Recalling India's Antarctica Activities

Why in news?

Parliament has just passed the Indian Antarctic Bill, 2022 in the Rajya Sabha.

What is the Indian Antarctic Bill 2022 about?

- Antarctica contains many very important minerals—especially atomic energy minerals and is one of the reasons why this area is attractive to various countries.
- The Bill seeks to give effect to
    - The Antarctic Treaty
    - The Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources
    - The Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty
- It also seeks to protect the Antarctic environment and regulate activities in the region.

To know more about the bill, click here

> *The Madrid Protocol sets forth basic principles applicable to human activities in Antarctica and prohibits all activities relating to Antarctic mineral resources, except for scientific research.*

How did India's engagement with the Antarctica begin?

- In 1956, at the instance of Jawaharlal Nehru and V.K. Krishna Menon, India became the first country to request for an item on the agenda of the eleventh United Nations General Assembly.
- It was entitled "The Question of Antarctica" that ensures that the vast areas and the resources of Antarctica were used entirely for peaceful purposes and for general welfare.
- Twelve countries who believed that they had a direct stake in Antarctica started discussions among themselves and in 1959, the Antarctica Treaty was signed in Washington DC.
- India was neither involved nor invited.
- The Treaty members worked on the development of the continent among themselves, inviting occasional criticism from other countries, including India.

What are the Indian expeditions in Antarctica?

> *The National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR), Goa—an autonomous institute under the Ministry of Earth Sciences—manages the entire Indian Antarctic program.*

- In 1982, India's first Antarctic expedition called **Operation Gangotri** started as soon as Indira Gandhi had returned to power two years earlier.
- The objectives were ecological dimensions - greater knowledge of the Indian Ocean and the monsoons, life in ice-bound regions and marine biodiversity.
- A second expedition led by one of India's top geologists V.K. Raina landed in Antarctica in 1982.
- With two expeditions successfully completed within a span of 11 months, India finally became a **member of the Antarctic Treaty** in August 1983 and China followed in 1985.

What are the notable achievements of India in Antarctica?

- **Research bases**- The first Antarctic team started wintering in Antarctica in 1984 and a few months afterwards an unmanned Antarctic research base -**Dakshin Gangotri** was established.
- Since then, India has set up two manned research stations in Antarctica — **Maitri** in 1988 and **Bharati** in 2012.
- As of today, Maitri and Bharati are fully operational.
- **Expeditions**- Forty expeditions to the continent have taken place.

What is the issue with the polar research vessel?

- **Issue-** So far, India has been chartering polar research vessels from countries like Russia and Norway while China has raced ahead and has two of its own.
- A decision was indeed taken by the Union Cabinet in 2014 for India to have its own research ship with ice-breaking and other advanced technological capabilities but it remains unimplemented.
- **Way forward**- A research ship could be acquired from abroad through the Make-in-India policy.
- There is also a need to revamp the quite old Maitri research station.

References

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