

RUBBER BOARD

Recently, the government has increased the allocation for Sustainable and Inclusive Development of the Natural Rubber Sector by 23% to Rs 708.7 crore for the next two financial years and the scheme is run by the Rubber Board.



About Rubber Board:

- It is a **statutory organisation** constituted under the **Rubber Act, 1947**.
- It functions under the administrative control of the **Ministry of Commerce and Industry**.

Functions:

- It is responsible for the **development of the rubber** industry in the country by assisting and encouraging research, development, extension and training activities related to rubber.
- It also maintains statistical data of rubber, takes steps to promote marketing of rubber and undertake labour welfare activities.
- A crucial function of the Rubber Board is **issuing licences to rubber producers, manufacturers, and exporters/traders**. This licence, known as the "Rubber Board licence/registration," is mandatory for anyone involved in rubber manufacturing and export
- **Structure:**
 - It is headed by a **Chairman appointed by the Central Government**.
 - It has 28 members representing various interests of the natural rubber industry.
- The activities of the Board are exercised through Five Departments viz. General Services, Extension & Advisory Services, Research Services (rubber Research Institute of India), Training (Rubber Training Institute) & Finance.
- **Headquarters:** Kottayam, Kerala.

NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR TRANSGENDER PERSONS



Recently, the National Council for Transgender Persons (NCTP) convened its pivotal meeting under the Chairmanship of Secretary, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

About the National Council for Transgender Persons:

- It is a **statutory body** constituted under the **Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act 2019** to safeguard the rights of transgender persons in India.
- It is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the provisions of the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 and making recommendations to the government on measures to promote and protect the rights of transgender persons.
- **Composition**
 - The Union **Minister of Social Justice & Empowerment is the Chairperson** (ex-officio).
 - The Union Minister of State for Social Justice & Empowerment is the Vice-Chairperson (ex-officio) of the council.
 - The other members of the Council include representatives of various Ministries/Departments
 - **Five representatives** of the transgender community.
 - Representatives of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the National Commission for Women (NCW), representatives of State Governments and UTs, and experts representing NGOs.
- **Functions:**
 - It **advises the Central Government** on the formulation of policies, programmes, legislation and projects with respect to transgender persons.
 - It **Monitors and evaluates** the impact of policies and programmes designed for achieving equality and full participation of transgender persons.
 - It **redresses the grievances** of transgender persons.
 - Performs such other functions as may be prescribed by the Central Government.

BHARATNET PROJECT

State-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) has floated around Rs 65,000-crore tender for the implementation of the phase-III BharatNet project.



About BharatNet Project:

- It is one of the biggest **rural telecom projects** in the world.
- It is implemented in a phased manner to all Gram Panchayats in the country to provide **non-discriminatory access to broadband connectivity** to all the telecom service providers.
- **Objective:** To enable access providers like mobile operators, Internet Service Providers (ISPs), Cable TV operators, and content providers to launch various services such as applications like e-health, e-education and e-governance in rural and remote India.
- The project was **approved in 2011**.
- It is being executed by a **Special Purpose Vehicle** namely Bharat Broadband Network Limited (BBNL), which was incorporated in 2012 under the Indian Companies Act 1956.
- The Telecom Commission approved the implementation of the project in **three phases**.
- **BharatNet Phase-I:**
 - It was approved in 2011 the project for the creation of **the National Optical Fibre Network (now BharatNet)** to provide broadband connectivity at the Gram Panchayat (GP) level by connecting block headquarters to GPs by.
- **BharatNet Phase-II**
 - It was **approved in 2017**, which integrates the implementation experience of Phase-I of the project and aligns it with the vision of Digital India.
 - Under Phase II, GPs are to be connected through multiple implementing models like the State-led Model, Private Sector Model and CPSU Model, along with last-mile connectivity in GPs through Wi-Fi or any other suitable broadband tech.
- In the third phase from 2019 to 2023, a state-of-the-art, future-proof network, including fibre between districts and blocks, with ring topology to provide redundancy would be created.

MORODHARO

Archaeologists recently discovered a Harappan-era fortified settlement named Morodharo.



