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Violence prompts poll panel to pull campaign plug in Bengal

Why in news?

In an unprecedented move, the Election Commission imposed a **blanket ban on political parties' campaigning activities** in the nine parliamentary constituencies of West Bengal from 10 p.m. on Thursday, in view of the "growing incidence of disruption and violence."

Elections on May 19:

- Polls in these constituencies are to be held in the last phase on May 19 and the 48-hour silence period was to start on Friday evening.
- The order bars campaigning activities till the conclusion of elections on May 19.
- Exercising its powers under Article 324 of the Constitution, to ensure the conduct of free, fair and peaceful elections, the EC directed that no person "shall" convene, hold, attend, join or address any election-related public meeting or procession.
- The order also states that no one can display to the public through movies and television or propagate any election matter by holding any event, including musical concert, theatrical performance or any other entertainment or amusement, with a view to attracting people in connection with elections.
- A ban has also been placed on the sale and distribution of liquor or "other substances of a like nature" within the polling areas.
- The Commission said the decision was taken based on a report from the Deputy Election Commissioner in-charge of the State.

- In the report, the officer said: “During the review with the observers, it clearly came out that there is distinct resistance and non-cooperation from the district administration and district police when it comes to providing level playing field to all candidates for campaigning and in providing a fearless threat-free environment to the voters.

Fear psychosis:

- The EC observers said that while on the surface everything looked fine, in their interactions with the public, the fear psychosis that was widely prevalent came out.
- They pointed out that utterances of the AITC [Trinamool] senior leaders on the lines of ‘Central forces will leave after the elections while we will remain’ sent a chilling message among the officers as well as voters alike,” said the order signed by Chief Election Commissioner Sunil Arora and the two Election Commissioners.
- The EC also received reports from Special Observers, Ajay Nayak and Vivek Dubey, who gave accounts of other incidents of poll-related violence on Tuesday, for which cases were registered.
- During investigations, about 100 persons were detained. Of these, 58 were arrested in two cases.
- During the last 24 hours, representatives of various political parties have met the Commission and expressed their concerns on the prevailing conditions of law & order and these campaign-related violent incidents are creating an atmosphere of fear and hatred in the polling areas which is affecting the overall electoral environment,” the order said.
- In a separate order, the Commission relieved the State Additional Director-General of Police (CID) Rajeev Kumar from his post with immediate effect and directed him to report to the Union Home Ministry at 10 a.m. on Thursday.
- The EC also removed State Principal Secretary (Home) Atri Bhattacharya for interfering in the process of conducting elections. The Chief Secretary has been given additional charge.
- Deputy Election Commissioner Chandra Bhushan said the poll panel expressed deep anguish over the vandalization of 19th century educationalist and reformer Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar’s bust and hoped that the local authorities would identify and take action against

the vandals at the earliest.

Monsoon to reach Kerala on June 6

Why in news?

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) said the southwest monsoon will be “**slightly delayed**” over Kerala and arrive on June 6. The normal onset date is June 1.

Customised Model:

- The IMD forecast is in line with the one by private forecaster Skymet, which said on Tuesday that it will reach Kerala on June 4.
 - The IMD has been using a customised model, since 2005, to forecast the monsoon’s onset over Kerala. From 2014 to 2018, the agency claims, it got the date wrong only in 2015.
 - This model crunches **six meteorological parameters**: minimum temperatures over northwest India; pre-monsoon rainfall peak over the south peninsula; outgoing longwave radiation (OLR) over the South China Sea; lower tropospheric zonal wind over the southeast Indian Ocean; upper tropospheric zonal wind over the east equatorial Indian Ocean; and OLR over the southwest Pacific region.
 - It has a built-in error margin of 4 days. That is, a June 6 onset can mean any day between June 2 to June 10.
 - Conditions are becoming favourable for advance of southwest monsoon over the southern part of Andaman Sea, Nicobar Islands and adjoining southeast Bay of Bengal during 18-19th May,” the IMD press note says.
 - Generally, the monsoon reaches Kerala within 10 days of crossing the Andamans.
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RBI envisions fourfold growth in digital transactions by

2021

Why in news?

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has envisaged four times growth in digital transaction in two years, in the payment system vision document for 2019-2021 released.

