

**NATIONAL SOCIAL ISSUES- WOMEN, POPULATION, URBANISATION, EMPOWERMENT ETC****Govt declares 'one-time financial assistance' for Rare diseases**

Government has announced a 'one-time financial assistance' for Rare diseases. The standing finance committee has approved a proposal for adding a sub-component under the umbrella scheme of Rashtriya Arogya Nidhi (RAN) for provision of one-time financial assistance to those below threshold poverty line for specified rare diseases which require one-time treatment.

**Rare diseases:**

- A rare disease, also referred to as an orphan disease, is any disease that affects a small percentage of the population.
- Most rare diseases are genetic, and are present throughout a person's entire life, even if symptoms do not immediately appear. In Europe a disease or disorder is defined as rare when it affects less than 1 in 2000 citizens.
- Rare diseases are characterised by a wide diversity of symptoms and signs that vary not only from disease to disease but also from patient to patient suffering from the same disease. Relatively common symptoms can hide underlying rare diseases, leading to misdiagnosis.
- The most common rare diseases recorded in India are Haemophilia, Thalassemia, sickle-cell anaemia and primary immuno deficiency in children, auto-immune diseases, Lysosomal storage disorders such as Pompe disease, Hirschsprung disease, Gaucher's disease, Cystic Fibrosis, Hemangiomas and certain forms of muscular dystrophies.

**Need of nationwide policy:**

- State has responsibility for providing affordable, accessible and reliable health-care services to every citizen. In fact constitution also mentions importance of health-care services under articles like 21, 38 and 47 and thus state cannot evade this responsibility under the pretext of non-justifiability of articles.
- Given the low volumes at which the drugs needed to treat such diseases would be consumed, pharmaceutical companies have little commercial incentive to produce them. Thus, a nationwide policy on orphan drugs could incentivize these players.
- Even if pharmaceutical companies are incentivized to develop drugs to treat rare diseases, pharmaceutical companies remain beholden to the laws of economics and, given the low demand for orphan drugs, price these drugs as high as they choose to. Hence there has to be regulation of the government in restricting the exorbitant prices of the drugs.
- Although proportion of rare diseases is much less than the other diseases, it does not reduce the importance of the life of person affected by rare diseases. Thus national policy would remove this adverse distinction and would make government committed equally to all people.

**Mandal Dam project:**

Mandal Dam is being built on the North Koel River. It will help around one lakh eleven thousand hectares of agricultural land in Jharkhand and Bihar to get irrigation facilities.

**Funding:** 60% of the project cost would be financed by the central government as a grant from Long-Term Irrigation Fund (LTIF) under Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY). Remaining 40% will be borne by the States through loan financed by NABARD.

**North Koel River:** North Koel River originates on Ranchi plateau in Jharkhand and joins the Sone River, a few miles north-west of Haidarnagar in Jharkhand. The river meanders through the northern part of Betla National Park. The principal tributaries of the North Koel River are Auranga and the Amanat.

**GEOGRAPHY****Polar vortex**

Weather experts are predicting an extremely cold January and February for the northeastern United States, much of northern Europe and parts of Asia. The reason being given is the polar vortex.

In this decade, the polar vortex has also been blamed on extremely cold weather in the United States in 2014 and the infamous 'Beast from the East', the blast of cold weather that blew from Siberia towards western Europe and the UK in February and March of 2018.

Polar vortex:

- It is described as a whirling cone of low pressure over the poles that is strongest in the winter months due to the increased temperature contrast between the polar regions and the mid-latitudes, such as the US and Europe.
- The polar vortex spins in the stratosphere, a layer of the atmosphere 10-48 km above the ground and above the troposphere, where most familiar weather patterns develop.
- Usually, when the vortex is strongest, cold air is less-likely to plunge deep into North America or Europe. In other words, it forms a wall that protects the mid-latitudes from cold Arctic air.
- But occasionally, the polar vortex is disrupted and weakens, due to wave energy propagating upward from the lower atmosphere. When this happens, the stratosphere warms sharply in an event known as sudden stratospheric warming, in just a few days, miles above the Earth's surface.
- The warming weakens the polar vortex, shifting its location somewhat south of the pole or, in some instances, 'splitting' the vortex up into 'sister vortices'.

