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Current Affairs - 24 December 2024

THE GATT-IFICATION OF THE WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION

- The World Trade Organisation (WTO), headquartered in Geneva, was established in 1995 as a monumental step towards a rule-based international trading system.
- However, it now finds itself in a precarious position, unable to fulfil its promise of a comprehensive dispute settlement mechanism and the paralysis of its Appellate Body (AB) is emblematic of deeper systemic issues that threaten the WTO's relevance in global trade.
- Now it becomes imperative to critically examine the origins of the WTO's decline, the geopolitical factors influencing its dysfunction, and the implications for global trade.

The Origins of WTO's Decline

- This obstruction began during Barack Obama's administration, escalated under Donald Trump's first presidency, and has continued under President Joe Biden.
- It reflects a bipartisan political consensus in the U.S. The U.S.'s hostile stance towards the AB will intensify further under what is anticipated to be a highly protectionist Trump 2.0 administration.
- The WTO panels, the first stage of dispute settlement, continue to operate and render decisions resolving trade disputes between WTO member countries.
- However, this is of little significance because the losing country uses its legal prerogative to appeal to a non-operational AB, and thus stall the adjudicatory process.
- It is a fool's errand to put the AB back on track because the real issue is the WTO's existential crisis and its quest to be a relevant player in global trade.
- The larger game is not about killing the AB but, rather, making the WTO dysfunctional.

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An Analysis of the Promising Beginning of the WTO

- **The Evolution from GATT to WTO**
 - The establishment of the WTO in 1995 marked a historic transition from the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).
 - It sought to address the limitations of its predecessor by shifting from **voluntary compliance** to enforceable legal commitments.
 - This change reflected the global embrace of neoliberal principles, including **market liberalisation and deregulation**.
- **A Comprehensive Rule-Based Framework**
 - The WTO extended its reach beyond trade in goods to encompass services and intellectual property, introducing agreements such as GATS and TRIPS.
 - This comprehensive framework aimed to harmonise global trade practices and ensure stability and predictability in international markets.
- **The Innovation of a Two-Tier Dispute Settlement System**
 - One of the WTO's key innovations was its **two-tier dispute settlement mechanism**, featuring a binding adjudicatory process and an appellate function.
 - This mechanism **enhanced impartiality and rigor**, positioning the WTO as a pioneer in international legal adjudication.

Conclusion

- The WTO's inability to restore its dispute settlement system by 2024 reflects a broader existential crisis.
 - While the paralysis of the Appellate Body is a pressing issue, the root cause lies in the shifting dynamics of global power, particularly the U.S.-China rivalry.
 - The transition from a rule-based to a politically-driven trade regime marks a reversal of the WTO's founding principles.
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FARMERS PRODUCER ORGANISATIONS (FPO)



- An FPO is a type of **Producer Organisation (PO)** formed by farmers.
- It operates as an organization of the producers, by the producers, and for the producers.
- The **Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium (SFAC)** plays a vital role in promoting FPOs across India.
- **Purpose of POs:**
 - A PO represents producers of various goods, including **agricultural products, non-farm items, and artisan goods.**
 - It can adopt legal forms such as **producer companies, cooperative societies,** or other entities that allow members to share **profits and benefits.**
- **Ownership of FPOs:** The **ownership** of an FPO lies entirely with its **member farmers.** It operates on the principle of **shared decision-making and benefits.**

Legal Framework for FPOs:

- FPOs can be registered under the following:
 - **Companies Act, 1956** or **Companies Act, 2013.**
 - **Societies Registration Act, 1860.**
 - **Public Trusts Act, 1882.**
- **Structure and Governance:** These legal frameworks ensure transparency, accountability, and effective management of FPOs.

About Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations (ICRIER):

- It is a leading Indian policy research think tank established in 1981, focusing on sectors like Agriculture, Climate Change, Digital Economy, and Economic Growth.



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CRITICAL MINERALS



- Critical minerals are those minerals that are **essential for economic development and national security**.
- The lack of availability of these minerals or concentration of extraction or processing in a few geographical locations may lead to **supply chain vulnerabilities** and even disruption of supplies.
- The future global economy will be underpinned by technologies that depend on critical minerals such as lithium, graphite, cobalt, titanium, and rare earth elements.
- These are essential for the advancement of many sectors, including high-tech electronics, telecommunications, transport and defence.
- They are also vital to power the global transition to a **low carbon emissions economy**, and the **renewable energy technologies** that will be required to meet the 'Net Zero' commitments of an increasing number of countries around the world.