- It is a **fortified settlement** dating back to the **Harappan era**.
- **Location:** Kutch District, Gujarat
- **Features:**
 - The settlement looks **mature (2,600-1,900 BCE) to late (1,900-1,300 BCE) Harappan**.
 - The fortification measures 102 m east to the west and 58 m north to the south.
 - The thickness of the wall is an average of 3.3 m.
 - It has a **10x10 m platform on the south-west side and a well on the north-east**.
 - **Burial cairns**, which are **mounds of stones to demarcate a boundary**, are also **found here**.
 - **Harappan pottery** with perforated jar sherds, reserved slipware, and terracotta cakes were unearthed. All these **items have a striking resemblance to those found in Dholavira**.

Key Facts about Harappan Civilization:

- The Indus Valley/Harappan civilisation was the **first urban civilisation in South Asia, coexisting with Mesopotamia and Egypt**.
- The Harappan civilisation **occupied the largest area** (approximately 8,00,000 sq. km) **among the three civilisations**.
- **Harappa** (Punjab, Pakistan), **Mohenjo-Daro** (Sindh, Pakistan), **Dholavira**, **Lothal**, and **Surkotada** (Gujarat, India), **Kalibangan** in **Rajasthan**, and **Banawali** and **Rakhigarhi** (Haryana, India) are the **major cities in the Harappan period**.
 - **Granaries and storage facilities:** The cities had well-planned granaries and storage facilities to store surplus agricultural produce.

PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEE ON LOCAL FINTECH PLAYERS

Why in news?

- In its recent report, the Standing Committee on Communications and Information Technology expressed worries about foreign-owned fintech apps having too much control in India.
- The committee suggested that Indian-owned apps should be encouraged more.
- It pointed out that while the Unified Payments Interface (UPI) made up a large portion (73.5%) of all digital payments in terms of volume in the fiscal year 2022-23.
- However, its share of the total payment value was much smaller, at only 6.67%.

National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI)

- NPCI is an umbrella organisation for operating retail payments and settlement systems in India.
- It is an initiative of RBI and Indian Banks' Association (IBA) under the provisions of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007.
- The objective of NPCI is to create a robust Payment & Settlement Infrastructure in India.
 - For this, NPCI was incorporated as a “Not for Profit” Company under the provisions of Section 25 of Companies Act 1956 (now Section 8 of Companies Act 2013).

UPI

- It was launched by NPCI.
- UPI is a system that powers multiple bank accounts into a single mobile application (of any participating bank), merging several banking features, seamless fund routing & merchant payments into one hood.
- It also caters to the “Peer to Peer” collect request which can be scheduled and paid as per requirement and convenience.

What are the concerns about fraud?

- **Fintech Companies and Money Laundering Concerns**

- The Committee highlighted that fintech companies were being exploited by scamsters for money laundering purposes.
 - An example cited was the Abu Dhabi-based app called Pyppl, which was reportedly administered by Chinese investment scamsters.
 - **Fraud Trends and Ratio**
 - Despite an increase in the volume of transactions over the past five years, the ratio of fraudulent transactions to total transactions has remained relatively low.
 - The fraud to sales ratio, representing the proportion of fraudulent transactions to total transactions in a financial year, hovered around 0.0015%.
 - **Impact on UPI Users**
 - The percentage of UPI users affected by frauds stood at 0.0189%.
 - Despite concerns about fintech platforms being used for illegal activities, the overall impact on users remained relatively low compared to the total volume of transactions.
 - **Advantages of Local and Foreign Fintech Players**
 - Local fintech companies possess a natural advantage in comprehending the intricacies of the customer base, various ecosystem participants, and the digital public infrastructure within the Indian market.
 - They are also well-versed in navigating the broader market infrastructure.
 - Conversely, foreign fintech firms excel in leveraging new technologies, employing innovative techniques, and capitalizing on global connectivity.
 - Hence, there is the necessity of fostering a balanced mix of local and foreign fintech players to effectively serve the Indian ecosystem.
 - **Regulatory Emphasis on Accountability and Compliance**
 - Analysts acknowledged the regulator's emphasis on the criticality of accountability and compliance with local laws.
 - They underscored the importance of adherence to regulatory frameworks to ensure the integrity and stability of the fintech sector within the Indian market.
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FOREST (CONSERVATION) ACT AND SC JUDGEMENT

Why in news?

