Today's Prelims Topics

Wroughton's free-tailed Bat

Context

Wroughton's Free-tailed Bat, a rare bat species, was recently spotted in Delhi's Yamuna Biodiversity Park.

About Wroughton's free-tailed Bat

- It is a highly rare species of **molossus bat.**
- **Features:**
  - **Physical Appearance:** Large size, big ears extending beyond the muzzle and bicolored velvety fur.
  - It is capable of flying long distances while **foraging (Search for food).**
  - **Ecological importance:** Assists in pollination.
- **Distribution:** The species has been found/sighted in just three locations globally:
  - Single breeding colony in the **Western Ghats.**
  - Small colonies in **Meghalaya's Jaintia Hills.**
  - A single individual was recorded in **Cambodia**.
- **Conservation Status:**
  - **IUCN:** Data Deficient
  - **Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972:** Schedule I

Key facts related to Bats

- Bats are classified into **2 subgroups:**
  - **Megabats (Fruit bats):** Larger in size & primarily frugivorous.
  - **Microbats:** Smaller, primarily insectivorous or carnivorous.
- **Flight:** Bats are the **only flying mammals.** Their wings are modified forelimbs with a flexible membrane.
- In winter, bats go into **hibernation.**
- The majority of bats are **nocturnal species (awake at night). (All bats are not nocturnal)**
- Bats locate their prey (insects) by emitting inaudible high-pitched sounds and listening to the echoes. This is called **echolocation.**
- **Ecological Importance:**
  - **Pollination and Seed Dispersal:** Many fruit bats are key pollinators of tropical plants, including bananas, mangoes, and durians. They **aid in reforestation** by dispersing seeds over long distances.
  - **Pest Control:** Insectivorous bats consume vast numbers of agricultural pests, reducing the need for pesticides. **A single bat can eat up to 1,000 insects per hour.**

UPSC PYQ

Q. Consider the following: **(2014)**

1. Bats
2. Bears
3. Rodents

The phenomenon of hibernation can be observed in which of the above kinds of animals?

(a) 1 and 2 only
(b) 2 only
(c) 1, 2 and 3
(d) Hibernation cannot be observed in any of the above

Answer: C

Source:
- **Indian Express - Rare species of Bat spotted in Yamuna Biodiversity Park**

Why Arctic tundra is emitting more carbon than it absorbs

Context

According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) latest *Arctic Report Card,* The Arctic Tundra has transitioned from a **carbon sink to a carbon emitter.**

About Arctic Tundra
- It is a vast, **treeless biome** characterized by its cold, dry and rocky terrain.
- **Location:** It is the **northernmost biome**, covering areas north of the Arctic Circle up to the **polar ice cap**. It is located between the taiga (boreal forest) and the Arctic Ocean.
- **Permafrost:** It refers to permanently frozen soil. During summer, only the upper layer thaws, while deeper layers remain frozen.
  - The frozen layer **restricts plant root growth and prevents tree growth,** resulting in a treeless landscape.
- **Soil composition:** The tundra's soil is rocky and nutrient-poor due to low decomposition rates. Organic material accumulates in the form of peat and humus (organic matter), making it a significant carbon sink.
- **Animals:** It is home to many animals, including **herbivores** like lemmings, arctic hares, squirrels and **carnivores** like arctic foxes, wolves and polar bears.

Key findings of the report

- **Carbon Storage in the Arctic Tundra:**
  - Arctic tundra stores carbon in permafrost, a layer of soil that remains frozen for at least **2 consecutive years.**
  - Cold conditions prevent the decomposition of organic matter, trapping carbon for millennia.
  - Arctic soils **contain over 1.6 trillion metric tonnes of carbon, which is double the amount of carbon in the atmosphere.**
- **Reasons for Increased Carbon Emissions**
  - **Rising Temperatures:** The Arctic is warming **4 times faster than the global average.**
    - 2024 had the second-warmest surface air temperatures in the Arctic since 1900.
  - **Thawing permafrost:** It is the process by which the ice in permafrost melts, leaving behind soil and water. It activates microbes in the soil, breaking down organic matter and releasing **CO2 and methane (CH4).**
    - CH4 is a more potent GHG than CO2. (Intensifying warming)
  - **Increased Wildfires:** The Arctic has seen more frequent and intense wildfires in recent years.
    - 2024 was the **2nd-biggest year for wildfire emissions**, and 2023 had the worst wildfire season on record.
    - Wildfires release GHGs and accelerate permafrost thawing.
  - **Net Carbon Loss:** Between 2001 and 2020, the Arctic tundra released more carbon than its plants absorbed, likely for the first time in millennia.

