

2024

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS





Daily Current Affairs from *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* & *The Assam Tribune*

5th Dec 2024

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GS 1: ART & CULTURE, HISTORY, INDIAN SOCIETY AND GEOGRAPHY

1. More lake-effect snow blankets US Great Lakes region

Context: More lake-effect snow continues to slam the Great Lakes areas in the United States with snow squalls, strong winds and winter storms. Lake effect snow occurs when cold air moves over a warmer lake, causing the air to absorb moisture and warmth from the water. As global temperatures continue to rise and further warm the Great Lakes, which are in lake-effect zones will continue to see increasing lake-effect snowfall as a warmer atmosphere will be able to hold increasing amounts of moisture.

Key points

- **Lake-effect snowfall:** The cold air near the lake's surface warms and picks up moisture from the lake. The warm, moist air rises and cools, causing the moisture to condense and freeze into ice crystals. The ice crystals collide and stick together to form snowflakes, which fall as snow.

Factors - Wind: Wind speed and direction affect the width, length, and intensity of the snow band.
Topography: Topography can affect the rate of snowfall. *Lake surface:* A frozen lake doesn't produce as much lake effect snow because the ice reduces the temperature difference between the air and the lake.

- **Role of climate change:** Human-caused climate change has the potential to intensify lake-effect snow events, at least in the short term, according to the NOAA's U.S. Climate Resilience Toolkit.
- **Location:** Lake effect snow can occur in the Great Lakes region throughout the winter.
- **Intensity:** Lake effect snow can produce intense snowfall rates of 2 to 3 inches per hour or more.
- **Blizzard-like conditions:** Strong winds can accompany lake effect snow, creating blizzard-like conditions.
- **The great lakes:** The Great Lakes are five large freshwater lakes in east-central North America:
 - *Lake Superior* - The largest by volume and deepest, larger than Scotland or South Carolina.
 - *Lake Michigan* - The second largest by volume and third largest by area, and the only one entirely in the U.S.
 - *Lake Huron* - The third largest by volume and second largest in area.
 - *Lake Erie* - The smallest by volume and shallowest.
 - *Lake Ontario* - Smallest of the Great Lakes in North America, but its maximum depth is deeper than Lake Erie and Lake Huron.

Four of the Great Lakes are on the border between Canada and the United States of America. They are the largest freshwater system in the world, representing 21% of the world's fresh water and about 84% of North America's surface fresh water. Collectively, these lakes constitute the largest group of freshwater lakes globally.

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

2. RS clears bill for regulating boilers, safety of life, property

Context: The Rajya Sabha on Wednesday cleared a bill with provisions for regulation of boilers, safety of life and property from explosions and uniformity in registrations. The Boilers Bill, 2024, which seeks to repeal the century-old Boilers act, 1923, was cleared in the upper house by a voice vote. The bill has provisions to ensure the safety of people working inside a boiler apart from repair of boilers to be undertaken by qualified and competent persons. The bill will benefit boiler users, including those in the MSME sectors.

The Boiler Bill, 2024

- **About:** It will repeal Boilers Act, 1923 which was enacted with to ensure uniformity throughout India in all technical aspects pertaining to regulation of boiler. Earlier, act was amended by Indian Boilers (Amendment) Act, 2007 which introduced inspection and certification by independent third-party inspecting authorities. Act was further reviewed to incorporate decriminalised provisions in consonance with Jan Vishwas (Amendment of Provisions) Act, 2023.
- **Key features of Bill:** Define competent authority as an institution recognised in such manner as may be specified by regulations, for grant of certificate to the welders for welding of boiler and boiler component. Any person who makes any structural alteration, addition or renewal in or to a boiler without obtaining authorisation of Chief Inspector shall be punishable. Central Government has power to remove any difficulty in giving effect to provisions of Boilers Act, 2024 within a period

of three years from date of commencement of this Act. Central Government constitute Central Boilers Board to regulate design, manufacture, erection and use of boiler and boiler components.

- **Objective of Bill:** Regulation of manufacture and use of boilers, ensuring safety of life and property of persons from danger of explosions of boilers. Prohibits the use of unregistered and uncertified boilers, mandates reporting of accidents and promotes uniformity in registration and inspection processes throughout manufacturing, erection and use of boilers.
- **Importance of Industrial Boiler:** Boiler deals with burning of fuel in large quantities, attainment of high temperature & pressure zones, handling of high energy steam etc.

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

3. Railways (amendment) Bill a move to privatization

Context: It was a serious step towards bringing good governance to the Indian Railways when the Union Railway Minister, Ashwini Vaishnaw, introduced the Railways (Amendment) Bill, 2024, in the Lok Sabha. The legislation amends the Railway Act of 1989 by importing certain provisions from the Indian Railway Board Act of 1905 to make the powers of the Railway Board statutory and rationalise the legal framework governing the Indian Railways. The committee, however, observed that while the role of the Railway Board was found to be critical in running and managing the affairs of the Indian Railways, it continued to function without its base provided by an Act, after the Railways Act of 1989 had repealed the earlier Act of 1890.

