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B.1.617 Variant - A Global Concern

- The World Health Organization said that the B.1.617 variant - first identified in India in December 2020 - was being classified as a variant of global concern.
- Due to its increased transmissibility, the variant has spread to other countries, and many nations have restricted movements from India.
- The WHO Foundation launched “Together for India” appeal to raise funds to purchase oxygen, medicines and protective equipment for health workers.
- To know more about the double mutant B.1.617 variant, click here.

National Horticulture Board

- National Horticulture Board has cleared many long-pending subsidy applications for integrated development of hi-tech commercial horticulture viz. promotion of post-harvest and cold chain infrastructure.
- NHB has also facilitated the convergence of its back-ended capital investment subsidy schemes with the Agricultural Infrastructure Fund Scheme in the horticulture sector.
- National Horticulture Board (NHB) was set up by Government of India in 1984 as an autonomous organization under the administrative control of the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.
- It was set up based on the recommendations of the "Group on Perishable Agricultural Commodities", headed by Dr M. S. Swaminathan, the then Member (Agriculture), Planning Commission.
- It was registered under Societies Registration Act 1860, thereafter, re-registered under the Haryana Registration and Regulation of Societies Act, 2012, with its headquarters at Gurugarm.
- The management of all the activities of NHB is undertaken by a "Board of Directors" - headed by the Union Agriculture Minister as its President.
- The main objectives of the NHB are to improve integrated development of Horticulture industry and to help in coordinating, sustaining the production and processing of fruits and vegetables.

Great Nicobar Development Plan

- The Environment Appraisal Committee (EAC) - Infrastructure I of the

Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has flagged serious concerns about NITI Aayog's Great Nicobar Plan.

- However, the EAC has removed the first hurdle faced by the project by recommending it for grant of terms of reference (TOR) for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) studies.
- NITI Aayog's proposed project includes an international container trans shipment terminal, a greenfield international airport, a power plant and a township complex to be built over coastal systems and tropical forests
- The project is estimated to cost ₹75,000 crore. It will be implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Island Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO) as the nodal agency.
- [ANIIDCO, the Port Blair project proponent, is a government undertaking involved in activities such as tourism, trading and infrastructure development for tourism and fisheries.]
- The EAC raised a number of additional issues, including about Galathea Bay, the site of the port and the centrepiece of the NITI Aayog proposal.

Galathea Bay

- On January 5, 2021, the Standing Committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) denotified the entire Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary to allow for the port there.
- Galathea Bay is an iconic nesting site in India of the enigmatic Giant Leatherback, the world's largest marine turtle.
- India's National Marine Turtle Action Plan had listed Galathea Bay as one of the 'Important Coastal and Marine Biodiversity Areas' and 'Important Marine Turtle Habitats' in the country.
- It is included in Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ)-I, the zone with maximum protection.
- Another Environment Ministry expert committee approved a "zero extent" Ecologically Sensitive Zone (ESZ) for the Galathea National Park.
- Galathea Bay is a UNESCO World Heritage Site that houses many forest types, has one of the world's best preserved tropical rainforests.
- It is home to the Nicobar wild pig, Nicobar tree shrew, the Great Nicobar crested serpent eagle, the Great Nicobar crake, the Nicobar cat snake, Nicobar paradise flycatcher and the Nicobar megapode.
- The park is home to the indigenous Shompen community.

Kaziranga Animal Corridors

- The authorities in Assam have begun probing cases of clearance of forest land, digging and construction activities on animal corridors within the eco-sensitive zone of the Kaziranga National Park and Tiger Reserve.

- These activities violated the Supreme Court's order in 2019, "No new construction shall be permitted on private lands which form part of the nine identified animal corridors."
- Kaziranga Animal corridors are crucial for the rhinos, elephants, tigers, deer and other animals that escape a flooded Kaziranga during the monsoon months for the safety of the hills of Karbi Anglong district.

Animal Corridors

- Animal corridors are also known as wildlife corridors or habitat corridors or green corridors. They can be underpasses or bridges.
- They allow local migratory animals to pass over or under roads and other manmade obstacles to keep them safe and their territory a bit intact.
- They are designed to keep animals from the encroaching human populations in areas of high interaction between the two.
- **Types** - There are two types of corridors, although many different kinds of ways in which these corridors can be built.
    1. **Continuous corridors** - They are large, unbroken strips of green corridor that lead to another habitat.
    2. **Stepping stone corridors** - They are small patches of habitat that are connected by smaller green corridors.

Har Ghar Jal

- Puducherry has become 'Har Ghar Jal' UT by ensuring that every rural home in the Union Territory gets a household tap connection.
- With this, the UT becomes the fourth State/UT after Goa, Telangana and Andaman & Nicobar Islands to provide assured tap water supply to every rural home under Jal Jeevan Mission.
- The UT of Puducherry is also planning to get NABL accreditation/ recognition for its water quality testing laboratories and take up testing of all drinking water sources on a campaign mode.

Connected Commerce Report

- NITI Aayog and Mastercard released a report titled 'Connected Commerce: Creating a Roadmap for a Digitally Inclusive Bharat'.
- It identifies challenges in accelerating digital financial inclusion in India.
- The report highlights key issues and opportunities, with inferences and recommendations on policy and capacity building across agriculture, small business (MSMEs), urban mobility and cyber security.
- **Key recommendations** - Strengthening the payment infrastructure to promote a level playing field for NBFCs and banks.

- Digitizing registration and compliance processes and diversifying credit sources to enable MSMEs to ‘get paid, get capital and get digital’.
- Building information sharing systems, including a ‘fraud repository’, and ensuring that online digital commerce platforms carry warnings to alert consumers to the risk of frauds.
- Enabling agricultural NBFCs to access low-cost capital and deploy a ‘phygital’ (physical + digital) model for achieving better long-term digital outcomes.
- To make city transit accessible to all with minimal crowding and queues, leveraging existing smartphones and contactless cards, and aim for an inclusive, interoperable, and fully open system like London ‘Tube’.

Source: PIB, The Hindu

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