BEWARE THE TEMPTING APPLE OF UKRAINE MEDIATION

Context

- The article underpins perils (dangers) of going beyond persuasion and exercising caution for India while playing a role in seeking to bring Russia and Ukraine to the negotiating table for brokering peace.

Background

- **Media report**: In a recent report, New York Times focussed on India's possible role in pressing for peace between Russia and Ukraine amidst the visit of External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's to Moscow (November 7-8).

o It also reported that India is trying to refashion India's tradition of non-alignment into a more commanding strategy of "all alignment"

o The daily also highlighted that if the peacemaking efforts succeed, it can bring a more prominent place for India in the global order and bring it closer to the long-sought prize, a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC).

- **India's perception:** It led to comment in the Indian media, on how Indian diplomacy since the Russian invasion of Ukraine had deftly put India in a position to promote peace between the warring parties.

o Few favouring the ruling system argued that a mediatory Indian role in the Ukraine war would naturally serve as a great vindication of Indian PM Modi's personal position as a world leader and his government's successful handling of India's external interests.

India's standing on Ukraine conflict

- **Expressed displeasure**: India has made its disapproval of Russia's action clear even if it has refrained from voting against it on substantive resolutions in United Nations forums, including the Security Council.

- **Limited outcry:** The maximum extent that India has gone to is of Indian PM openly telling Russian President Vladimir Putin in Samarkand (September 2022) that the present age was not one of war.

- **Peaceful resolution:** India has advocated a return to diplomacy and dialogue and has intervened in specific cases with Russia.
- For example, to prevent it from endangering the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant (in Ukraine) or to allow the export of Ukraine foodgrains.
- **Minimal outcomes**: But all the above steps are far from attempts to mediate or bring the parties to the negotiating table.

INTERNATIONAL FORUM ON 'RIGHT TO DRUG-FREE CHILDHOOD'

The UN-backed conclave will open in Thiruvananthapuram on November 16, featuring prominent voices against drug abuse from India and abroad.

About:
- It is organised by **Fourth Wave Foundation (FWF) in partnership with United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and World Federation Against Drugs (WFAD).**
- **Theme:** 'Children Matter-Right to a Drug-Free Childhood' is the central theme of the meet.
- Fourth Wave Foundation's initiative against substance abuse named **'VENDA' (No to Drugs),** strongly advocates the 'alternative pursuit' model in Kerala on the lines of Icelandic Model (IM).
- Major activities of 'VENDA' include empowerment programmes for children, football training, summer camp, football tourney 'Venda Cup' and awareness classes for parents, teachers, counsellors, police and excise officers.
- 'VENDA' is active in districts that have a very high number of drug-addicted teens found by the National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction (NAPDDR) survey conducted by the Narcotic Control Bureau.
- The increasing relevance of the **Icelandic Model (IM)** of intervention in bringing teenagers affected by drug use disorders back to normal life through alternative pursuits will be a key topic of deliberations at the International Forum on 'Right to Drug-free Childhood'.
- Around 30 years ago, Iceland was the hotspot of teenage drug consumption in Europe.

o   Today, the country stands first on the European list of de-addicted teenagers.

EKLAVYA MODEL RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS (EMRS)

The Tribal Affairs Ministry intends to go ahead with its plan to build new Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) on 15 acres of land in all sub-districts which have Scheduled Tribe communities of more than 20,000 people, who make up at least 50% of their total population, despite a Parliamentary panel saying that this criteria is "impractical".

About:

- **Implementing ministry:** Ministry of Tribal Affairs.
- **Background**: The scheme of EMRSs was introduced in the year 1997-98 to ensure tribal students get access to quality education in the remote tribal areas.

- **Features:**
o   The schools would focus to provide quality upper primary, secondary and senior secondary level education to ST Students in these areas.
o   Apart from school building including hostels and staff quarters, provision for a playground, students' computer lab, teacher resource room etc. are also included in the EMRSs.
- **Revamp of scheme:** In 2018, Union Cabinet revamped the scheme with following features.
o   EMRSs will be setup in every block with more than 50% ST population and at least 20,000 tribal persons.
o   There will be an Autonomous Society under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs similar to Navodaya Vidyalaya Samiti to run the EMRSs.

INDIAN BIOLOGICAL DATA BANK

The 'Indian Biological Data Bank' has recently come up at the Regional Centre for Biotechnology in Faridabad.

About:

- The government has for the first time set up a digitised repository where Indian researchers will store biological data from publicly funded research, reducing their dependency on American and European data banks.

- The digitised data will be stored on a four-petabyte supercomputer called 'Brahm'.

o A petabyte equals 10,00,000 gigabytes (gb).

- The government has mandated that data from all publicly funded research should be stored in this central repository.