- The Supreme Court told States and Union Territories to act as per the definition of ‘forest’ laid down in its 1996 judgment for identifying and preserving forest land.
- It asked States/UTs to refrain from using the 2023 amendment to the Forest (Conservation) Act.
 - The amendment act allegedly removed 1.97 lakh square km of land from forest area.

Definition of forest in India

- **No clear definition**
 - At present, in India, there is no clear nationally-accepted definition of ‘forest’.
 - In September 2019, the Forest Advisory Committee (FAC) observed that there cannot be any uniform criteria to define forest which can be applicable to all forest types in all states and union territories.
- **Responsibility of States**
 - States are responsible for determining their definition of forests.
 - In November 2019, the environment ministry emphasised that the states, having well-established forest departments.
 - They are in a better position, rather than the MoEFCC, to understand their own forests and needs, and should frame criteria for their forests.
 - The prerogative of the states to define forests stems from a 1996 Supreme Court order called **the T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad Vs the UoI**

Forest (Conservation) Act and SC Judgement

- The Supreme Court issued a temporary order instructing States and Union Territories to follow the 1996 definition of forest from the T.N. Godavarman Thirumulpad case.

Key highlights of the judgement

- **Forest will continue to have a broad and all-encompassing meaning**

- SC directed that the expression 'forest' will continue to have a "broad and all-encompassing" as per the 1996 judgement.
 - This means it includes 1.97 lakh square km of undeclared forest lands.
- The Bench emphasized that the broad dictionary meaning of "forest" upheld by the Supreme Court over 25 years ago will still apply.
- This will continue until the States and union territories compile a comprehensive record of all lands marked as 'forest' in government records, including forest-like areas, unclassified, and community forest lands.
- **Directions to states**
 - SC also directed states to file, by the end of March, reports on forest land identified as per its ruling in the T N Godavarman case.
- **Establishment of zoos or safaris**
 - The Bench also mandated that no government or authority should proceed with the establishment of "zoos or safaris" without the final approval of the apex court.

IMPACT OF LA NINA ON AIR QUALITY IN INDIA

- According to a new study, an unprecedented La-Nina event, extended by climate change, triggered a peculiar trend in the 2022-23 winter season in India.
- During the 3 consecutive years of La Niña (2020-23) - a rare "triple-dip" **phenomenon** - air quality improved in north India while peninsular India recorded an increase in pollution levels in the 2022-23 winter season.

What is El Nino and La Nina?

- **El Nino and La Nina** are two opposing climate trends that deviate from the normal conditions and normally run nine to twelve months, but can often extend.
- These events occur **every two to seven years on average** (El Nino is more frequent than La Nina), but not on a regular basis and together are referred to as the **El Nino-Southern Oscillation (ENSO)** cycle by scientists.

- El Nino is typically known as the **warm phase** (a band of warmer water spreading from west to east in the equatorial Pacific Ocean) and La Nina is identified as the **cold phase** (a band of cooler water spreads east-west) of ENSO.
- Both El Nino and La Nina can have global effects on **weather, wildfires, ecosystems and economics**.

Findings of the New Study - Impact of La Nina on Air Quality in India:

- **The study is conducted** by researchers at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (Bengaluru) and the Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (Pune).
- **Monsoon rainfall over India** is known to be strongly influenced by El Nino and La Nina events, the alternating warming and cooling of the eastern Pacific Ocean that impacts weather across the world.
- According to the study, **this is the first time that air quality in Indian cities has been linked to a La Nina event** - and indirectly to **climate change**, which is making El Nino and La Nina more severe.
- **Normally**, northern Indian cities (particularly Delhi) experience very high concentrations of PM2.5 during October to January.
- However, the winter of 2022 **showed a significant deviation from this normal**.
 - Northern Indian cities (including Delhi) were cleaner than usual, while cities in the west and the south, like **Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chennai**, experienced worse-than-usual air quality.
 - The study said PM2.5 concentrations in **Delhi saw a reduction of about 10%**. Simultaneously, the concentrations in **Mumbai rose by 30%, while Bengaluru registered a 20% rise**.
- The researchers had set out to investigate this unusual behaviour when they discovered the potential effects of **La Nina**.