Source:
- **Indian Express - Why Arctic tundra is emitting more carbon than it absorbs**

Bitcoin Strategic Reserve

Context

Bitcoin has hit a record high after President-elect Donald Trump reiterated plans to create a U.S. bitcoin strategic reserve.

About Strategic Reserve

- A strategic reserve is a **stock of a critical resource** which can be released at times of crisis or supply disruptions.
- **E.g. U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve,** the world's largest supply of emergency crude oil, which was created by an act of Congress in 1975 after a 1973-74 Arab oil embargo throttled the U.S. economy.

Strategic reserves of Other Countries

- **India's Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPRs):** Collection of oil stockpiles which the government can use to respond to supply disruptions in the **global oil market.**
  - India's SPRs have a total capacity of **5.33 million** metric tonnes (MMT) of crude oil.
  - **Locations:** Visakhapatnam, Mangalore and Padur.
  - **Under Construction:** Chandikhol (Odisha) & Padur-II (Karnataka)
- **Canada:** It has the **world's only strategic reserve of maple syrup.**
- **China:** It also has strategic reserves of petroleum, metals, grains and even pork products.

- **Functioning of the Bitcoin Reserve:**
  - **Establishment: Currently** unclear if it would require executive powers or Congress approval. Some suggest an executive order to manage bitcoin through the **U.S. Treasury's Exchange Stabilization Fund.**
  - **Composition of Reserve:** Could include bitcoin seized from criminal actors by the government. That stands at around 200,000 tokens, worth about $21 billion at the current price.
- **Benefits of such Reserve:**
  - **Global Market Dominance:** It will increase U.S. control over the global bitcoin market, especially against competitors like China.
  - **Economic Advantage:** Could reduce U.S. fiscal deficit and strengthen the U.S. dollar.
- **Risks:**
  - **Volatile Nature:** Bitcoin's value is uncertain due to volatility and lack of intrinsic use.
  - **Security:** Vulnerability to cyber-attacks and market fluctuations.
- **Source:**
  - **Indian Express - How a US strategic bitcoin reserve might work**

Did Opposition score a 'win' as government introduced 'One Nation, One Election' Bills

Context

Amid strong objections from Opposition members Bills on implementing "One Nation, One Election" were introduced in the Lok Sabha after a division vote.

Amendment Procedure (Article - 368)

- **Introduction of a bill**:
  - **Exclusive power of Parliament**, can be introduced in either of the houses of Parliament by **any member of the Parliament.**
    - State legislatures do not have the power to introduce such a bill.
- **Legislative procedure in Parliament:** The bill must be passed by a **Special majority in each House,** which is a majority of the **total membership of the House and a majority of two-thirds of the members present and voting.**
  - The Constitutional Amendment bill must be **passed by each House separately. (No provision for a joint sitting)**
- **Ratification by State Legislatures**: If the bill seeks to amend the **federal provisions of the Constitution,** it must also be **ratified by the legislatures of half of the states by a simple majority.**
- **Assent by President:** The Constitutional Amendment bill must be assented by the President. He **can not withhold his assent to the bill or return it to Parliament for reconsideration.**
  - **The 24th constitutional amendment** made it obligatory on the President to give his assent to constitutional amendment bills.
- **Indian Constitution can be amended using 3 different methods**:
  - Amendment by a **simple majority -**Creation & abolition of legislative councils, formation of news state etc.
  - Amendment by a **special majority of the Parliament -** Changes in Fundamental rights, Directive Principles of State Policy etc.
  - Amendment **by special majority of Parliament and ratification by State Legislatures -** President election process, Distribution of legislative functions between the Union and the states, High courts and the Supreme Court etc.

## Rules related to Amendment Procedure (LS)

- **Rule 157:**
  - The motion for the Bill to be taken into consideration requires a majority of the total membership of the House and two-thirds of those present and voting.
  - Motions for the Bill to be referred to a Select or Joint Committee or the Bill to be passed at various stages also require simple majorities.
- **Rule 158 - Division Voting:**
  - Voting by division takes place when a motion needs to be carried by a majority of the total membership and two-thirds of members present and voting.
  - The results of the division determine whether the motion is passed or not.

