



DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS 14-02-2024

GS-2

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GS-3

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Greening and Restoration of Wasteland with Agroforestry' (GROW) report and portal

Syllabus: GS-2; Government policies and Interventions, GS-3; Environmental concern, Agriculture

Context

- Recently, NITI Aayog launched the *Greening and Restoration of Wasteland with Agroforestry (GROW) report and portal*, **aiming to bolster efforts in environmental conservation and sustainable land use across India.**

Report

- Utilizing cutting-edge remote sensing and **Geographic Information Systems (GIS)** technologies, the report offers a comprehensive state-wise and district-wise analysis, providing crucial insights to government departments and industries engaged in greening and restoration projects.
- Under the leadership of NITI Aayog, the report employed remote sensing and GIS techniques **to evaluate the suitability of agroforestry practices across all districts of India.**
- Additionally, it introduced an **Agroforestry Suitability Index (ASI)** for national-level prioritization, utilizing thematic datasets.
- Presently, **agroforestry covers 8.65%** of India's total geographical area, encompassing approximately 28.42 million hectares.
- The GROW report emphasizes the immense potential of converting underutilized areas, particularly wastelands, into productive agroforestry zones.
- This initiative aligns with national commitments to restore 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030 and establish an additional **carbon sink** capable of sequestering 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent.

Portal

- The GROW initiative includes the launch of the "Greening and Restoration of Wasteland with Agroforestry (GROW)-Suitability Mapping" portal on 'Bhuvan' (https://bhuvan-app1.nrsc.gov.in/asi_portal/), ensuring universal access to state and district-level data.
- This portal is expected to significantly boost the **promotion of agroforestry initiatives by government bodies.**

Significance

- *Agroforestry, which integrates trees, crops, and livestock, addresses multifaceted challenges related to food security, nutrition, energy, employment, and environmental conservation.*
- *These efforts are in alignment with global commitments such as the **Paris Agreement, Bonn Challenge, UN Sustainable Development Goals, United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification (UNCCD), Doubling Farmers' Income initiative, Green India Mission, among others.***

Regulation of online gaming

Syllabus: GS-2: Governance – Online Gaming industry.

Context:

- *The meteoric rise of online gaming has brought with it an array of concerns such as addiction, mental illness, suicides, financial frauds, privacy and data security concerns.*

Online gaming:

- **Definition:** *Playing games via the internet, enabling player connections and collaborative gameplay regardless of physical locations.*
- **Accessibility:** *Available on multiple devices like computers and mobile phones.*
- **Characteristics:** *Focuses on entertainment and social interaction.*
- **Example:** *Multiplayer online games like Fortnite or Call of Duty.*

Online gambling:

- **Definition:** *Engaging in gambling activities online by placing bets or wagers on games and events to win money or prizes.*
- **Accessibility:** *Can be accessed on various devices.*
- **Characteristics:** *Involves risk-taking and potential monetary rewards.*
- **Example:** *Online poker, sports betting, or virtual casinos.*

Skill vs. Chance:

- *Gaming: Relies on player skill, strategy, and decision-making.*
- *Gambling: Dependent on chance or luck rather than skill.*
- *Determining factor: The presence of skill distinguishes gaming from gambling.*

Current Scenario of the Indian Online Gaming Ecosystem:

Growth Prospects:

- *Predominantly homegrown start-up ecosystem experiencing a **27% Compound Annual Growth Rate (CAGR)**.*
- **Estimated potential:** *AI integration in online gaming could contribute up to USD 300 billion to India's GDP by 2026-27.*
- **Mobile gaming sector:** *Revenue projected to surge from USD 1.5 billion in 2020 to USD 5 billion by 2025, as per a 2021 report by Boston Consulting Group (BCG).*

Bills for Regulating Gaming Industry:

- *Introduction of the Online Gaming (Regulation) Bill, 2022 during the Budget session of Parliament, initially as a Private Members Bill.*
- *Aimed at ensuring integrity in online gaming and establishing a regulatory framework.*
- *MeitY task force has finalized recommendations for regulating the online gaming sector.*
- **Previous state attempts at regulation:** *Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka passed laws banning online games, later invalidated by state High Courts due to perceived unfairness in blanket bans.*
- **Draft Bill by Rajasthan Government:** *Proposal to regulate online games, particularly fantasy games, outlined in a draft Bill.*

Increasing Gaming Companies:

- *Over 400 gaming companies operating in India, including prominent names such as Infosys Limited, Hyperlink InfoSystem, Fgfactory, and Zensar Technologies, among others.*

Legality of Online Gaming and Gambling in India:

Legal Jurisdiction:

- *State legislators are granted exclusive authority, as per Entry No. 34 of List II (State List) of the **Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India**, to enact laws concerning Gaming, Betting, and Gambling.*
- *Many Indian states regulate gaming based on the distinction between 'games of skill' and 'games of chance'.*

Public Gambling Act, 1867:

- *India's sole central law governing gambling across all forms.*

- *Outdated law inadequately equipped to address digital casinos, online gambling, and gaming challenges.*

Goods and Services Tax (GST):

- *The Finance Ministry of India imposed a **28% Goods and Services Tax (GST)** on online money gaming, casinos, and horse racing.*

Lotteries Regulation Act, 1998:

- *Lottery activities are considered legal in India if organized by the state government, with the draw conducted within the respective state.*

Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), 1999:

- **FEMA Act, 1999 prohibits** remittance of income generated from lottery winnings, racing, or riding activities.