- So it will not only provide a platform to researchers to securely store their data within the country, it will also provide access to a large database of indigenous sequences for analyses.

- At present, most Indian researchers depend on the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) and National Center for Biotechnology Information databases for storing the biological data.

- There are other smaller datasets available with some institutes, but those are not accessible to all. This will be the first national data repository, where the data will not only be submitted from across India but can be accessed by researchers from across India.

Database:

- The bio-bank, which cost about Rs 85 crore to set up, currently accepts neucleotide sequences — the digitised genetic makeup of humans, plants, animals, and microbes.

- There are now 200 billion base pair data in the bio-bank, including 200 human genomes sequenced under the '1,000 Genome Project', which is an international effort to map the genetic variations in people.

- The database also contains most of the 2.6 lakh Sars-Cov-2 genomes sequenced by the Indian Sars-CoV-2 Genomic Consortium (INSACOG).

- The database will also store the 25,000 sequences of mycobacterium tuberculosis.

- The database currently also stores the genomic sequences of crops such as rice, onion, tomatoes and mustard, among others.

- The database currently offers two mechanisms for data submission to researchers.

- One, open access where the data uploaded can be immediately used by other researchers from across the country and
- two, controlled access where the data will not be openly shared for a number of years before being opened up to all.
- The biobank also has a backup data 'Disaster Recovery' site at National Informatics Centre (NIC)-Bhubaneshwar.

NAAC TO DIVULGE SECRET SCORES FOR COLLEGE GRADE BENCHMARKS

In News:

- The National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) has decided to open up its secret ledger of maximum scores it awards to colleges.
- It will, for the very first time, declare the highest marks, called as benchmarks in NAAC terminology, that it has set aside for each of the parameters it grades colleges on.

About National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC):

- NAAC is an autonomous body established by the University Grants Commission (UGC).
- It was established in **1994** on the basis of recommendations made under the **National Education Policy (1986)**.
- It is registered under the Karnataka Societies Registration Act of 1960.
- **Vision**:
- To make quality the defining element of higher education in India through a combination of self and external quality evaluation, promotion and sustenance initiatives.
- **Headquarters**: Bengaluru

Objectives of NAAC:

- To arrange for periodic assessment and accreditation of institutions of higher education or units thereof, or specific academic programmes or projects;
- To stimulate the academic environment for promotion of quality of teaching-learning and research in higher education institutions;

- To encourage self-evaluation, accountability, autonomy and innovations in higher education;
- To undertake quality-related research studies, consultancy and training programmes, and

What is Assessment & Accreditation?

- **Assessment** is the performance evaluation of an institution or its units based on certain established criteria.
- **Accreditation** is the certification of quality for a fixed period, which in the case of NAAC is five years.
- The University Grants Commission (UGC) through a gazette notification in January 2013, has made it mandatory for Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) to undergo accreditation.

Benefits of Being NAAC-Accredited:

- Through a multi-layered process steered by the NAAC, a higher education institution gets to know whether it meets certain standards of quality set by the evaluator in terms of curriculum, faculty, infrastructure, research and financial well-being among others.
- Based on these parameters, the **NAAC gives institutions grades ranging from A++ to C**. If an institution is graded D, it means it is not accredited.
- Apart from recognition, being accredited also helps institutions attract capital as funding agencies look for objective data for performance funding.
- It helps an institution know its strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities through an informed review process.
- NAAC accreditation helps students going for higher education abroad as many global higher education authorities insist on recognition and accreditation of the institution where the student has studied.

WHAT IS MASTODON, AND WHY ARE SO MANY USERS LEAVING TWITTER TO JOIN IT?

In News:

- Amid concerns over the direction that Twitter seems to be taking after its takeover by billionaire Elon Musk, a number of users are flocking to a platform called Mastodon.
- Since October 27, when the SpaceX and Tesla CEO formalised his Twitter takeover, Mastodon has gained nearly 500,000 new users, effectively doubling its user base.

Mastodon

- Founded in 2016 by German software developer Eugen Rochko, Mastodon is a decentralised, open source ad-free social media platform.
- Mastodon, which is not just one website, is decentralized — meaning the service is not controlled by a single entity.
- It is essentially made up of thousands of different servers, or "instances", run across the world.
- All the different instances on Mastodon can communicate to each other — that is, what users in a certain instance are posting is accessible to users in a different instance.
- It can be understood by following analogy:
- When a user first creates an account on Mastodon, they will have to choose a server or instance they want to join.
- This is similar to how, when they create an email account, they choose between Gmail, Hotmail, Yahoo etc. that generates their profile address.
- No matter where a user initially creates their email account, they can still send mails to users on other email platforms.
- Now, imagine that happening over a single platform, with the different email services being different servers, or instances.

Why people are migrating to Mastodon?