Did you Know
- **Prior recommendation** or approval of the President **is not required** for introduction of a Constitutional Amendment Bill.
- The Constitutional Amendments **done by simple majority are not included under Article 368 of the Constitution.**

Source:

● **Indian Express - Did Opposition score a 'win' as government introduced 'One Nation, One Election' Bills**
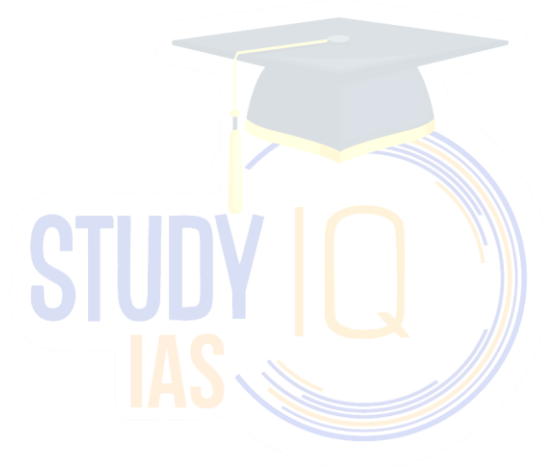
The Constitution on minority rights

Context
The UN General Assembly adopted a declaration on the 'Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities' on December 18, 1992. After this **18th December is celebrated as Minority rights day** all over the world.

Historical Origins of Minority Rights
- **Austria (1867):** Recognized ethnic minorities' rights to maintain their nationality and language.
- **Swiss Confederation Constitution (1874):** Equal rights for the country's three languages in civil services, courts and legislation.
- **Post-World War I Treaties:** Incorporated minority protection clauses in agreements with nations like Poland and Czechoslovakia.
- **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948):**
  - **Article 27:** Recognizes individuals' right to their culture and participation in cultural forums.

Provisions related to minorities in the Indian Constitution
- **Article 29:** Grants all citizens the right to conserve their distinct culture, language, or script.
  - Acknowledges multiculturalism and individual rights to preserve minority cultures.
- **Article 30:** Grants religious and linguistic minorities the right to establish and administer educational institutions.
  - **Aligarh Muslim University Case (2024):** Expanded this right to institutions of national importance.
- **Article 350 A:** Instruction in the mother tongue at the primary level.
- **Article 350 B:** Appointment of a Special Officer for linguistic minorities.

Minority -Definition
- The term **'minority'** has been used in **4 places in the Constitution,** but definition of the term has not been given.
  - **Judicial Interpretation:** The Supreme Court, in cases like **TMA Pai Foundation (2002),** defined minorities at the state level. **E.g.** Hindus are considered minorities in Punjab and north-eastern states.
- **Defining Minority Institutions:**
  - **TMA Pai Foundation Case (2002):** Left the indicia of minority institutions undefined.
  - **Aligarh Muslim University Case (2024):**
    - Broad, holistic indicators to define minority institutions.
    - Key considerations: the founder's intent, funding and initiative must originate from the minority community.

Source:
- **The Hindu - The Constitution on minority rights**

Reforms in National Entrance Exams

Context
A high-level committee chaired by former ISRO chief K. Radhakrishnan has proposed major reforms to enhance transparency and efficiency in conducting national entrance exams such as NEET, CUET, and UGC-NET.

About National Testing Agency
- It was established in **2017** as a specialist, self-sustaining and autonomous organisation under the **the Union Ministry of Education.**
- It is registered under the Societies Registration Act 1860.
- It is headed by a **director general** appointed by the Union government.
- It is responsible for conducting entrance exams and assessments for admission and recruitment
- **Examinations conducted by the NTA:** JEE (Main), NEET-UG, Common Management Admission Test (CMAT), University Grants Commission-National Eligibility Test (UGC-NET) etc.