Concerns in Online Gaming in India:

Loss to Exchequer:

- *Lack of regulation allows illegal offshore gambling markets to flourish, causing harm to users and significant revenue losses to the government.*
- *Illegal offshore gambling receives **USD 100 billion annually from India**, with a growth rate of 20% over the past three years.*

Addictive Behavior:

- *Growing concerns about the addictive nature of certain online gaming activities, leading to compulsive behavior, neglect of responsibilities, and negative impacts on mental health.*
- *Need for thorough examination of the psychological effects of prolonged gaming.*

Financial Risks:

- *Vulnerable demographics may face financial risks, including debt and economic hardship, due to excessive spending on gaming.*
- *Raises questions about responsible consumer engagement and ethical considerations in the gaming industry.*

Regulatory Ambiguity:

- *Lack of clear definitions between skill-based gaming and gambling introduces regulatory ambiguity, sparking ethical debates and diverse interpretations.*
- *Crucial to establish fair and responsible regulations.*

Money Laundering:

- *Online gambling used as a channel for money laundering, allowing players to deposit and withdraw large sums of cash in a legitimate manner.*

Cybersecurity Vulnerabilities:

- *Online gambling sites susceptible to cyber-attacks, leading to theft of sensitive personal and financial information, violating data protection rules and compromising user privacy.*

Social Detachment:

- *Online gambling can contribute to social isolation as players spend excessive time online, diminishing social interaction with family and friends, especially concerning for children's well-being.*

Emerging Cybercrime Trends:

- *Parliamentary Standing Committee on Finance identifies trends such as the use of international online betting sites for money laundering, emphasizing the necessity of a specialized regulatory authority to address these issues.*

Steps to Regulate Online Gaming in India:

Urgent Need for Robust Regulation:

- *Address the urgent need for robust regulation in the online gaming industry, considering the challenges posed by the cross-border nature of the internet.*
- *Reform and adoption of the Online Gaming (Regulation) Bill, 2022, introduced as a Private Members Bill, by the Parliament.*

Centralised Regulatory Approach:

- *Consider implementing a centralised government regulator for online gaming, similar to the UK model, to publish regular reports on the effects of regulation and enforce strict measures to combat disordered gaming.*

Balancing Regulated and Unregulated Segments:

- *Recognize the importance of balancing regulated and unregulated segments of the market to ensure responsible growth and prevent the proliferation of a shadow economy.*
- *Adopt a balanced approach for the overall benefit of society.*

Information Technology Rules as Oversight:

- *Acknowledge the significance of Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, as a commendable step towards oversight in the online gaming industry.*
- *Ensure timely implementation of **Self-Regulatory Bodies** to expedite progress and protect the gaming population in India.*

Ensuring Overall Well-being:

- *Establish a regulatory framework prioritizing harm reduction, player protection, and the overall well-being of society.*
- *Ensure compliance with **data privacy norms as per proposed Digital India Act, 2023**, and Information Technology Act, 2000.*

Corporate Ethical Responsibility:

- *Hold gaming **corporations accountable for prioritizing user well-being over profit motives.***
- *Emphasize the **ethical role that corporations** play in shaping a responsible gaming environment.*

Comprehensive Research and Analysis:

- *Invest in extensive **research on the psychological and socio-economic impacts of online gaming.***
- *Facilitate **evidence-based policymaking** and development of effective regulatory measures through comprehensive research and analysis.*

Practice Question

Q. The meteoric rise of online gaming has brought with it an array of concerns such as addiction, mental illness, suicides, financial frauds, privacy and data security concerns. Analyse. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme 2023-24

Syllabus: GS-3: Indian Economy – Gold Bond.

Context:

- *Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme 2023-24 – Series IV will be open for subscription for five days until 16 February 2024, as per Reserve Bank of India (RBI).*

What is it?

