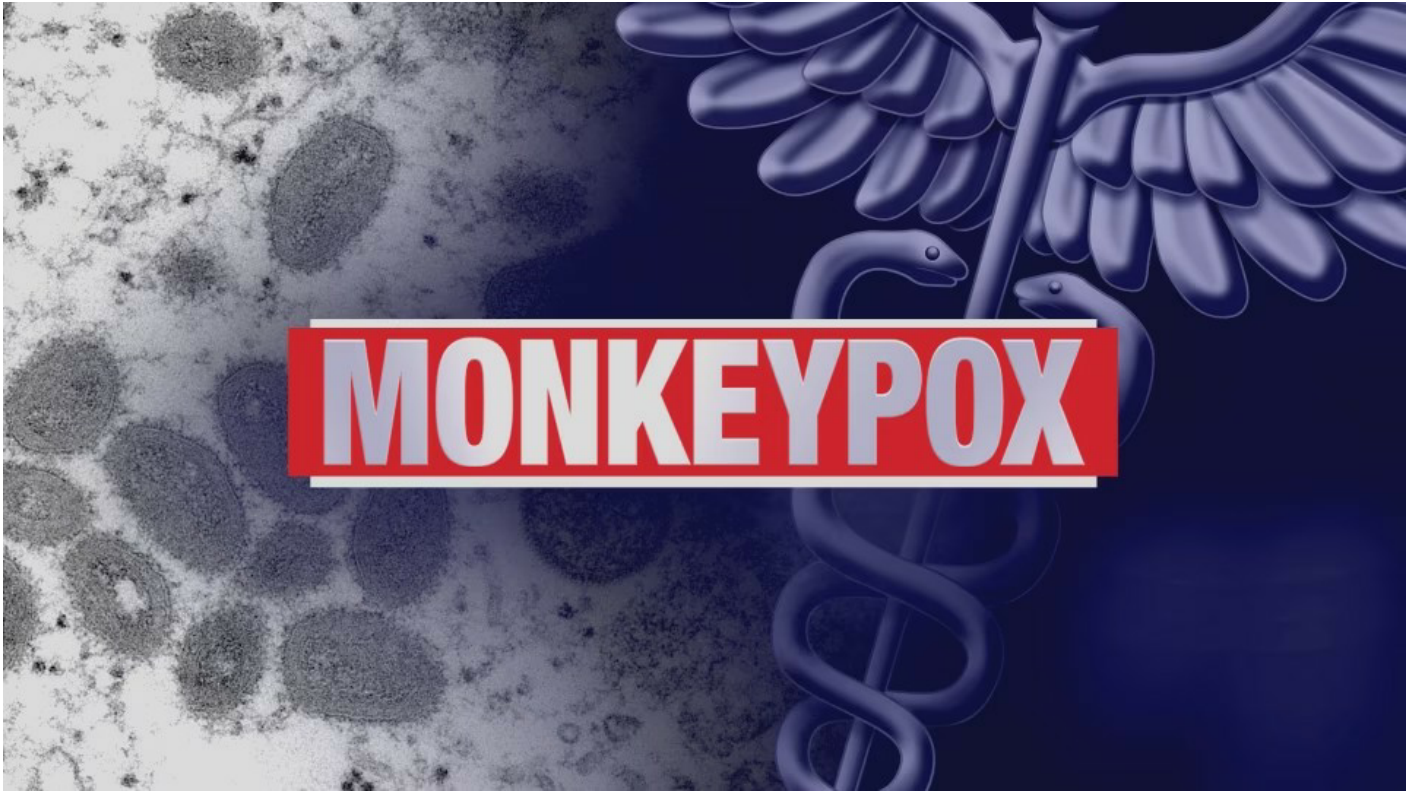


WHO classifies monkeypox as ‘public health emergency’

(GS Paper 3, Health)

Why in news?

- Recently, the World Health Organisation has declared the **global monkeypox outbreak** a “**public health emergency of international concern**” (PHEIC), one step below that of a ‘pandemic’.
- The monkeypox outbreak has affected more than 14,500 people in 72 countries.



What is PHEIC?

