

21st Dec, 2024

1. Higher GST on Tobacco Can Improve Societal Health GS 2 (Health)

• Why in News:

- The recent proposals by the Group of Ministers (GoM) under India's GST Council reflect a common-sense approach to taxation, emphasising national priorities of public health and equity.
- These reforms aim to recalibrate the country's tax structure by lowering GST rates on essential items like bicycles and exercise books while increasing taxes on high-value luxury goods, including tobacco products.
- This dual strategy not only prioritises the well-being of citizens but also addresses the broader societal costs associated with preventable health crises, particularly those arising from tobacco consumption.

• The Burden of Tobacco Consumption

- Tobacco usage in India is a public health crisis of staggering proportions.
- Killing nearly 1.3 million people annually and debilitating millions more, tobacco exacts enormous societal costs in terms of lost productivity and escalating healthcare expenses.
- These stark realities underscore the urgent need for effective policy interventions. Among these, taxation stands out as the single most effective measure to curb tobacco use.
- By increasing prices through higher taxes, governments can discourage new users, encourage current users to quit, and prevent relapse among former users.

• Benefits of High Taxation on Tobacco Products

- **Impact on Consumption Patterns**
 - One of the key advantages of taxing tobacco is its ability to influence consumer behaviour, particularly among price-sensitive groups such as lower-income populations and young people.
 - When taxes are raised, the cost of tobacco products increases, prompting consumers to rethink their consumption habits.
 - Studies consistently show that higher tobacco prices discourage people from starting to smoke, encourage current smokers to quit, and reduce overall consumption levels.
 - This price sensitivity is more pronounced among economically disadvantaged groups, who spend a larger proportion of their income on tobacco.
 - As a result, higher taxes are more likely to lead to significant reductions in tobacco use among these populations, creating a disproportionately positive impact on their health.
- **Generating Revenue for Public Welfare**
 - Beyond reducing consumption, tobacco taxation generates substantial revenue for governments.
 - The paradox of tobacco taxation lies in its elasticity: while higher prices lead to reduced consumption, the decline is typically less than proportional to the tax increase.
 - This means that governments can collect more revenue even as fewer tobacco products are sold.
 - The additional funds generated can be strategically reinvested in public goods and services, amplifying their societal impact.
 - For example, revenues from tobacco taxes can be directed toward strengthening healthcare infrastructure, funding education programs, or supporting anti-smoking campaigns.
 - These investments create a virtuous cycle, where the benefits of reduced tobacco use extend beyond individual health to broader societal gains.
- **Addressing Inequities through Taxation**



A smoker check

Higher GST on tobacco can improve societal health, revenues

JEFFREY DROPE AND MUKESH KEJRIWAL

IMAGINE ABC, vibrant poor family filled with peace, ambitious members, wide dreams of education, better opportunities, and a healthy life. The family had prioritised essential needs like food, clothing, education, health and life insurance to safeguard their future. Thrilled, they would naturally check on essential or survival expenses.

Interestingly, this common-sense approach is exactly what the Group of Ministers (GoM), set up by the GST Council, has proposed for the country's tax structure. It has recommended a range of measures, aligning them more closely with the ethical and essential priorities of the common person. Essential items like bottled water, bicycles, and exercise books, will see reduced taxes. Simultaneously, there is a movement to reduce the GST on health and life insurance premiums, making these essential services more affordable. High-value luxury goods, including tobacco products, will face higher GST rates. Just as a family prioritises investment for the well-being of its members, the proposal reflects a national vision for a healthier, more equitable India.

Using tobacco products like cigarettes, bids and gutka kills about half of the people who use them and takes 11 years off a life on average. In India, tobacco kills nearly 1.3 million people each year and makes millions more sick. These numbers are not just statistics; they represent families torn apart and enormous societal costs in terms of lost productivity and escalating healthcare expenses.

