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13 May, 2024

Aurora Lights in India

Context: *Red-hued Aurora lights graced Ladakh's clear skies late at night, bridging the gap between Friday (May 10) and Saturday.*

➢ **Aurora Sightings in Ladakh:**

- The Indian Institute of Astrophysics, Bengaluru (IIA), captured auroras using all-sky cameras positioned around the Indian Astronomical Observatory (IAO) in Hanle, Ladakh.
- The IAO, owned and operated by the IIA, is equipped with cameras capable of continuously imaging the sky.
- Aurora activity persisted between midnight and the twilight hours of Saturday, peaking at 2 am.
- Red aurora lights adorned the skies over the IAO in Hanle, Ladakh.

➢ **Explanation of Auroras:**

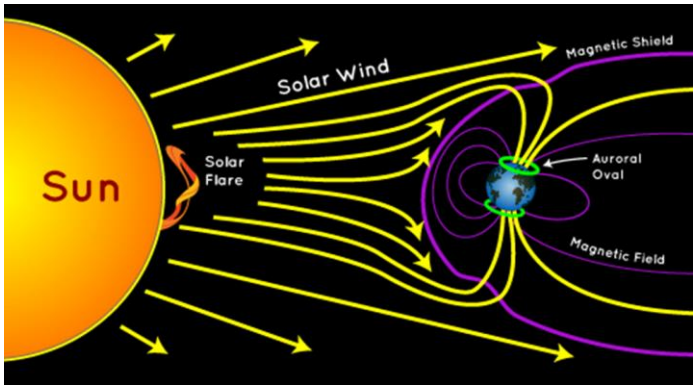
- Auroras result from the interaction in space between charged solar winds and the Earth's magnetosphere.
- Solar winds, composed of charged particles, collide with the Earth's upper atmosphere, producing light.
- The Earth's magnetosphere, strongest at the poles, typically protects against solar winds.

➢ **Reasons for Auroras in Wider Regions:**

- Heightened solar flare activity, including four strong solar storms between Friday and Saturday, caused the auroras.
- Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs) from an active region on the Sun reached Earth, disturbing space weather.
- Solar flares travelling at high speeds hit Earth's atmosphere, resulting in auroras visible even in lower-latitude regions.
- Similar intensity solar storms previously affected Earth in November 2003.

➢ **Impact of Solar Storms:**

- Continuous solar storms pose a threat to satellite operations in Low Earth Orbit (LEO).
- Satellites used for navigation, communication, and other purposes could be vulnerable to solar storms.
- Solar storms create a highly energetic particle environment, inducing heating in the upper atmosphere and increasing radiation hazards.
- Excessive drag on satellites in LEO can lead to operational issues and, in extreme cases, satellite destruction.



ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA)

Context: *The fourth Joint Committee meeting to review the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) took place in Putrajaya, Malaysia, from May 7th to May 9th, 2024.*

➢ **Progress of Joint Committee Meetings:**

- The Joint Committee has convened four times to conduct the review process.
- In the initial two meetings, the Committee finalised the Terms of Reference and Negotiating Structure for the review negotiations.
- The third meeting, held in New Delhi on February 18-19, 2024, marked the initiation of negotiations for the review of AITIGA.

➢ **Sub-Committees and Discussions:**

- Eight Sub-Committees have been established to address various policy areas of the Agreement during the review.
- Five Sub-Committees have commenced discussions, with all five reporting their outcomes to the 4th AITIGA Joint Committee.
- Four of these Sub-Committees, focusing on 'National Treatment and Market Access,' 'Rules of Origin,' 'Standards, Technical Regulations and Conformity Assessment Procedures,' and 'Legal and Institutional Issues,' physically met alongside the 4th AITIGA Joint Committee in Putrajaya, Malaysia.
- The Sub-Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary met earlier on May 3rd, 2024, with guidance provided by the Joint Committee.

➢ **Overview of AITIGA:**

- The ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITIGA) is a free trade agreement (FTA) signed in 2009 between India and the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).
- Its primary goal is to liberalise trade in goods between the two regions, fostering economic growth and development.

➢ **Objectives of AITIGA:**

- Reduce and eliminate tariffs on the majority of goods traded between India and ASEAN countries.
- Simplify customs procedures, harmonise standards, and enhance transparency to facilitate trade.
- Enhance market access for goods and services.
- Encourage foreign investment and promote regional economic cooperation.

