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SPICES BOARD

The Spices Board is working with the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and other regulatory agencies to bring in more regulations for the industry.



- It is a **statutory body** constituted in 1987 under the **Spices Board Act 1986**, with the merger of the erstwhile Cardamom Board (1968) and Spices Export Promotion Council (1960).
- It is one of the five Commodity Boards functioning **under the Ministry of Commerce & Industry**.
- It is an autonomous body responsible for the export promotion of the 52 scheduled spices and development of Cardamom (Small & Large).
- The Board is an **international link between the Indian exporters and the importers abroad**.
- It enhances industry regulations, quality control, and global standards to boost sustainable spice exports and market growth.

SELENIUM



- It is a **mineral found** in the soil and **naturally appears** in **water and some foods**.
- Soil and ground water contain **inorganic forms** of

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selenium that plants accumulate and convert to organic forms, mostly **selenomethionine** and **selenocysteine** and their **methylated derivatives**.

- Selenium is a constituent of **25 selenoproteins**, including thioredoxin reductases, glutathione peroxidases, and selenoprotein P.
 - Selenoproteins play critical roles in **thyroid hormone metabolism**, **DNA synthesis**, reproduction, and protection from oxidative damage and infection.
- Human body **cannot produce selenium** on its own but needs only a small amount of it.
- The Recommended Dietary Allowance (RDA) of selenium for adult men and women 19+ years of age is 55 micrograms daily. Women who are pregnant and lactating need about 60 and 70 micrograms daily, respectively.
- **Food Sources of selenium:** Protein rich foods from animals are generally good sources of selenium. **Seafoods, organ meats, and Brazil nuts** are the foods highest in selenium.

BLACK PLASTIC

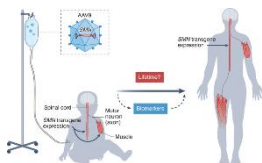


- It is a type of plastic **used to make everyday items** like food trays, containers, and utensils.
- It is often **made from recycled electronic waste** such as **computers, TVs and appliances**.
- These are more likely to contain unregulated amounts of **toxic chemicals including heavy metals and flame retardants**.
 - The issue is that these electronics typically contain substances such as the **flame retardant bromine; antimony; and heavy metals** such as lead, cadmium, and mercury.
- **Impact on human health:**
 - The aforementioned substances and heavy metals are known to be **toxic to humans at high levels** of exposure.

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- **Children are particularly vulnerable** as they often come into prolonged contact with toys that could expose them to harmful chemicals through direct handling or ingestion.
- Toxic chemicals in black plastic kitchen utensils could **leach into food during heating**, compounding the risk of exposure for households using these products regularly.
- Studies have shown that chemicals in black plastic, such as **BPA and phthalates**, **disrupt the endocrine system**, leading to potential reproductive health issues, obesity, and diabetes.
- It is **difficult to recycle** and often ends up in landfills or incinerators, releasing toxic substances like **dioxins and furans into the air**.

SPINAL MUSCULAR ATROPHY



- It is a **debilitating genetic condition** which affects **motor neurons** that control movement, and leads to progressive muscle weakening.
- **Types of SMA:** There are five subtypes of SMA - Type 0, 1, 2, 3, 4. Healthcare providers classify them based on the age of onset, as well as the severity and life expectancy.

Symptoms:

- Its symptoms vary and **may be mild or disabling**, but involve a weakness of the muscles that control movement. Involuntary muscles are not affected, such as those in the heart, blood vessels and digestive tract.
- The weakness in SMA tends to be more severe in the muscles that are close to the center of the body than in the muscles farther away from the body's center.

