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CIVIL SERVICES ACHIEVERS' POINT

A ONE STOP SOLUTION FOR UPSC/APSC/SSC & BANKING

THE ASSAM TRIBUNE ANALYSIS

DATE - 3RD APRIL 2021

For Preliminary and Mains examination

As per new Pattern of APSC

(Also useful for UPSC and other State level government examinations)

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ARTICLES

India for early disengagement in remaining areas in eastern Ladakh

- India on Friday hoped that China will work with it to ensure disengagement of troops in remaining areas of eastern Ladakh at the earliest, and asserted that de-escalation of tension alone will lead to restoration of peace and tranquility in border areas and provide conditions for progress of bilateral ties.
- At a media briefing, Spokesperson in the Ministry of External Affairs Arindam Bagchi said the two sides continue to remain in touch through military and diplomatic channels on the issue.
- He also referred to External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar's comments that a prolongation of the situation is in neither side's interest. "We, therefore, hope that the Chinese side will work with us to ensure that disengagement in the remaining areas is completed at the earliest," he said.
- This, he said, would allow both sides to consider de-escalation of forces in eastern Ladakh as that alone will lead to the restoration of peace and tranquility and provide conditions for progress of the bilateral relationship.
- Bagchi also said that there was a consensus that the two sides should now quickly resolve the remaining issues in the region.
- "The disengagement in Pangong Tso area was a significant step forward and it has provided a good basis for resolution of other remaining issues along the LAC in western sector," he said. – PTI

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- **Forex reserves fall by USD 2.986 bn**
- The country's foreign exchange reserves declined by USD 2.986 billion to reach USD 579.285 billion in the week ended March 26, RBI data showed on Friday.
- In the previous week ended March 19, the forex kitty had increased by USD 233 million to USD 582.271 billion. It had touched a record high of USD 590.185 billion in the week ended January 29, 2021.
- In the reporting week ended March 26, 2021, the fall in reserves was on account of a decrease in foreign currency assets (FCA), a major component of the overall reserves.

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- FCA declined by USD 3.226 billion to USD 537.953 billion, as per weekly data by the Reserve Bank of India.
- Expressed in dollar terms, the foreign currency assets include the effect of appreciation or depreciation of non-US units like the euro, pound and yen held in the foreign exchange reserves.
- The gold reserves increased by USD 276 million to USD 34.907 billion in the reporting week, the RBI data showed. – PTI

Refiners asked to review oil import contracts with Saudi

- Amid tensions with Saudi Arabia over oil production cuts, India has asked its state refiners to review contracts they enter into for buying crude oil from the Middle East nation and negotiate more favourable terms, a top official said.
- Keen to break producers cartel dictating pricing and contractual terms, the government has told Indian Oil Corporation (IOC), Bharat Petroleum Corporation Ltd (BPCL) and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Ltd (HPCL) to look for oil supplies from outside the Middle East region and use collective bargaining power to get favourable terms.
- India imports 85 per cent of its oil needs and is often vulnerable to global supply and price shocks. When oil prices started to rise in February, it wanted Saudi Arabia to relax output controls but the Kingdom ignored its calls. This has led to the Indian government now pressing for diversification of the supply base.
- “Traditionally, Saudi Arabia and other OPEC producers have been our mainstay suppliers of crude oil. But their terms have often been loaded against the buyer,” the official with direct knowledge of the discussions said.
- For one, Indian firms buy two-third of their purchases on term or fixed annual contracts.
- These term contracts provide assured supplies of the contracted quantity but the pricing and other terms favour only the supplier, he said.
- “While buyers have an obligation to lift all of the contracted quantity, Saudi and other producers have the option to reduce supplies in case OPEC decides to keep production artificially lower to boost prices. Why should the consumer have to pay for decisions of OPEC? If we commit to offtake, they should also supply no matter what,” he said.
- More importantly, the buyer has to indicate at least six weeks in advance of their intention to lift quantity out of the annual term contract in any month and has to pay an average official price announced by the producer.

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- “In an ideal market, the pricing should be of the day when the loading is taking place. That way we can get the advantage of any drop in international oil rates. But that is not the case. They (Saudi and other OPEC suppliers) insist on selling at their official selling price only,” the official said.
- To begin with, Indian refiners will look to reduce the quantity they buy through term contracts and instead buy more from the spot or current market.
- Buying from the spot market would ensure that India can take advantage of any fall in prices on any day and book quantities.
- “It’s like stock market. You would want to buy shares on a day or time when the prices are low. So is the case with crude oil – we would want to buy when we see there is a drop. Term contracts devoid us of that flexibility,” he said.
- Indian refiners have raised spot purchases from 20 per cent a decade back to 30-35 per cent of the total oil bought now.
- India, the world’s third-largest consumer of oil, hopes to use the might of its market to change the terms of engagement with big suppliers.
- The Middle East accounts for 60 per cent of all oil bought by India while Latin America and Africa are the other big supplier blocks.
- In recent months, India has bought more oil from the US and from newer sources such as Guyana, which has a large Indian diaspora.
- Due to its geographical proximity, the Middle East can, however, supply cargoes in less time and at low freight rates. – PTI