➢ **Key Features of AITIGA:**

- **Tariff Reductions:** AITIGA outlines phased reductions and eventual elimination of tariffs on over 90% of traded goods within a specific timeframe.
- **Non-Tariff Barriers (NTBs):** The agreement addresses NTBs such as technical regulations,

sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and customs procedures to ensure smoother trade flow.

- **Rules of Origin:** Clear rules are established to determine the origin of goods, ensuring they qualify for preferential treatment.
- **Safeguard Measures:** Provisions are in place to protect domestic industries from sudden import surges.
- **Dispute Settlement:** A mechanism is available for resolving trade disputes between India and ASEAN member countries.

Sickouts

Context: *Over the span of a few weeks, Vistara and Air India Express, two Indian airlines, faced protests from certain employee sectors crucial to their operations.*

➢ **Understanding Sickouts and Their Distinction from Strikes:**

- Sickouts, also known as calling in sick en masse, have become a method of industrial action employed by employees, primarily in crucial operational roles, to disrupt operations and strike work without formally declaring a strike.
- Unlike traditional strikes, sickouts involve organising a large number of workers to take coordinated leave on grounds of illness, often with little notice to management, making it difficult to implement mitigation measures effectively.
- While both strikes and sickouts involve employees refusing to work to address grievances and demands, strikes typically follow formal procedures, involve recognised unions, and adhere to legal protocols, whereas sickouts are informal and swift actions.

➢ **Factors Contributing to the Rise of Sickouts:**

- Sickouts have become more frequent in recent years, particularly as formal strikes have declined in frequency.
- They are most effective when employees in key operational roles participate, such as pilots, cabin crew, and engineering staff, whose absence can significantly disrupt company operations.
- Sickouts are seen as effective protest tools for specific worker categories with limited grievances, as rallying support from other departments or colleagues may be challenging.
- Management faces difficulties in taking punitive action against sickouts due to the covert nature of the action, disguised as illness, making identification of organisers and leaders challenging.

➢ **Extent and Impact Beyond Aviation:**

- Sickouts have been observed beyond the aviation sector, with examples from various industries in different countries.
- In India, instances of sickouts have occurred in sectors such as aviation, including protests by aircraft technicians and cabin crew at IndiGo and engineers at Kingfisher Airlines.
- Sickouts are not restricted to specific sectors, as they have been utilized by workers in various industries globally, particularly in essential services where legal constraints on striking may apply.
- Examples include sickouts by Amazon workers in the US over concerns regarding the company's response to the Covid-19 pandemic and alleged punitive actions against workers who raised issues, as well as actions by public school teachers in Detroit protesting poor working conditions.

News in Between the Lines

Central Empowered Committee

Recently, a report by the Central Empowered Committee (CEC) informed the Supreme Court that over 308 hectares of the ecologically sensitive Delhi Ridge area have been encroached upon and another 183 hectares have been diverted for "non-forestry purposes."

About Central Empowered Committee:

- The Central Empowered Committee (CEC) is **a national-level body** that **monitors the implementation of the Supreme Court's orders related to environmental conservation**.
- It is a panel of experts established by the Supreme Court of India on **9th May 2002** to monitor compliance with the court's orders and directives related to environmental conservation.
- **In August 2023**, the Supreme Court allowed the government to make the CEC a permanent body.
- It was **reconstituted on December 8, 2023** to improve its effectiveness in safeguarding the environment.
- It's made up of a **group of experts** and **officials**, including **retired IAS and Forest Service officers, environmentalists** and **legal experts.**
- The **members are nominated by the Central government** for a **tenure of three years.**

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Sahitya Akademi Fellowship

Recently, an eminent author Ruskin Bond has been awarded the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship at his Mussoorie residence.

About Sahitya Akademi Fellowship:

- The Sahitya Akademi Fellowship is **India's highest literary honour for living writers, given by the Sahitya Akademi, India's National Academy of Letters.**
- The fellowship includes a **cash prize of Rs. 3 lakhs**, a **copper plaque** and **a shawl**.
- This Fellowship was **established in 1968, with Dr. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan** as the first elected fellow.
- The Sahitya Akademi also gives out an award, which is the **second-highest literary honour** in India, **after the Jnanpith award.**
- To be eligible for the award, an **author must be Indian** and their work must be an **outstanding contribution to their language and literature**.

PS4 Engine

Recently, the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) has successfully tested the new liquid rocket engine (PS4 Engine) at Mahendragiri in Tamil Nadu.

