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Current affairs summary for prelims

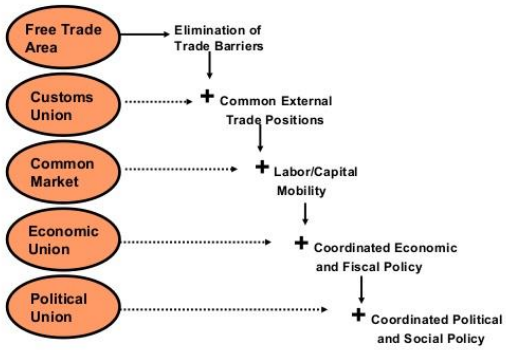
11 March, 2024

India-EFTA Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement

Context: *On March 10th, 2024, India and the European Free Trade Association inked a Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA).*

- **Overview of TEPA with EFTA:**
  - The Union Cabinet, chaired by the Hon'ble Prime Minister, has approved the Trade and Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) with EFTA countries, comprising Switzerland, Iceland, Norway, and Liechtenstein.
  - EFTA, established in 1960, promotes free trade and economic integration among its four Member States.
- **Key Points Highlighted:**
  - TEPA represents a modern and ambitious trade agreement, marking India's first FTA with four developed nations in Europe.
  - It includes binding commitments of $100 billion in investment and 1 million direct jobs over the next 15 years.
  - The agreement aims to boost Make in India and provide opportunities for the young and talented workforce, enhancing access to European and global markets.
- **Contents of the Agreement:**
  - The agreement comprises 14 chapters focusing on various aspects including market access, rules of origin, trade facilitation, investment promotion, intellectual property rights, and sustainable development.
  - It addresses sectors like goods, services, investment, and legal provisions for enhanced trade relations.
- **Highlights of TEPA:**
  - EFTA commits to promoting investments aiming to increase FDI by $100 billion and generate 1 million jobs in India over 15 years.
  - Tariff concessions cover a significant portion of trade, with India offering access to 82.7% of its tariff lines.
  - Specific provisions safeguard sensitive sectors such as pharma, medical devices, and processed food.
- **Services and Intellectual Property Rights:**
  - TEPA facilitates services exports in sectors like IT, business services, education, and healthcare.
  - Provisions for Mutual Recognition Agreements in professional services ensure compatibility in standards.
  - Intellectual property rights commitments adhere to TRIPS standards, addressing concerns related to generic medicines and patent regulations.
- **Sustainable Development and Trade Facilitation:**
  - TEPA underscores commitments to sustainable development, transparency, and efficiency in trade procedures.
  - It aims to empower exporters, enhance access to specialized inputs, and create a conducive environment for trade and investment.
- **Implications for India's Economy and "Make in India" Initiative:**
  - TEPA is expected to boost domestic manufacturing in sectors like infrastructure, manufacturing, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy.
  - It provides an opportunity for Indian companies to access EU markets through Switzerland and encourages technology collaboration and innovation.
- **Job Creation and Skill Development:**
  - The agreement foresees the creation of a significant number of direct jobs for India's youth over the next 15 years.
  - It emphasizes vocational and technical training, along with facilitating technology collaboration and access to leading-edge technologies.

A Hierarchy of Regional Economic Integration Initiatives



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Appointment of Election Commissioners

Context: *The Election Commission (EC) is expected to fill the two vacancies left by the unexpected resignation of Arun Goel and the retirement of Anup Chandra Pandey by March 15.*

- The high-level selection committee, chaired by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is anticipated to convene on March 14 to address the vacancies within the Election Commission.
- Opposition leader Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury has been enlisted as a member of this committee.
- With the announcement of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections looming, the government is accelerating the appointment process.
- A shortlist of candidates will be compiled by a search committee under the guidance of Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal, which includes the Union Home Secretary and the Secretary of the Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT).

- **Constitutional Provisions:**
  - Part XV (Elections) of the Constitution encompasses only five Articles (324-329).
  - The legislative process for appointing the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs) is not specifically outlined in the Constitution.

Face to Face Centres
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- Article 324 grants the Election Commission the authority for the "superintendence, direction, and control of elections," comprising the CEC and other ECs appointed by the President.
- The President appoints the CEC and ECs based on the advice of the Union Council of Ministers led by the Prime Minister.
- The Law Minister recommends a pool of suitable candidates to the Prime Minister for consideration, with the President making the final appointment based on the PM's advice.

➢ **Removal:**

- CEC and ECs have the option to resign voluntarily or may face removal before the completion of their term.
- The process for removing the CEC mirrors that of a Supreme Court judge and requires parliamentary involvement.
- Removal of any other EC can only occur upon the recommendation of the CEC.