- *The Sovereign Gold Bond Scheme (SGB) is a **government-backed investment scheme offered by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** on behalf of the Government of India.*
- *It allows investors to invest in gold in a paper form, eliminating the need to hold physical gold and its associated risks.*

Key features:

- **Denomination:** *Bonds are issued in grams of gold (minimum 1 gram, maximum 4 kg for individuals and HUFs, 20 kg for institutions).*
- **Tenure:** *8 years with an exit option after 5th year.*
- **Interest:** *Fixed rate of 2.50% per annum, payable semi-annually.*
- **Redemption:** *Upon maturity, the redemption price is based on the prevailing market price of gold.*

Tax benefits:

- **Income tax:** *Interest earned is taxable as per income tax slab.*
- **Capital gains tax:** *Exempt if held till maturity.*
- **TDS:** *No deduction at source on purchase.*
- **Liquidity:** *Bonds can be traded on stock exchanges after one year from the date of issue.*
- **Subscription:** *Through authorized agencies like banks, stock exchanges, post offices, etc.*

Benefits:

- **Investment in gold:** *Provides exposure to gold price movements without holding physical gold.*
- **Regular income:** *Earn fixed interest of 2.50% per annum.*
- **Safe and secure:** *Backed by the Government of India.*
- **Tax benefits:** *Attractive tax exemptions.*
- **Convenient:** *No storage hassles associated with physical gold.*

Dzuds in Mongolia

Syllabus: GS-3; Environment and Ecology

Context

- *The ongoing “white and iron” dzud in Mongolia has reached a “critical” level, with over 90 per cent of the country facing high levels of risk from the **unique weather phenomenon**, according to a recent report by UN agencies.*



What are dzuds?

- *Dzuds, a peculiar slow-onset disaster unique to Mongolia, are **extreme winters characterized by freezing temperatures, heavy snow and ground so frozen that animals cannot reach pasture.***
- *These conditions are commonly preceded by a dry summer with equally scant grazing, leaving livestock unable to build up the stores of fat they need for winter.*
- *According to the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), the frequency and intensity of dzuds have been increasing since 2015 due to worsening impacts of climate change and poor environmental governance.*
- *This winter, the dual “white” and “iron” dzud is marked by a very deep snow cover preventing animals from accessing grass (white dzud) combined with a short thaw and subsequent hard freeze that locks up pastures in ice (iron dzud).*
- *Dzuds freeze the soil, leaving animals unable to access pasture. In this file photo, a horse grazes on tree bark as there is nothing else to eat.*

Global Biodiversity Framework Fund

Syllabus: GS-3: Biodiversity – conservation.

Context:

- *The inaugural council meeting of the **Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF)** convened recently in Washington DC, United States, from February 8 to 9, 2024.*
- *During the gathering, delegates established guidelines for the execution of the GBFF, originally proposed at the **15th Conference of Parties (COP15) of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2022.***

Background:

- *Ecosystems and wildlife populations worldwide face threats such as wildfires, floods, extreme weather, urban expansion, and pollution, endangering their health.*
- *In response, the global community adopted the **Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (KMGBF)** at the 15th Conference of Parties (COP15) to the **UN Convention on Biological Diversity** in December 2021.*
- *The KMGBF outlines 23 targets aimed at conserving and sustainably managing biodiversity by 2030, necessitating increased financing for conservation and sustainability endeavors globally.*
- *The establishment of the GBFF aims to **mobilize essential investments to support the achievement of these targets.***

GBFF

- *The **Global Biodiversity Framework Fund (GBFF)** is a financial tool devised to facilitate and expedite funding in the preservation and sustainable management of natural species and habitats.*
- *Originated during the **7th Assembly of the Global Environment Facility** in Vancouver, Canada, in 2022.*

Funding and Management:

- *The **Global Environment Facility (GEF)**, an **international financing mechanism** with a history of channeling funds into biodiversity, climate change, land degradation, chemicals and waste, international waters, and sustainable forest management projects, oversees the management of the GBFF.*
- *Differing from previous GEF initiatives, the GBFF will diversify its funding sources, tapping into private, philanthropic, and governmental investments beyond the traditional donor pool of approximately 40 countries.*

- *In the 2022-2026 GEF funding cycle, a substantial portion of the \$5.25 billion cumulative budget, specifically 36%, has been allocated to biodiversity-focused projects, which the GBFF can leverage for its initiatives.*

Fund council:

- *The oversight of the **GBFF is entrusted to a Fund Council**, composed of:*
 - *16 Members representing developing countries*
 - *14 Members representing developed countries*
 - *2 Members representing countries of central and eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union*
- *Decisions within the Fund Council are made through consensus, following the established governance procedures of the GEF.*

Expected activities:

- *The GBFF will fund projects aimed at **safeguarding endangered ecosystems and species**, rehabilitating deteriorated habitats, enlarging protected regions, and integrating biodiversity preservation into economic sectors such as agriculture, fishing, and forestry.*
- *Projects financed by the GBFF will be in alignment with the **objectives delineated in the KMGBF**.*
- *Over the period spanning 2022-2026, the GBFF endeavours to mobilize **investments totalling \$5 billion for biodiversity conservation** efforts, with a minimum of \$1 billion earmarked specifically for restoration initiatives.*
- *The introduction of the **GBFF heralds a significant influx of funding**, poised to support countries in intensifying their endeavours to fulfill their obligations under the new Global Biodiversity Framework.*