About the Critical Minerals Summit:

- **Organised by:** Ministry of Mines, Government of India, with collaboration from Shakti Sustainable Energy Foundation, CEEW, and IISD.
- **Purpose:** To foster collaboration, innovation, and policy dialogue on critical mineral beneficiation and processing.
- **Key Highlights:**
 - Focus on eight key minerals, including **lithium, rare earth elements, graphite, vanadium, and platinum group minerals**.
 - Interactive workshops on mineral auctions, policy incentives, and sustainable solutions.

India's Current Scenario:



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- The Ministry of Mines listed **30 critical minerals** essential for economic and strategic security.
 - India relies entirely on imports for 10 critical minerals.
- **Dependence on China:** India's dependency on China exceeds 40% for 6 critical minerals: **Bismuth** (85.6%), **Lithium** (82%), **Silicon** (76%), **Titanium** (50.6%), **Tellurium** (48.8%), and **Graphite** (42.4%)
- **Reasons for reliance:** China's dominance in mineral processing, controlling: **87% of rare earth processing**, **58% of lithium refining**, and **68% of silicon processing**.

YOUTH CO:LAB



The Atal Innovation Mission (AIM), NITI Aayog, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in partnership with Citi Foundation, have officially launched the seventh edition of the Youth Co:Lab National Innovation Challenge for 2024-2025.

- It was **co-created in 2017 by UNDP and Citi Foundation**, aims to empower and invest in youth to accelerate the implementation of the **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** through leadership, social innovation and entrepreneurship.
- In India, Youth Co: Lab was **launched in 2019** in collaboration with **Atal Innovation Mission, NITI Aayog**.
- As of the end of 2024, Youth Co:Lab has conducted **six national theme-specific youth social innovation and entrepreneurship** dialogues in India through this collaboration.
- This year, the Youth Co: Lab National Innovation Challenge 2024-2025, held in collaboration with AssisTech Foundation (ATF).
- It will focus on empowering young entrepreneurs and entrepreneurs with disabilities innovating for solutions that “Enhance access to opportunities and well-being of Persons with Disabilities”, across the following **sub-categories: Inclusive and Accessible**



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Assistive Technology (AT), Inclusive Educational Technology and Skilling Solutions and Accessible and Inclusive Care Models.

About Atal Innovation Mission (AIM):

- It is a flagship initiative set up by the NITI Aayog in 2016.
 - **Objective:** To create and encourage an environment of innovation and entrepreneurship across schools, educational organisations, research institutes, and industries, including MSMEs.
 - **Functions:**
 - Promote entrepreneurship by encouraging innovators to become entrepreneurs through financial support as well as mentorship.
 - Promote innovation by creating a platform where ideas are generated through like-minded individuals.
 - AIM has created **four programs** to support these functions: Atal Tinkering Labs, Atal Incubation Centres, Atal New India Challenges and Atal Grand Challenges.
 - All the initiatives of AIM are currently monitored and managed systematically using real-time **MIS systems and dynamic dashboards**.
 - AIM is also currently having its **programs reviewed by third party agencies** for ensuring continuous improvements.
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BIO-BITUMEN



Union minister for road transport and highways inaugurated a 1km stretch of Asia's first highway with a bio-bitumen blended surface.

- It is a **petroleum-free alternative** to bitumen, or asphalt.
 - It is designed to **lower the carbon footprint of road construction**.
 - It is made **using non-petroleum-based renewable resources** and can be made from vegetable oils, synthetic polymers, or both, making it a more sustainable model long term.
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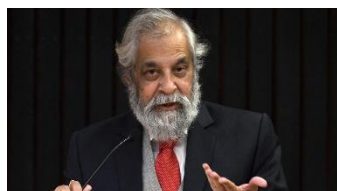
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- **Advantages:**
 - **Sustainable:** It is generated from renewable materials. This makes it a more environmentally friendly alternative to petroleum-based bitumen, which is derived from limited resources.
 - **Low Carbon Footprint:** As it is derived from organic materials that have absorbed carbon dioxide during their development, it often has a lower environmental impact than standard bitumen.
 - **Improved environmental performance:** It is less toxic and detrimental to the environment than regular bitumen. It contains fewer heavy metals and other hazardous pollutants.
- **Applications:** It is versatile and may be utilised in a variety of applications, including **road paving, roofing, and waterproofing.**

What is Bitumen?