➢ **The CEC and Other ECs (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Bill, 2023**

- **Replacement of Existing Legislation:**
  - The Bill replaces the Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991.
  - It addresses matters concerning the appointment, salary, and removal processes of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs).
- **Appointment Process:**
  - The President will appoint the CEC and ECs based on the recommendation of a Selection Committee.
  - The Selection Committee comprises the Prime Minister, a Union Cabinet Minister, and the Leader of the Opposition or the leader of the largest opposition party in Lok Sabha.
  - Recommendations made by the Selection Committee remain valid even in the event of vacancies within the committee.
  - A Search Committee led by the Cabinet Secretary will propose a list of names to the Selection Committee.
  - Eligibility for these positions includes holding or having held a post equivalent to the Secretary to the central government.
- **Changes in Salary and Conditions:** The salary and service conditions of the CEC and ECs will now align with those of the Cabinet Secretary, departing from the previous equivalence to a Supreme Court Judge's salary.
- **Removal Process:**
  - The Bill maintains the constitutional provision (Article 324(5)) allowing the removal of the CEC similar to that of a Supreme Court Judge.
  - ECs can only be removed upon the recommendation of the CEC.
- **Protection for CEC and ECs:**
  - The Bill provides legal protection to the CEC and ECs against proceedings related to actions taken during their tenure, given such actions were performed in the discharge of official duties.
  - This amendment aims to shield these officials from civil or criminal proceedings concerning their official functions.

Voyager 1 goes 'senile'

Context: *Concerns have arisen about the functionality of Voyager 1, the farthest human-made object in space, as it has been transmitting nonsensical data since November.*

➢ **Voyager 1's Contributions:**

- Voyager 1 made significant discoveries during its mission, including identifying a thin ring around Jupiter, two new moons of Jupiter, five new moons of Saturn, and a new ring around Saturn known as the G-ring.
- Launched in 1977 along with Voyager 2, the spacecraft was originally planned for a two-planet mission but extended to explore Uranus and Neptune as well.

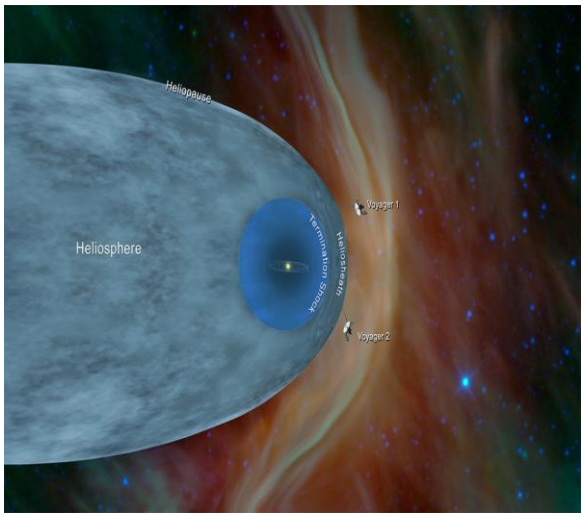
➢ **Legacy of the Voyager Mission:**

- Despite being initially designed for a five-year mission, the Voyager spacecraft have continued to operate and transmit valuable data for over four decades.
- NASA asserts that even if the mission had ended after the Jupiter and Saturn flybys, the information gathered would have significantly impacted astronomy and our understanding of the solar system.

➢ **Voyager 1**

- Voyager 1, part of NASA's Voyager program, launched on September 5, 1977, to explore the outer Solar System and interstellar space.
- Launched 16 days after its twin Voyager 2, it communicates with Earth through the NASA Deep Space Network (DSN).
- Real-time distance and velocity data are provided by NASA and JPL, with Voyager 1 currently 163 AU (24.4 billion km; 15.2 billion mi) from Earth as of January 2024.
- Voyager 1 conducted flybys of Jupiter, Saturn, and Saturn's moon Titan, prioritizing Titan over Pluto due to its known atmosphere.

- It studied the weather, magnetic fields, and rings of Jupiter and Saturn, providing detailed images of their moons.
- Voyager 1's extended mission aims to explore the boundaries of the outer heliosphere and the interstellar medium.
- It crossed the heliopause and entered interstellar space on August 25, 2012, becoming the first spacecraft to do so.
- On December 12, 2023, NASA announced that Voyager 1's flight data system is unable to use its telemetry modulation unit, potentially impacting its ability to transmit scientific data, with its future mission status uncertain.



NEWS IN BETWEEN THE LINES

The National Commission for Scheduled Castes

Recently, the Union government has constituted the National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC), ensuring representation from the Madiga community, particularly prominent in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.