About PS4 Engine:

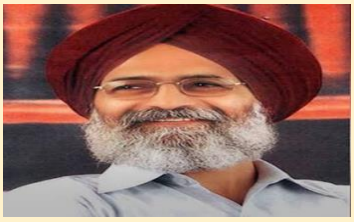
- The PS4 engine is a **crucial component of India's Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle** (PSLV).
- It **serves as the fourth stage propulsion system**, responsible for placing satellites into their intended orbits.
- It operates on a **bipropellant combination** comprising **nitrogen tetroxide (N_2O_4)** as the oxidizer and **monomethyl hydrazine as the fuel**.
- The number of parts has been **minimized from 14 to a single piece, eliminating 19 weld joints.**
- The PS4 engine is manufactured using **Additive Manufacturing technology, also known as 3D printing.**
- Apart from its primary function in the PS4 stage, the **engine also powers the Reaction Control System (RCS) of the first stage (PS1)** of the PSLV.
- Metal powder consumption has been reduced from **565 kgs to 13.7 kgs per engine**.
- Production time has been **slashed by 60%,** indicating increased manufacturing efficiency.

Magpies

About Magpies:

- Magpies are birds **with long tails, black** and **white plumage** and a **noisy chatter** and **inquisitive nature.**
- They **belong to the Corvidae family**, which includes **crows**, **jays** and **ravens**.
- Several closely related blue magpie species are commonly found from **Kashmir to Myanmar.**
- The **gold-billed magpie, red-billed magpie and blue magpie** inhabit different altitude zones.
- The **gold-billed magpie, for example, occupies high altitude zones, while the blue magpie resides at lower altitudes near human settlements.**
- **Yellow-billed blue magpies are pigeon-sized birds** with distinctive long tails, exhibiting characteristic flight patterns.
- They are **omnivores** and **scavengers** that eat wild fruit, grain, grasshoppers and beetles.
- They have **green**, **blue**, **black** and **white feathers**, **black legs** and a wingspan of 52–60 cm.
- The **trekking corridor in Western Sikkim,** from **Kanchenjunga** near the **Goche La pass,** offers prime sightings of yellow and red-billed magpies.

Personality in News
Surjit Patar



Surjit Patar (14 January 1945-11 May 2024)

Surjit Patar, a renowned Punjabi writer and poet was born in Jalandhar, Punjab.

Contributions:

- Surjit Patar's notable poetic works include "**Hawa Vich Likhe Harf**," "**Hanere Vich Sulagdi Varanmala**," "**Patjhar Di Pazeb**," "**Lafzaan Di Dargah**" and "**Surzameen**."
- He also served as the **president of the Punjab Arts Council**.
- He **wrote dialogues for the Punjabi films Shaheed Udham Singh** and **Videsh**.

Awards and Honours:

- Surjit Patar honoured with **Sahitya Akademi Award** for **Hanare Vich Sulghadi Varanmala in 1993**.
- He was **conferred with the Padma Shri award for Literature and Education in 2012.**

Place in News
Nepal

Recently, Nepal's legendary mountaineer Kami Rita Sherpa made history by breaking his record for the highest number of ascents of Mt. Everest as he scaled the world's highest peak for the 29th time.

Nepal (Capital: Kathmandu)

Location: Nepal is a **landlocked country** in South Asia.

Political Boundaries: Nepal shares its borders with **India** (East, West and South) and the **Tibet Autonomous Region of China** (North).

Physical Features:

- The world's highest peak, **Mount Everest** (8,848 meters), also known as **Sagarmatha in Nepali** and **Chomolungma in Tibetan,** lies on the Nepal-China border in the Himalayas.
- Major rivers in Nepal include the **Koshi**, **Gandaki** and **Karnali**, which originate in the Himalayas and flow southwards through the country.
- Nepal possesses minerals such as **limestone**, **iron ore**, **copper**, **coal**, **mica**, **quartz**, and **magnesite**.

International Relations: Nepal maintains diplomatic relations with various countries and is a member of international organizations like the **United Nations** (UN) and **South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation** (SAARC).

POINTS TO PONDER

- Recently, which organization enacted the inaugural legislation to combat violence against women? **– European Union (EU)**
- Recently, which organization issued updated Dietary Guidelines for Indians to align with modern dietary habits for 2024?

  – Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR)
- Hindon River, recently in the news, is a tributary of which river? **– Yamuna**
- Sonai Rupai Wildlife Sanctuary, recently in the headlines, is situated in which state? **– Assam**
- Mahamat Idris Deby has recently been elected as the President of which African country? **– Chad**