the trust deficit pertaining to India's economic indicators and poverty estimates.
- The establishment of the SCoS holds notable importance as a response to crucial feedback on India's statistical apparatus from the Economic Advisory Council (EAC) to the Prime Minister.
- The EAC's chairperson, Bibek Debroy, emphasized the dearth of expertise in survey design within the Indian Statistical Service.
- The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) was established as an Independent Ministry in 1999 following the amalgamation of the Department of Statistics and the Department of Programme Implementation.
- The Ministry is divided into two wings: one is dedicated to Statistics, known as the National Statistical Office (NSO), which includes the Central Statistical Office (CSO), the computer center, and the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO).
- In addition to these wings, there are two more entities: the National Statistical Commission (NSC), which was established through a resolution, and the autonomous Institute called the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI), which holds national significance.