However, there is a proven way to reduce this needless death and disease – taxation. Raising taxes on tobacco products to increase their prices is the single most effective policy to reduce consumption. Higher prices discourage people from starting, encourage current users to quit, and prevent relapse among former users. This is particularly true for young people, whose high price-sensitivity. Many smokers would quit. Many young people would never start, and hundreds of thousands of lives could be saved even in the short term.

To add another leg to the stool, because consumption drops disproportionately less compared to the tax increase, there is an increase in revenue. This revenue can be used to support health, education, and other public goods that promote societal well-being. And because lower-income people are more responsive to price, they are more likely to quit consumption, and the benefits will go more to them. In other words, taxing tobacco products is a highly progressive policy.

In the context, the proposal to place tobacco products at a higher slab of the GST at 35 percent is an excellent policy for both public and fiscal health. It will also help to correct a somewhat rocky recent path for tobacco tax policies in India that began with when the GST was implemented.

The Economics for Health programme at Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health evaluates countries' tobacco

ductivity and healthcare burdens.

India continues to struggle on both tax structure and change in affordability. Like many of its South Asian neighbours, India maintains a tiered structure where excise taxes are lower on sensitive health products like cigarettes, and higher on other products to which there is more demand. Furthermore, bids have much lower or no excise tax and are therefore very unprogressive. Because of both the progressive tax structure and the lack of right, significant tax increases, from 2018 to 2022, tobacco products like cigarettes, bids and chewing tobacco products have become more affordable on average.

For India to maximise the health and fiscal potential of tobacco taxes, it is necessary to progress on several things. It must implement a unified tax structure – the same rate applied per cigarette no matter the brand, price, or other characteristics – that also ensures significant excise taxes and a uniform approach to all more than the combination of inflation and income growth. The government must

also consider how to regulate and tax bids, the other major smoked tobacco product, more effectively, and eventually eliminate products like gutka.

Just as every family must balance its books wisely, so too must a nation. India is on the right track with the proposed increase in the GST for tobacco products. The GST Council's deliberations on restructuring the tax system come as a timely opportunity to address these gaps.

While these proposals are commendable, they require strong public and political commitment. The industry, with its vast resources, will undoubtedly resist any move that threatens its profits. However, the scales are tipped in favour of the nation. The GST Council has an opportunity to demonstrate courage and foresight by adopting these reforms.

Altogether, GST and tobacco products will not only save lives but also align with India's broader goal of creating a healthier, more productive population. The revenue generated can be reinvested in public goods, strengthening the nation's commitment to universal health and social equity.

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- Tobacco taxes are inherently progressive when designed thoughtfully.
- **Lower-income individuals, who are more sensitive to price increases, benefit the most from reduced consumption** and the associated health improvements.
- This **effect helps to mitigate health disparities**, as economically disadvantaged groups are often disproportionately affected by tobacco-related illnesses.
- Furthermore, **the reinvestment of tobacco tax revenues into public welfare programs can enhance social equity**.
- For instance, **funding universal healthcare initiatives or subsidising health insurance premiums with tobacco tax revenues ensures that the benefits are distributed widely**, including to those who need them the most.
- **Limitations of India's Current Tobacco Tax Structure and Measures to Address These Challenges**
 - **Tiered Tax Structure: A Barrier to Effectiveness**
 - One of the most pressing issues in India's tobacco tax system is its tiered structure, where **different types of tobacco products, and even brands within a category, are taxed at varying rates**.
 - For example, **cigarettes may be taxed higher than bidis, and premium cigarette brands often face higher rates** than lower-cost alternatives.
 - This **disparity creates a loophole for consumers** to switch to cheaper options when prices rise for one category or brand.
 - **The tiered structure diminishes the deterrent effect of taxation** by making it possible for users to maintain their consumption levels through substitution.
 - **Bidis, in particular, are taxed minimally or not at all in some cases**, despite being a major source of tobacco use in India.
 - **This not only perpetuates widespread bidi consumption but also results in significant revenue losses** for the government.
 - To address this, **India needs a unified tax structure where the same rate is applied per unit of tobacco, regardless of brand, size, or other characteristics**.
 - A consistent and simplified system eliminates substitution opportunities and ensures that all tobacco products are equally disincentivized.
 - **Affordability of Tobacco Products**
 - Despite periodic tax increases, many tobacco products in India remain highly affordable.
 - **Between 2016 and 2022, cigarettes, bidis, and chewing tobacco products became more affordable on average**, largely due to the combination of stagnant tax rates and rising incomes.
 - **As tobacco products become more affordable, their consumption increases**, counteracting public health efforts.
 - To tackle this issue, **taxes must be adjusted annually to account for inflation and income growth**.
 - **Specific excise taxes**, rather than ad valorem taxes (which are a percentage of the price), are **particularly effective in this context**.
 - **Specific excise taxes impose a fixed amount per unit of tobacco, ensuring that prices rise predictably and significantly over time**.
 - This approach reduces affordability and maintains the deterrent effect of taxation.
 - **The Problem of Lower Taxation on Bidis**
 - Bidis, a traditional form of smoked tobacco, **pose a unique challenge in India's tobacco control efforts**.
 - They are **consumed predominantly by low-income groups** and are often seen as a cheaper alternative to cigarettes.
 - However, **bidis are equally, if not more, harmful to health, and their minimal taxation exacerbates their widespread use**.
 - To address this, **the government must consider comprehensive taxation and regulation of bidis**.
 - **Bringing bidis under the same tax framework as other tobacco products would significantly reduce their affordability** and consumption.