- It is a dense, highly viscous, **petroleum-based hydrocarbon.**
 - It is found in deposits **such as oil sands and pitch lakes** (natural bitumen) or is obtained as a residue of the distillation of crude oil.
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UNITED NATIONS INTERNAL JUSTICE COUNCIL



Former Supreme Court judge Justice Madan B. Lokur was appointed Chairperson of the United Nations Internal Justice Council (IJC) for a term ending on November 12, 2028.

U.N. Internal Justice Council (IJC) was established by the UN General Assembly as part of the new internal justice system in order to help ensure independence, professionalism and accountability in the administration of justice system of the United Nations.

- The IJC members are **appointed by the UN Secretary General.**
 - It is composed of **five members.**

Chair: a distinguished jurist chosen by consensus by the four other members.

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- **Functions:**


- To undertake the search for **suitable candidates** for the positions of judges when there is a vacancy on the **UN Dispute Tribunal (UNDT) and the UN Appeals Tribunal (UNAT)**, to be appointed by the General Assembly.
- To recommend General Assembly two or three candidates for each vacancy with due regard to geographical distribution.
- To provide its views on the **implementation of the system of administration of justice** to the General Assembly.

CENTRE SCRAPS NO-DETENTION POLICY FOR CLASSES 5 AND 8

The Indian government has **abolished the no-detention policy** for Classes 5 and 8 across schools under its jurisdiction. This includes **over 3,000 central schools**, including Kendriya Vidyalayas, Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, Sainik Schools, and Eklavya Model Residential Schools (under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs).

This significant policy change **aims to improve learning outcomes and accountability** while balancing the rights of students with academic standards.

Overview of the No-Detention Policy:

'NO-FAIL POLICY AFFECTING LEARNING'	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ► Right to Education Act, 2009, introduces no-detention policy up to Class VIII ► In 2017, Union cabinet scraps policy after 24 states demand it ► On Aug 11, 2017, amendment introduced. Sent to standing committee on HRD ► On Feb 13, 2018, panel 	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> backs proposal to abolish the policy ► On Jan 3, 2019, RS passes amendment, empowers states to detain students in the same class if they fail annual exams

- **Adopted the change:** 18 states and UTs, including Delhi, Rajasthan, and Tamil Nadu.

- **Pending decision:** Haryana and Puducherry.

- **Continuing No-detention policy:** Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Maharashtra, etc.

Reasons for Scrapping the No-Detention Policy:

- **Criticism of academic dilution:**

- Experts argued that the policy led to a **decline in academic standards and student accountability**.
- It was believed to have **transformed schools into mid-day meal hubs rather than centers of learning**.

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- **State and expert advocacy:**
 - By 2016, most states supported scrapping the policy during a Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) meeting.
 - The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasised improving learning outcomes while retaining educational access.
- **Balancing accountability with equity:** The policy change aims to instill seriousness in studies while providing remedial measures for underperforming students.

Key Provisions of the New Policy:

- **Promotion and re-examination:**
 - Students failing the annual exams in Classes 5 or 8 will receive remedial instruction and an opportunity for a re-examination within two months.
 - Failure in the re-examination may lead to detention.
- **Competency-based assessments:** Examinations will focus on holistic development rather than rote memorisation or procedural skills.
- **Support for struggling students:** Teachers and school heads will provide targeted support, identify learning gaps, and closely monitor students' progress.
- **Safeguards for student rights:**
 - No child can be expelled before completing Class 8.
 - Detailed records of detained students and their progress will be maintained.

Conclusion:

- The abolition of the no-detention policy marks a shift in India's educational approach, aiming to **balance accountability with inclusivity**.
 - While it seeks to improve learning outcomes, **its success will depend on careful implementation and continued support for underperforming students**.
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