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

1. Frosty and bitter

Context: The first winter session of 18th Lok Sabha ended on December 20 as one of the least productive and most acrimonious in history. The acrimony peaked with the Opposition turning a reference by Home Minister Amit Shah to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar into a stick to beat the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with Mr. Shah's misspoken remarks were taken out of context by the Opposition which feels that it is par for the course. Productivity in the Rajya Sabha was 40%, as it met for 43 hours and 27 minutes of the schedule. The Lok Sabha functioned for 54.5% of its scheduled time. The session was scheduled to take up 16 Bills in the legislative business and the first batch of supplementary grants under the financial business. Of the 16 Bills, only one Bill, the Bharatiya Vayuyan Vidheyak, 2024, significant for the civil aviation sector, was passed in both Houses.

Key points

- **Parliament Winter Session:** *J&K Statehood* - Discussion on J&K statehood following the new assembly's formation and demand for deputy speaker post in Lok Sabha, vacant since the last term.
- *Foreign Policy Topics* - Likely debates on India's stance regarding Israel-Palestine and Russia-Ukraine conflicts.

Census and Caste Count - Expected questions on the upcoming census and potential inclusion of a caste count.

One-Nation, One Election - Opposition may seek clarity on this proposal, recently approved by the Union Cabinet.

Waqf (Amendment) Bill - The Joint Committee is expected to submit its report during this session.

Constitution Day Celebration: A special event will be held on November 26 in the Central Hall of the Samvidhan Sadan to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Constitution's adoption.

- **Summoning of Parliament: Article 85** of the Constitution empowers the President to summon each House of Parliament. This is done at the recommendation of the Cabinet Committee on Parliamentary Affairs. Once approved, MPs are officially summoned in the name of the President.
Frequency - The Constitution mandates that there should not be a gap of more than six months between two sessions, ensuring that the Parliament meets at least twice a year.
Convention - Although the Constitution does not provide a fixed schedule, Parliament typically meets for three sessions each year as per established conventions.
- **Related Constitutional Articles:** *Article 79* - Establishes a bicameral legislature comprising the President, the Rajya Sabha, and the Lok Sabha.
Article 85 - Provides for the summoning, prorogation, and dissolution of Parliament.
Article 100 - Specifies voting and quorum requirements for both Houses.
- **Three Parliamentary Sessions:** *Budget Session (January–April/May)* - The first and longest session, it typically starts in the last week of January and ends by April or early May.
Monsoon Session (July–August) - This session lasts around three weeks and focuses on a range of legislative matters.
Winter Session (November–December) - This is the shortest session, generally held from November to December.
 - *Special Session* - A special session is an unscheduled session called outside the three regular annual sessions (Budget, Monsoon, and Winter) to address urgent matters or specific issues of national importance.
- **Significance of sessions:** The sessions of Parliament ensure the regular functioning of India's legislative process, guided by conventions and constitutional provisions to address the nation's needs. Through structured meetings, the Parliament examines budgetary allocations, legislates on critical issues, and maintains checks and balances on the executive, fulfilling its constitutional mandate as the supreme legislative body in India.
- **Reasons for Low Productivity of Parliament:** Frequent disruptions and protests by opposition parties. Lack of consensus on key issues despite the ruling party majority. Shorter sessions limiting time for debates and discussions.
- **Implications of low productivity:** Delays in crucial legislation on taxation, infrastructure, and social welfare. Hinders accountability and oversight of the government. Diminishes public trust in democratic institutions. Wastes resources and negatively impacts the economy.
- **Way Forward:** Foster a culture of respect and professionalism among parliamentarians. Promote constructive dialogue and debate on policy matters. Strengthen oversight through rigorous questioning and scrutiny. Ensure timely and transparent information access for parliamentarians.

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

2. A chance to strike gold during the Kuwait visit

Context: In the realm of international diplomacy, the relations between India and Kuwait exemplify a historically robust and mutually beneficial partnership. With Prime Minister Narendra Modi's impending visit to Kuwait on December 21-22, 2024, the first such visit by an Indian Prime Minister in 43 years, there is significant focus on reinforcing these multifaceted ties. The visit underlines the strategic partnerships, economic cooperation, and strong people-to-people ties that have conventionally marked the India-Kuwait relationship. India-Kuwait relations are characterized by deep historical roots, robust economic ties, and strong people-to-people connections.