- Additionally, **targeted public health campaigns and alternative livelihood programs for bidi workers can help mitigate resistance** to such reforms.
- **Tax on Smokeless Tobacco Products**
 - Smokeless tobacco products, including **chewing tobacco and gutka**, are another area of concern.
 - **These products are widely consumed across India and contribute significantly to the country's tobacco-related disease burden.**
 - Yet, their taxation and regulation remain inconsistent.
 - **Including smokeless tobacco products in a unified tax structure and subjecting them to regular price increases would complement efforts** to reduce overall tobacco consumption.
 - Public awareness campaigns highlighting the health risks of smokeless tobacco can further reinforce these measures.
- **Conclusion**
 - **The GST Council's proposed reforms represent a decisive step** toward balancing the nation's fiscal and public health goals.
 - **Higher taxes on tobacco products, coupled with reduced levies on essentials, reflect a thoughtful prioritisation** of societal well-being.
 - **By aligning taxation policies with national health and equity goals, India can pave the way for a healthier, more productive, and equitable society.**

2. Takeaways from the India-SL recent engagement

GS 2 (International Relations)

- **Why in News:** The recent visit of Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) to India— his first trip overseas since becoming leader of his country — saw some classic diplomatic deal-making, with give and take on both sides
- **Win Some, Lose Some: Key Takeaways from AKD's Visit to India**
 - **Assurance on Anti-India Activities**
 - **Sri Lankan President Anura Kumara Dissanayake (AKD) assured PM Modi that Sri Lanka's territory would not be used for activities harmful to India's interests.**
 - This commitment addresses India's concerns regarding the frequent visits of Chinese "research vessels" to Sri Lankan ports.
 - The reiteration of this stance is significant, as AKD is perceived to be pro-China.
 - **Tamil Minority Issue: Divergent Views**
 - AKD resisted India's push for the full implementation of the 13th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution, which aims to empower the Tamil minority.
 - He opposes the amendment and investigations into alleged war crimes from the LTTE-Sri Lankan military conflict.
 - PM Modi emphasized "reconciliation and reconstruction" and urged Sri Lanka to fulfil its constitutional commitments and hold provincial council elections.
 - **Focus on Unity and Development**
 - While AKD avoided specific commitments on the Tamil issue, he emphasized unity, social protection, and sustainable development.
 - He highlighted the importance of diversity as a fundamental principle of democracy.
- **Confident President: Sri Lanka's Evolving Stance and Domestic Actions**
 - **Firm Position on Tamil Issue**
 - The joint statement reflected **Sri Lanka's influence in shaping the narrative.**

As Dissanayake visits, takeaways from the India-SL engagement

SHUBHAJIT ROY
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 20

THE VISIT OF Sri Lanka's President Anura Kumara Dissanayake to India this week — his first trip overseas since becoming leader of his country — saw some classic diplomatic deal-making, with give and take on both sides.

