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Mains Master

The long road to reforming India's political party system

Context:

- With the 2024 Indian general elections approaching, several instances of politicians switching parties (MLAs defecting) have been observed across the country.
- This includes defections from the Congress, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).
- In response to these defections, disqualifications of MLAs have occurred under the Anti-Defection Law in states like Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, and Maharashtra.

Background:

- The Anti-Defection Law, enshrined in the Tenth Schedule of the Indian Constitution, was enacted in 1985 to address the issue of frequent party switching by legislators.
- This law aims to promote stability and cohesion within political parties by penalizing legislators who:
  - Voluntarily give up their membership in the party they were elected on behalf of.
  - Vote against the party's whip (official directive) in the legislature.
  - Abstain from voting without permission from the party leadership.

What is Defection?

- Defection occurs when a member of a political party switches their allegiance to another party, often after being elected on the first party's ticket.
- This can have significant consequences, including:
  - Loss of their seat in the legislature if disqualified under the Anti-Defection Law.
  - Damage to the reputation of both the defecting politician and the parties involved.
  - Potential for instability within the legislature and the government.

Recent examples of flouting Anti-Defection Law by Speakers:

- The recent rulings by the Maharashtra Assembly Speaker in the Shiv Sena and NCP splits raise concerns about the application of the Anti-Defection Law.
  - In both cases, no MLAs from either faction were disqualified, despite the split effectively creating two separate groups within the original party.
  - One faction in each case (led by Eknath Shinde in Shiv Sena and Ajit Pawar in NCP) was recognized as the "real" party, even though they did not merge with another existing party.
  - The Speaker argued that these situations represented "intra-party dissent" and were not subject to disqualification under the law.

Defection and Lack of Intra-Party Democracy:

- The issue of defection is often linked to a lack of internal democracy within political parties.
- When individuals feel unheard, sidelined, or unable to participate meaningfully within their party, they may be more inclined to defect to another party that they perceive as better representing their interests.
- To address this concern, the Law Commission of India recommended a two-pronged approach:
  - Studying the internal democratic structures and processes within political parties to identify areas for improvement.
  - Introducing statutory regulations that compel political parties to ensure greater internal democracy.

Recommendations:

- Implement the Law Commission's recommendations to strengthen intra-party democracy and potentially reduce the incentive for defection.
- Conduct a comprehensive review of the Anti-Defection Law to address its limitations in light of recent rulings and evolving political realities. This review should consider:
  - Whether the current definition of "defection" is sufficiently clear and comprehensive.
  - How to balance the need for stability within legislatures with the right of dissent within political parties.
  - The role of the Speaker in interpreting and applying the law.

Way Forward:

- The upcoming review committee headed by the Maharashtra Assembly Speaker presents a valuable opportunity to reform the Anti-Defection Law.
- By addressing the concerns surrounding its perceived need and effectiveness, the committee can work towards:
  - Ensuring the law is effectively implemented and enforced.
  - Creating a political system that is both stable and responsive to the needs of the people.

Mountains of plastic are choking the Himalayan States

Context:

- Plastic waste has become ubiquitous across the globe, contaminating environments ranging from the highest mountain peaks to the deepest ocean trenches.
- This plastic pollution even reaches the human body, with microplastics being detected in our lungs and placentas.
- Microplastics are formed through the degradation and fragmentation of larger plastic items that are improperly discarded.
- These tiny plastic fragments have been found accumulating in the mountains, rivers, lakes, and streams of the Indian Himalayan Region (IHR).
- Trapped within glaciers, microplastics can be released into rivers during snowmelt, further polluting vital water sources.

Background:

- The IHR serves as a critical source of water for the Indian subcontinent, feeding major rivers like the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra.
- Unfortunately, unsustainable practices related to plastic disposal are causing widespread soil and water pollution throughout the IHR.
- This pollution has a devastating impact on the region's biodiversity, ultimately affecting the lives and livelihoods of downstream communities who rely on these clean water sources.