The Railways (Amendment) Bill, 2024

- **About:** The Railways (Amendment) Bill, 2024, being laid is to give effect to the overdue requirement of statutory recognition to the Railway Board by formalising its powers and enhancing operational independence.
- **Key Features:**
 - Statutory powers of Railway Board* - The Railways Act, 1989, would be further inclusive of all the provisions of the Indian Railway Board Act, 1905. This would bring out the statutory powers for the Railway Board and define formally its role and responsibilities under the legal framework of the Indian Railways.
 - Financial independence* - The Bill provides for the fact that expenditure of the Railway Board shall keep on being met out of annual Budgetary provisions under the revenue budget of Indian Railways. This assures that there are no further financial considerations to be made to meet the needs of the Board.
 - Section 24A - Enhancement of Connectivity* - A new section, 24A, is incorporated into the Railways Act of 1989. Provision has been given for the Central Government to permit the running, extension, or diversion of superfast trains through Thawe Junction. This provision concedes long-pending demands of the districts of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar for improved rail services in the region.
 - No New Board or Body* - The Bill does not propose the creation of any new board or body, thereby avoiding additional administrative or financial burden. No change is being proposed in the existing provision relating to the terms and conditions of service for Chairman, Members of the Board, Secretary, and other officers.
- **Significance of Bill:** *Simplification of Legal Framework* - The Bill has incorporated provisions that rested in the Indian Railway Board Act, 1905, in the provisions of the Railways Act, 1989. The rationalisation of the legal framework under which the Indian Railways operate dispenses with the need to reference two separate laws, thereby reducing reference cases and making the process of governance more efficient.

Strengthening Railway Governance - It vests statutory powers upon the Railway Board, making it more free and empowered, and thus, more functional. This is crucial for the management of such a vast and complex network as the Indian Railways.

Regional Development - The addition of Section 24A caters to the meeting of the aspirations of regional people, particularly those pertaining to the people of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, since it now provides that superfast train services can be extended up to under-provisioned Thawe Junction. This will further strengthen regional connectivity and economic development in these areas.

- **Conclusion:** The Railways (Amendment) Bill, 2024, is progressive towards the transformation of the governance framework of Indian Railways. Simplification of the legal framework and giving statutory status to the Railway Board help in improving the operational efficiency and autonomy of Indian Railways. Improved connectivity of underdeveloped areas puts an emphasis on government commitment to balanced regional development. As the Bill goes through the legislative wringer, it will be important to keep an eye on how it impacts the functioning of Indian Railways and larger objectives of governance reforms in India.

GS 2: POLITY, GOVERNANCE, SOCIAL JUSTICE, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS/INSTITUTIONS

4. India's strategic focus on West Africa

Context: Last month, on his way to Brazil to participate in the G-20 Summit, Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a strategic halt in Nigeria. During his first two terms, Mr. Modi travelled to 10 African countries, including Uganda, where he delivered a historic speech outlining India's vision of Africa. However, his visit to Nigeria is significant as it marks the first African visit of the Prime Minister in his third term. This visit is also the first by an Indian Prime Minister to Nigeria in 17 years. The Indian Prime Minister was conferred Nigeria's second-highest national award, the Grand Commander of the Order of the Niger. He became the only second foreign dignitary to receive the distinction since 1969, after Queen Elizabeth II, underlining India's rising global stature and the trust and recognition Mr. Modi has gained for his commitment to the Global South.

India-Africa relations

- **Economic and Development Cooperation:** *Market Potential* - Africa presents an untapped market for Indian businesses, especially in textiles, pharmaceuticals, automobiles, and light machinery.
Trade Growth - From 2011 to 2022, India's total goods trade with Africa surged from USD 68.54 billion to USD 90.52 billion, reflecting a robust economic partnership. In 2022, India recorded a positive trade balance with Africa for the first time.
- **Health and Humanitarian Collaboration:** *Affordable Medicines* - Indian pharmaceutical firms are key providers of generic medicines in Africa, improving access to essential healthcare and supporting public health systems.
Medical Assistance - India has dispatched medical teams to assist in combating diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, and Ebola, contributing to health infrastructure and emergency response capabilities.
- **Defence and Security Engagement:** *Strategic Partnerships* - India has signed MoUs with African nations along the Indian Ocean Rim, highlighting a commitment to enhance defence collaboration and maritime security.

Joint Exercises - The first Trilateral Maritime Exercise with Tanzania and Mozambique in 2022 reflects a proactive approach to strengthening maritime cooperation and addressing security challenges.

- **Technology and Digital Initiatives:** *Pan African e-Network Project* - Launched in 2009, this project facilitates satellite connectivity for telemedicine and tele-education, significantly impacting access to services in remote areas.

e-VidyaBharti and e-ArogyaBharti - These programs provide free tele-education and continuing medical education, enhancing learning and professional development for healthcare workers in Africa.