Win some, lose some

AKD, as he is popularly known, committed not allowing the use of Sri Lanka's territory for any anti-Indian activities.

"I have given an assurance to the Prime Minister, that we will not have our land, said it, a manner that is detrimental to the interest of India," Dissanayake said after bilateral talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Monday.

The joint statement said "President Dissanayake reiterated Sri Lanka's stated position of not permitting its territory to be used in any manner inimical to the security of India as well as towards regional stability."

This was a signal to China — whose "research vessels" frequently visit Sri Lanka, and are seen with suspicion in New Delhi. The fact that the President, who is seen as being pro-China, has clearly articulated this position is a relief to India.

On the issue of Tamil minorities, however, AKD did not yield to the formulation preferred by New Delhi. There was no explicit mention of the implementation of the 13th amendment in the Sri Lankan Constitution, which gave powers to the Tamil majority — a long-standing demand of the Indian government. AKD does not support the implementation of the amendment, and has opposed any investigation into alleged war crimes during the last phase of the civil war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan military.

Modi and the two leaders had discussed "reconciliation and reconstruction" in Sri Lanka, and hoped that the Sri Lankan government would "fully implement the Constitution and fulfil its commitment to hold provincial council elections".

AKD, on his part, mentioned unity, social protection, and sustainable development. "Diversity," he said, is the "cornerstone of democracy".

Confident President

The joint statement suggested that the new establishment in Sri Lanka had got its way in its framing.

About two months ago, after External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met AKD in Colombo, the Indian statement had said that Jaishankar reiterated India's support for the aspirations of all communities, including Tamils, for equality, justice, dignity, and peace, while maintaining the unity, territorial integrity, and sovereignty of Sri Lanka.

The full and effective implementation of the 13th Amendment... and the early holding of Provincial Council elections would facilitate these objectives," it had said.

Two and a half months later, AKD — emboldened by the historic parliamentary majority in the November election — is much more confident in his dealings with big powers such as India and China.

This confidence has been visible in the President's actions at home as well, where he has appeared determined to abide by the anti-corruption principles of the "Clean Sri Lanka" campaign that propelled him to power.

As a sign post was the controversy days before the President travelled to India, about the academic qualifications of his close political ally, Speaker Anura Kumara. The senior member of AKD's coalition, Vinoditha Perera (JVP) was forced to step down after AKD made a fully-welcomed reference to the party's endorsement for even the appearance of impunity.

Focus on mutual benefits

The message from the Ranawaka incident was that the President would not be distracted as he went about his difficult and arduous agenda committed to Sri Lanka after the social and economic crises of recent years. That he was visible as the India-Sri Lanka joint statement, "Fostering Partnerships for a Shared Future".

On bilateral development cooperation, the joint statement said the two leaders acknowledged the "positive and impactful role of India's development assistance to Sri Lanka that has significantly contributed to its socioeconomic growth".

The countries agreed to work together for the timely completion of ongoing projects such as Phase III & IV of Indian Housing Project, the three islands Hybrid Renewable Energy Project, and High Impact Community Development Projects across Sri Lanka.

The elements of cooperation range from digital connectivity — the Aadhaar project and UPI — to energy cooperation. The countries are discussing the supply of LNG to Sri Lanka, the development of Trinamalee as a regional energy and industrial hub, high-capacity power grid interconnection, and the development of offshore wind power in the Palk Strait.

On physical connectivity, apart from the resumption of the passenger ferry service between Nagapattinam and Kalakshetra, the two leaders agreed that officials should work towards the early commencement of the passenger ferry service between Ranawaka and Talaimannar. They will also

explore the possibility of working on the rehabilitation of Sri Lanka's Kalakshetra port.

It was also agreed to "explore the possibility of concluding a Standstill Agreement on Defence Cooperation", provision of "defence platforms and assets to augment Sri Lanka's defence capability", and intensify collaboration through joint exercises, maritime surveillance, and defence dialogue and exchanges, according to the joint statement.

PM Modi flagged the importance of maritime security, cyber security and counter-terrorism among the issues to be discussed through the Colombo Security Council mechanism.

All of this suggests that even though India is now no longer dealing with the traditional set of interlocutors who have dominated Sri Lanka's government, priorities and interests have not fundamentally changed for either New Delhi or Colombo.

AKD looking at a consequential five years in power, while India, which has deep strategic stakes in Sri Lanka's success and stability, is keen on a "mutually beneficial" partnership.

- Earlier, India had emphasized Tamil aspirations and the need for the 13th Amendment's full implementation, along with provincial council elections.
- However, AKD's confidence, stemming from his strong parliamentary mandate, has enabled him to resist external pressure, including from India.
- **Confident Engagement with Major Powers**
 - AKD's historic parliamentary majority has bolstered his confidence in dealing with influential nations like India and China.
 - This self-assurance marks a shift in Sri Lanka's diplomatic posture, signaling a more assertive and independent approach.
- **Anti-Corruption Commitment at Home**
 - The President's adherence to the principles of the "Clean Sri Lanka" campaign has been evident in domestic politics.
 - For instance, Speaker Asoka Ranwala, a close ally of AKD, was forced to step down amid allegations about his academic qualifications, demonstrating AKD's zero-tolerance policy toward impropriety.
- **Focus on Mutual Benefits: India-Sri Lanka Cooperation**
 - **Rebuilding Sri Lanka with Focus and Clarity**
 - President AKD is pursuing an ambitious agenda to rebuild Sri Lanka after recent crises.
 - The India-Sri Lanka joint statement, titled **"Fostering Partnerships for a Shared Future,"** underscores this shared focus on development and collaboration.
 - **Bilateral Cooperation**
 - Digital collaboration includes implementing Aadhaar and UPI systems in Sri Lanka.
 - Both leaders acknowledged India's significant contributions to Sri Lanka's socioeconomic growth through **development assistance**. Key projects include:
 - Phase III & IV of the Indian Housing Project.
 - High Impact Community Development Projects.
 - **Advancing Connectivity and Energy Cooperation**
 - LNG supply.
 - Development of Trincomalee as a regional energy and industrial hub.
 - Offshore wind power development in the Palk Strait.
 - High-capacity power grid interconnection.
 - Three islands' Hybrid Renewable Energy Project.
 - **Enhancing Physical Connectivity**
 - Resumption of passenger ferry services between:
 - Nagapattinam and Kankesanthurai.
 - Rameswaram and Talaimannar (under review).
 - Discussions on rehabilitating Sri Lanka's Kankesanthurai port are underway.
 - **Defence and Security Cooperation**
 - Agreements to explore:
 - A framework Agreement on Defence Cooperation.
 - Provision of defence platforms and joint exercises.
 - Maritime surveillance, cyber security, and counter-terrorism under the Colombo Security Conclave mechanism.
 - **Strategic Continuity Amid New Leadership**
 - Despite new leadership in Sri Lanka, priorities and interests remain aligned.
 - India views Sri Lanka's stability as critical to its strategic interests, while AKD seeks to make the next five years impactful through a mutually beneficial partnership.

3. Northern giant hornet GS 3 (Environment)

- **Why in News:** The Department of Agriculture of the United States said that it has been eradicated the Northern giant hornet, nicknamed the "murder hornet".
- **About Northern giant hornet:**
 - **Scientific name:** *Vespa mandarinia*
 - It is the **largest hornet in the world**, measuring up to 2 inches long.
 - **Habitat:** They are known for inhabiting the **lower altitude forest** and avoiding large plains and high-altitude regions.
 - **Distribution:** They are native to temperate regions in **China, Korea, Japan, and India**.
 - It is an **invasive species** which poses a significant threat to **insects and native pollinators**.
 - It is nicknamed as 'Murder hornets', can kill an entire beehive of honeybees in just 90 minutes.
 - The hornets then defend the hive as their own, taking the brood to feed their own young.
 - They can sting through most beekeeper suits, delivering almost **seven times the amount of venom as a honey bee**. Moreover, they have the ability to sting multiple times.
 - They mainly feed on native insects: butterflies, moths, dragonflies, bees, wasps, etc.
 - **Ecological impact:** It preys on honey bees and poses an indirect **threat to plants** that depend on honey bees for pollination.

WHY AND HOW DID THE UNITED STATES ERADICATE 'MURDER HORNETS'?

ALIND CHAUHAN
NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 20

THE NORTHERN giant hornet, nicknamed the "murder hornet", has been eradicated in the United States, the Department of Agriculture said on Wednesday. The insect was first spotted in Washington state near the Canadian border in 2019. Efforts quickly began to track down and get rid of the invasive species which poses a threat to bees and agriculture. Washington was the only state in the US that has had confirmed sightings of the northern giant hornets.

What made 'murder hornets' a threat?

The hornets, which can be 2 inches long and are an invasive species from Asia, first came under the spotlight in 2013 when they killed at least 42 people in China, and seriously injured 1,675, according to a report by the Associated Press.

The species poses a significant threat to insects and native pollinators. "Murder hornets" can kill an entire beehive of honeybees in just 90 minutes.

"The hornets can enter a 'slaughter phase' where they kill entire hives by decapitating the bees. The hornets then defend the hive as their own, taking the brood to feed their own young," according to the Washington State Department of Agriculture. "They also attack other insects but are not known to destroy entire colonies of these insects."

Northern giant hornets can sting through most beekeeper suits, delivering almost seven times the amount of venom as a honey bee. Moreover, they have the ability to sting multiple times.

How did the US eradicate 'murder hornets'?

State, federal, and international government agencies joined forces to eradicate northern giant hornets in the US. The first task was to find the nests of hornets. This was a challenge as hornets usually build their nests in forested areas, often in an underground cavity, according to the US Department of Agriculture.

"In some cases, entomologists captured a live hornet, attached a radio tag to it, released it, and tracked the hornet back to its nest," a report by CBS News said.

After locating a nest in a tree, entomologists "plugged the nest with foam, wrapped the tree in plastic, and vacuumed out the hornets" the report said. They also used carbon dioxide to kill any of the remaining hornets.

The public participated in the process by helping entomologists track down hornet nests, and agreeing to place traps at their residences.

Dr Mark Davidson, deputy administrator at USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, said in a statement, "By tackling this threat head-on, we protected not only pollinators and crops, but also the industries, communities, and ecosystems that depend on them."

The eradication, however, does not mean that the hornet cannot return to the United States.



4. Significance of Siliguri Corridor GS 2 (Security)

- **Why in News:** Union Home Minister Amit Shah highlighted the significance of the Siliguri corridor as a crucial link to Northeast India and said that the presence of Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) in the area comes as an assurance to the entire country.
- **About Siliguri Corridor:**
 - The Siliguri Corridor, often referred to as the "Chicken's Neck", is a narrow stretch of land in the Indian state of West Bengal.
 - It connects the northeastern states of India with the rest of the country. Its geopolitical, strategic, and economic significance makes it a critical asset for India.
 - **Geographical Overview:**
 - **Location:** The corridor is situated in the northern part of West Bengal, spanning approximately 22 kilometres at its narrowest point.
 - **Borders:** It is flanked by Nepal to the west, Bhutan to the north, and Bangladesh to the south.
 - **Connectivity:** It links the **North-eastern Region (NER)** comprising eight states—Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, and Tripura—to mainland India.
- **Significance of Siliguri Corridor:**
 - **National Security:**
 - The corridor is crucial for maintaining India's territorial integrity. Any compromise in the region can isolate the northeastern states from the rest of India.