About the National Commission for Scheduled Castes:

- The National Commission for Scheduled Castes (NCSC) was established under **Article 338 of the Constitution** of India to safeguard the interests of **Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Anglo Indian community** and ensure their social, educational, economic and cultural development.
- It was established in **2004** by the Parliament of India and is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.
- It is a constitutional body tasked with investigating and monitoring all matters relating to the safeguards provided for SCs under the Constitution and other laws.
- It consists of a **Chairperson, a Vice-Chairperson, and three other members**, all **appointed by the President** of India by warrant under his hand and seal.
- It investigates and monitors matters relating to SCs' safeguards, inquires into complaints, advises the government, and submits reports based on its investigations and findings.

Madiga Community:

- The Madiga community is a **Telugu caste** from southern India.
- They are a **Scheduled Caste (SC)** and primarily reside in the states of Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Karnataka.
- A small minority of the Madiga community also live in Tamil Nadu.
- The Madiga community is traditionally associated with cobbling, tanning leather, and crafting the traditional drum called the Dappu.
- **Sub-categorization involves classifying existing SC caste groups into further categories** based on their historical dominance in availing government benefits.
- Its aim is to ensure a more equitable distribution of benefits among SC communities by allocating higher shares to historically marginalized groups and lesser shares to traditionally dominant groups.

Golden Langur

Recently, a comprehensive survey conducted by the Primate Research Centre NE India (PRCNE), Assam Forest Department, Bodoland Territorial Council, SACON and Conservation Himalayas revealed an estimated population of 7,396 golden langurs in India.

About Golden langurs:

- The golden langur, scientifically known as **Trachypithecus geei**, belongs to the family **Cercopithecidae** and the genus Trachypithecus.
- It is primarily found in the northeastern region of India, particularly in the states of **Assam**, **West Bengal** and **Meghalaya**.
- It inhabits forested areas, including tropical and subtropical forests.
- It has **a long tail**, **well-developed limbs** and a relatively small head with a short face.
- It inhabits both primary and **secondary forests**, as well as areas adjacent to rivers and streams.
- It is primarily arboreal, spending most of its time in the trees, but it also forages on the ground for food.
- The golden langur is primarily folivorous, feeding on a variety of leaves, fruits, flowers, and seeds.
- The golden langur is classified as **Endangered on the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species.**

Connectome

About Connectome:

- The Connectome is a **comprehensive map of connections, or synapses, between neurons in the brain.**
- It represents the intricate network of neural pathways responsible for transmitting electrical and chemical signals.
- It **serves as a blueprint of the brain's neural architecture**, depicting how neurons are interconnected and communicate with each other.
- It plays a crucial role in understanding brain function, cognition and behavior.
- Mapping the Connectome involves tracing and visualizing the connections between individual neurons and neural circuits using advanced imaging techniques and computational methods.
- This process helps researchers uncover the structural and functional organization of the brain at various levels of complexity.
- Understanding the Connectome provides insights into brain disorders and neurological conditions such as **Alzheimer's disease, autism spectrum disorders** and **schizophrenia**.

Place in News

Catalhoyuk

Recently, the scientists in Catalhoyuk, Turkey have discovered the 'oldest bread' in the world.

Catalhoyuk:

- Catalhoyuk is situated in **Anatolia, specifically within the Asiatic part of Turkey**, in the Cumra district of Konya Province.
- Catalhoyuk in southern Anatolia is among the largest and best-preserved Neolithic sites in the world.
- Designated as a **UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2012**, Catalhoyuk provides invaluable insights into early human settlements during the Neolithic period.

Bread Loaf:

- The oldest bread was found within a furnace-like structure identified **as "Mekan 66"** at Catalhoyuk.
- Analysis revealed that the bread loaf was **made from a mixture of wheat, barley and peas.**
- Scientists conducted radiocarbon dating on the bread residue, dating it to **6600 BC,** indicating an age of approximately 8,600 years.
- It was prepared by mixing water and flour, left to ferment; however, it was not cooked, possibly due to incomplete or failed baking attempts.
- Both **wheat** (Triticum aestivum) and **barley** (Hordeum vulgare) were **first domesticated by humans** in the Fertile Crescent around 10,000 BCE, marking a significant transition from hunter-gatherer to settled farming communities.

POINTS TO PONDER

- Which state/UT initiated Operation Kamdhenu to combat cattle smuggling? **– Jammu and Kashmir**
- With which bank did RBI enter into an MoU to encourage the utilization of local currencies? **– Bank Indonesia**
- In 2024, which country joined NATO as its 32nd member? **– Sweden**
- What is the name of the joint coast guard exercise between India and another country, recently known as "Sea Defenders-2024"? **– United States of America**
- Which ministries jointly launched the School Soil Health Programme? **– Ministry of Education & Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare**