



Current Affairs of the Day

- Joe Biden elected 46th President of the United States
- India successfully launches earth observation satellite EOS-01
- Four more biodiversity heritage sites for Karnataka
- Months after starting the Chabahar rail project without India, Iran seeks help
- Inter-faith marriages, conversion and the law
- Delivery of COVID-19 vaccines poses a huge challenge
- Paris Accord: A race against the clock to keep the planet cool



Joe Biden elected 46th President of the United States

Democratic candidate Joseph Robinette Biden Jr., was elected the 46th President of the United States. Mr Biden's running mate, Kamala Devi Harris, a U.S. Senator from California, will become the first woman and the first Indian and African American Vice-President of the country. Mr Biden will inherit, from President Trump, a deeply divided country, battered by the coronavirus pandemic, facing high levels of unemployment and fraying race relations.

Significance:

1. Survival of Multilateralism in the world
2. Paris climate deal
3. Globalization, free trade and rule-based global order

India successfully launches earth observation satellite EOS-01

India successfully launched its latest earth observation satellite EOS-01 and nine international customer spacecraft.

Highlights:

The Indian Space Research Organisation's (ISRO) workhorse Polar Satellite Launch Vehicle (PSLV-C49) injected EOS-01, intended for applications in agriculture, forestry and disaster management support.

Four more biodiversity heritage sites for Karnataka

The Karnataka Biodiversity Board has decided to declare four more areas in the State as biodiversity heritage sites.

Highlights:

1. The board passed a resolution to declare Antaragange Betta in Kolar; Aadi Narayana Swamy Betta in Chickballapur; Mahima Ranga Betta in Nelamangala, Bengaluru; and the Urumbi area on the Kumaradhara river basin in Dakshina Kannada as biodiversity heritage sites.
2. Biodiversity heritage sites are considered unique and fragile ecosystems that can be marine ecosystems, coastal and inland waters, or terrestrial areas.



3. Antaragange Betta has a unique and perennial water source flowing all through the year, and Aadi Narayana Swamy Betta in Gudibande taluk, Chickballapur, had many dry-belt species protected by locals.
4. Mahima Ranga Betta is a prominent lung space surviving in Bengaluru.
5. Urumbi area in Kadaba taluk of Dakshina Kannada has a fragile environmental system and is located on the banks of the river Kumaradhara.
6. Notifying an area as a biodiversity heritage site will help protect the rich and unique ecosystem in a particular area from further destruction. Now, the Forest Department will take necessary steps, such as a survey of the areas for earmarking the borders, and documentation, before issuing the notification of declaration.

Background:

1. Under Section 37 of Biological Diversity Act, 2002 (BDA) the State Government in consultation with local bodies may notify in the official gazette, areas of biodiversity importance as Biodiversity Heritage Sites (BHS).
2. "Biodiversity Heritage Sites" (BHS) are well-defined areas that are unique, ecologically fragile ecosystems - terrestrial, coastal and inland waters and, marine having rich biodiversity comprising of any one or more of the following components: the richness of wild as well as domesticated species or intra-specific categories, high endemism, presence of rare and threatened species, keystone species, species of evolutionary significance, wild ancestors of domestic/ cultivated species or their varieties, past pre-eminence of biological components represented by fossil beds and having significant cultural, ethical or aesthetic values and are important for the maintenance of cultural diversity, with or without a long history of human association with them
3. List of BHS of India: <http://nbaindia.org/content/106/29/1/bhs.html>

