



Current Affairs of the Day

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'Incentivise States for disinvestment in PSEs'

News: The Centre should incentivise States to come clean on their fiscal deficit positions, bring off-budget liabilities above board and take up their own strategic disinvestment programmes for State-owned public sector enterprises, Fifteenth Finance Commission Chairperson N.K. Singh mooted in an interview.

Highlights:

1. Terming the Centre's decision to "transparently" acknowledge a fiscal deficit of 9.5% of GDP this year as "a very positive development", Mr Singh said that the Centre could incentivise the States to adopt a similar practice to enhance the confidence of investors in India's overall debt and fiscal deficit trajectory.
2. There is a decisive case for State governments to take a leaf out of the Central government's book and drop opaque practices and off-budget borrowings.

SC to examine plea against CEC, parties

News: The Supreme Court has decided to examine a contempt petition against Chief Election Commissioner and leaders of prominent political parties for not fully adhering to the Supreme court order against allowing "dreaded criminals" contest in the Bihar Assembly polls.

Highlights:

1. The Supreme Court in February 2020 directed political parties to publish the criminal antecedents of their candidates in "widely circulated newspapers," which was wilfully disobeyed by political parties in the elections.
2. The court had ordered parties to publish on their websites the reasons for selecting such candidates and why those without a criminal record were not found better-suited to contest the elections.
3. The parties published the details of their candidates in only one Hindi newspaper and gave similar reasons for their choice of candidates.
4. These reasons invariably were the popularity of the person, social work, educational background, that cases were filed against them out of political vendetta by rival political parties, having shown a good effort in handling the COVID-19 crisis.



'Defence fund to tap Gross Revenue Receipts, not tax revenue'

News: The Centre has accepted the Fifteenth Finance Commission's (FFC) recommendation to share 41% of the divisible pool of taxes with the States and is examining the panel's views on the creation of a non-lapsable Defence and Internal Security Modernisation Fund.

Highlights:

1. The important thing is the reprioritisation of the expenditure pattern. FFC has assigned a very specific treatment of the resources to urban local bodies towards improving the health infrastructure of primary health centres and district hospitals considering the background of COVID.
2. Unlike in the past, the fiscal consolidation roadmap for the Union and the States have been made somewhat flexible and introduce a range instead of a fixed point.
3. Recognising that the State finances may be under stress, even though State FRBM laws assigned a certain fiscal deficit target, FFC has given them one percentage point more — 4% instead of the 3% of GSDP, and an additional 0.5% for undertaking power sector reforms.
4. If any of the States have to undertake fresh borrowing on account of liabilities arising out of the GST compensation cess, that would be over and above the flexibility, we have given now.

The Defence and Internal Security Modernisation fund

1. The FFC has suggested about ₹1.5 lakh crore be shifted from the Consolidated Fund of India over five years for the Defence and Internal Security Modernisation fund.
2. None of this is coming from the Gross Tax Revenue, but the Gross Revenue Receipts. And we have already calibrated it without touching the GTR or the options of a cess or a surcharge or a defence tax.
3. Historically, there has been a mismatch between the procurement cycle and the financial allocations on an annual basis. We need to give a degree of stability to the availability of resources for meeting capital expenditure for Defence.
4. While one component comes from the Consolidated Fund, there is a very significant part which will come from the monetisation of idle land assets — defence is the biggest holder of land.



5. They can use that for their own benefit and the proceeds of the disinvestment from the public sector defence enterprises.
6. This is ₹51,000 crore per annum for defence and ₹10,000 crores for the Ministry of Home Affairs for strengthening the capital expenditure of forces like the ITBP and BSF.

Detailed genome map of malaria vector

In-depth: To engineer advanced forms of defence against malaria transmission, scientists require intricate knowledge of the genomes of vector mosquitoes.