- The exodus is largely the result of confusion after the takeover of Twitter by Musk.
- Musk initially said that he was a free speech absolutist.
- However, post his takeover, the platform started suspending accounts of users who had changed their profile names to Musk's along with his profile picture.

- o After allowing users to essentially buy verification marks for their profile with an $8 subscription of Twitter Blue, Musk said that prominent personalities like politicians will be given an additional tag of "official" on their profiles.
- o However, within hours of launching the "official" tag, he scrapped it saying that it was another way of creating a two-class system.

PART-TIME DEGREES, NO NEED TO PUBLISH RESEARCH: WHAT NEW PHD REGULATIONS SAY

In News:

- The University Grants Commission (UGC) has notified new regulations on PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) degrees.
- The new regulation has introduced a set of sweeping changes in eligibility criteria, admission procedure and evaluation methods governing doctoral programmes in college and universities.

Status of PhD admission in India

- Over the years, annual enrolment figures in PhD have risen, but it still accounts for a very small share of the higher education pie.
- Between 2015-16 and 2019-20, the enrolment at PhD level increased from 1,26,451 to 2,02,550 (0.5 per cent of the total enrolment in higher education), according to the latest available All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) report 2019-20.
- Also, most PhDs in India are in the field of engineering and technology, followed by natural sciences.

News Summary

- The University Grants Commission (UGC) announced new regulations on PhD degrees called "University Grants Commission (Minimum Standards and Procedures for Award of PhD Degree) Regulations, 2022".
- These rules will replace the rules notified in 2016.

Key highlights

- **Eligibility criteria for admissions**

  o Anyone with a four-year/eight-semester Bachelor's programme degree with a minimum 75 per cent mark in aggregate or its equivalent grade will be eligible for a PhD.

  ▪ So far, a Master's degree with at least 55 per cent marks in aggregate was mandatory for doctoral aspirants.

  ▪ Many universities also insisted on using M. Phil as the gateway.

  o Those joining PhD programmes after a four-year UG programme can do so after a one-year Master's degree.

  o Graduates with conventional three-year UG degrees need to have completed two-year Master's degrees.

- **Phil programme to be discontinued**

  o The new Rules discontinue the M. Phil programme altogether. However, that will have no bearing on those holding or pursuing M. Phil degrees currently.

- **Mandatory requirement of publishing research papers has been scrapped**

  o The mandatory requirement of publishing research papers in refereed (Peer-reviewed) journals or presenting in conferences has been scrapped.

  o Part-time PhDs have been launched for working professionals.

  ▪ The eligibility conditions are the same for both full-time and part-time candidates.

  ▪ Their PhD work will be assessed in the same way as is done for the full-time PhD students.

  ▪ However, in addition to meeting the regular criteria, the part-time PhD candidates will also have to produce a No-Objection Certificate or NOC from their employer.

- **Relaxation for EWS candidate**

  o Apart from reserved category applicants, those falling under the EWS bracket will also be granted five per cent relaxations.

- **No major changes in the procedure for admissions**

  o As was the norm so far, universities and colleges will be free to admit students through the NET/JRF qualification route as well as entrance exams at the level of the institutions.

  o The proposed common entrance test for PhDs has been left out of the new Regulations.

- **Functioning of research supervisors**

o Eligible professors, associate professors, and assistant professors can continue to guide up to eight, six, and four PhD candidates respectively at any given time, as earlier.

o However, earlier, professors, associate professors, and assistant professors could also guide three, two, and one M. Phil scholars respectively over and above their PhD candidates.

o Now they cannot do so as the MPhil programme has been scrapped under the new regulation.

o The new Rules also bar faculty members with less than three years of service left before superannuation from taking new research scholars under their supervision.

Why has the requirement to publish research papers in peer-reviewed journals before the submission of a PhD thesis been scrapped?

- The UGC has been grappling with this issue for quite some time, particularly with the proliferation of so-called predatory journals, where many doctoral scholars were found publishing their research in return for a fee.

- In 2019, a UGC panel had recommended that publication of research material in such journals or presentations in conferences organised by their publishers should not be considered for academic credit in any form.

- As per experts, by removing the mandatory clause, the commission is trying to ease some pressure of scholars so that they can focus more on high-quality research.

INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL OF INDIA (IFFI)

International Film Festival of India (IFFI) is all set for its 53rd edition in 2022 in Goa.

About:

- The International Film Festival of India (IFFI), founded in 1952, is among Asia's most prominent film festivals.

- It is held annually, currently in the state of Goa.

- Since 2004, starting from the 35th edition, the International Film Festival of India, became globally competitive, and moved to its permanent venue Goa, and is being held during the months of November and December of each year.
- The festival is conducted jointly by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Directorate of Film Festivals and the Government of Goa.
- The idea of the International Film Festival of India is to celebrate films, the stories they tell and the people behind them.