- According to the WHO, a **PHEIC represents** “an extraordinary event, which constitutes a public health risk to other States through international spread, and which potentially requires a coordinated international response”.
- On January 30, 2020, the organisation had categorised **COVID-19 as a PHEIC**, after about 7,500 cases of novel coronavirus were reported. On March 1, 2020, the agency elevated it to ‘pandemic’.
- The latest decision followed a seven-hour meeting of the **International Health Regulations Emergency Committee** to discuss the monkeypox outbreak in several countries. It is this committee of the WHO that decides on the seriousness of a public health crisis.
- The WHO has been criticised in the past for not recognising the incipient threat from COVID-19 soon enough.

Guidelines to follow:

- As part of the PHEIC declaration, which is said to be “**temporary**” and **reviewed every three months**, countries are expected to follow guidelines.

They are grouped in three categories:

- a) Those with no reported cases or where the last case was from 21 days ago;
 - b) those with recently imported cases and experiencing human-to-human transmission and finally,
 - c) countries where cases are being reported and have a history of the presence of the virus.
- The guidelines direct countries to **step up surveillance, spread awareness, and ensure** that at-risk groups are not stigmatised.

Affected regions:

- The WHO said that so far 14,533 probable and laboratory-confirmed cases (including 3 deaths in Nigeria and 2 in the Central African Republic) have been reported from 72 countries across six WHO Regions; up from 3,040 cases in 47 countries in early May.
- The highest numbers of cases are currently reported from countries in the European region and the Americas.

How monkeypox virus is transmitted or spread?

- A pertinent question is doing rounds among people about how an individual get infected with monkeypox virus.
- According to the WHO, the **virus is transmitted from infected animals to humans** via indirect or direct contact.
- Human-to-human transmission can occur through direct contact with infectious skin or lesions, including face-to-face, skin-to-skin, and respiratory droplets.
- In the current outbreak countries and amongst the reported monkeypox cases, transmission appears to be occurring primarily through close physical contact, including sexual contact.
- Transmission can also occur from contaminated materials such as linens, bedding, electronics, clothing, that have infectious skin particles.

Monkeypox cases concentrated among men:

- The majority of monkeypox cases are reported in males, and most of these cases occur among males who identified themselves as **gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (MSM)**, in urban areas, and are clustered in social and sexual networks.
- Early reports of children affected include a few with no known epidemiological link to other cases.

Samyukt Kisan Morcha on Sanjay Agrawal Committee

(GS Paper 2, Polity and Governance)

Why in news?

- Recently, the **Union Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Ministry formed a committee**, as promised by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on November 19, 2021 while announcing the repeal of three controversial farm laws.
- It is headed by former Agriculture Secretary Sanjay Agrawal, to **promote zero budget based farming**, to **change crop pattern keeping in mind the changing needs** of the country, and to **make MSP** (minimum support price) more effective and transparent.



Issue:

- Three slots were kept vacant in the 28-member committee to accommodate nominees of the Samyukt Kisan Morcha (SKM), the umbrella body of about 300 farmers' organisations that spearheaded the protests against the three farm laws.
- With the agenda not mentioning making of a law on MSP, the **SKM, rejected the government's offer** and said it will not send any of its representatives to the panel.

Why is the farmers' organisation upset?

- Since the repeal of the three laws, the Centre communicated with the SKM on the formation of the panel and sought names.
- In their replies, the SKM wanted to know the terms of reference of the proposed committee, names and details of other organisations and individuals who will be included in the committee, chairman's details and so forth.
- The SKM claims that there were no replies to these queries and called for nationwide protests from July 19, the day the Monsoon session of Parliament began. The SKM says that the Centre hurriedly announced the committee to escape questions in Parliament about the delay.

Concerns:

- The SKM, which faced a minor split recently, is upset that the former Agriculture Secretary is chairman of the panel as he was at the helm when the Centre launched the three farm laws as ordinances.
- It also alleges that Niti Aayog member Ramesh Chand, who is also in the panel, was the main advocate of the farm laws. Economists C.S.C. Shekhar and Sukhpal Singh have been against giving legal status to MSP, the SKM argues.
- Both factions of the SKM also allege that the five members representing other farmers' associations are either directly associated with the BJP-RSS or support their policies.

What is the government's stand?

