

Today's Prelims Topics

Schengen accession for Bulgaria, Romania

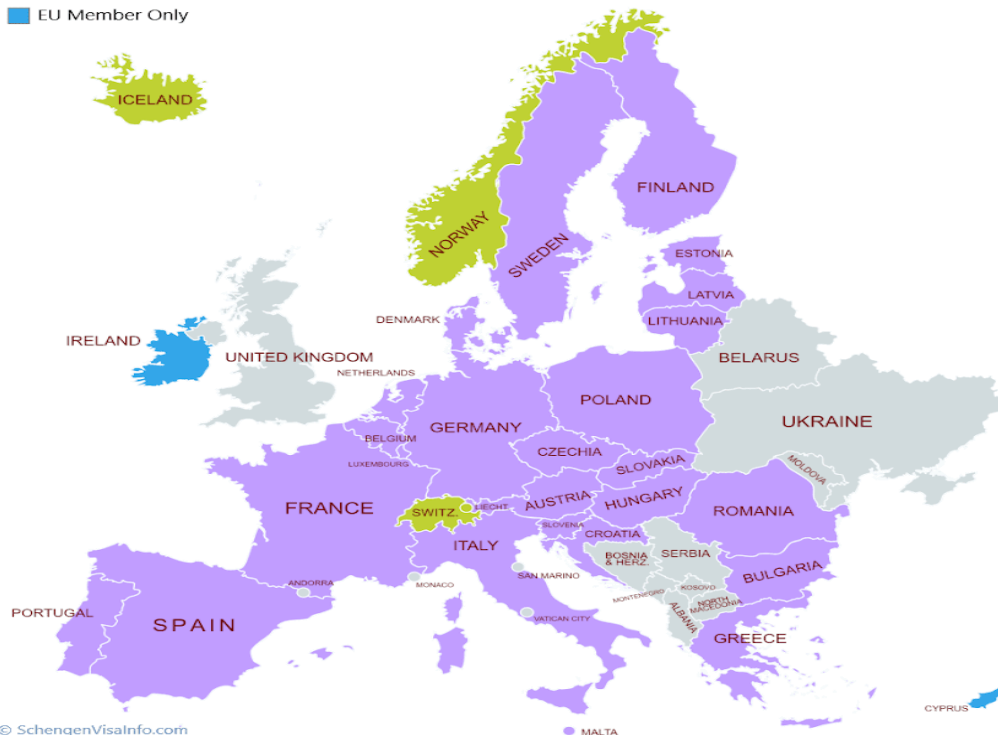
Context

EU states cleared **Bulgaria and Romania** to become full members of the borderless Schengen zone from the start of next year.

About Schengen Area

- It is a free travel area in Europe made up of **29 countries**.
- **History:** It was established in **1985 by 5 EU countries:** France, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg. The name comes from the small Luxembourg village where the Schengen Agreement was signed.
- **Presently out of the 27 EU member states, 25 participate in the Schengen Area. (After addition of Bulgaria & Romania).**
 - **EU states not part of the Schengen Area:** Cyprus and Ireland
 - **Non-EU states part of the Schengen Area:** Iceland, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and Norway.
- **Features of Schengen Area:**
 - **No internal borders:** Countries in the Schengen Area don't perform checks at their internal borders, except in cases of specific threats.
 - **Common visa policy:** The Schengen Area has a common visa policy and rules for controls at external borders.
 - **EU citizens and non-EU residents can travel freely:** Citizens and many non-EU nationals staying legally in the EU can travel freely within the Schengen Area

- EU and Schengen Member
- Schengen Member Only
- EU Member Only



Source: [The Hindu - EU states agree to full Schengen accession for Bulgaria, Romania](#)

MP moves breach of privilege against Union Minister Kiren Rijju

Context

A Rajya Sabha MP of Trinamool Congress has submitted a notice of breach of privilege against Parliamentary Affairs Minister Kiren Rijju.