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- **Causes:** The condition is caused by **mutations in the survival motor neuron gene (SMN1)** which causes a deficiency of a protein crucial for the survival of motor neurons in the spinal cord.
- This prevents muscles from receiving signals from the brain, causing them to waste away.
- **Prevalence:** About one in every 10,000 births has some form of the condition — making it a leading genetic cause of death in infants and children.
- **Treatment:** Unfortunately, there **isn't a cure for SMA**. Treatment for SMA mainly seeks to manage symptoms and prevent complications.
- **Symptom management therapies may include:**
 - Physical therapy, which can help improve posture, prevent joint immobility and slow muscle weakness.

THE RTI IS NOW THE 'RIGHT TO DENY INFORMATION'

- The **Right to Information (RTI) Act** was introduced with the objective of enhancing transparency and empowering citizens by **granting them access to government-held information**.
- It was **perceived as a means to uphold democratic principles** by ensuring accountability and reducing corruption.
- However, **despite its initial promise**, the Act has encountered **numerous challenges**, resulting in a diminished impact.
- Therefore, **it is important to examine the trajectory of the RTI Act**, the systemic issues that have weakened its implementation, and the legal interpretations that have further restricted citizens' access to information.

Systematic Issues and Judicial Interpretations that Weakened the RTI Act

- **Bureaucratic Resistance and Systemic Erosion**

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- One of the earliest challenges to the RTI Act was **the reluctance of government officials to relinquish control over information.**
- Recognising that the Act effectively transferred power from public servants to citizens, **the government attempted to weaken the law through amendments.**
- However, **strong public opposition forced it to abandon these efforts.** Despite this, a gradual erosion of the Act's effectiveness ensued through bureaucratic resistance and judicial reinterpretations.
- The **implementation of the Act was entrusted to Information Commissions,** which functioned as appellate authorities.
- Unfortunately, **most of the commissioners appointed were retired bureaucrats,** many of whom viewed these positions as post-retirement sinecures rather than opportunities to uphold transparency.
- **Their reluctance to impose penalties for non-compliance further weakened the Act.**
- Additionally, **delays in appointing commissioners led to massive backlogs,** rendering the right to information ineffective.
- **The mandated 30-day period for providing information was often not adhered to,** turning RTI into a tool that provided historical records rather than timely insights.

The Way Forward: A Call for Citizen Vigilance

- To safeguard the integrity of the RTI Act, **active citizen participation is essential.**
- **Public awareness and media discourse must highlight attempts to dilute the Act** and push for reforms that restore its effectiveness.
- **Information Commissions must be strengthened** by appointing independent and competent officials with a commitment to transparency.
- Additionally, **the legal framework must be reviewed to ensure that exemptions under Section 8** are interpreted in a manner that prioritizes public interest over bureaucratic convenience.

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STRATEGY ON FERTILIZERS

India aims to cap or reduce the consumption of urea, di-ammonium phosphate (DAP) and muriate of potash (MOP) due to their heavy reliance on imports.

India's Dependence on Imported Fertilisers

- **MOP:** Fully imported from Canada, Russia, Jordan, Israel, Turkmenistan, and Belarus due to the lack of domestic potash reserves.
- **Urea:** Over 85% of demand met domestically, but production depends on imported liquefied natural gas (LNG) from Qatar, the US, UAE, and Angola.
- **DAP:** imported in the form of
 - finished fertiliser (mainly from Saudi Arabia, China, Morocco, Russia and Jordan) as well as
 - raw material (rock phosphate from Jordan, Morocco, Togo, Egypt and Algeria; sulphur from UAE, Qatar and Oman) and
 - intermediate chemicals (phosphoric acid from Jordan, Morocco, Senegal and Tunisia; ammonia from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and Indonesia).

Need to Limit the Usage of Urea, MOP, and DAP

- **High Import Dependence and Currency Depreciation**
 - India heavily relies on imports for MOP and DAP, while urea production depends on imported LNG.
 - The rupee's depreciation further increases the cost of these fertilisers, putting pressure on foreign exchange reserves.
- **Imbalance in Nutrient Application**
 - Urea (46% nitrogen), MOP (60% potash), and DAP (46% phosphorus + 18% nitrogen) are high-analysis fertilisers.
 - Most crops do not require such high concentrations of individual nutrients, leading to inefficient nutrient absorption and wastage.