Siliguri corridor a crucial link, SSB presence boosts security, says Shah

The Hindu Bureau
KOLKATA

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Friday highlighted the significance of the Siliguri corridor as a crucial link to Northeast India and said that the presence of the Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB) in the area came as an assurance to the entire country.

"Located between Mahananda and Teesta, the Siliguri corridor serves as an important link between the northeast and the rest of India. The presence of SSB in the area provides assurance and confidence to the rest of the country," Mr. Shah said. He made the remarks while addressing



Reassuring force: Union Home Minister Amit Shah during the 61st Raising Day celebrations of the SSB, near Siliguri, on Friday. PTI

Referring to the SSB's efforts in tackling left-wing extremism, he said: "The SSB has played an important role in ending the menace of Naxalism in Bihar and Jharkhand. From this stage, I want to say that Bihar and Jharkhand are free of left-wing extremism."

He also commended the SSB for its unique initiatives in fostering cultural integration in the border areas. "This initiative strengthens the bond between the nation and its border communities," he added.

Mr. Shah virtually laid the foundation stones of eight construction projects related to the SSB in different parts of the country.



- The area is vulnerable to external threats, especially given its proximity to the **China-Bhutan border** in the north and Bangladesh in the south.
- **Military Importance:**
 - The corridor serves as a vital supply route for the Indian Army, particularly for accessing forward bases in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh.
 - It is critical for India's preparedness against China, especially in light of past conflicts like the **1962 Sino-Indian War** and the ongoing border tensions.
- **Geopolitical Sensitivity:**
 - Its proximity to China's **Chumbi Valley** (a tri-junction of India, Bhutan, and China) poses a strategic challenge. Control over this area could jeopardize India's access to the Northeast.
- **Economic Importance:**
 - **Trade and Connectivity:**
 - The Siliguri Corridor is a gateway for trade between mainland India and its north-eastern states, facilitating the movement of goods and services.
 - It connects to important international trade routes, including access to Bhutan and Nepal.
 - **Tourism Hub:**
 - The region is a base for tourism to destinations like Darjeeling, Gangtok, and Bhutan, contributing significantly to local and national economies.
 - **Developmental Integration:**
 - The corridor supports initiatives like the **Act East Policy**, which aims to integrate north-eastern states with Southeast Asia for economic development.
- **Challenges:**
 - **Geographical Vulnerability:**
 - The narrow width of the corridor makes it highly susceptible to natural disasters like floods and earthquakes, which could disrupt connectivity.
 - **Security Concerns:**
 - Cross-border terrorism, illegal migration, and smuggling from Bangladesh add to the security challenges.
 - The region has seen insurgency issues in the past, requiring constant vigilance.
 - **Infrastructure Gaps**
 - Despite its importance, the corridor faces infrastructural deficits, including poor road and rail connectivity, hindering efficient transport and logistics.
- **Government Initiatives:**
 - **Border Infrastructure Development:**
 - Investments in road and rail networks, including the **Bharatmala Pariyojana** and **Golden Quadrilateral**, aim to strengthen connectivity in the region.
 - **Act East Policy:**
 - This policy focuses on improving trade and cultural ties with Southeast Asia, with the Siliguri Corridor acting as a vital link.
 - **Strategic Rail and Air Connectivity:**
 - The development of **Bagdogra Airport** and improved rail connectivity through **Northeast Frontier Railways** enhances accessibility and economic prospects
 - **Integrated Check Posts (ICPs):**
 - Modern ICPs along the borders of Nepal and Bangladesh are being developed to streamline trade and security.
- **About Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB):**
 - It is a border guarding force of India deployed along its borders with **Nepal** and **Bhutan**.
 - The force was originally set up under the name **Special Service Bureau** in 1963 in the aftermath of the Indo-China War to strengthen India's border areas against enemy operations.