About Parliamentary Privilege

- As elected representatives, the members of the House enjoy certain rights and immunities to effectively discharge their functions.
- **Currently India lacks a law that defines what is a parliamentary privilege.**
- **Article 105** explicitly mentions only two kinds of privileges,
 - Freedom of speech in the Parliament
 - Right to publish the house proceedings.
- **The Code of Civil Procedure, 1908**
 - Grants freedom from arrest and detention of members under a civil process during house proceedings (**40 days before and after commencement of session of house**)

About Privilege Motion

- If a member believes that such a privilege has been breached or misused, a motion or complaint can be raised to the **house chairman or speaker**.
- The right to raise a question of privilege is based on satisfying two conditions -
 - The question shall be restricted to a specific matter of recent occurrence
 - The matter requires the intervention of the Council.

Committee of Privileges in Parliament

- This committee consists of **15 members in Lok Sabha and 10 members in case of Rajya Sabha nominated by the Speaker (Chairman in case of RS)** from time to time.
- In the RS, the deputy chairperson is appointed as the head of the committee of privileges.
- The Speaker/RS Chairman is the first level of scrutiny of a privilege motion.
 - The Speaker/Chairman can decide on the privilege motion himself or herself or refer it to the privileges committee of Parliament.

UPSC PYQ

Q. Which of the following statements about the **Ethics Committee** in the Lok Sabha are correct?

1. Initially it was an ad-hoc Committee.
2. Only a Member of the Lok Sabha can make a complaint relating to unethical conduct of a member of the Lok Sabha.
3. This Committee cannot take up any matter which is sub-judice.

Select the correct answer using the code given below :

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: C

Source:

- [The Hindu - MP moves breach of privilege against Rijju](#)

What is Disease X and why the world should prepare for it

Context

The unclassified outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), with over 400 deaths, has raised concerns about Disease X becoming a reality.

About Disease X

- Disease X represents a hypothetical, yet highly probable, global health threat.
 - Pathogen X could include **viruses, bacteria, parasites, fungi, helminths or prions.**
- The term was coined by the **World Health Organization (WHO) in 2018**, the term is a placeholder for any unknown pathogen capable of causing a devastating epidemic or pandemic.
- **Historical Patterns:**
 - Since 1940, over **300** emerging infectious diseases have been identified, **with 70% of them having zoonotic origins (transmitted from animals to humans).**
 - Deforestation, urbanisation and climate change push humans and wildlife into closer contact, increasing zoonotic spillover risks.
- **Examples of Past Emerging Diseases:** HIV, SARS, MERS and Ebola: All emerged due to ecological disruptions and human activity.
- **WHO's Priority List of Pathogens:**
 - It includes diseases like **Ebola, Marburg, Nipah and Disease X.**
 - This list aims to direct global research, funding and policy efforts toward combating high-risk diseases with limited medical countermeasures.

Preparing for Disease X

- **Surveillance Systems:** Use genomic sequencing and real-time data sharing for early outbreak detection.
- **Healthcare Infrastructure:** Strengthen healthcare systems in low- and middle-income countries to improve outbreak response.
- **Research Investments:** Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) is developing platforms to create vaccines within 100 days of outbreak detection.
- **Global Frameworks:** Expanding frameworks like the Nagoya Protocol to include biological materials such as pathogens can ensure fair and equitable access to research findings and medical solutions.

Source:

- [The Hindu - What is Disease X and why the world should prepare for it](#)

Apex court freezes suits on claims over places of worship

Context

The Supreme Court has issued interim directions regarding disputes related to places of worship under the Places of Worship Act, 1991, while hearing petitions challenging the constitutional validity of the law.

Key Directions Issued by the Supreme Court

- **Restriction on New Suits:** Civil courts across India are barred from:
 - Registering new suits challenging the ownership or title of any place of worship.
 - Ordering surveys of disputed religious sites.
- **Impact on Pending Cases:**
 - Courts cannot pass any effective interim or final orders in pending suits.
 - Includes halting surveys or other investigative actions until further notice.

About Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act, 1991

- It was enacted by the Government of India to maintain communal harmony by preserving the religious character of places of worship

Key Provisions

- **Status of Religious Places (Section 4):**
 - The religious character of any place of worship existing on August 15, 1947, shall remain unchanged.
 - No legal proceedings can challenge the religious character of such places as it stood on that date.
 - **Exception:** The Act does not apply to the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute, which was ongoing at the time of its enactment.
- **Prohibition of Conversion (Section 3):**
 - Conversion of a place of worship or any part thereof from one religious denomination to another or from one religious group to another is prohibited.
- **Penalties for Violation (Section 6):**
 - Violators attempting to alter the status of a religious site can face imprisonment of up to 3 years and/or a fine.
- **Scope of Application:**
 - The Act applies to all religious places in India, except those specifically exempted by the government or related to ongoing disputes as of 1991.

Challenges to the Act

- Multiple petitions have been filed challenging the Act, arguing it restricts the right to judicial remedies and violates **Article 25 (freedom of religion)** and **Article 26 (right to manage religious affairs)**. The Supreme Court is yet to decide on the constitutionality of the Act.
- **Justice D.Y. Chandrachud's 2022 observation:** Determining a site's religious character may not violate the Act's provisions.
- **Prominent Disputed Sites:**
 - **Gyanvapi Mosque (Varanasi)**
 - **Eidgah Masjid (Mathura)**
 - **Kamal-Maula Masjid (Dhar)**
 - **Atala Mosque (Jaunpur)**
 - **Quwwat-ul-Islam Mosque (Delhi)**
 - **Ajmer Sharif Dargah**
 - **Shahi Jama Masjid (Sambhal)**

Source:

- [The Hindu - Apex court freezes suits on claims over places of worship](#)
- [Indian Express - 1991 Act, What SC stopped, Why?](#)



Section 69 of Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)

Context

Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, seeks to address a specific issue concerning sexual relationships based on false promises of marriage.

About Section-69 BNS

- **Section-69 criminalizes sexual intercourse under:**
 - False promises of marriage without intention to fulfill them.
 - Promises of employment or promotion.
 - Deception by identity suppression.
- **Punishment:** Up to 10 years of imprisonment and/or a fine.
- **Category:** Classified under Chapter 5 of the BNS, covering "Offences Against Women and Children" under sexual offences.

Criticism of Section 69

- **Gender Bias:**
 - Perceived as discriminatory as it assumes that women lack the ability to make independent decisions in sexual matters.
 - The law does not account for situations where men might be deceived or coerced.
- **Legal Ambiguities:**
 - Challenges in proving a verbal promise or intent to deceive.
 - Risk of misuse to settle personal scores.
- **Regressive Implications:**
 - Ignores the evolving dynamics of modern relationships, including live-in partnerships.
 - Excludes LGBTQ+ relationships, raising constitutional concerns.
- **Concerns from Parliamentary Report:**
 - **A report by the Rajya Sabha in 2022** highlighted that Section 69 could infringe on individual privacy and autonomy.
 - It also warned that the vague definitions in the law might reinforce gender stereotypes and lead to difficulties in its enforcement.

Source:

- [The Hindu - The knotty promise of Section 69](#)

IIT researchers take rare look inside foetal brain

Context

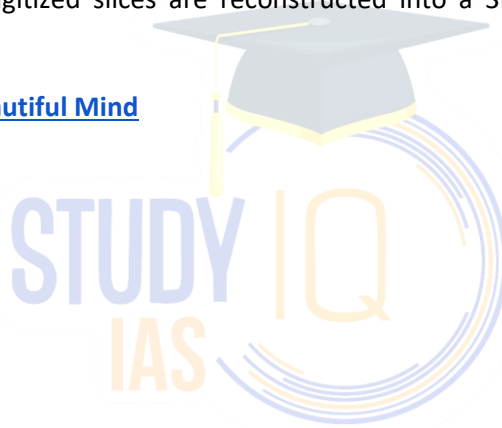
Researchers at IIT Madras have unveiled **DHARINI**, the largest and most detailed 3D map of developing baby brains during the second trimester.