Key Recommendations of the Committee
- **Conduct Exams Like Elections:**
  - The Centre and state governments should work together, using the state administrative machinery, similar to how elections are conducted.
  - Each testing centre should have a presiding officer appointed by the NTA, responsible for ensuring that the exam follows predefined protocols, just like polling booths during elections.
- **Strict Management of Exam Centres**
  - Exam centres should be **sealed before the scheduled test** in the presence of district officials and the police.
  - They should **remain guarded until they are reopened on exam day l**ike handling of strong rooms for electronic voting machines.
- **Choosing Exam Centres:**
  - District committees must select centres after evaluating past records, the reputation of the centre's management and intelligence inputs about potential risks.
- **Formation of Coordination Committees:**
  - **State-Level Committees:** Headed by a Chief Secretary-nominated nodal officer, these committees will include representatives from state police, NTA, the Intelligence Bureau (IB) and the NIC.
  - **District-Level Committees:** Led by the District Magistrate including police chief.
- **Improve Digital Infrastructure:**
  - Reduce reliance on private agencies like TCS iON for conducting computer-based exams.
  - Upgrade the digital infrastructure of centrally-run schools like Kendriya Vidyalayas and Navodaya Vidyalayas to serve as reliable testing centres.
- **Introduce a Digi-Exam System:**
  - Inspired by the DigiYatra model, this system will ensure candidate verification.
  - Candidates' primary data will be collected at the time of application, while biometric data will be verified before the exam begins.
- **Enhance Monitoring and Security:**
  - **Question Paper and OMR Sheet Safety:** NTA officials will be responsible for safeguarding question papers and OMR sheets until the exam concludes.
  - **CCTV Surveillance:** Candidates will be continuously monitored during the exam via CCTV.

Source:
- **Indian Express - Panel proposes poll-style framework for entrance tests to boost transparency**

News in Shorts

Environmentalist Tulsi Gowda revered as Tree Goddess dies
- She was born in Honnali village of Karnataka's Ankola Taluk. She was a member of the indigenous **Halakki tribe**.   - She was Known as the **'encyclopedia of forest'**.   - In 2021, she was awarded the **Padma Shri.**   - She has been credited with planting and nurturing over **1 lakh trees across Karnataka**   **Souce:**   **Indian Express - Tulsi Gowda passes away at 86**
Myanmar rebels recapture headquarters after 30 years
Recapture of Manerplaw: The KNU regained control of Manerplaw, located **near the Thai border,** after several days of intense fighting. It was once the headquarters of the KNU.   **About Karen National Union (KNU):**   - It was established in **1947**, shortly after Myanmar gained independence from British rule.   - It was formed to represent the **Karen people, an ethnic group indigenous to Myanmar**, primarily located in the southeastern part of the country, near the Thailand border.   - Initially, the KNU demanded the creation of an **independent Karen state,** but over time, its demands have evolved **into seeking political autonomy** within a federal Myanmar.   **Source:**   **The Hindu - Myanmar rebels recapture headquarters after 30 years**

Editorial Summary

Stuck in the classroom — students, teachers, NEP 2020

Context
- Indian higher education students spend significantly more time in class than their peers in the EU and North America, yet they risk receiving a comparatively weaker education.
- This is largely due to two factors introduced by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: a greater emphasis on teaching time within course credits and a heavier course load per semester.

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020: Higher Education
- The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to nearly **double the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)** in higher education from **26.3% in 2018 to 50% by 2035**, while enhancing the quality of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and establishing India as a global education hub.
- A significant change will be the **establishment of the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI)**, which will serve as a single regulatory body overseeing the entire higher education sector.
  - The HECI will manage various functions such as accreditation, funding, and setting academic standards through independent verticals, replacing existing regulatory bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE).

Serial No	HECI Vertical	Function
1	National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC)	Creating and Implementing Higher Education regulation
2	General Education Council (GEC)	Standard setting for academia
3	Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC)	For funding academic and research activities
4	National Accreditation Council (NAC)	Accreditation to academic institutions

Key Highlights of the NEP 2020
- **Vocational Education Integration**: Ensure 50% of learners gain exposure to vocational education by 2025.
- **Equity and Inclusion**: Establish high-quality higher education institutions (HEIs) in underserved regions, including at least one multidisciplinary HEI in each district by 2030.
- **Multidisciplinary Teacher Education**: Transition to integrated teacher education programs, making the four-year B.Ed. the minimum qualification by 2030.
- **Institutional Autonomy**: Provide autonomy to institutions through independent Boards of Governors (BoGs); phase out the affiliating college system.
- **Professional Institution Conversion**: Convert standalone professional institutions into multidisciplinary HEIs with a student body exceeding 3,000 by 2030.
- **Three-Tier System**: Develop a three-tier system of Research Universities, Teaching Universities, and Autonomous Colleges, with accreditation and degree-awarding autonomy by 2035.
- **Promotion of Multidisciplinary Education**: Expand the number of HEIs and promote multidisciplinary learning approaches.

