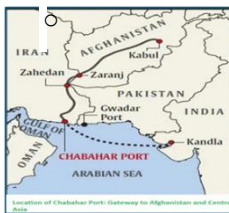


INDIA, IRAN SIGN 10-YEAR CONTRACT FOR CHABAHAR PORT OPERATION

Why in news?

India and Iran signed a long-term agreement covering Indian operations at the Chabahar port, eight years after concluding the general framework of cooperation for the port in Iran.

Chabahar port



- Chabahar is a deep-water port in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province. It is the Iranian-port that is the closest to India.
- It is located in in south-eastern Iran, on the **Gulf of Oman**, providing easy and secure access for large cargo ships.
- It is Iran's first deepwater port that puts the country on the global oceanic trade route map.
- **Development of port**
 - An MoU for the development of Chabahar port by India was signed in May 2015. The contract was executed in May, 2016 during the visit of PM Modi to Iran.
- **Current status**
 - India has so far supplied six mobile harbour cranes (two of 140-tonne and four of 100-tonne capacity) and other equipment worth \$25 million.
 - India Ports Global Ltd (IPGL) has been operating Chabahar port through its wholly owned subsidiary, India Ports Global Chabahar Free Zone (IPGCFZ), since December 24, 2018.
 - The port has handled more than 90,000 twenty-foot-equivalent units (TEUs) of container traffic and more than 8.4 million metric tonnes (MMT) of bulk and general cargo since then.



Significance of Chabahar Port

- **Strategic significance** to both Iran and India

- It can potentially help Tehran ward off the effect of Western sanctions.
- It offers New Delhi an alternative route that bypasses Pakistan in order to ensure access to Afghanistan and Central Asia.
 - The port is partly intended to provide an alternative for trade between India and Afghanistan as it is 800 kilometres closer to the border of Afghanistan than Pakistan's Karachi port.
 - Pakistan does not allow India, land access for trade with Afghanistan and Central Asia.
- **Humanitarian corridor**
 - The port has also facilitated the supply of humanitarian assistance, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.
 - Till date, a total of 2.5 million tonnes of wheat and 2,000 tonnes of pulses have been transhipped from India to Afghanistan through Chabahar port.
 - In 2021, India supplied 40,000 litres of the environment friendly pesticide (malathion) through the port to Iran to fight locust attacks.

Chabahar and International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

- The INSTC, which was initiated by Russia, India, and Iran, is a multi-modal transportation route envisaged to link the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea via Iran, and onward to northern Europe via St Petersburg in Russia.



sea;

- The INSTC envisages the movement of goods:
 - from Mumbai to Bandar Abbas in Iran by sea;
 - from Bandar Abbas to Bandar – e- Anzali, an Iranian port on the Caspian Sea, by road;
 - from Bandar-e-Anzali to Astrakhan, a Caspian port in the Russian Federation by ship; and
 - onward to other parts of the Russian Federation and Europe by rail

- Hence, INSTC and Chabahar Port will complement each other for optimising Indian connectivity with Russia and Eurasia.
 - **Tool to strengthen India's relation with Iran & Afghanistan**
 - This port has potential to herald a new age of trade, marine cooperation, and transshipment while boosting trilateral trade between India, Iran, and Afghanistan.
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WHAT IS GENERAL PROVIDENT FUND (GPF)?



A single judge bench of the Madras High Court recently held that employees are not automatically entitled to pension benefits based on deductions made under the GPF scheme.

- It is a **kind of Public Provident Fund (PPF)** account that is available only for government employees in India. It allows them to allocate a portion of their salaries to their GPF accounts.
- **Upon retirement**, employees **receive the accumulated corpus** from their GPF accounts, reflecting their service tenure contributions.
- As per the GPF rules, the **following are eligible** to subscribe to GPF account:
 - All temporary government servants who have given their service for continuously one year
 - All re-employed pensioners (except those eligible for admission to the contributory provident fund)
 - All permanent government servants

Contribution:

- It is a **mandatory scheme** for government employees, requiring them to contribute a certain percentage of their salary towards the fund.
- The contributions are deducted from the employee's monthly salary, and the amount earns interest at a predetermined rate.
- Employees can also increase their GPF deductions as per their choice.

Withdrawal:

- Employees can withdraw their savings from the fund **upon retirement or resignation** from service.
- A GPF is flexible, allowing employees to withdraw money from the fund **for various reasons**, such as **marriage, education, and medical emergencies**.
- Employees **can also take out loans against their GPF** account, subject to certain conditions.
- Employees who transfer to another government department or leave their job can withdraw their GPF balance or transfer it to their new employer.
- The GPF sum will be paid to their nominee if the employee passes away.
- GPF also offers a **competitive interest rate, revised quarterly**.
- The GPF scheme is administered by the Department of Pension and Pensioners' Welfare, falling under the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions.
- This scheme offers several benefits to government employees, including tax savings, low-risk investments, and guaranteed returns.

WHAT IS GPT-4O?



The ChatGPT, OpenAI has brought the capabilities of GPT-4 through its latest model named **GPT-4o**.

- GPT-4o (“o” for “omni”) offers GPT-4 level intelligence and it is much faster and improves its capabilities across **text, vision, and audio**.

Features

- It makes **human-to-machine interaction** much more natural and far easier.
- The voice mode on GPT-4o is efficient and intuitively recognises **the voice of the speaker** or multiple speakers.