About DHARINI

- DHARINI is the world's largest and most detailed high-resolution 3D foetal brain atlas, mapping over 5,000 brain sections and 500 brain regions.
- The atlas focuses on brains from the second trimester (at 14, 17, 21, 22 and 24 weeks of pregnancy), a key period for rapid growth and development.
- DHARINI is the **only brain atlas** to capture the growing brain in fetuses.
- **Technological Process**
 - **Freezing and Slicing:** The brains were frozen and thinly sliced, enabling scientists to see the structures. Thin slicing was done using complex robotic instrumentation — the slices are of just 10 to 20 micron thickness which is equivalent to 1/10th or 1/5th the thickness of human hair.
 - **Microscopic Imaging:** These thin slices, which become transparent, are then stained and microscopically imaged in extreme detail.
 - **3D Mapping:** Digitized slices are reconstructed into a 3D brain atlas using advanced technology.

Source:

- [Indian Express - The Beautiful Mind](#)



News in Shorts

Saydnaya prison

- After the fall of **Bashar al-Assad, regime** in Syria **Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)**, stormed the infamous **Saydnaya Prison**.
- Thousands of detainees, mainly political prisoners imprisoned since the **Syrian uprising in 2011**, were freed.
- **Location:** Situated in Saydnaya, a town 30 km north of **Damascus**.
- **In 2017 Amnesty International (2017)** labeled this prison a **“Human Slaughterhouse”** for its brutal conditions.

Source:

- [The Hindu - The end of an era](#)

Jubaland Region

- Jubaland is an autonomous region in **southern Somalia**. It borders **Kenya and Ethiopia**.
- The region has been involved in conflict with Kenya and Somalia and with **Al Shabab, an affiliate of Al-Qaeda**.

About Somalia

- **Bordering countries:** Djibouti (Northwest), Ethiopia (West) and Kenya (Southwest).
- **Bordering water bodies:** Gulf of Aden and Indian Ocean.
- **Highest Peak:** Mount Shimbiris, also known as Mount Surud Cad.
- **Major Rivers:** Jubba and Shabele.
- Coastal plains parallel to the Gulf of Aden are known as **Guban**.

Source:

- [The Hindu - Somali federal forces retreat from Jubaland positions after clashes](#)

Editorial Summary

Pakistan at the UNSC, the points of its compass

Context

In January 2025, Pakistan will begin its term as an elected non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

Pakistan's UNSC Entry

- Pakistan will join the **United Nations Security Council (UNSC)** as a **non-permanent member** for a two-year term starting **January 1, 2025**, marking its **eighth term** in the Council.
- **Composition of the UNSC for 2025-26:**
 - **New Elected Members:** Denmark, Greece, Pakistan, Panama, and Somalia will replace Ecuador, Japan, Malta, Mozambique and Switzerland.
 - **Current Non-Permanent Members:** Algeria, Guyana, the Republic of Korea, Sierra Leone and Slovenia.
- With Pakistan's entry, nearly **half (5 out of 10)** of the elected members of the UNSC will be from the **Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)**.

Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC)

- OIC is an organization that promotes international peace and harmony and protects the interests of the Muslim world.
- It was established in **1969** after the **Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem** was set on fire by an Australian extremist Jew.
- It is the **2nd-largest intergovernmental organization** in the world after the United Nations
- **Membership: 57 states** spread over **4 continents**.
- **HQ:** Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

Pakistan's Stated Priorities in UNSC:

- **Afghanistan Relations:** Pakistan is expected to focus on **Afghanistan**, using its term to repair its relations with the **Taliban**. It will likely have the support of **Russia** and **China** in this regard.
- **Palestinian Cause & Gaza:** Pakistan, with the backing of OIC countries, is expected to advocate for a ceasefire in Gaza and further the Palestinian cause within the UNSC.
- **Peacekeeping:** As a significant contributor to **UN peacekeeping missions**, Pakistan will push for better peacekeeping efforts and reforms in the UNSC.