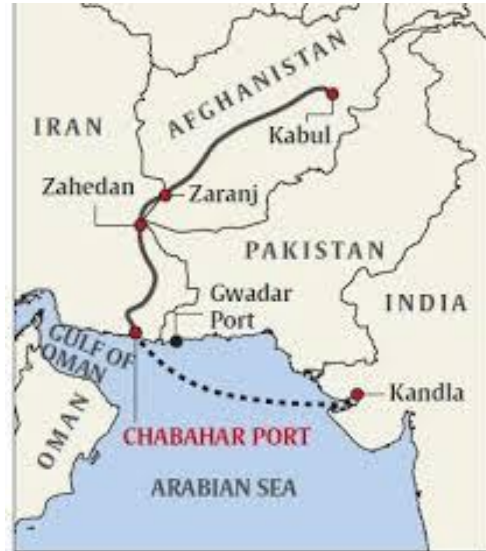


Months after starting the Chabahar rail project without India, Iran seeks help

Request for cranes, tracks, switches, signalling equipment, locomotives comes as Tehran has had difficulty in getting them directly due to the U.S.-imposed sanctions.

Highlights:

1. India is not a part of the Chabahar-Zahedan railway at present, but as Iran begins the second phase of the 628-km project, Tehran hopes New Delhi will help it procure equipment to run the rail line from the Chabahar port to the Afghan border.
2. The railway will connect Chabahar port to the Afghan border, but through the existing rail system, to Turkmenistan and Central Asia as well.
3. Delays due to sanctions have also taken a toll on the Indian interest in developing the Farzad-B gas field, where ONGC Videsh made a discovery in 2008.



Inter-faith marriages, conversion and the law

Context: The Special Marriage Act, 1954 (SMA) was enacted to facilitate the marriage of couples professing different faiths and preferring a civil wedding. However, some practical problems arise in registering such marriages. The law's features on prior public notice being given and objections being called from any quarter place a question mark on the safety and privacy of those intending to marry across religions. Many settle for marriage under the personal law of one of them, with the other opting for religious conversion. Even this option is now under threat, as recent remarks by the Chief Ministers of Uttar Pradesh and Haryana and a Karnataka Minister indicate. All of them want to ban conversion for the sole purpose of marriage.



The Problematic features of the SMA

Parties to an intended marriage should give notice to the 'marriage officer' of the district in which one of them had resided for at least 30 days. The notice will have to be entered in a 'Marriage Notice Book' and a copy of it displayed at a conspicuous place in the office. The Notice Book is open for inspection at all reasonable times without a fee.

1. Further, if either of the parties is not a permanent resident of the district, the marriage officer has to send a copy to his counterpart in the district where the party has permanent residence. The notice shall be displayed in that district office too. The marriage has to be solemnised within three months of the notice, and if it is not, a fresh notice will be needed.
2. The law also provides for objections to the marriage. Any person can object to the marriage within 30 days of the publication of the notice on the ground that it contravenes one of the conditions for a valid marriage.
3. The marriage officer has to inquire into the objection and give a decision within 30 days. If he refuses permission for the marriage, an appeal can be made to the district court. The court's decision will be final.
4. Also, the Act says that when a member of an undivided family who professes Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh or Jaina religions, gets married under SMA, it results in his or her "severance" from the family.

The hurdles faced by couples

The provisions relating to notice, publication and objection have rendered it difficult for many people intending to solemnise inter-faith marriages. Publicity in the local registration office may mean that family members objecting to the union may seek to stop it by coercion. In many cases, there may be a threat to the lives of the applicants. There have been reports of right-wing groups opposed to inter-faith marriages keeping a watch on the notice boards of marriage offices and taking down the details of the parties so that they can be dissuaded or coerced into abandoning the idea.

These provisions have been challenged in the Supreme Court recently on the grounds that they violate the privacy of the couples, their dignity and right to marry. In the case of Hindu and Muslim marriage laws, there is no requirement



of prior notice and, therefore, such a requirement in the SMA, say violates the right to equality of those opting for marriage under it.

The other options for registration of inter-faith marriages

1. Many opt for inter-faith marriages through the relevant law of the faith of one of the parties.
2. This will involve one of them converting to the religion professed by the other.
3. While conversion to Islam and Christianity has formal means, there is no prescribed ceremony for conversion to Hinduism.
4. In a recent ruling, the Allahabad High Court declined to grant police protection to a couple, of whom the bride was a Muslim who converted to Hinduism, citing past precedents that said conversion should be based on the change of heart and conviction and should not be solely for the purpose of marriage.