- **International Collaboration**: Encourage reputed international universities to establish campuses in India.
- **Faculty Career Growth**: Provide clear pathways for faculty promotion through teaching, research, and leadership roles.
- **Flexible Curricular Structure**: Introduce multiple entry and exit points to enable lifelong learning opportunities.
- **Online and Distance Learning**: Emphasize online and distance learning (ODL) to enhance access, equity, and inclusion.
- **Research Funding**: Establish the National Research Foundation (NRF) to fund and support high-quality research.
- **Transparency and Accountability**: Enhance public oversight through greater disclosure of institutional information.

What are the Different Issues?
- **Excessive Classroom Time**: Indian students under NEP 2020 spend 20 hours per week in the classroom compared to 12 hours for EU and North American students.
  - This **leaves little time** for self-study, reading, and assignments, **leading to exhaustion and reduced learning**.
- **Assessment Challenges:** The increased classroom time has resulted in a reduction in feasible assessments within courses:
  - Previously, under a three-year undergraduate program with four courses per semester, there was more room for continuous assessment.
  - With the new structure, students struggle to complete more than two assessments per course, often favoring simpler formats like multiple-choice questions over more comprehensive evaluations such as term papers or reflective essays.
- **Incentivizing Rote Learning**: Limited time for self-directed learning promotes rote learning, **replicating school-like dynamics** where students remain passive recipients of knowledge.
- **Continuous Assessment Challenges**: Continuous assessment requires diverse evaluation methods, which are difficult to implement due to time constraints.
- **Quality of teaching**: Indian faculty spend 14-16 hours per week in the classroom compared to 9 hours for their EU and North American counterparts.
  - This reduces time for research, course development, and interdisciplinary collaboration, impacting the quality of teaching.
- **Disparity Between Elite and Public Institutions**: Elite institutions (IITs, IIMs, and central universities) may have more flexible teaching loads and resources.
  - However, the majority of teaching happens in public universities and colleges, which are burdened by heavier teaching loads.

Facts
- Only 2 universities of India are in the top 200 universities in the world. (as per QS World University Rankings 2025)
  - **IIT Bombay:** 118th
  - **IIT Delhi:** 150th
- According to a report by AISHE (2018- 19), India has achieved a GER of 26.3% which is lower than the global average GER of 36.7%.

Key differences between the US and Indian education systems

Features	India	United States
Structure of School Education	Follows a 5+3+3+4 system under NEP 2020	Follows a three-tier system: Elementary, Middle, High
Learning Methodology	Traditionally focused on rote learning, with shifts towards critical thinking under NEP 2020	Emphasises hands-on learning, creativity, and critical thinking
Subject Flexibility	Historically rigid, but becoming more flexible with NEP	Highly flexible, allowing students to explore various disciplines
Technology Integration	Developing, with initiatives like "Digital India" but facing unequal access, especially in rural areas	Well-equipped with advanced technology, seamlessly integrated into learning
Cost of Education	Generally affordable in public institutions, though private education can be costly	Significantly higher costs, with students often relying on financial aid and scholarships
Class Sizes and Dress Codes	Larger class sizes, with uniforms typically mandatory	Smaller class sizes, with flexible dress codes
Assessments and Exams	Exam-centric, with an emphasis on memorization, but NEP 2020 aims for experiential learning	Continuous assessment through projects and participation, with less emphasis on high-stakes exams
Higher Education	Theoretical and rigid, with limited international exposure	Broad-based and flexible, with a strong global perspective and international student presence
Technology and Infrastructure	Varies widely; some schools face significant infrastructure challenges	State-of-the-art facilities, extensive resources available in most schools and universities
International Exposure	Limited opportunities for international collaboration	Diverse student population and global partnerships offering international exposure

Solutions

● **Reconsideration of Course Load:** A reduction in the number of courses per semester could alleviate pressure on students and allow for deeper engagement with material.

● **Encouragement of Self-Learning:** Providing students with adequate time for reflection and independent study can foster ownership over their learning process.

● **Diverse Assessment Formats:** A broader range of assessment types should be integrated into curricula to promote critical thinking and creativity rather than rote memorization.