- According to the Centre, it had not promised the SKM a committee to ensure MSP.
- The government had assured the formation of a committee to make MSP more effective and transparent, to promote natural farming and to change crop patterns keeping in mind the changing needs of the country.
- Accordingly, a committee has been constituted consisting of representatives of farmers, Central government, State governments, agricultural economists and scientists, etc.

What do the farmers want?

- The farmers want legal guarantee of MSP, which should be as per the recommendation of the M.S. Swaminathan formula — C2 (input cost for the farming, including the land value) +50%; **withdrawal of all cases against farmers who participated in protests** and the resignation of the Minister of State for Home Affairs Ajay Teni over the Lakhimpur Kheri incident.
- On these demands, the SKM has started nationwide protests for a month from July 19. It also points out that there is no mention of making a law on MSP in the agenda of the committee.

What is the MSP on key crops now?

- The government fixes MSPs for 22 mandated agricultural crops and fair and remunerative price (FRP) for sugarcane on the basis of the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACAP), after considering the views of the State Governments and Central Ministries/Departments.
- The 22 mandated crops (the MSP is for a quintal) include 14 kharif crops, six rabi crops and two commercial crops.

What happens next?

- Farmers argue that the MSP is much less than the C2+50% formula. But the Centre says there is substantial improvement in the income of farmers as there is a consistent increase in MSP.
- The struggle for the legal guarantee of MSP to ensure fair price for the crop to the farmers will continue.

Controversy over GST levies on food


(GS Paper 3, Economy)

Why in news?

- Recently, a 5% Goods and Services Tax (GST) has been levied on several food items and grains that are sold in a pre-packed, labelled form even if they are not branded. So far, these items, which include curd, lassi, buttermilk, puffed rice, wheat, pulses, oats, maize and flour, were exempted from the GST net.
- The fresh tax levies have attracted an outcry from traders as well as Opposition parties, with proceedings in Parliament's Monsoon session repeatedly disrupted over the issue.

EXEMPTION STATUS

All these items when sold loose will be exempt from GST

➤ Pulses/ Daal 

➤ Wheat


➤ Rye

➤ Oats

➤ Maize

➤ Rice 


Source: FM's tweet

➤ Aata/ Flour 

➤ Suji/Rawa

➤ Besan

➤ Puffed Rice

➤ Curd and Lassi 

“ This was a unanimous decision by the GST Council. All states were present in the GST Council when this issue was presented by the group of ministers on rate rationalisation in the 47th meeting held in Chandigarh on June 28, 2022...



— NIRMALA SITHARAMAN |
FINANCE MINISTER

How did the rate hikes come about?

- The **5% tax on unbranded packed food items** was approved by the GST Council in June 2022, and was part of a broader set of changes in the GST structure to do away with tax exemptions as well as concessional tax rates.
- Some of the **other items to have lost their tax-exempt status** include bank cheques, maps and atlases, hotel rooms that cost up to ₹1,000 a night, and hospital room rents of over ₹5,000 a day.
- While the decision was signed off by the Council, chaired by Finance Minister, the ground for such changes in the GST regime was set at the Council's previous 'regular' meeting at Lucknow in September 2021.
- During that meeting, the Centre and States had discussed the need to raise revenues from the GST, which at the time of its launch five years ago, was premised on levying a 'revenue-neutral' rate of 15.5%.
- Officials made a detailed presentation to show that several changes in rates since 2017 had brought down the effective rate to 11.6%.

GoMs:

- Shoring up GST revenues was the driving force for the Council's decision to form two groups of Ministers (GoMs) — one to consider steps to rationalise the tax rates and correct anomalies, and another to tap technology to improve compliance.
- The current rate changes stem from an interim report of the first ministerial group, led by Karnataka Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai based on officials' recommendations.

What has the government said on the issue?

- Finance Minister hit out at misconceptions about the GST levies on food items and dismissed suggestions that they were imposed unilaterally by the Centre.
- The 5% levy was **critical to curb tax leakages** and was not taken by 'one member' of the GST Council alone as all States had agreed to the move.
- All affected food items, including wheat, pulses, rice, curd and lassi, will be exempt from GST when sold loose. The Revenue Department has also clarified that **pre-packed items weighing over 25 kg would not attract GST**.
- When GST was rolled out, a GST rate of 5% was made applicable on branded cereals, pulses, flour. Later this was amended to tax only such items which were sold under a registered brand or brands on which enforceable right was not foregone by the supplier.
- This tax exemption triggered 'rampant misuse' by reputed manufacturers and brand owners leading to a gradual drop in revenues.