Challenges India Faces

- **India-Pakistan Relations:** Relations between India and Pakistan remain strained and India should prepare for **anti-India initiatives** from Pakistan during its UNSC term.
 - Despite some backchannel communications, India and Pakistan do not have enhanced multilateral cooperation in the UN, particularly in the UNSC.
 - Pakistan's diplomatic strategy will likely include continued **anti-India rhetoric** and attempts to undermine India's position, especially regarding issues like **terrorism** and **Kashmir**.
- **Pakistan's Diplomatic Approach:**
 - **Terrorism and the UNSC 1267 Sanctions:** Pakistan has historically tried to deflect international criticism of its role in terrorism by accusing India of terrorism against Pakistan.

- Pakistan has unsuccessfully attempted to list **Indian nationals** as terrorists under **UNSC Resolution 1267**.
- Conversely, **India's proposal** to list **Abdul Rehman Makki** (Lashkar-e-Taiba deputy leader) under the sanctions regime **was successfully accepted by the UNSC in 2021, with China agreeing to the listing**.

Kashmir Issue & Use of Islamophobia

- Pakistan will likely continue to raise the issue of **Jammu and Kashmir (J&K)**.
 - **Pakistan's lobbying** for UNSC consultations on Kashmir post-India's **abrogation of Article 370** was unsuccessful, with most **P-5 countries (permanent members - USA, China, UK, France & Russia)** showing no interest.
 - Pakistan might present Kashmir as an ongoing **international dispute** in the UNSC, though the issue is largely considered **bilateral**.
- **Islamophobia and Counter-Terrorism:**
 - Pakistan has tried to use **Islamophobia** as a justification for terrorism, seeking to incorporate it into **UN counter-terrorism strategies**.
 - In 2021 and 2023, Pakistan, with OIC support, pushed for a reference to Islamophobia in the **UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy**, but India successfully blocked these efforts.
 - In 2023, however, OIC-backed resolutions on **Islamophobia** were inserted into UNSC documents, with broader international backing, including **China and Russia**.

Indus Waters Treaty and Bilateral Issues:

- In 2024, Pakistan raised the issue of the **Indus Waters Treaty** in the UNSC, despite it being a **bilateral issue** between India and Pakistan which the UNSC did not address.
- This was seen as a misuse of the UNSC for domestic political purposes.

Pakistan's Internal Challenges and Multilateralism:

- Pakistan's **internal political and economic struggles** have hindered its ability to focus on constructive multilateralism. Despite this, it will continue to use the **UNSC platform** to pursue its national agenda.
- India, on the other hand, has focused on strengthening international peace and security during its **2021-2022 UNSC term**, emphasizing **UN peacekeeping** and **global challenges** like **climate change** and **SDGs**.

Conclusion:

- Pakistan's entry into the UNSC in 2025 will likely result in **continued anti-India initiatives**, especially around issues like **terrorism, Kashmir, and Islamophobia**. India should be prepared for these diplomatic challenges but can count on support from **like-minded countries** to counter these efforts.

Source:

- [The Hindu](#)

Beijing's war against air pollution

Context

Delhi is currently facing severe air pollution, with an average Air Quality Index (AQI) of 155 for 2024, comparable to Beijing's AQI of 144 in 2015. However, Beijing has successfully reduced its pollution levels by one-third between 2013 and 2017 through a comprehensive anti-pollution strategy.

Beijing's Efforts to Tackle Air Pollution

- **Three-Phase Anti-Pollution Programme (1998-2017)**
 - Beijing implemented a phased and carefully planned anti-pollution strategy involving public participation and local government autonomy.
- **Energy and Coal Combustion Control**
 - Ultra-low emission renovation in power plants.
 - Replacement of coal-fired boilers with cleaner alternatives.
 - Elimination of civil bulk coal consumption used for residential heating.
- **Transportation Infrastructure Overhaul**
 - Retrofitted cars and public service vehicles with **Diesel Particulate Filters (DPF)**.
 - Gradual scrapping of high-polluting vehicles with subsidies.
 - Expansion of subway and bus networks and urban layout optimization.
- **Industrial and Construction Regulation**
 - Stricter environmental requirements and end-of-pipe (EOP) treatment.
 - Elimination of outdated industrial capacities.
- **Regional Cooperation**
 - The final phase emphasized collaboration with 5 neighboring provinces, leading to a significant reduction in pollution levels through a collective regional effort.
- **Achievements - Significant Reduction in Key Pollutants (2013-2017)**
 - **Sulphur Dioxide (SO₂):** -83%
 - **Nitrogen Oxides (NO_x):** -43%
 - **Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs):** -42%
 - **PM_{2.5}:** -59%