Sources:
● **The Hindu: Stuck in the classroom — students, teachers, NEP 2020**
● **Times of India**

The legal gaps in India's unregulated AI surveillance

Context

The evolving use of AI in surveillance highlights that there need to consider legal frameworks, gaps, and concerns surrounding it in India and how they intersect with constitutional rights, particularly the right to privacy.

Use AI Surveillance in India:

- In 2019, the Indian government announced plans to create the world's largest facial recognition system for policing.
- AI-powered surveillance systems are in use at railway stations.
- The Delhi Police is preparing to use AI for crime patrols.
- Plans include launching **50 AI-powered satellites** to enhance India's surveillance infrastructure.

What are the issues associated with AI Surveillance In India?

- **Privacy Infringement:** AI surveillance systems can lead to *dragnet surveillance*, a term that refers to indiscriminate data collection beyond just suspects or criminals, infringing on citizens' right to privacy (Article 21).
  - **Example**: Hyderabad police accessed the databases from social welfare schemes like "Samagra Vedika."
- **Lack of Proportional Safeguards:** Existing safeguards are insufficient to prevent misuse of AI-driven surveillance.
  - The promised **Digital India Act** (for regulating AI) has yet to materialize.
- **Exemptions in the Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA), 2023:** Section 7(g) waives consent requirements for processing medical data during epidemics, while Section 7(i) exempts government from consent for employment-related data processing.
  - These exemptions raise concerns about misuse, especially regarding AI surveillance technologies that rely on vast amounts of personal data.
  - Citizens face increased scrutiny under DPDPA provisions like Section 15(c), which mandates that individuals must not suppress any material information when submitting personal data.
- **Lack of Transparency and Accountability:** Absence of publicly available guidelines on **how data is collected, processed, stored, and protected** by law enforcement agencies.
  - No independent oversight to prevent potential misuse of AI technologies.
- **Risk of Discrimination and Bias:** AI surveillance systems can perpetuate **algorithmic biases** and lead to unfair targeting of certain communities.
  - These biases can **violate the principles of equality and non-discrimination**.
- **Data Security Concerns:** High risk of **data breaches** and misuse due to inadequate cybersecurity infrastructure.
  - **Example**: The **Telangana Police data breach** exposed vulnerabilities in law enforcement data management.
- **Civil Liberties Erosion:** Unchecked surveillance threatens fundamental rights such as **freedom of expression, association, and movement**.
  - Excessive surveillance may create a **chilling effect on democratic participation**.

Global Comparisons and Best Practices

European Union (EU) – Artificial Intelligence Act

- **Risk-Based Approach:** Categorizes AI activities into **unacceptable, high, transparency, and minimal risk**.
- **Unacceptable Risk:** Prohibits real-time remote biometric identification, except for narrowly defined exceptions (e.g., searching for victims of serious crimes).
- **Transparency and Accountability:** Requires clear documentation and disclosure of AI system operations.
  - Mandates regular **audits and risk assessments** for high-risk AI applications.

United States – Section 702 of FISA

- **Oversight Mechanisms:** Surveillance programs are subject to review by the **Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court (FISC)**.
  - However, the program has faced criticism for overreach and inadequate safeguards.

United Kingdom – Surveillance Camera Code of Practice

- **Principles-Based Regulation:** Surveillance activities must be **justified, proportionate, and transparent**.
  - Requires law enforcement agencies to follow a **code of conduct** for deploying CCTV and facial recognition technology.

Proposed Reforms for AI Surveillance in India

- **Comprehensive Regulatory Framework:** Enact a robust legal framework to regulate AI-driven surveillance with clear guidelines on **data collection, processing, storage, and deletion**.
  - Ensure alignment with the principles of **necessity, legitimacy, and proportionality**.
- **Transparency and Oversight Mechanisms:** Mandate **public disclosure** of:
  - What data is being collected.
  - The purpose of collection.
  - Duration of data retention.
  - Establish **independent judicial oversight** to review and approve surveillance activities.
- **Strict Consent Requirements:** Narrow and specific exemptions for consent under the DPDPA, ensuring they are not overly broad or ambiguous.
  - Implement **transparent consent-gathering practices** with proper safeguards.
- **Risk-Based Regulation:** Adopt a **risk-based approach** to categorize AI activities (similar to the EU model)
- **Data Protection and Security:** Strengthen **cybersecurity infrastructure** to prevent data breaches.
  - Introduce penalties for **unauthorized access or misuse of personal data** by law enforcement agencies.
- **Algorithmic Fairness and Bias Mitigation:** Conduct regular **audits of AI systems** to identify and mitigate biases.
  - Ensure AI algorithms used in surveillance are **transparent and explainable**.
- **Judicial Oversight and Redressal Mechanisms:** Implement **judicial review** for AI surveillance operations.
  - Create mechanisms for **citizens to challenge surveillance practices** and seek redressal for violations.