Key points

- **India-Kuwait relations:** India and Kuwait have a relationship tracing back to ancient times when they traded in spices, pearls, and textiles. Indian merchants regularly visited the shores of Kuwait and built strong trade and cultural relationships. Post independence, India and Kuwait had formalized their diplomatic relationship in 1962.
- **Indian Diaspora:** The Indian diaspora is an integral part of Kuwait's social and economic fabric. Over a million Indians reside in Kuwait, making them the largest expatriate community. They work across various sectors, including healthcare, education, construction, and domestic services. The Indian community in Kuwait actively participates in and contributes to the cultural and economic activities of their host country, fostering deeper bilateral ties.
- **Strategic Implications of PM Modi's Current Visit to Kuwait:** Prime Minister Narendra Modi will be visiting Kuwait on 21-22 December 2024. It is the first visit of an Indian Prime Minister after 43 years. It is important for several reasons-
 - *Strengthening Diplomatic Ties* - Direct engagement with Kuwait's leadership will reinforce political relations and pave the way for future strategic collaborations.
 - *Economic Boom* - Discourse will likely center around intensifying trade cooperation, but that too on other sectors except the oil sector, for instance, technology, healthcare, and education, thereby striking an equal economic balance.
 - *Diaspora Engagement* - Interaction with the Indian community in Kuwait is an opportunity to engage with expatriates who play a crucial role in bilateral relations and in addressing their concerns, hence strengthening people-to-people ties.
 - *Assurance of Energy Security* - The visit is likely to reiterate Kuwait as an energy partner of dependability to ensure uninterrupted oil supply which is essential to sustaining the Indian economy.
 - *Institutional Agreements* - The visit may lead to new agreements and the activation of joint commissions and working groups so that cooperation is focused and continues uninterrupted in the various sectors.
- **Importance of Kuwait to India:**
 - Energy Security* - Kuwait is one of the top oil suppliers to India. Being an energy-hungry country, India relies heavily on imports. Thus, a stable relationship with Kuwait is essential for ensuring a constant supply of oil and LPG, which are essential for maintaining the growth of the Indian economy.
 - Geopolitical Stability* - Kuwait's strategic location in the Gulf and its ability to mediate regional disputes are fundamental for maintaining peace and stability, which aligns with India's broader interests in the Middle East.

- **Issues Concerning India-Kuwait Relations:** *Trade Imbalances* - While the bilateral trade is robust, the trade balance is often skewed due to the high volume of oil imports. Efforts to diversify trade and boost Indian exports can address this imbalance.

Political Dynamics in the Region - The volatile political dynamics of the Middle East can impact India-Kuwait relations, compelling both nations to navigate their foreign policies carefully to avoid conflicts and ensure sustained cooperation.

- **Conclusion:** The bilateral ties between India and Kuwait stand on a rich historical background, along with economic cooperation, cultural engagement, and strategic partnership. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is scheduled to visit Kuwait for which both the nations highly value their bilateral relationship. It will offer the chance to address the challenges that have already arisen, new areas of cooperation, and mutual commitments. With both countries in preparation for this high-level engagement, the visit is going to further cement the foundation for a prosperous and collaborative future, which will benefit not only the two nations but also regional and global stability.

GS 3: ECONOMY, ECOLOGY, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY, DEFENCE, SECURITY AND DISASTER MANAGEMENT

3. Biggest killer

Context: Road accidents continue to be the biggest killer in the State (Assam), accounting for some 3,000 deaths annually on an average besides injuring many more. The two-month period from September to October this year recorded 570 fatalities, laying bare that the ominous trend has far from over. While human error, including negligent driving, drink driving and driving in violation of road safety norms, has been the biggest factor behind fatal road mishaps, it is also apparent that the interventions made by the Government have been far from adequate. A sizeable number of mishaps is also caused by the shocking lapses on the part of authorities like the Transport Department, PWD and police mandated with the task of making the road safe for commuters.

Key points

- **Overview:** India recorded over 1.72 lakh road fatalities in 2023, highlighting the country's global lead in road accident deaths.
- **Causes of Road Accidents:** Lack of essential safety features like airbags in many budget-friendly cars in India. Overcrowding of roads with vehicles, pedestrians, and animals.
 - *Behavioural Issues* - Lack of adherence to rules, over-speeding and reckless driving.
 - *Road Engineering* - Potholes, black spots, and inadequate infrastructure.
 - *Enforcement Gaps* - Weak implementation of traffic laws, especially at state and district levels.
 - *Vehicle Standards* - Need for improved automobile engineering and technology.
 - *Awareness and Education* - Insufficient awareness programs on road safety.
- **Impacts of Road Accidents:**
 - Impact on the economy* - Road crashes cost the Indian economy around 5-7% of its GDP annually.
 - Loss of life* - In India, a traffic accident claims the life of one person approx. every three and a half minutes.
 - Disproportionate impact on the poor* - The financial loss due to road accidents amounted to more than seven months of household income, while it was equivalent to less than one month's household income for affluent households.

Increased out-of-pocket (OOP) expenditure - Under-coverage of health insurance facilities uplifts medical and non-medical expenditures, imposing severe financial burdens and pushing non-poor families into poverty and the already poor into extreme poverty and indebtedness.