- Until now, **the voice mode** had three models that came together to deliver the feature. These are – **transcription, intelligence, and text-to-speech** and they all came together and orchestrated to deliver the voice mode. This led to latency, however, with GPT-4o all of this happens natively. “GPT-4o reasons across voice, text, and vision.
 - It also **has a vision**, allowing users to upload photos and documents, and can **start conversations** about the same.
 - One can also use **the Memory feature**, and browse to **search real-time information** during conversations. Also, OpenAI has improved the quality and the speed in 50 different languages.
 - This model **can pick up on a user’s emotions**, and come up with different kinds of emotive styles of conversation.
 - It is also **capable of telling** about your **feelings** by looking at your face in real-time.
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SILK COTTON TREE



Silk cotton trees are disappearing from south Rajasthan, launching a cascade of adverse consequences for forests and people in the area.

- It is locally known as **semal tree**. It is a **lofty deciduous tree** with buttressed base when old and whole trunk is covered with large conical prickles.
- It is mainly found in **moist deciduous and semi-evergreen forests**, also in the plains. Occasionally found in plains from the coast, on the deciduous belt of the hills to 1400 m.
 - Members of the **Garasia tribe** in Rajasthan believe they are descended from semal trees.

Distribution: In India it is seen in Andaman & Nicobar Island, Assam, Bihar, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Odisha, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh.

Significance of the tree:

- It is a fire-resistant tree. It is also known for its **cooling properties**.
- It is **considered a pioneer tree** that generates a rich biomass every season, and has been used to reclaim wastelands.
- It fixes carbon and helps carbon sequestration by shedding all leaves before flowering.
- Many researchers believe the **semal to be a bio indicator**—a late flowering could mean a hot summer or a delayed monsoon.
- The **rock bees nestle** on its branches because the tree's spikes keep its predator, the sloth bears, away.
- Members of tribal communities consume the **tree's reddish root** for food during the monsoons.
- It provides opportunities for agroforestry and resources like food, fodder, and fuel wood.
- Members of the **Kathodi tribe** use its wood to craft musical instruments while those of the **Bhil** use it to make utensils.

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SMART CITIES MISSION

Why in News?

In this year's list of poll promises and accomplishments, the NDA-1 government's flagship program - Smart Cities Mission (SCM), has taken a back seat.

What is the Smart Cities Mission(SCM)?

- It is a **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** of the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), launched on **25 June, 2015**.
- **Its objective is to promote cities -**
 - To ensure a **decent quality of life** to their citizens through the application of 'smart solutions'.

- To **drive economic growth** through comprehensive work on social, economic, physical and institutional pillars of the city.
- To drive **sustainable and inclusive development**.
- **100 cities were selected** for five years under the mission, **which did not clearly define a smart city**.
 - The Central Government will give financial support to the extent of Rs. 48,000 crores over 5 years i.e. on an average **100 crore per city per year**.
 - An equal amount on a matching basis is to be provided by the State/ULB.
- The mission that was to be completed in 2020, was given two extensions till **June 2024**.

What are the Main Components of SCM?

- **The SCM had two main aspects:**
 - Area-based development consisting of three components [redevelopment (city renewal), retrofitting (city improvement), and green field projects (city extension)] and
 - Pan-city solutions based on ICT.
- **These further comprised some six categories** that would include e-governance, waste management, water management, energy management, urban mobility, and skill development.

What are the Achievements of SCM?

- Around ₹2 lakh crore was kept aside for the mission, with **public-private partnerships (PPP)** an important driver of the same (though, not more than 5% has come through the PPP route).
- In order to make the mission effective, a **business model of governance** was adopted bypassing the existing models of city governance in the country.
 - **An SPV (special purpose vehicle)** led by a bureaucrat or a representative of an MNC, and other major stakeholders was created and registered under the Companies Act.

- The SCM, with an allocation of ₹86,850 crore over eight years, **has achieved an impressive completion rate of 83%**.
- Participating cities have utilised ₹72,571 crore, **focusing on 21 sectors including** education, health, housing, water supply, solid waste management, and public transport.
- The most common feature across all cities - **Integrated Command and Control Centers (ICCCs)**, enable monitoring and management of various urban functions.
 - They have been instrumental in **disaster response, flood monitoring, and traffic management**.

Some Success Stories of SCM:

- **Davanagere's (Karnataka) Stormwater Drainage System:**
 - It successfully implemented a holistic stormwater drainage system, significantly reducing instances of flooding.
 - This project exemplifies the mission's effectiveness in addressing crucial urban challenges.
- **Jabalpur's (MP) Water Supply Enhancement:**
 - Jabalpur is set to provide 24x7 water supply to 2,000 households, showcasing the mission's focus on improving essential services.
 - However, challenges remain in retrofitting existing infrastructure with new technologies.

What are the Criticisms of SCM?

- **The selection of 100 cities** on a competitive basis and implementation of SCM was flawed, as the urbanisation in India is dynamic and not static like the West.
- **The SCM became an exclusionary scheme** wherein not more than 1% of a city's geographical area was selected for development.
- The projects sanctioned under the SCM **have seen a fall in the total outlay** from the expected ₹2 lakh crore to ₹1,67,875 crore.



CROSS & CLIMB ROHTAK



- This is 16% less than the projected capital flow in 100 cities.
 - **The SPV model** designed for smart cities was not aligned with the **74th Constitutional Amendment**, resulting in a **top-bottom governance structure**.
 - In the name of executing smart city projects, **there was displacement of people living in poorer localities**. For example, street vendors.
 - Another major consequence of the SCM has been **enhanced urban flooding**, because infrastructure projects dismantled water channels in some of the towns.
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