Source: The Hindu: The legal gaps in India's unregulated AI surveillance

The challenge of universal health coverage

Context

Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in India often overlooks the complexities of the country's diverse health systems and the unique challenges they present.

Challenges in Achieving Universal Health Coverage (UHC) in India

- **Disparity in Health Expenditure Across States:** Government health expenditure varies widely, with states like **Kerala** and **Tamil Nadu** spending more than **Uttar Pradesh** and **Bihar**.
  - This creates a **two-tier health system** where people in resource-poor states face inadequate access to quality healthcare.
- **High Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (OOPE):** Despite increased government expenditure, OOPE remains high (67% in West Bengal, 64% in Andhra Pradesh).
  - OOPE leads to **financial hardship** and medical impoverishment for low-income populations.
  - Even states with higher spending, like **Kerala** and **Punjab**, face high OOPE due to systemic inefficiencies.
- **Inadequate Primary Healthcare Infrastructure:** States like **West Bengal** face a **58% shortfall** in primary health centres (PHCs) and health and wellness centres (HWCs).
  - This hampers early diagnosis and management of diseases, increasing reliance on expensive tertiary care.
- **Diverse Health Profiles and Needs: Teenage pregnancy rates** differ significantly between states (16% in West Bengal vs. 2.4% in Kerala).
  - **Non-communicable diseases (NCDs)** like high blood sugar rates are prevalent in West Bengal, Bihar, and Gujarat, requiring tailored interventions.
  - Generic solutions fail to address these state-specific health challenges.
- **Inefficient Health System Design:** Programs like **Swasthya Sathi** in West Bengal compensate for a perceived deficiency in public hospitals but are misaligned with actual needs.
  - High rates of **C-sections in public hospitals** suggest an adequate public sector capacity, making such insurance schemes less effective.
- **Lack of Accountability and Oversight:** Absence of **transparent governance and accountability** mechanisms leads to inefficiencies and misalloction of resources.

Solutions

- **Strengthen Primary Healthcare Infrastructure:** Invest in building and staffing more **Primary Health Centres (PHCs)** and **Health and Wellness Centres (HWCs)**, especially in underserved rural areas, to address preventive and basic healthcare needs.
- **Reduce Out-of-Pocket Expenditure (OOPE):** Expand **free essential healthcare services** and medicines while aligning public insurance schemes with actual healthcare supply to minimize financial burdens on citizens.
- **Ensure Equitable Health Financing:** Increase government health expenditure in **low-resource states** like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, ensuring **per capita spending** meets the estimated requirement for UHC (₹2,205).
- **State-Specific Health Strategies:** Develop tailored health plans considering each state's unique health profile (e.g., addressing high teenage pregnancy in West Bengal or diabetes management in Gujarat).
- **Invest in Health Workforce and Technology:** Train and recruit more healthcare professionals and integrate **telemedicine** and **digital health tools** to improve access and quality of care, especially in remote regions.

Source: The Hindu: The challenge of universal health coverage

Detailed Coverage

One Nation One Election (Simultaneous Election)

Context

Two bills aimed at establishing a mechanism for simultaneous elections have been formally introduced in Lok Sabha: the **Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill, 2024 and the Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024.**

Details of the Bills

● Currently, simultaneous elections are **only applicable to Parliament and state Assemblies**, excluding municipal corporations.
● These changes are expected to be **implemented at the earliest during the 2034 election cycle**.
● The Constitution amendment Bill specifies that the "President may issue a public notification on the date of the first sitting of the House of the People after a general election to activate the provisions of this article, with that date referred to as the appointed date."

Quote

"We must go back to the situation where the elections to Lok Sabha and all the Legislative Assemblies are held at once" – **Justice B P Jeevan Reddy**

What is a Simultaneous Election?