- **Road Safety Initiatives in India:** *National Road Safety Policy India, 2010* - It emphasised the need for better road infrastructure, stricter traffic rule enforcement, enhanced emergency medical services, public awareness campaigns, and improved post-crash care.

Supreme Court Committee on Road Safety (SCCoRS) - Established in 2014 to address the issue and guide and monitor all states and UTs to bring down crash fatalities in the country.

Motor Vehicles Amendment Act, 2019 - The Act introduced higher penalties for traffic violations, including speeding, drunk driving, and not wearing helmets or seat belts, and imposed stricter penalties for offences by juveniles.

Integrated Road Accident Database (iRAD) - It is a central accident database management system that analyses the causes of road crashes and devises safety interventions to reduce them.

- **Way Forward:** *Improved Road Infrastructure* - Address potholes and build more underpasses and foot-over bridges across state and district highways.

Behavioural Interventions - Promote respect for traffic rules through awareness campaigns by engaging NGOs and communities in road safety education.

Technology and Innovation - Integrate AI-based traffic management systems; Mandate advanced vehicle safety features (like airbags and ADAS).

State-Level Cooperation - Active participation of state govts in addressing local road safety issues.

Raise Awareness - More efforts are needed to promote awareness about road safety, the implications of road accidents, and what needs to be done to reduce the increasing number of road accidents.

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4. How global crises are connected

Context: Some of the biggest challenges humankind faces are like, climate change, biodiversity, loss and hunger. All of these are interconnected, which means that an integrated approach is needed to address these. The report was produced by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity & Ecosystem Services (IPBES), a global group of scientific experts. The group examined the interlinkages among five major challenges which are, climate change, biodiversity loss, food insecurity, water scarcity, and health risks. The report found that the world's current economic direction was negatively impacting all these challenges, leading to unaccounted for cost of at least \$10-25 trillion annually.

Key points

- **Overview:** Recently, the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) has launched the Nexus report. The final full report will be published in 2025, and it is expected to further guide global efforts toward addressing these interconnected crises.
- **About IPBES:** It is an independent intergovernmental body established in 2012. It provides policymakers with objective scientific assessments about the state of knowledge regarding the planet's biodiversity, ecosystems and the benefits they provide to people, as well as the tools and methods to protect and sustainably use these vital natural assets. This independent body inspired by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.

Purpose - IPBES was established in 2012 to strengthen the science-policy interface for biodiversity and ecosystem services. Its goals include conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, human well-being, and sustainable development.

Membership - IPBES has 150 member governments, including India, which was a founding member.

Structure - IPBES is not a United Nations body, but the UN Environment Programme provides secretariat services.

Recent news - IPBES recently launched the Nexus report and was selected as one of the two recipients of the 2024 Blue Planet Prize.

- **Key Highlights from the Report:** The Nexus Report includes 186 scenarios, projecting interactions between the Nexus elements until 2050-2100. This Report provides over 70 solutions for managing the intersection of biodiversity, water, food, health, and climate change.

The report identifies the drivers of biodiversity loss as follows-

- *Indirect drivers* - Overconsumption, waste, and population growth.
- *Direct drivers* - Land use change and pollution.

The world has been witnessing biodiversity decline at the rate of about 2-6 percent on an average every decade over the last half a century.

Existing policies have failed to address the complexity of interlinked challenges, often prioritizing one aspect (e.g., food production or climate change) at the expense of others thus leading to adverse outcomes.

- Economic policies often ignore the environmental costs, leading to \$10-25 trillion per year in unaccounted costs related to biodiversity, water, health, and climate change.
- Delays in addressing these issues could double costs and result in irreparable biodiversity loss and increased financial burdens in the future.

Illegal resource extraction, including wildlife trade, timber, and fisheries, is valued at \$100-300 billion annually, which further degrades ecosystems.

- In contrast, global expenditure on biodiversity protection is less than 1% of global GDP.
- Negative externalities from sectors like fossil fuels and agriculture, which affect biodiversity and water systems, cost up to \$25 trillion annually.

- **Impact on Ecosystems:** *Forests*, that provide vital ecosystem services like water filtration, are under threat due to deforestation, impacting water availability and quality.

Wetlands are critical in water regulation and climate change mitigation but are being degraded by human activities.

Freshwater biodiversity is deteriorating faster than terrestrial ecosystems due to human activities.

Marine and freshwater species, particularly those in coastal and wetland areas, are especially vulnerable to pollution, sediments, and other anthropogenic stressors.

Coral reefs face multiple threats, including unsustainable fishing, ocean acidification, and climate change, endangering about a third of coral species globally.

- **Conclusion of the report:** The report suggests that Governments should act decisively and collaborate across sectors to meet global environmental and health commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement. The report warns that delaying action would significantly increase costs, with potential economic benefits from immediate action estimated at \$10 trillion in business opportunities and 400 million jobs by 2030.