

WHY HAS THE NTA FAILED TO DELIVER

The National Testing Agency (NTA):

- In 2010, a committee comprising directors of IITs recommended establishing an autonomous and transparent body (NTA) through legislation, modelled after the **Educational Testing Service (ETS) of the US**.
- Prior to the NTA's formation, various government bodies like the UGC, the CBSE, and central universities such as Delhi University and JNU conducted their own entrance examinations.
- **About NTA:**
 - It was set up in 2017 as a **specialist, self-sustaining and autonomous organisation** under the aegis of the **Union Ministry of Education**.
 - It is registered under **the Societies Registration Act 1860**, and falls under the **Right to Information (RTI) Act**.
- **Objectives:** It aims to
 - Address the challenges of **assessing candidates' competence** by adhering to international standards, ensuring efficiency, transparency, and error-free delivery.
 - **Conduct efficient and transparent tests**, Research and development and Expert collaboration Information dissemination.

Examinations conducted by the NTA:

- JEE (Main), NEET-UG, Common Management Admission Test (CMAT), Graduate Pharmacy Aptitude Test (GPAT) and University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET).
- **The National Education Policy 2020** envisaged a broader role, recommending that the NTA conduct an entrance or aptitude test for all universities across the country.
- In all, the NTA now has charge for more than 20 examinations.

Who runs the NTA?

- Its director general and governing body are **appointed by the Union government.**
- The core team of the NTA consists of test item writers, researchers, psychometricians, and education specialists.

Issues Faced by the NTA:

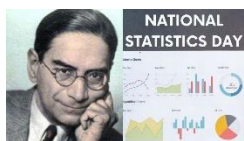
- **Conduct computer-based tests only:**
 - This is to ensure that high volume can be processed in a short period of time.
 - As the NIC (National Informatics Centre) does not have the capacity or IT infrastructure needed, third-party technical partners are being engaged.
 - However, third-party players **take accountability out of the government's hands** and leave loopholes in the system which can be exploited by unscrupulous players.
- **Agency is severely understaffed:** The agency was set up with only about 25 permanent staff positions and its functions have been outsourced to technical partners from the very beginning.
- **Absence of robust security mechanisms:**
 - These are needed to handle a large-scale pen-and-paper examination, including the
 - Setting of the question paper and its encryption,
 - Selection of external printing presses and exam centres,
 - Transportation to printing presses,
 - Storage and distribution to examinees at examination centres and
 - Then the collection and transportation of answer sheets to evaluation centres.
 - Each of these is a stage where malpractice can occur without robust security mechanisms.

NEET and UGC-NET exams irregularities:

- The NTA faced severe criticism after it **awarded grace marks to 1,563 candidates** in the NEET exam due to delays at seven examination centres.
- **This decision led to accusations of inflated marks**, culminating in a record 67 candidates sharing the top rank. The integrity of the NEET-UG was further compromised when the **exam question paper was allegedly leaked**.
- Similarly, the UGC-NET exam was cancelled a day after being conducted, following reports that its integrity had been breached.

What Needs to be Done to Reform India's Examination Process?

- **Radhakrishnan committee:** The high-level panel headed by former ISRO chief K. Radhakrishnan has been constituted to recommend
 - Reforms in the examination process,
 - Improve data security protocols, and
 - Overhaul the NTA's functioning.
- **Adding manpower and infrastructure to the NTA:** To equip it to take on large-scale pen-and-paper examinations, as these are more equitable, especially for students in rural and remote areas with little access to technology.
- **Dismantling the centralisation process:** More decentralised structures are needed to meet the vastly differing needs of institutions.



NATIONAL STATISTICS DAY

National Statistics Day is celebrated in India on June 29 every year.

- It is celebrated in recognition of the notable contributions made by Professor (late) **Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis** in the fields of statistics and economic planning.
- The main objective of celebrating Statistics Day is the creation of **public awareness**, especially among the younger generation, on the role and importance of **statistics in socio-economic planning and policy formulation** for the development of the country.

- Since 2007, Statistics Day has been celebrated every year with a theme of contemporary national importance.
- The theme for Statistics Day, 2024 is "Use of data for decision-making".
- The concept of data-driven decision-making is important for making informed decisions in any field, and it is one of the pre-requisites for better understanding of statistical information, emanating from official statistics and for facilitating evidence-based decision making.