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- **Need for Balanced Fertilisation**

- Crops require a mix of macronutrients (N, P, K), secondary nutrients (sulphur, calcium, magnesium), and micronutrients (zinc, iron, copper, boron, manganese, molybdenum).
- Excessive use of high-analysis fertilisers disrupts soil health and reduces long-term productivity.

- **Efficient Use of Resources and Foreign Exchange**

- Reducing dependence on high-analysis fertilisers ensures better utilisation of imported raw materials.
- Balanced fertilisation promotes sustainable farming, enhances crop yields, and reduces unnecessary expenditure on imports.

SLENDER-BILLED GULL



Birders in Chennai recently recorded a rare shorebird, the slender-billed gull, at the Pallikaranai marshland.

- It is a **medium-sized seabird**
- Scientific Name: **Chroicocephalus genei**
- **Distribution:**
 - It **breeds** very locally around the **Mediterranean** and the **north of the western Indian Ocean** (e.g. Pakistan) on **islands and coastal lagoons**.
 - Most of the population is somewhat **migratory**, wintering further south to **North Africa and India**, and a few birds have wandered to **Western Europe**.
 - **In India**, it is considered a regular along the **western coast** with several records from wetlands of northern India.

Features:

- It is 37 to 40 cm long with a 90 to 102 cm wingspan.

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- It has a **pale grey body**, a **white head and breast**, and black tips to the primary wing feathers.
- The head and dark red bill have an elongated tapering appearance, and this bird also appears **long-necked**.
- The **legs are dark red**, and the iris is yellow.
- **About half** of the slender-billed gull's **food is fish**. It flies a few metres above the surface of the water and dives into the water when it sees suitable prey.
- **Conservation Status:**
 - **IUCN Red List: Least Concern**

Pallikaranai Marshland:

- It is a **freshwater marsh** and **partly saline wetland** situated about 20 kilometres south of the city of **Chennai, Tamil Nadu**.
- It serves as an **aquatic buffer** of the **flood-prone Chennai and Chengalpattu**
- It encompasses 65 wetlands through two outlets, viz., Okkiyam Madavu and the Kovalam Creek, and falls into the Bay of Bengal.
- **On its eastern periphery**, the marsh is **flanked by the Buckingham Canal**.
- Parts of the marsh are well below the mean sea level and qualify as low-lying basins.
- It is one of the **Ramsar sites** in India.

BHITARKANIKA NATIONAL PARK



- It is located in the Kendrapara district of **Odisha**.
- It is essentially a network of **creeks and canals** which are inundated with waters from **Brahmani, Baitarani, Dhamra and Patasala rivers** forming a unique ecosystem.
 - It houses a variety of **brooks, backwaters, estuaries, deltas, and mud huts**.
 - It is also designated as the second **Ramsar site** in Odisha after the Chilika Lake.

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- It is spread over a vast area of 672 sq.km.
- It is **India's second largest mangrove ecosystem** after the Sunderbans.
- **Proximity to the Bay of Bengal** makes the **soil** of the national park **enriched with salt**.
- The **vegetation and species** of the sanctuary are comprised of those that are mainly found in the tropical and subtropical intertidal regions.

Flora: Mangrove species, casuarinas, and grasses like the indigo bush.

Fauna:

- It is home to the **largest congregation of the endangered Salt Water Crocodile** in the country.
 - The **Gahirmatha Beach**, which forms the boundary of the park in the east, is the **largest colony of the Olive Ridley Sea Turtles**.
 - It is also home to numerous animals like **hyenas, wild boar, Chitals, Sambar**, Spotted Deer, Wild Boar, Jungle cat, Wild Pigs, etc., and **migratory birds**, which make it their home during the winter season, lending a vibrant hue to the ecosystem.
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