- **Significance of Africa for India:** *Economic Potential* - Projected GDP growth of 4% in 2023 and a bilateral trade reaching USD 98 billion in 2022-23, Africa is an attractive market for Indian businesses. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) creates a unified market of 1.3 billion people, enhancing export and investment prospects.

Geopolitical Importance - Africa's 54 nations form a significant bloc in international forums, crucial for India's aspirations for greater global representation. India's support for African representation in the UN Security Council and the African Union's permanent membership in the G20 during India's 2023 presidency highlight this strategic partnership.

- **Significance of India for Africa:** *AfCFTA Opportunities* - The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is poised to create the largest free trade zone, providing India with opportunities to enhance bilateral trade and lift millions out of poverty.

Shared Development Goals - Both regions face similar developmental challenges, facilitating a mutual understanding of issues like UNSC reform, climate change, and trade negotiations.

Security Cooperation - India and Africa can strengthen ties in addressing security challenges, including terrorism and regional stability, enhancing peace and security across the continent.

- **Concern issue between Africa India cooperation:** *Lagging Investments* - Indian investments in Africa are significantly lower than those from China and Western countries.

Quality Concerns - Some African markets perceive Indian products as inferior compared to Western or Chinese alternatives.

Regional Imbalance - India's engagement has been criticized for focusing predominantly on East and Southern Africa, neglecting West Africa.

Tariff and Non-Tariff Barriers - African countries often impose high tariffs and regulatory hurdles that can impede Indian exports, making market access challenging.

- **Way forward:** *Bilateral Trade Agreements* - Negotiate and implement comprehensive trade agreements that reduce tariffs and non-tariff barriers, facilitating easier access to markets.

Risk Mitigation Strategies - Develop mechanisms to address risk perceptions among Indian investors, such as insurance schemes or government-backed guarantees.

Diversified Engagement - Expand focus beyond East and Southern Africa to include West and Central Africa, ensuring a more balanced approach.

Scholarships and Exchanges - Increase scholarships and exchange programs for African students to study in India, promoting people-to-people connections.

Community Engagement - Actively involve local communities in project planning and execution to address their concerns and needs.

Start-up Collaboration - Encourage partnerships between Indian and African start-ups to foster innovation and share best practices.

5. Will Reserve bank go for a CRR cut?

Context: Although there seems to be broad consensus that the repo rate is likely to remain unchanged at 6.5% in the three-day monetary policy review that got underway on Wednesday, there is an expectation that the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) may announce a cut in the cash reserve ratio (CRR). The reduction may occur due to the gained momentum amid a tight liquidity condition in the banking system and shockingly low Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth, which slowed to a seven-month low of 5.4% in the July-September 2024 quarter.

Key points

- **Overview:** The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) began its three-day monetary policy review. There is increasing speculation that the RBI may announce a cut in the Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR) to ease liquidity pressures.
- **Cash Reserve Ratio (CRR):** CRR is the percentage of a bank's total deposits that it must maintain as liquid cash with the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) as a reserve. It is a tool used by the RBI to manage inflation and check excessive lending by banks. As of now, the CRR is set at 4.5% of a bank's Net Demand and Time Liabilities (NDTL). Banks do not earn interest on the amount they maintain as CRR with the RBI.
- **CRR Requirements for Different Types of Banks:** *Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs)* - Includes Public Sector Banks (PSBs), Private Sector Banks (PVBs), Regional Rural Banks (RRBs), Small Finance Banks (SFBs), Payments Banks, Primary (Urban) Co-operative Banks (UCBs), State Co-operative Banks (StCBs), and District Central Co-operative Banks (DCCBs). *Non-Scheduled Co-operative Banks & Local Area Banks* - They must maintain CRR with themselves or with the RBI.
- **Restrictions on CRR Funds:** Banks cannot lend the funds held as CRR to corporates or individual borrowers. The money held under CRR cannot be used for investment purposes by the bank. No interest is earned on the funds maintained as CRR by banks with the RBI.
- **Incremental CRR (I-CRR):** Introduced temporarily on August 10, 2023, to absorb surplus liquidity in the banking system. Banks were required to maintain 10% I-CRR on the increase in their NDTL between May 19, 2023, and July 28, 2023. The I-CRR was implemented from August 12, 2023, and applied during periods of excess liquidity in the financial system.
- **Impacts of Declining CRR on the Economy:** *Positive Impacts* - Increased Bank Liquidity: A reduction in CRR frees up more funds for banks, improving credit availability and promoting investment and consumption. Stimulus for Economic Growth: With more funds to lend, businesses can secure loans more easily, boosting economic activity and encouraging growth across sectors. Lower Interest Rates: As banks have more liquidity, they may lower interest rates on loans, making credit cheaper and encouraging investment and consumer spending. *Negative Impacts* - Potential Inflationary Risks: Increased lending and spending can raise demand, which, if not matched by supply, can lead to inflationary pressures in the economy. Asset Bubbles: Excess liquidity may result in overvalued assets like stocks or real estate, creating the risk of unsustainable price increases and potential market instability.