Status of Plastic Pollution:

- The issue of plastic pollution in the IHR is being exacerbated by several factors:
  - Rapid and unplanned urbanization is leading to increased waste generation without proper management infrastructure.
  - Changing consumption patterns and a growing tourist industry contribute to the surge in plastic waste.
  - A recent report by the Social Development for Communities (SDC) Foundation Dehradun has shed light on the alarming situation in towns across Uttarakhand, where plastic waste is becoming a major burden.
  - Similar problems are being reported in other Himalayan states, with the National Green Tribunal taking necessary actions against waste dumping by tourists and businesses in Himachal Pradesh.
  - Beyond Himachal Pradesh, states like Assam and Manipur are also facing concerning issues with plastic pollution in their rivers and wetlands, impacting wildlife and ecosystems.
  - Data from the Himalayan Clean Up initiatives (2018-2021) conducted by the Integrated Mountain Initiative with Zero Waste Himalayas and the National Productivity Council of India reveals a disturbing trend of increasing plastic waste, particularly non-recyclable types, within the IHR.
  - The findings of the Himalayan Clean Up (2022) further highlight the severity of the problem, with 92.7% of collected waste being plastic, of which 72% was non-recyclable.

Microplastics and Pollution Caused by Them:

- The presence of microplastics in the IHR poses a significant threat to the region's delicate ecosystem.
- These tiny plastic fragments, formed from the breakdown of larger plastic items, can easily enter the food chain when ingested by aquatic organisms.
- This can have cascading effects throughout the ecosystem, potentially impacting the health of larger animals and ultimately reaching humans who consume fish and other contaminated food sources.
- The trapping of microplastics within glaciers creates a long-term reservoir of pollution, with the potential to release these harmful fragments into rivers and streams during periods of snowmelt, further contaminating vital water sources.

Fragility and Vulnerability of the Himalayan Region:

The Indian Himalayan Region (IHR) is a majestic landscape renowned for its breathtaking peaks, diverse ecosystems, and rich cultural heritage. However, this very magnificence translates to a crucial vulnerability when faced with environmental threats like plastic pollution. Here's a deeper look into why the IHR is particularly susceptible:

1. Delicate and Diverse Ecosystems:

- The Himalayas harbor a unique tapestry of ecosystems ranging from lush forests and alpine meadows to snow-capped peaks and glacial valleys. Each ecosystem is home to specialized flora and fauna adapted to survive in these specific conditions.
- The fragile balance of these ecosystems is easily disrupted by external factors like plastic pollution, which can disrupt food chains, contaminate habitats, and introduce invasive species.

2. Young and Unstable Mountain Ranges:

- Unlike older, more established mountain ranges, the Himalayas are still geologically young and actively growing. This means the slopes are steeper, the soil is less developed, and the overall landscape is more prone to landslides, avalanches, and erosion.
- Plastic pollution adds an additional layer of stress to these already unstable slopes. The non-biodegradable nature of plastic can clog drainage channels, exacerbate landslides, and hinder the natural processes of soil formation, further jeopardizing the mountain's fragile stability.

3. Permafrost and Glacial Melt:

- The higher altitudes of the Himalayas are characterized by the presence of permafrost, permanently frozen ground that holds significant amounts of water and plays a crucial role in maintaining the region's delicate hydrology.
- Plastic pollution, especially microplastics, can accelerate the melting of permafrost by absorbing solar radiation and trapping heat. This, in turn, contributes to increased glacial melt, leading to floods, water scarcity, and disruptions in the natural water cycle.

4. Limited Capacity for Waste Management:

- The harsh terrain and limited infrastructure in the IHR pose significant challenges for effective waste management. Setting up and maintaining waste collection and processing facilities in these remote and often inaccessible areas is a complex and expensive undertaking.
- This lack of robust waste management infrastructure allows plastic waste to accumulate in the environment, further exacerbating the existing vulnerabilities of the region.

5. Downstream Impacts:

- The detrimental effects of plastic pollution in the IHR extend beyond the immediate vicinity. The rivers originating from the Himalayas are vital sources of water for millions of people downstream.
- Plastic contamination in these rivers affects water quality, harms aquatic life, and poses a health risk to communities relying on this water for drinking, irrigation, and other purposes.

Plastic Overshoot Day:

- In 2023, India reached its Plastic Overshoot Day on January 6th. This signifies a critical point where the country's plastic waste generation surpasses its waste management capacity.
- This stark reminder highlights the urgent need for effective solutions to address the growing plastic pollution crisis in India, including the IHR.

India grapples with a significant challenge when it comes to plastic waste management. Here's a breakdown of the key issues and the discrepancies between reported and actual recycling rates:

High Mismanaged Waste Index (MWI):

- India has one of the world's worst MWI scores at 98.55%, indicating a massive gap between waste generation and proper management capacity. This means a significant portion of plastic waste ends up in landfills, dumpsites, or the environment, causing severe pollution.