Laws against conversion

1. The Himachal Pradesh Freedom of Religion Act, 2019, and the Uttarakhand Freedom of Religion Act, 2018, both prohibit conversion by misrepresentation, force, fraud, undue influence, inducement, allurement and 'by marriage'.
2. There is a separate section in both laws under which, not conversion for the purpose of marriage, but marriage done solely for the purpose of conversion, may be declared null and void by a family court based on a suit by either party.
3. The U.P. State Law Commission has recommended a similar Freedom of Religion law in the State and favours a provision under which marriages solemnised solely for the conversion of one of the parties may be nullified by a family court.

Mains:

1. Provisions of the Special Marriage Act violate the right to equality and Right to marriage of Inter-faith couples. Discuss reforms.



Delivery of COVID-19 vaccines poses a huge challenge

The government recently said it will procure the vaccine and distribute it under a special COVID-19 immunisation programme to four categories of people, free-of-charge. The priority groups named are healthcare professionals including doctors, nurses and ASHA workers, a second category that includes frontline workers including police and armed forces, the third category of those aged above 50 and finally those below 50 years of age with co-morbidities.

Challenges in COVID vaccination:

1. A bigger challenge comes in the form of keeping the vaccines at ultralow temperatures during distribution. Most of the COVID-19 vaccines, the RNA vaccines in particular, that are in the advanced stage of Phase-3 trials require -70 degrees C to -80 degree C cold-chain.
2. In India, we have never had this kind of storage requirement and building the infrastructure for ultracold storage requires considerable resources, because you need not just the freezers, but also the uninterrupted power supply.
3. Hence, the decision to use a COVID-19 vaccine will need to take into consideration the logistics and infrastructure needed to distribute and deliver vaccines, which goes beyond financial resources to purchase vaccines.
4. The Oxford vaccine does not require ultracold temperatures, and hence, the existing system used in the routine immunisation programme may be able to handle the vaccines.
5. The next biggest challenge might be in vaccinating people with two doses four weeks apart during the pandemic.
6. While the national immunisation programme is limited to vaccinating children, COVID-19 vaccination will be across age groups, including older people. It remains to be seen how well the lessons learnt from the national immunisation programme can be replicated for other age groups.
7. With vaccines seen as one sure way to end the pandemic if 60-70% of the population is vaccinated, the question of making the vaccines available for free gains importance.

Mains:

1. Highlights the challenges in COVID-19 vaccination with particular reference to India.



A race against the clock to keep the planet cool

Significance of Biden win:

1. The U.S. could become the leader in the world's quest to avert dangerous climate change under a Joe Biden presidency, marking a return to global cooperation and reversing President Donald Trump's isolationist rejection of efforts to cut carbon emissions.
2. Without far-sighted U.S. policy, which acknowledges the responsibility of the industrialised world to help developing nations, and its legacy of carbon emissions, valuable momentum to create a safer planet will be lost over the next four years.

Paris Agreement:

1. Under the Agreement, developed countries are required to help raise funds for developing countries, aid in efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and help transfer clean technologies. But out of \$100 billion dollars targeted to be raised for such climate funding by 2020, the latest assessed figure in 2018 was \$78.9 billion, an OECD study says.
2. The Paris Agreement also lays emphasis on transparency, requiring all parties to submit national emissions sources and removals of carbon dioxide, using good practices outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC).
3. Within 100 days, Mr Biden also promised to host a world summit on climate at which the leaders of the nations with the highest emissions would be engaged, to collaborate and raise ambition on cutting greenhouse gases.
4. Under the Paris pact, updated plans aimed at achieving enhanced goals are expected to be filed by ratifying countries every five years, and they are due in 2020, although the pandemic has slowed progress.

Background:

The Paris Agreement came into force on November 4, 2016, and works on the principle of voluntary national contributions to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. It seeks to keep global temperature rise well within the goal of 2°C from pre-industrial levels, and to try and limit it to 1.5°C.