Payment Systems Vision 2021:

- Payment Systems Vision 2021, with its 36 specific action points and 12 specific outcomes, aims to achieve a **'highly digital' and 'cash-lite' society** through the goal posts of competition, cost effectiveness, convenience and confidence (4Cs).
- The RBI expects accelerated growth in individual retail electronic payment systems, both in terms of number of transactions and increased availability.
- Payment systems like UPI and IMPS are likely to register average annualised growth of over 100%, and NEFT at 40%, over the vision period.
- The number of digital transactions is expected to increase more than four times from 2,069 crore in December 2018 to 8,707 crores in December 2021," the document said.
- A 35% growth has been targeted in use of digital modes of payment for purchase of goods and services through increase in debit card transactions at point-of-sale terminals during the vision period.
- Use of debit cards in PoS transactions is expected to be at least 44% of total debit card transactions.
- In value terms, it is 15.2% in 2018-19 (5.2% in 2014-15) which is expected to be 22% by end 2021," it said. It is expected that there will be 5 million PoS machines by 2021. Mobile based transaction are projected to increase by 50%, considering lower base.

No specific target:

- Interestingly, no specific target has been considered for reducing cash in circulation.
- While no specific target is considered for cash in circulation, the enhanced availability of PoS infrastructure is expected to reduced

demand for cash and thus, over time, achieve reduction in Cash in Circulation (CIC) as a percentage of GDP,” the document said.

TRA unveils AI tool to improve tea quality

Why in news?

Tea Research Association (TRA) has introduced artificial intelligence (AI)-based technology aimed at improving quality.

QualiteaProfiler:

- The technology has been developed through a collaboration between **TRA and Agnext**, a start-up which was incubated by IIT Kharagpur.
- The machine, called TRA Agnext QualiteaProfiler (QTP), developed through this technology would help determine the ‘fine leaf’ of a tea batch ‘without human intervention.’
- The objective is to improve accuracy and reduce time. **Fine leaf count** (FLC) determines the presence of the two (or three) leaves and a bud in a batch, which go towards enhancing quality.
- TRA is also planning to harness other frontline technologies based on AI, chat bots and sensor-based machinery while equipping the age-old industry against the ravages of climate change.

Not always followed:

- The proverbial two leaves and a bud or three leaves and a bud is crucial for determining tea quality, although this norm is not always followed, an industry official said adding that while violation was most common among small tea-growers, the organised sector, too, was occasionally found to be engaging in this practice.
- TRA Agnext QTP will have a machine version which is likely to cost around ₹2 lakh and a mobile app version for quality leaf profiling.

Not mandatory:

- Launching the initiative, Tea Board Deputy Chairman Arun Ray said

that this would not be made mandatory at this stage.

- However, every garden or bought leaf factory could have an FLC machine made either by Agnext or anyone else. He said that large-scale adoption will hinge on the success at the field level.
 - Also present were Tea Board Chairman P. K. Bezboruah, senior tea industry officials and BijoyGopal Chowdhury, president of the Confederation of Indian Small Tea Growers Association.
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China to assist Sri Lanka in its anti-terror efforts

Why in news?

Chinese President Xi Jinping has promised “all possible assistance” to Sri Lanka from defence cooperation to intelligence sharing for the island’s efforts to “strengthen national security by wiping out terrorism”, according to sources here.

Chinese assistance:

- President Maithripala Sirisena, currently in Beijing for an international conference, met Mr. Xi.
- He [Mr. Xi] said that China is always ready to go hand in hand with Sri Lanka, which is recovering after effectively facing the challenge of terrorism, adding that the Chinese government will provide any assistance to Sri Lanka at any time,” the Presidential Media Division said.
- As requested by Mr. Sirisena, China will provide a grant of LKR 2,600 million towards strengthening Sri Lankan Security Forces, besides providing 100 jeeps and other equipment costing LKR 1,500 million to Sri Lanka Police.
- Further, responding to Mr. Sirisena’s concern over Sri Lanka “lacking technological expertise and equipment to trace the individuals who fan the flames of terrorism”, Mr. Xi has offered to send a Chinese technical team to Sri Lanka soon to assist authorities.

India signs 'Christchurch Call to Action'

Why in news?

India signed the 'Christchurch Call to Action'. The agreement came in the backdrop of the attacks on mosques on March 15 and is aimed at stopping abuse of the Internet by extremists.

About the agreement:

- The dissemination of such content online has adverse impacts on the human rights of the victims, on our collective security and on people all over the world," declared a statement issued by the 17 signatory countries.
 - The meeting held in Paris was attended by representatives of online giants like Microsoft, Google, Twitter, Facebook and Amazon. India was represented by Ajay Prakash Sawhney, Secretary.
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Illegal photocopying of documents is theft

Why in news?