Discrepancy in Recycling Claims:

- The Indian government claims a 60% plastic waste recycling rate. However, independent analysis by the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) using CPCB data paints a different picture.

Reality of Plastic Recycling:

- The CSE analysis reveals that only around 12% of plastic waste undergoes mechanical recycling, the traditional method of sorting and reprocessing plastic into new products.
- Another 20% is diverted for alternate uses like co-incineration (burning waste to generate energy), plastic-to-fuel conversion, and road construction with plastic additives. While these might seem like solutions, they raise **concerns:**
  - **Co-incineration:** Burning plastic releases harmful pollutants into the air, negating any potential energy benefit.
  - **Plastic-to-fuel:** This technology is still developing and raises questions about efficiency and emissions.
  - Road construction with plastic: The long-term durability and environmental impact of such roads remain unclear.

Legal and Institutional Mandate:

- The following regulations form the legal framework for plastic waste management in India:
  - Solid Waste Management (SWM) Rules 2016
  - Plastic Waste Management (PWM) Rules 2016
  - Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) 2022
- While the SWM Rules acknowledge the special needs of hill areas, they fail to translate this recognition into concrete and effective mandates for both local authorities and waste producers.
- Furthermore, the PWM and EPR regulations completely overlook the specific challenges faced by the IHR due to its unique geographical and ecological characteristics.

Critical Estimate:

- Despite various state initiatives, including plastic bans and buy-back schemes, the problem of widespread littering persists across the IHR.
- While the Indian government claims a 60% plastic recycling rate, independent analyses suggest that

Facts and statistics

Headline Growth:

- India's National Statistical Office (NSO) reported an impressive 8.4% year-on-year growth in real GDP for the October-December quarter, exceeding expectations and prompting positive financial market reactions.

Discrepancies and Revisions:

- However, this figure sparked debate due to discrepancies exceeding 1% between the official estimate and various economists' projections.
- The NSO subsequently revised growth estimates for the first two quarters, settling at 8.2% and 8.1%, respectively.
- The full-year forecast was adjusted to 7.6%, up from 7.3%, primarily due to changes in historical data impacting the base effect.

Base Effect Explained:

- The base effect significantly influenced the revisions. This phenomenon occurs when the growth rate is compared to a previous year with an unusually low or high value. A low base year amplifies the current year's growth, while a high base year can make it appear slower.
- In this case, upward revisions to the 2021-22 data (9.7% growth) led to a lower base for comparison in 2022-23, consequently inflating the year-on-year growth in the current year.

Sectoral Performance:

- While headline growth appears robust, a deeper dive reveals a more nuanced picture.
- The real productive sectors, which contribute significantly to economic output, witnessed a slower growth rate of 6.5% in the third quarter.
- Notably, the crucial agriculture sector experienced a contraction of 0.8%, raising concerns about rural income and food security.
- Additionally, growth momentum decelerated across most other sectors, indicating challenges beyond the headline figure.

Growth Drivers:

- This discrepancy between headline growth and sectoral performance is attributed to a 32% surge in net indirect taxes, driven by reduced government subsidies. This surge inflated the overall GDP figure but doesn't necessarily reflect organic economic growth.

Expenditure Trends:

- Consumer spending, a crucial driver of economic activity, remained tepid with a modest 3.5% growth.
- Government spending also contracted by 3.2%, further dampening overall economic momentum.

Election Year Context:

- With an impending election, this NSO data is likely to become a focal point of public discourse.
- It's crucial to analyze the data critically and consider multiple sources to gain a holistic understanding of the Indian economy's true state beyond headline figures.
- Additionally, addressing the challenges faced by sectors like agriculture is vital for ensuring inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Prelims Booster

CSL builds on success with South Asia's largest ship repair unit

Kochi's Cochin Shipyard Ltd (CSL) is set to become South Asia's largest ship-repair center following the inauguration of ₹4,000-crore worth infrastructure projects by PM Narendra Modi, including a new dry dock and international ship repair facility costing ₹2,800 crore approximately.

The shipbuilding sector is expected to experience growth due to the increasing demand for fleet replacements globally, with CSL and other yards in India likely to see improved order intake in the coming years.

CSL's recent expansion aligns with the Central government's Maritime India Vision 2030 and 'Amrit Kaal Maritime Vision 2047' initiatives, aiming to position India among the world's top 10 shipbuilding and ship repair destinations by 2030 and promote sustainable practices in the maritime sector.

The new dry dock at CSL, 310 meters long, and the international ship repair facility equipped to hoist vessels weighing up to 6,000 tonnes, will bolster Kochi's shipbuilding and repair capabilities and facilitate the development of a business ecosystem in the region.