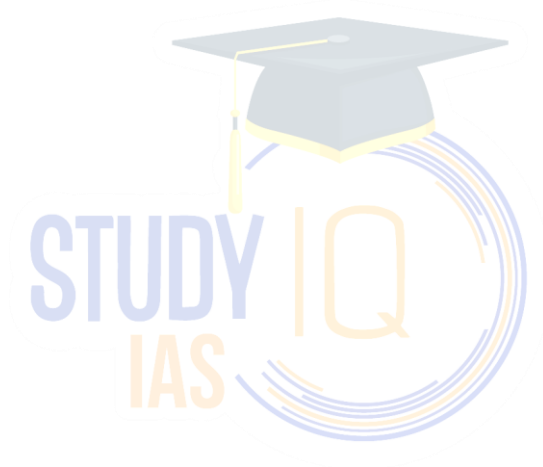
What can Delhi learn from the Beijing experience?

- **Ideas related to transportation**
 - Implementing an efficient bus-metro integrated transport system, upgrading the DTC bus fleet and improving last-mile connectivity.
 - A program to scrap old vehicles, provide subsidies, and build exclusive cycling and walking lanes should be implemented.
 - Cross-subsidization between public transport and private vehicles (through congestion or parking charges) should be explored.
- **Energy Overhaul for Cleaner Air**
 - Delhi's reliance on coal-fired electricity must be reduced.
 - Investing in renewable energy sources, such as solar and offering incentives like subsidies for rooftop solar installations could help improve the energy system.
- **Regional Cooperation for Pollution Control**
 - Coordination with neighboring regions is necessary, as pollution sources often originate beyond Delhi.
 - A collective effort across the NCR is necessary to reduce overall pollution levels.
- **Public Awareness and Accountability**
 - Citizens must demand clean air and hold the government accountable.
 - Normalizing poor AQI levels should be avoided and long-term exposure to pollutants, even at moderate levels, should be seen as harmful.

Delhi can reduce its pollution levels by learning from Beijing's multi-phase, coordinated, and well-funded strategy. This requires a commitment from both government and citizens to prioritize clean air over short-term political interests.

Source:

- [The Hindu - Beijing's war against air pollution](#)



Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs report on PMAY-Urban

Context

Almost 50% of affordable housing constructed under PMAY-Urban are unoccupied.

About Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U)

- It was launched in 2015 with the goal of providing affordable housing for the urban poor, slum dwellers, and economically weaker sections (EWS) across India.
- Initially it was scheduled to end in 2022. Later it was extended till **December, 2024 to complete the 122.69 lakh houses that were sanctioned.**
- **Status of Construction:** Out of the **122.69 lakh** sanctioned houses, **88.32 lakh** have been completed so far.
- **The scheme operates under 4 verticals:**
 - **Beneficiary-led construction**
 - **In-situ slum redevelopment (ISSR)**
 - **Affordable housing in partnership (AHP)**
 - **Credit-linked subsidy scheme**
- The Centre provides **financial assistance** under the PMAY-U scheme:
 - **Rs. 1 lakh** for each house under the ISSR vertical
 - **Rs. 1.5 lakh** under the AHP vertical.