What's next?

- The traders' body, the Confederation of All India Traders (CAIT), has urged all Chief Ministers to roll back the tax by holding an emergency meeting of the GST Council, arguing that 85% of the country's consumers use such unbranded goods.
- Economists expect a marginal impact from these taxes on India's consumer inflation rate that has now been over 7% through the first quarter of 2022-23. One will have to wait for August's retail inflation print to gauge the effect.
- The GST Council is also expected to meet again in August, where the issue may be raked up afresh.
- Meanwhile, the Karnataka CM has urged firms to avail of input tax credits on their packaging material rather than transfer the full 5% tax onto consumers.
- On cue, the Karnataka Milk Federation partially rolled back price hikes for curd, lassi and buttermilk. How the majority of informal market players implement these taxes may be an important factor in determining the next chapter of GST rate rationalisation.

Bat habitats in South Western Ghats lie predominantly outside protected areas

(GS Paper 3, Environment)

Why in news?

- A recent study indicates that **more than 50% of habitats suitable for 37 species of bats** in the Southern Western Ghats lie outside protected areas.

- It increases **threats faced by the animals** due to **poaching for their meat, habitat loss and stigma from local communities**, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic.



Biodiverse regions:

- The authors based their study area around **1,600 km of the Southern Western Ghats**, encompassing **biodiverse regions in Kerala, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu**.
- **Six major biodiversity hotspots— Agastyamalai, Periyar Tiger Reserve, Anamalai, the Nilgiris, the Wayanad-Mudumalai complex and Brahmagiri—** were part of the study area.
- The Southern Western Ghats was home to **rare and endangered bat species such as Salim Ali’s fruit bat (Latidens salimalii) and the Pomona roundleaf bat (Hipposideros pomona)**.

Broad distribution ranges:

- Seven of the 37 bat species studied in the region had broad distribution ranges exceeding 20,000 square km, 19 species had intermediate distribution ranges between 10,000 and 20,000 square km, and 11 species were restricted to ranges less than 10,000 square km.
- Worryingly, only two species of bats had a distribution range that was significantly located in protected areas. Meanwhile, the distribution ranges of 35 other species lay primarily outside protected areas.
- Different species had different percentages of their ranges protected: five had less than 10% protection; six had between 10% and 20% protection; 10 had between 20% and 30% protection; 14 had between 30% and 40% protection; and two had between 40% and 50% protection.
- Moreover, potential suitable areas of forest-dependent species were mostly found to be in unprotected areas.

Rising threats:

- While bats like the Salim Ali’s fruit bat continued to be hunted for their meat, there have also been reports of people’s attitudes towards bats deteriorating since the COVID-19 pandemic due to misplaced concerns of having bat colonies near human settlements.
- People are increasingly coming to believe that the chances of them contracting zoonotic diseases increases due to presence of bats near their houses.
- Identifying these populations of bats outside protected areas could help forest conservation authorities spread awareness among human communities on the importance of bats to ecology and the environment.

Way Forward:

- The study will help local governments and forest departments come up with conservation plans to protect bat species across the Western Ghats.

Preserving Assam's indigenous culture (GS Paper 1, Culture)

Context:

- The **United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues (UNPFII)**, on its very first session, requested UN to prepare a report on the **state of the world's indigenous people (SOWIP)**.
- SOWIP's first publication in 2021 revealed certain alarming data on the state of the indigenous people's poverty, health, education, employment, human rights, environment, among others.

UNDRIP:

- On September 2007, the UN General Assembly adopted the **Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP)**.
- It contains provisions that indigenous people and communities can use to protect and preserve their rights and heritage. As many as 146 countries have adopted the declaration and also have given a commitment to respect the provisions in it.

Culture of Assam:

- The indigenous culture of India carries within itself an amalgamation of integration, unification and synthesis of socio-cultural demonstrations belonging to the Mongoloids, Negritos, Australoids and Nordics.
- In the case of Assam, its culture is a result of the continuous exchange of ideas and practices between the Indo-Aryans and the tribals. But with the advent of globalisation and inflow of intra- and inter-nation cultural migration, there has been an adverse effect on the ethnicity of the region.
- The direct outcome of it is the loss of many ethnic practices ranging from festivals to customs to food habits as well as dressing and living standards.