Who is Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis?

- He was born on 29 June 1893.
- He is known as the **father of Indian statistics** and was an Indian scientist and statistician. His role in India's post-independence economic planning is undeniable.
- He established the **Indian Statistical Institute** in 1931. It is one of the premier institutions for statistical research and training.
- He was awarded one of the highest civilian awards, the **Padma Vibhushan** from the Government of India for his contribution to science.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE PREPAREDNESS INDEX (AIPI)



Recently, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) released an Artificial Intelligence Preparedness Index (AIPI) Dashboard.

- It assesses the level of AI preparedness across 174 countries.
- The rating for each country is given based on the assessment of readiness in four key areas - **digital infrastructure, human capital and labour market policies, innovation and economic integration, and regulation and Ethics.**
- The Index has categorised each country into **Advanced Economy (AE), Emerging Market Economy (EM), and Low-Income Country (LIC).**
 - Singapore (0.80), Denmark (0.78), and the United States (0.77) are among the highest-rated AEs,

- India was categorised as an EM with a 0.49 rating. India ranks 72 in a total of 174 countries, with Bangladesh (0.38) on 113, Sri Lanka (0.43) on 92, and China (0.63) on 31.

Key facts about International Monetary Fund

- It **fosters economic growth** and employment by providing temporary financial assistance to countries to help ease the balance of payments adjustment and technical assistance.
- It was formed in **1944 at the Bretton Woods Conference** with the goal of reconstructing the international monetary system.
- **Important Reports:** World Economic Outlook and Global Financial Stability Report
- **Headquarters:** Washington, DC, USA

RIM OF THE PACIFIC (RIMPAC) EXERCISE



Indian multi-role stealth frigate INS Shivalik, mission deployed in the South China Sea and North Pacific Ocean, has reached Pearl Harbour in Hawaii to take part in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise.

- It is the world's largest **international maritime exercise**, being held in **Hawaii**.
- It is aimed at **enhancing interoperability** and building trust among the navies of friendly foreign countries.
- It is being held under the theme of **Partners: Integrated and Prepared**, which runs until August 1.
- It is **led by the US Navy**, approx **29 countries are participating** in the current edition of the multi-dimensional exercise.
 - The **harbour phase** of the exercise from 27 Jun to 07 Jul 2024 will see participation in multiple symposiums, exercise planning discussions, sports competitions and reciprocal deck visits.
 - The **sea phase** of RIMPAC-24, divided into three sub-phases will witness ships undertaking basic and advanced level integration exercises during the first two sub-phases.

- The exercise will witness the participation of an **Aircraft Carrier Battle Group**, **submarines**, **maritime reconnaissance aircraft**, unmanned aerial vehicles, remotely piloted surface ships and also amphibious force landing operations including **joint operations with special forces of multinational navies**.
 - It provides a unique training opportunity while **fostering and sustaining cooperative relationships** among participants, critical to ensuring the safety of sea lanes and the security of the world's oceans.
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KEY FACTS ABOUT SOUTH CHINA SEA



India recently said it opposes unilateral actions seeking to change the status quo by force in South China Sea amid concerns over China's escalatory moves against the Philippines' maritime operations in the region.

- It is an arm of the **western Pacific Ocean** that **borders the Southeast Asian mainland**.
- It embraces an area of about 1,423,000 square miles (3,685,000 square km), with a mean depth of 3,976 feet (1,212 metres).
- **Boundaries:**
 - It is bordered by **China, Taiwan, Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, and Vietnam**.
 - The **southern boundary** of the South China Sea is a rise in the seabed between **Sumatra and Borneo**, and the northern boundary stretches from the northernmost point of **Taiwan** to the coast of **Fujian province, China, in the Taiwan Strait**.
- It is **connected by the Taiwan Strait with the East China Sea** and by the **Luzon Strait with the Philippine Sea** (both marginal seas of the Pacific Ocean).
- The **South China Sea and the East China Sea together form the China Sea**.
- The two **major archipelagos** are known as the **Paracel Islands, controlled by China, and the Spratly Islands**.
- **Climate:** The weather in the sea is **tropical** and largely controlled by monsoons.

- It is the **second most used sea lane in the world**. It is a significant **trade route for crude oil** from the Persian Gulf and Africa through the Strait of Malacca to Singapore, Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan.
 - **Major Ports:** Hong Kong, Singapore, and Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan.
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WHAT IS SAUBHAGYA SCHEME?