Dishonest and temporary "removal" of original documents to take photocopies and to further use information amounts to theft, the Supreme Court has held.

SC Observation:

- Temporary removal of original documents for the **purpose of replicating the information** contained in them in some other medium would thus fulfil the requirement of "moving" of property which is the actus reus of the offence of theft as defined under

Section 378 (theft) of the Indian Penal Code,” a Bench observed in a May 9 judgment.

- The judgment followed the principle laid down by the apex court in its earlier precedents that **“to commit theft, one need not take movable property permanently out of the possession of another** with the intention not to return it to him. It would satisfy the definition if he took any movable property out of the possession of another person though he intended to return it later on.”
 - Here, the information contained in the documents taken out of the possession of the rightful owner is considered “movable property.
 - The loss need not be caused by a permanent deprivation of property but may be caused even by temporary dispossession, though the person taking it intended to restore it sooner or later.
 - A temporary period of deprivation or dispossession of the property of another causes loss to the other,” the apex court reasoned.
 - The observations are part of a 68-page judgment on the appeal filed by Birla Corporation alleging the theft of 54 documents by Adventz Investments and Holdings.
 - The Calcutta High Court, however, held that since the first 28 documents were still in Birla’s custody, the taking away of the information contained in these documents and their temporary removal would not qualify as theft, dishonest misappropriation of property or dishonest receiving of the stolen property.
 - In its judgment, the apex court set aside the High Court decision.
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SC penalises Bihar govt. officials for lethargy

Why in news?

The Supreme Court ordered the Bihar government to collect a fine of Rs. 20,000 from the pockets of its officers whose “lethargy” led to a 728-day delay in the filing of an appeal in the apex court.

Gross incompetence:

- A Bench of Justices Sanjay Kishan Kaul and Indira Banerjee said State

governments should not feel that they can approach courts at will and the judiciary is obliged to take up the case of the State.

- We are of the view that a clear signal has to be sent to the government authorities that they cannot approach the court as and when they please, on account of gross incompetence of their officers and that too without taking any action against the officers concerned.
 - No detail of the delay of 728 days have been given as if there is an inherent right to seek condonation of delay by State government," the Supreme Court observed in its order.
 - The Bihar government said it had taken time to get the sanctions from various departments, receive the affidavit and vakalatnama from the department concerned, and hence the delay in approaching the apex court.
 - But the court said "condonation of delay is no more admissible on the pretext of government working lethargy.
 - Noting that the Bihar government should collect the fine from the officers responsible and deposit the amount with the Supreme Court Mediation Centre, the court said it was punishment for "**wastage of judicial time**".
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6% women drugs users sought help, says report

Why in news?

A global survey of recreational drug-use has found that about 6% of Indian women surveyed reported seeking '**emergency medical treatment**' after using intoxicants in the past 12 months. The global average was about 13%.

Findings of the survey:

- **The Global Drug Survey (GDS)** said none of the men surveyed in India reported seeking medical treatment, compared with the global average of 12%.
- Indians said they 'enjoyed being drunk' on 71% of the occasions close to the global average of 74% and 15 spots below world leader

Portugal, whose respondents enjoyed 82% of the occasions.

850 respondents:

- Adam Winstock, one of the key authors of the survey, emphasised that there were only about 850 respondents from India and they didn't represent the larger population.
- The Indians surveyed were mostly male and in the 25-34 age group. A third of those surveyed "had gone clubbing" at least four times in the last year. While 43% of 250 Indians surveyed reported using cannabis and 44% of them said they sourced it from 'known dealers', 21% said they got their fix 'from friends.'

Less cannabis:

- Only 2% sought emergency medical treatment after using cannabis but, similar to alcohol use, 51% said they wanted to use 'less cannabis' in the following year; more than any other nationality and well above the global average of 31%.
- Alcohol and tobacco apart, the most used drugs globally were cannabis, MDMA (or Ecstasy), cocaine, amphetamines, LSD (or 'acid'), magic mushrooms, benzodiazepines, prescription opioids, ketamine, nitrous oxide.
- The survey also found that globally approximately 14% (11,000) reported being taken advantage of sexually while intoxicated in their lifetime and 4% in the last 12 months. There were no figures from India available.

Odisha pegs losses at Rs. 11,942 crore

Why in news?

Even as normal life is limping back to normality in the districts ravaged by cyclone Fani on May 3, the Odisha government presented a preliminary report putting the losses at Rs. 11,942 crore.