Highlights:

1. Scientists have unveiled the detailed genome of the malaria mosquito vector, revealing thousands of new genes vital for the development of genetic control strategies of disease transmission.
2. In order to engineer advanced forms of defence against malaria transmission, including targeted CRISPR and gene drive-based strategies, scientists require intricate knowledge of the genomes of vector mosquitoes.
3. CRISPR technology is a gene-editing tool which allows researchers to easily alter DNA sequences and modify gene function.
4. With the newly upgraded *Anopheles stephensi* genome, the team unearthed more than 3,000 genes that previously evaded scrutiny and which offer fresh gene-drive targets, play key roles in blood-feeding and the metabolism of ingested blood meal, reproduction and immunity against microbial parasites.
5. This reference genome and its excellent quality should help malaria biologists in India and the rest of the world, particularly in view of the national goal of malaria elimination in India by 2030.
6. The discoveries include 29 formerly undetected genes that play crucial roles in resistance to chemical insecticides, a development that can help address the growing Asian and African *An. stephensi* populations with insecticide-resistant mutations.

Spotlight on dams after Chamoli disaster

The story so far: A snow avalanche triggered possibly by a landslide caused a flash flood in the Rishi Ganga River washing away a functional small hydroelectric project and destroying the under-construction 520 MW Tapovan Vishnugad project of the NTPC on the Dhaulti Ganga river.



In focus

The disaster that struck Chamoli has turned the spotlight on several ongoing dam-based hydroelectric projects, rampant road building, tree felling for projects, and also construction practices in the State.

Why is the Chamoli incident of concern?

1. Uttarakhand is geologically unique. As a part of the lesser Himalaya — a region bounded by earth faults — it remains active in terms of deep movement of rock assemblages.
2. The result of these geological stresses, scientists say, is weakening of rocks, making the development of large dam projects in the region unwise.
3. In an assessment of the proposed 315-metre-high India-Nepal Pancheshwar dam project across the Kali river in the Kumaon region, the research said the chosen site could witness a strong earthquake in the Nepal area from the Rangunkhola Fault, perhaps of a magnitude of 7.4, with a potentially serious fallout.
4. Moreover, the geology of mountains in many parts of Uttarakhand is such that the threat of landslides is high. Rocks here have been weakened by natural processes across time and are vulnerable to intense rainfall as well as human interference, in the form of house-building and road construction.
5. The careless disposal of enormous debris from mining and construction projects has added to the problem, blocking flow paths and providing additional debris.
6. In fact, researchers from IIT Roorkee writing in the Indian Geotechnical Journal (2018) estimate that various tourist locations such as Gopeshwar, Joshimath, and Badrinath fall within high-hazard and very high-hazard zones for landslides, as does Chamoli town, calling for preventive and protective measures.

Uttarakhand and climate change?

1. The IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) Special Report on the Ocean and Cryosphere in a Changing Climate found that in the Himalayan ranges, there could be variations in overall water availability, but floods, avalanches and landslides were all forecasts to increase.



2. Changes in monsoonal precipitation could also bring more frequent disasters. In 2013, catastrophic loss of lives was seen in the floods that swept Kedarnath. They were triggered by heavy rainfall over a short period in June.
3. Floods due to extreme rainfall events will cause heavy destruction by bringing debris and silt down the river courses, destroying physical structures, reducing dam life, and causing enormous losses.
4. These problems are also aggravated by the erosion of mountain slopes and the instability of glacial lakes in upper elevations.

Are expensive hydroelectric projects worth the investment today?

1. The Ministry describes this source of power as “highly capital-intensive” but without recurring cost, renewable and cheaper compared to coal and gas plants.
2. But a response it gave earlier this month in the Lok Sabha indicates that it has been offering incentives since March 2019 to make hydropower attractive.
3. These include classification of large hydropower projects as Renewable Energy sources, creating a separate category for hydropower within Non-Solar Renewable Purchase Obligation, tariff rationalisation to bring down tariff, and budgetary support for putting up enabling infrastructures such as roads and bridges.
4. Though hydropower has been reliable where suitable dam capacity exists, in places such as Uttarakhand, the net benefit of big dams is controversial because of the collateral and unquantified damage in terms of loss of lives, livelihoods and destruction of ecology.
5. That too when solar power has become much cheaper and is ecologically more benign than Hydropower.

Conclusion:

Chipko movement activist Sunderlal Bahuguna argued that large dams with an expected life of about 100 years, that involve deforestation and destruction, massively and permanently alter the character and health of the hills. The solution lies in rethinking economy in the Himalayan state towards solar energy and service sector based industry and livelihoods.