Effects: The split higher up in the atmosphere can give rise to both, sudden and delayed effects, much of which involves declining temperatures and extreme winter weather in the eastern US along with northern and western Europe.

A sudden stratospheric warming also leads to a warm Arctic not only in the stratosphere but also in the troposphere as well. A warmer Arctic, in turn, favours more severe winter weather in the Northern Hemisphere mid-latitudes including the eastern US.

## CONSTITUTION AND POLITY

### **Legal status for SSC**

A Parliamentary Standing Committee (PSC) has recommended that the Centre accord statutory status to the Staff Selection Commission (SSC), one of the largest recruitment agencies in the country.

The SSC was created to ease the burden of the UPSC by taking over the recruitment for posts below the Group 'A' level. The Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) and all State Public Service Commissions either have constitutional or legal status. The SSC is the only such organisation that performs similar functions on a much larger scale, but does not enjoy statutory status. At present, the SSC has sanctioned staff strength of 481 officers but is functioning with 75% of its sanctioned strength.

### **Need for a statutory status:**

- There has been a phenomenal increase in the workload of the SSC, from 9.94 lakh candidates in 2008-09 to over 2 crore in 2016-17.
- While the workload and responsibilities of the SSC have increased exponentially over the years, it has remained an "attached body" under the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT), and has to depend entirely on the government for all its needs, with no autonomy.
- According statutory status to the SSC would contribute to greater functional autonomy, faster decision-making and efficiency in the overall performance and delivery of results by the SSC in the recruitment process.

### **Freedom of Literature Bill in Parliament:**

Congress MP Shashi Tharoor recently introduced the "Freedom of Literature Bill" in the Lok Sabha as a private member bill. The Bill seeks to amend certain provisions in –

- the Indian Penal Code
- the Code of Criminal Procedure
- the Customs Act
- Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act

The specified provisions largely affect the literary and artistic freedom in the country. The objective is to amend and remove the existing provisions of the laws which can be misused to harass authors by vested interests.

The need for the Bill: In recent times, several attempts were made to get books withdrawn, pulped or sanitised of offending content. Some of the instances include the following:

- Wendy Doniger's 'The Hindus: An Alternative History' was withdrawn from circulation
- A.K. Ramanujan's essay 'Three Hundred Ramayanas' was dropped from a Delhi University syllabus
- Tamil writer Perumal Murugan's 'Madhorubagan' (One Part Woman) was withdrawn by the author under mob pressure (resurrected by a Madras High Court verdict)
- The principles of public order, national unity and social or religious harmony are being invoked against the practice of literary freedom.
- These have, over the period, evolved as threats to free expression, especially artistic freedom.
- It is in this context that the Freedom of Literature Bill was introduced.
- The Bill is a welcome step towards removing or diluting penal provisions that inhibit literary freedom.

#### **GOVERNANCE- SCHEMES, E-GOVERNANCE, SERVICES ETC**

##### **Maharashtra farmers to get sops for using solar pumps**

To encourage farmers to use solar agriculture pumps, the Maharashtra government has decided to give two LED bulbs, a DC fan and a mobile charging socket as freebies.

##### **Atal Solar Krishi Pump (ASKP) Yojana**

- Maharashtra govt. has launched ASKP scheme for farmers to provide subsidy of upto 95% on solar agriculture pumpsets.
- Farmers with less than 5 acres of land just need to pay 5% i.e. Rs. 12,000 and get three horse power pump
- Farmers with more than 5 acres of land just need to pay Rs. 30,000 and get five horse power solar powered pump

##### **Benefits of the Initiative**

- The State aims to reduce losses due to non-payment of electricity bills and also promote solar energy by implementing the scheme.
- The scheme would be beneficial to farmers who reside in remote areas where the agricultural feeder is not possible.

#### **INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS- BILATERAL, GROUPINGS, ORGANISATIONS**

##### **Asia Competitiveness Institute's (ACI) EDB index:**

Asia Competitiveness Institute's (ACI) has released its Ease of Doing Business Index on Attractiveness to Investors, Business Friendliness and Competitive Policies (EDB Index ABC).

Performance of Indian states: Andhra Pradesh has topped the list. It is followed by Maharashtra and Delhi.

ACI: Asia Competitiveness Institute at Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore was established as a research centre in 2006 with an aim to build intellectual leadership and network for understanding and developing competitiveness in the Asia region.