- **News Summary:**

- Union Home Minister Amit Shah emphasized the strategic importance of the **Siliguri Corridor**, also known as the **Chicken's Neck**, during the 61st Foundation Day celebrations of the **Sashastra Seema Bal (SSB)** in Siliguri.
- This narrow stretch of land in West Bengal is critical due to its proximity to neighbouring countries like China, with a width of about 20 km and a length of 60 km.
- Shah praised the SSB for ensuring security along the 2,450 km border with Nepal and Bhutan and expressed confidence in their ability to protect India's borders.
- He highlighted the SSB's significant role in eradicating **left-wing extremism** in Bihar and Jharkhand, declaring both states free of such threats.
- He also commended the SSB's efforts in fostering cultural integration in border villages, strengthening ties between border communities and the Indian mainstream.
- During the event, Shah **inaugurated and laid the foundation stone for infrastructure projects for the SSB**, including residential complexes at Agartala and Petrapole.
- The Home Minister's remarks underscored the corridor's critical role in India's security and its integration with the Northeast.

5. Swatantrata Sainik Samman Pension Scheme GS 2 (Governance)

- **Why in News:** The Minister of State for Home Affairs informed the Rajya Sabha about the Swatantrata Sainik Samman Pension Scheme.
- **About Swatantrata Sainik Samman Pension Scheme:**
 - It was launched on 15th August 1972 by the **Ministry of Home Affairs**.
 - It provides the grant of pension to **living freedom fighters and their families**; if they are no more alive, and to the families or martyrs.
 - **Eligibility:**
 - A person who had suffered a **minimum imprisonment of six months** in the mainland jails before Independence.
 - A person who remained underground for more than six months.
 - A person interned in his home or externed from his district provided the period of internment/externment was six months or more.
 - A person **whose property was confiscated** or attached and sold due to participation in the freedom struggle.
 - A person who became **permanently incapacitated** during firing or lathi charge.
 - A person who lost his job (Central or State Government) and thus means of livelihood for participation in the national movement.
 - **Benefits:**
 - Free life time **railway pass** to travel by any train.
 - Free **medical facilities under CGHS** and free medical treatment in hospitals run by PSUs are provided to the Freedom fighters and eligible dependents.
 - Free transit stay with meal at State Bhawan, New Delhi.
 - Collectors/SDMs have been directed to regularly enquire about the well-being of the freedom fighters and resolve their pension related issues.

MCQ Current Affairs
21st Dec, 2024

1. **Bordoibam-Bilmukh Bird Sanctuary is a large freshwater lake situated in Assam. It was originally a part of which one of the following tributaries of the Brahmaputra River?**
 - a) Lohit
 - b) Subansiri
 - c) Teesta
 - d) Manas

2. **In which of the following ways, the Polyethylene terephthalate bottle-derived nanoplastics (PBNPs) facilitate the Antibiotic Resistance in bacteria?**
 - A. They can act as physical carriers of the Antibiotic Resistance plasmids across bacterial membranes.
 - B. They can induce increased secretion of outer membrane vesicles (OMVs), which serve as potent vectors for gene transfer between bacterial species.

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- a) A only
- b) B only
- c) A and B
- d) Neither of two

3. Consider the following statements regarding the National Handloom Day:

- A. It commemorates the Swadeshi Movement, launched on 7th August 1905.
- B. It recognises the efforts and skills of the handloom weaving community.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a) A only
- b) B only
- c) A and B
- d) Neither of two

4. Consider the following statements regarding GLP-1 receptor agonists:

- A. They mimic a hormone that regulates appetite and blood sugar levels.
- B. They can help in the treatment of cardiovascular disorders.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a) A only
- b) B only
- c) A and B
- d) Neither of two

5. Consider the following statements regarding the Northern giant hornet:

- A. It is an invasive species and poses a significant threat to insects and native pollinators.
- B. It can kill an entire beehive of honeybees in just 90 minutes.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a) A only
- b) B only
- c) A and B
- d) Neither of two

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1. b
2. c
3. c
4. c
5. c