The Meghalaya Lokayukta recently issued notifications to the former chief secretary and other former officials of the Meghalaya Energy Corporation Limited (MeECL) for their alleged irregularities in the implementation of the Saubhagya scheme in the state.

- The Government of India launched **Pradhan Mantri Sahaj Bijli Har Ghar Yojana (SAUBHAGYA)** in October, 2017
- **Objective:** Achieving **universal household electrification**, by providing **electricity connections** to all **un-electrified households in rural areas** and all **poor households in urban areas** in the country.
- Under the Saubhagya scheme, **LED bulbs, wire, holders, switches**, etc are to be provided to BPL families **free of cost**.
- **Salient features** of the scheme were:
 - Providing **last-mile connectivity and electricity** connections to all un-electrified households in rural areas.
 - Providing **Solar Photo Voltaic (SPV)-based standalone systems** for un-electrified households located in remote and inaccessible villages / habitations where grid extension is not feasible or cost effective.
 - Providing last mile connectivity and electricity connections to all remaining economically **poor un-electrified households in urban areas**. Non-poor urban households are excluded from this scheme.
- **In the rural areas, families other than BPL family's electricity connection** has to be provided for **Rs. 500**. The consumer has to pay the amount in 10 equal instalments of Rs.

50 in each bill, in the urban areas, the **BPL families** will be provided **free power connection**.

- It is a provision that families of rural areas, which are not possible to issue electrical assemblies through grid supply, have to be published through solar energy.
- **Rural Electrification Corporation (REC)** has been designated as its **nodal agency** for the Saubhagya scheme.
- The **beneficiaries** for free electricity connections will be **identified using Socio Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 data**.

PENCH TIGER RESERVE



The **Pench Tiger Reserve** recently launched an advanced **Artificial Intelligence (AI)** system for the early detection of forest fires.

- **Location:** The reserve is located in the **southern reaches of the Satpura hills** in the Seoni and Chhindwara districts in **Madhya Pradesh** and continues in Nagpur district in Maharashtra as a separate Sanctuary.
- It is named after the **Pench River**, which flows from north to south through the Reserve.
- It comprises of the **Indira Priyadarshini Pench National Park, the Pench Mowgli Sanctuary**, and a buffer.
- The area of the Pench Tiger Reserve and the surrounding area is the real-story area of Rudyard Kipling's famous "The Jungle Book".
- **Terrain:** It is undulating, with most of the area covered by small hills and steep slopes on the sides.
- **Vegetation:** The undulating topography supports a mosaic of vegetation ranging from a moist sheltered valley to an open, dry deciduous forest.
- **Flora:** The reserve boasts a diverse range of flora, including teak, saag, mahua, and various grasses, and shrubs.
- **Fauna:**

- The area is especially famous for large herds of Chital, Sambar, Nilgai, Gaur (Indian Bison), and wild boar.
 - The key predator is the tiger, followed by the leopard, wild dogs, and wolf.
 - There are over 325 species of resident and migratory birds, including the Malabar Pied Hornbill, Indian Pitta, Osprey, Grey Headed Fishing Eagle, White Eyed Buzzard, etc.
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KEY FACTS ABOUT SHYOK RIVER



- It is a river that **flows through northern Ladakh** in Jammu and Kashmir, India and **enters** the Pakistan-administered region of **Gilgit-Baltistan**, where it **joins the Indus River**.
 - It is a tributary of the **Indus River**.
 - **Course:**
 - It originates from the **Rimo Glacier**; one of the **tongues of the Siachen Glacier**, and gets its name from a Ladakhi word meaning 'the river of death'.
 - The alignment of the Shyok river is very strange, originating from the Rimo glacier, it **flows in a South-East direction** and at **joining the Pangong range**, it takes a north-west turn and flows parallel to its prior path.
 - The Shyok, flowing in a broad valley, rapidly **enters a narrow gorge after Chalunka** and then **joins the Indus at Skardu (Pakistan)**.
 - The total length of the river is around **550 km** (340 mi).
 - It is **fed by meltwater from numerous glaciers** on its journey.
 - It **meanders through the high-altitude deserts and mountain ranges** of Ladakh before converging with the Indus.
 - Its main right-bank **tributary is the Nubra River**.
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