Damage assessments:

- The report was presented to the visiting inter-ministerial Central team assessing the cyclone damages. The cyclone affected 1.6 crore people in 18,388 villages and 51 towns in 14 districts of Odisha.
 - A detailed memorandum on the damages and funds required for relief and restoration will be submitted to the Centre after the estimation of the actual loss, State Chief Secretary Aditya Prasad Padhi told reporters after the meeting with the Central team
 - Joint Secretary in the Union Home Ministry, Vivek Bhardwaj, who headed the 11-member Central team, appreciated the Odisha government's action in providing relief and assistance to the affected people.
 - More than five lakh houses were damaged in the region, including 1,89,095 houses and apartments in Puri district alone.
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Indians eager to cut alcohol intake

Why in news?

A global survey of recreational drug use, which for the first-time polled respondents from India, has found that Indians more than from other nationalities are seeking help to reduce their alcohol intake.

Findings of the survey:

- Alcohol, tobacco and cannabis were the most common stimulants used by Indians. Of the nearly 1,00,000 respondents from 30 countries, Indians reported 'being drunk' on an average of 41 times in the last 12 months behind the U.K., the U.S., Canada, Australia and Denmark in that order but well above the global average of 33 times.
- The Global Drug Survey (GDS) is an anonymised, online survey that uses a detailed questionnaire to assess trends in drug use and self-reported harms among regular drug users and early adopters of new trends.
- Though the survey is not designed to determine the prevalence of drug behaviour in a population, it throws light on "stigmatised behaviours and health outcomes of a hidden population that is

otherwise difficult to reach...and can be used to inform targeted interventions,” according to a description by the organisation in a 2018 editorial in the medical journal Lancet.

- Indian respondents to the survey, conducted online during October-December 2018, appeared more than other nationalities to be eager for help with reducing their alcohol intake.
 - According to the 2019 GDS, 51% of the respondents wanted to ‘drink less’ in the following year and 41% ‘wanted help to do so’ — again the highest percentage among other countries.\
 - It might genuinely reflect high levels of concern among drinkers of being aware of consuming at levels known to be harmful,” said Adam Winstock, among the key authors of the survey, in an email.
 - Mr. Winstock is a London-based psychiatrist and founder and director of the GDS.
 - Indians said they ‘enjoyed being drunk’ on 71% of the occasions — close to the global average of 74% and 15 spots below world leader Portugal, whose respondents enjoyed 82% of the occasions.
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NIN stands by its report on no onion, garlic in its meals

Why in news?

The National Institute of Nutrition (NIN) said that it stands by its findings certifying mid-day meals without onion and garlic provided by the Akshaya Patra Foundation (APF) in Karnataka schools as compliant with nutritional norms laid down by the State government.

NIN stand:

- The response from the institute follows an open letter from experts asking it to withdraw its report on APF on the ground that it was not based on a “systematic scientific study”, which would include a physical inspection at schools.
- The signatories of the letter comprised 10 organisations as well as 94 experts, including faculty from prestigious institutes like IIM Bangalore, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Centre for Sustainable

Agriculture, Jan SwasthyaAbhiyan, Right to Food Campaign-India, and People's Union for Civil Liberties.

- We stand by our response to the Karnataka Government," NIN's Director, Dr Hemalatha R, wrote in response to a story in The Hindu on May 14, 2019.

What is the issue?

- In January, 2019, the Karnataka government had asked NIN to assess APF meals for nutritional compliance, food safety, taste and diversity of meals following objections by the Karnataka State Food Commission as well as activists that absence of onion and garlic from meals made the food unpalatable and resulted in children consuming less quantity of food.
- APF provides food under the government's mid-day meals programme at 2,814 schools in the State.

NIN's response:

- NIN's response added that its report was based on computing macronutrients and micronutrients from menus suggested by the Karnataka government and those provided by APF.
 - Using computational methods to compare different menus and assess nutritional quantity and quality and diversity is an accepted scientific tool," the NIN Director wrote.
 - On the issue of onion and garlic missing from meals, the Director wrote, "looking at each vegetable or compound in isolation and implicating it to the overall nutritional quality of composite meal is not justifiable.
 - Bengaluru-based independent researcher, Siddharth Joshi, who was among the signatories of the open letter, rejects NIN's explanation.
 - How could NIN prepare a report without a field-level assessment of the ingredients used in preparation of food to ensure nutritional requirements were being met and not verify claims being made on a paper menu by APF.
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