Key Findings from the Parliamentary Report:

- **Unoccupied Houses:**
 - **Nearly 47% of completed houses remain unoccupied.** This includes a mix of houses under AHP and ISSR verticals.
 - **AHP Vertical:**
 - Out of **15.65 lakh** sanctioned houses, **9.01 lakh** have been completed.
 - Of these, only **54% (4.89 lakh)** are occupied, and **46% (4.12 lakh)** remain unoccupied.
 - **ISSR Vertical:**
 - Out of **1.84 lakh** sanctioned units, **67,806** houses have been completed.
 - **70% (47,510)** of these houses remain unoccupied.
- **Reasons for Unoccupancy:**
 - **Incomplete infrastructure** (lack of roads, water, sewage, electricity)
 - **Delayed allotment** of houses
 - **Unwillingness of beneficiaries** to move in due to inadequate facilities
 - **Non-allotment of houses** in some cases.

Source:

- [Indian Express - Almost 50% of affordable housing constructed under PMAY-Urban remains unoccupied](#)

The missing spotlight on urban local government polls

Context

Delays in ULG elections and disempowered State Election Commissions hinder their effectiveness, making timely reforms essential for strengthening local democracy.

Role of Urban Local Governments (ULGs)

- **Urban Local Governments (ULGs)** are crucial for decentralised governance, as they are tasked with delivering civic services and ensuring a good quality of life for citizens.
- The **74th Constitutional Amendment Act (CAA)** (1992) was introduced to institutionalise the role of ULGs, but its objectives remain largely unmet more than 30 years later.
- The ongoing debate on **One Nation One Election (ONOE)** provides a unique opportunity to highlight the necessity of timely elections for ULGs, a critical aspect that has often been overlooked in ONOE discussions.

Constitutional and Legal Challenges

- The **2015 Parliament Standing Committee Report** on the feasibility of simultaneous elections recommended synchronising elections for the **Lok Sabha** and **State Assemblies** but did not address elections for ULGs.
- The **2017 NITI Aayog Discussion Paper** on simultaneous elections also excluded ULGs, citing them as **State subjects** and expressing concerns over the impracticality of synchronising elections for the thousands of ULGs in the country.
- Similarly, the **2018 Law Commission Report** on simultaneous elections also did not focus on ULGs, reiterating the complexities involved.
- However, the **High-Level Committee (HLC)** set up by the Government of India in 2024 recommended synchronising local body elections within **100 days** of simultaneous elections to the **Lok Sabha** and **State Assemblies**.

Importance of Urban Local Governments

- India has over **4,800 ULGs**, which govern nearly **40% of the population**, a figure projected to exceed **50% by 2050**.
- Cities contribute over **60% of India's GDP**, making well-governed cities essential for economic growth and social well-being.
- Ensuring regular and timely elections for ULGs is crucial for **effective governance** and meeting the developmental needs of urban populations.

Issues surrounding ULG Elections

- **Delays in ULG Elections:**
 - According to a **2024 Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) Report**, over **60% of ULG elections** have been delayed across India.
 - Such delays often extend for several years, with ULGs being governed by **State governments** instead of elected representatives, undermining local democracy.
- **Disempowerment of State Election Commissions (SECs):**
 - **State Election Commissions (SECs)**, which are responsible for conducting ULG elections, lack the necessary autonomy and resources.
 - Only a few states have empowered SECs to carry out crucial tasks like **ward delimitation**, resulting in delays caused by political interference and disputes over reservations.
 - **Only 4 out of 15 States** have empowered their SECs to conduct ward delimitation.

Consequences of Delayed Elections

- **Administrative Inefficiency:** Delays in ward delimitation and reservation exercises prevent timely elections.
- **Political Interference:** Some state governments delay elections for political reasons, undermining the autonomy of ULGs.
- **Citizen Disengagement:** When elections are delayed, citizens lose trust in the democratic process, leading to reduced participation in governance.

Proposed Measures to Address ULG Election Delays

- **Empowering SECs:** State Election Commissions need more independence and resources to handle ward delimitation and reservation exercises without political interference.
- **Strict Enforcement of Timelines:** The constitutional mandate for holding ULG elections every **five years** must be enforced, with penalties for delays.

Source:

- [The Hindu - urban local government polls](#)