CSL has also developed India's first hydrogen fuel cell ferry, showcasing indigenous technology for eco-friendly vessels, and is working on new projects for the Indian Navy, including anti-submarine warfare shallow watercraft and next-generation missile vessels.

Alang makes more space for dying ships

The Alang ship-breaking yard in Gujarat is set to expand its ship-recycling capacity by adding 50 new plots, doubling its capacity from 4.5 million light displacement tonnage (LDT) to 9 million LDT, through a new master plan being prepared for the entire Alang region in Bhavnagar district.

Currently equipped to recycle 400-450 ships a year, Alang has been producing 3.5 million tonnes of steel annually from recycling about 200 ships, and the expansion aims to attract more ships to Alang and operationalize the vacant plots in two phases.

Despite having 153 plots, with 131 operational and the rest vacant, business at Alang has seen a decline since 2011-12, with the number of ships for recycling dropping from 415 ships with 3.8 million LDT to 137 ships in 2022-23, before improving slightly to 209 ships in 2021-22.

60 years later, UN peacekeepers role vital for 'precarious' Cyprus divide

Cyprus has remained peaceful since the Turkish invasion, but the buffer zone remains tense, with thousands of infringements each year, including unauthorised civilian crossings and criminal activities, leading to serious confrontations and challenges for the United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (UNFICYP).

The buffer zone, patrolled by UN peacekeepers, requires meticulous attention to detail to maintain the status quo, with the mission facing questions about its long-term mandate and efficacy, especially as hopes for a resolution remain slim following the collapse of the last UN-backed talks in 2017.

The appointment of a new UN envoy has sparked a flicker of hope for a new push for a settlement, but with six decades of failed negotiations behind it, the UN faces questions of how much longer it should stay, despite the potential risks of escalation involving NATO allies.

Since 1974, Sector 2 of the buffer zone, covering Nicosia, has been headquartered in the Ledra Palace Hotel, once among the most glamorous in Cyprus and now a symbol of its division.

Why obesity, undernutrition high in India: what a Lancet study says

India has seen a steady increase in obesity levels, not only in adults but in children too, over the last 32 years, while the prevalence of undernutrition has remained high in the country, resulting in a high "double burden" of malnutrition, according to a new Lancet study. The study attributes this trend to a lack of access to affordable and nutritious food, as well as increased consumption of processed foods high in fats, salt, and sugar.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), obesity is defined as an abnormal or excessive accumulation of fat that poses health risks. Adults (over 20 years) are considered obese if they have a body mass index (BMI) of 30 kg/m2 or more, while school-aged children and adolescents (5-19 years) are considered obese if their BMI is two standard deviations more than the mean.

Underweight, a form of undernutrition, is characterized by a BMI of less than 18 kg/m2 in adults and two standard deviations below the mean in school-aged children and adolescents.

The study found that obesity in women has spiked in the past three decades, with 44 million women living with obesity in 2022, while obesity in men increased by 4.9 percentage points during the same period, with 26 million men living with obesity in 2022. Additionally, thinness in Indian girls was found to be the highest in the world, with a prevalence of 20.3%, and the second highest in Indian boys, with a prevalence of 21.7%.

Shehbaz Sharif becomes the Pakistan PM for second time

PML-N leader secures 201 votes, while his PTI-backed opponent Omar Ayub Khan got only 92 votes; 72-year-old leader raises Kashmir issue in victory speech and compares it to Palestine crisi

Grey zone warfare

"Grey zone warfare" is described as a middle ground between direct conflict and peace, encompassing a range of activities such as economic actions, influence operations, cyberattacks, mercenary operations, assassinations, disinformation campaigns, debt traps, and economic sanctions. This form of warfare gained popularity during the Cold War, when direct conflict between nuclear-armed powers was not feasible, and has since been employed by parties seeking to gain an advantage over technically superior adversaries more accustomed to conventional warfare.

Examples of grey zone warfare include Chinese military presence in the South China Sea, with countries like the Philippines challenging China's territorial claims and Taiwan reporting stepped-up Chinese military actions aimed at pressuring without engaging in full-blown conflict. The US has also engaged in similar tactics, including economic sanctions against China and imposition of duties on Chinese imports, along with maritime reconnaissance.

Grey zone warfare poses the risk of baiting a rival into a reaction that legitimizes military reprisal, highlighting the complex and challenging nature of this form of warfare.