India pitches for easing cuts in crude oil production

- India on Friday strongly pitched for easing cuts in crude oil production saying high oil prices are hurting the consumption-led recovery of several countries including it.
- Spokesperson in the Ministry of External Affairs Arindam Bagchi also said that crude supply should be market determined rather than artificially managed. At the same time, he said India has noted announcements by OPEC and OPEC Plus to effect a slight easing of crude production cuts.
- The OPEC (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) is an influential entity that plays a key role in policy formulations relating to crude production. The OPEC Plus comprises the OPEC countries, Russia and several other crude producers.
- “India has been appealing to crude oil producing countries – OPEC and OPEC Plus, since the beginning of the year, to ease crude oil production cuts announced last year, as high crude prices hurt the consumption-led recovery of several countries including India,” Bagchi said. The MEA

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spokesperson said the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas is reviewing closely the global crude supplies and price situation. – PTI

APSC observes 85th foundation day

- The Assam Public Service Commission observed its 85th foundation day on April 1.
- Chairman of the Commission Rajiv Kumar Bora along with members and staff took an oath to abide by the provisions of the Constitution of India. “They solemnly pledged to serve with dedication, integrity and efficiency and to ensure that the Commission functioned without fail, in a clean, transparent, fair and responsive manner,” an official press release stated.

EDITORIALS

Free and fair

- In comparison with States like West Bengal and Bihar, Assam has had a good reputation of holding free and fair elections in the past.
- There had been a few aberrations, of course, such as the unilaterally imposed elections during the six years long mass movement against foreign infiltration which witnessed a degree of violence as well as abstaining of the public from the voting process, but those had taken place under abnormal circumstances.
- Despite many elections in the region being held in the backdrop of insurgency, they had been relatively peaceful and the people’s voice had been allowed to be heard. In contrast, elections in Bengal and Bihar have without exception been violence-ridden affairs, with clashes between contending political parties being common and people being killed. Equally insidious had been the fact that malpractices such as booth capturing and illicit stuffing of ballot papers in boxes or tampering with EVMs were rife.
- It is incumbent that the voting public in Assam continue to maintain the tradition of having free and fair elections conducted in our State, and political parties, their representatives and candidates, as also voters themselves, refrain from any action that might vitiate the process. Such a caution



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needs particularly to be reiterated in the ongoing elections to the Assam State Assembly, considering that certain infringements of norms have been shown to have taken place.

- The most amazing of such infringements, something unprecedented in the election history of free India, is the sudden abdication of his officially invested candidature by a candidate of a particular party even before the elections were held, and his joining another party! This act of travesty entails that, since he cannot withdraw his candidature, the individual in question remains the official candidate of the party, though he will no longer campaign in the elections.
- Knowledgeable observers believe that the party which he had shifted allegiance to has either threatened or bribed him heavily in order to get him to switch. Also, in these elections, some candidates have been caught on camera threatening opponents and even members of the media, with the Election Commission issuing show cause notices to the alleged offenders. The media has also reported a number of attempts at bribing voters and an alert public thwarting some of these attempts.
- However, incidents which cause the gravest concern are the ones where people by themselves have stopped vehicles carrying unused EVMs which they suspect might be used to rig elections in certain constituencies. Such developments make it more imperative than ever that the Election Commission becomes highly proactive in its efforts to prevent electoral malpractices. As suggested by some political parties, the EC must maintain round the clock monitoring through use of electrical aids such as CCTV cameras in strongrooms to ensure that no hanky-panky takes place.

Shadow of the coup

- The Manmohan Singh era which preceded the Narendra Modi era in Delhi had been a glorious phase for the daydreamers and lotus-eaters of the Northeast! That had been because a 'Look East Policy', ostensibly targeted towards the economic development of the Northeast in general and Assam in particular, had been framed during that era.
- The then Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, during his inaugural speech in the 10th India-ASEAN Summit at Phnom Penh in 2012, had announced an agreement between India, Myanmar and Thailand which set a time frame to complete the Trilateral Highway Project that would connect the Northeast to nations of Southeast Asia as well as China. The 'Trilateral Highway Project Task Force' had even met in New Delhi and resolved to establish connectivity from Moreh in India to Mae Sot in Thailand by 2016!
- An ASEAN-India car rally had established the feasibility of forging land connectivity between the Northeast and Southeast Asian countries. Dignitaries from the ASEAN nations, including

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ministers for trade and commerce, had sat down to work out the nitty-gritty. It was envisaged that in due course the road connection would be extended to other nations like Vietnam and Cambodia, as proposed during the India-ASEAN Summit. If I recall correctly, there was also a proposal to set up an India-ASEAN Centre at Guwahati!