Unity in cultural diversity:

- Although Assam consists of many tribes, the **major tribes include pre-dominantly Bodo, Karbi, Mising, Sonowal-Kacharis, Deori, Rabha, Dimasa, Tiwa, Tai-Phake, Singpho, Kuki, Khelma and the Tea-tribes.**
- Each of these tribes are unique in their own ways and, therefore, it is important to know their basic facets, preserve and protect their cultural heritage.

Bodos & Karbis:

- **Bodos and Karbis depend on agriculture as their primary means of occupation**, but the seasonal festivals of Bodos include Baisagu, Domashi and Katrigacha, alongside the religious festival Kherai.
- But the **main festivals of Karbis include Rongker and Hacha Kekan.**

Misings:

- The **Misings** are another major tribe of Assam who are dependent on agriculture.
- The women of this community are known for their **weaving art and they celebrate festivals like Ali-Ai-Ligang and Porag.**

Sonowal-Kacharis:

- The Sonowal-Kacharis have a common belief that nature is still alive with invisible forces, deities and spirits.
- The tribe **celebrates the three Bihus**: Bohag Bihu, Rongali Bihu and Kati Bihu with great fun and gaiety.

Deoris:

- The Deoris, on the other hand, speak a **Tibeto-Burman language** also known as Deori and they celebrate festivals like Ibaku Bisu, Magiyo Bisu and Joydam.
- Dance and music are an important part of the lifestyle of rabhas and most of the rituals that they perform are accompanied by dance to please the deity.

Dimasa:

- The tribe Dimasa lives on river banks and Bushu is their most important festival.

Tiwas:

- The Tiwas speak a Tibeto-Burman language, but the mother tongue of a majority of the tribe is Assamese.
- People of the Tiwa tribe are associated with the Gobha kingdom, and the relevance of the Gobha king can be still found in contemporary times in the form of a **fair called Junbeel Mela.**

Kukis:

- Kukis are Tibeto-Burman people who are spread throughout the northeastern states of India.
- An important event in the history of this tribe was the acceptance of Christianity that was influenced by the missionaries.

Tea-tribe:

- The Tea-tribe is also one of the prominent tribes of Assam and they are also known as adivasis.
- They have different dance forms like Jumur Santhali, Chhau, Karam and Sambalpuria.

Uniqueness of Assam:

- The famous **Chandubi festival**, which is regarded as a means to celebrate the rich tribal ethnicity, has lost its essence with the introduction of western culture in the form of food items.
- Similarly, while Assam is known for its indigenous celebration of holi, locally called **doul utsav**, the **Indianised version of La Tomatina** and rain dance have affected the traditional practices of holi celebrations to a great extent.
- The tribes of Assam are also unique in their dressing styles and the westernised form of wardrobe changes that our people have embraced has also adversely impacted the traditional attires of the tribes.

Felicitous step:

- Therefore, understanding the importance of preserving and promoting the rich cultural identity of Assam, Chief Minister Himanta Biswa Sarma had a dialogue with the representatives of 30 tribal communities in March 2022.

Indigenous and Tribal Faith and Culture Department:

- Earlier, he expressed his desire to introduce a **specific department known as Indigenous and Tribal Faith and Culture Department** for promoting and preserving the tribal history and heritage.
- Accordingly, after the approval of the Assam Cabinet, the Assam governor ordered July 30, 2021 the introduction of the department with immediate effect. Thus, Assam became the **second state in the northeast to introduce such a department**.

What needs to be done?

- It first needs to **bridge the gap between age-old traditions and customs of Assam** and the interest of the younger generation towards it. Only then, can it forward the state's unique culture and tradition at the global level.
- For doing so, the department should focus on recruiting appropriate researchers to extensively study on different tribes of the state. Once the extensive research is completed, the department needs to focus on promoting the unique research details of each tribe by various seminars, exhibitions and practices.
- But the greatest danger the tribal identity of Assam faces is the **domination by western influence** and that is something the department should administratively handle.
- The department should also timely engage in talks with representatives of each tribe and try to inculcate in them the sense of belongingness alongside other dwellers.