- And we opium-pipe smokers in the Northeast had woven dreams that, after issues such as transit visas for travellers were resolved, in the course of a few years we would be able to take a leisurely drive from Guwahati and elsewhere to Myanmar and beyond!
- It was expected that land connectivity with the Southeast Asian nations would transform the dismal economic scenario of the Northeast dramatically. It would open out the huge markets of those nations to products of this region. The Brahmaputra Valley would become a corridor through which products from India to Southeast Asian nations and vice versa would be transported. The spillover impact in terms of transit infrastructure including the hospitality industry would be phenomenal and boost the region's economy.
- The Indian corporate sector, which had avoided the Northeast as if a leper, would then see the strategic advantage of setting up manufacturing industries in this region since it would lower transport costs. Establishment of industries in turn would create jobs, thereby alleviating the huge unemployment problem afflicting this region.
- Equally important, it would erase the sense of remoteness which breeds alienation. The idea behind the Look East Policy is, of course, in reality an attempt to re-forge age-old links binding the Northeast to other Asian countries. Since ancient times there had been trade and cultural exchanges between the Brahmaputra Valley and people of China and Southeast Asia, facilitated by well-established routes, the accessibility provided by the Brahmaputra river corridor enabling traders from mainland India too to utilize them for commercial purposes. In fact, the Stilwell Road from Assam to China through Myanmar (Burma) built by the British in the early 20th century actually traced the core contours of an ancient 'silk route'.
- Only when the Ahom dynasty, beset by fierce assault of the hordes of *Maans* from Burma, sacrificed the sovereignty of its realm by inviting imperial Britain to intervene, that these age-old ties were severed and the Northeast became isolated from Southeast Asia. Strangely, and perhaps fortunately, the British did not consider the ethnic and cultural affinities to be reason enough to lump together the Northeast with Burma as far as administration was concerned, choosing instead to integrate this tribal-dominated region with the Indian subcontinent, while having a different set up for Burma.
- Thus it must be noted that, in the past this region, being strategically positioned between China and Southeast Asia and India, enjoyed a geopolitical centrality. The cataclysmic Burmese invasion in the early part of the 19th century and the consequent advent of the British had brought about a political, economic and psychological repositioning, reducing the region to the easternmost

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outpost of Britain's Indian Empire and ensuring that its inhabitants look perpetually to the west for succour.

- Students of this region's history, including yours truly, have been crying ourselves hoarse that it is this psychological, claustrophobic feel of being boxed in from all sides except the west which had been responsible for many of the problems beleaguering this region, including insurgency. We had been arguing that a viable land outlet to Southeast Asia will go a long way to ensure that the Northeast regain its past historical centrality.
- However, Myanmar for five decades had stood as an impassable wall for India to make a move towards such connectivity. The seizure of power in Myanmar by the military junta in 1962 had led to the cooling down of India's cordial relationship with that nation, since the latter had tried to stand by its ideals of democracy. There was absolutely no possibility that the junta would allow a road to be built from India to Thailand and China through their country, let alone to let foreigners travel across that road!
- The situation was further vitiated by the 1988 incarceration of Aung San Suu Kyi. Thus, despite the awareness in Delhi that the influence lost by India over its resource rich neighbour was being capitalized upon by a more pragmatic and authoritarian Beijing, little attempt at rapprochement with the junta was made.
- It had been only in the 1990s that Indian diplomacy conceded that democratic ideals had to be sacrificed at the altar of expediency and the first essays towards mending fences with Myanmar commenced, with India refusing to go along with the West in imposing sanctions against its neighbour. Suu Kyi was cynically abandoned, and both nations stepped into the 21st century if not exactly holding hands, yet with a far more amicable stance.
- But, sometime later, economic compulsions coerced the Myanmar junta to loosen its iron grip upon the country, as well as try and present a more humane and democratic face to the outside world. International sanctions and popular internal protests induced Myanmar's military again to take steps to usher in civilian rule in 2007. Suu Kyi's National League of Democracy (NLD) party won overwhelmingly in the elections, thereby creating a conducive environment wherein land connectivity between India, Myanmar, China and ASEAN nations could be conceived and our nation could announce the Look East Policy.
- Unfortunately, as happens to most Central projects involving the Northeast, Delhi had been dragging its feet, with the result that though over a decade has elapsed since the announcement of the Look East Policy, it is yet to be translated into reality! In fact, the Department Related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Development of the Ministry of DoNER had recently reviewed the implementation of the policy and expressed dissatisfaction at the slow progress made on the India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project.

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- And now the shadow of yet another coup has fallen over the Look East Policy! Last February, army Generals seized control over Myanmar in a repeat of 1962. At the moment the country is in a warlike situation, with the armed forces killing protesting civilian in hundreds and converting Myanmar into the police state where secret arrests and torture are rife.
- There is no telling how long this junta would last, which means that, perhaps for quite many more years, the perpetually deprived people of the Northeast can stop weaving opium-dreams about the Look East Policy, which the BJP had renamed as the Act East Policy, and the miracles it might bring!



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