● Simultaneous elections, also known as **synchronised elections** or **one-nation-one-election,** refer to the practice of holding **multiple elections** for various levels of government (such as national and state) at the **same time** or on a **synchronised schedule.**
● This would mean that the **voters will cast their vote** for electing members of the LS and the state assemblies on a **single day, at the same time** (or in a phased manner as the case may be).

History of Simultaneous Elections in India

● The concept of simultaneous elections is **not new to the country**.
● Post adoption of the Constitution of India, the **First General Elections to the Lok Sabha** (House of the People) and **all Vidhan Sabhas** (State Legislative Assemblies) were **held simultaneously in 1951-52.**
● This practice **continued in three subsequent General Elections** held in the years **1957, 1962 and 1967**.
● However, **due to premature dissolution** of some State Legislative Assemblies in 1968 and 1969, the cycle of **synchronised elections got disrupted.** In 1970, the Lok Sabha itself was dissolved prematurely and fresh elections were held in 1971.
● Thus, **since 1967 elections**, the practice of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and the Vidhan Sabhas could not be maintained and the **elections have still not been realigned**.

Amendment Requirement

● For a constitutional amendment to be approved in Parliament, a "**special majority**" is required in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha.
● According to Article 368 of the Constitution, two conditions must be met for this special majority:
   ○ At least **half of the members in both the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha** must vote in favor of the amendment.
   ○ Among all members who are **present and voting**, a minimum of **two-thirds must support the amendment.**

- It is practical to exclude municipal elections at this stage because doing so would necessitate an amendment that must be "ratified" by the legislatures of at least half of all states in India.

Proposed Amendments Align With the Recommendations of Ramnath Kovind Panel on Simultaneous Election

Constitution (One Hundred and Twenty-Ninth Amendment) Bill, 2024

- It aims to amend 3 articles of the Constitution and introduce a new article, Article 82A(1-6).
- **Article 82A: Provisions for Simultaneous Elections**
  - **Clause (1):** The President will determine the date when the proposed amendments come into effect, aligning with the date of the first sitting of the newly elected Lok Sabha.
  - **Clause (2):** The terms of all state Assemblies elected after the appointed date, and before the current Lok Sabha's term ends, will conclude at the end of the Lok Sabha's five-year term. This adjustment may shorten some Assemblies' terms to enable simultaneous elections.
  - **Clause (3):** The Election Commission of India (ECI) will be responsible for conducting simultaneous elections for the Lok Sabha and all state Legislative Assemblies.
  - **Clause (4):** Simultaneous elections are defined as general elections held concurrently for both the Lok Sabha and all state Legislative Assemblies.
  - **Clause (5):** The ECI may decide that specific Assembly elections cannot be held concurrently with the Lok Sabha election. In such cases, the ECI can recommend to the President that those Assembly elections be held at a later date.
  - **Clause (6):** If an Assembly election is postponed, the term of that Assembly will still end when the term of the newly elected Lok Sabha concludes.

What if a government falls before the completion of its five-year term?

- **Addition of New Clause in Article 83:** Article 83 states that in Rajya Sabha one-third of its members retire every second year and the Lok Sabha's term is a fixed 5 years unless it is dissolved sooner.
  - **New Clauses:** If the Lok Sabha is dissolved before the end of its full term, the next Lok Sabha will only be for the unexpired term — "the period between its date of dissolution and five years from the date of the first meeting."
    - The new Lok Sabha formed after a mid-term election is **not considered a continuation of the previous one**.
    - **Pending Bills** from the dissolved House will **lapse**, as happens when a full term concludes.
- **Amendment to Article 372: Simultaneous Polls for State Legislatures**
  - The amendment proposes adding "**conduct of simultaneous elections**" to the **powers of Parliament** regarding state legislature elections.
  - This extends Parliament's authority to manage simultaneous elections for both Houses of Parliament and state legislatures.
- **Amendment to Article 172: State Assembly Term Adjustment**
  - If a state Assembly is dissolved before the end of its five-year term, the subsequent Assembly will serve only the remainder of the unexpired term of the preceding Assembly.

The Union Territories Laws (Amendment) Bill, 2024

- The Bill seeks to amend three Acts:
  - Government of Union Territories Act, 1963
  - Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi Act, 1991
  - Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019

- These changes aim to align Union Territories' legislative processes with the provisions for simultaneous elections.

Various Reports in Favour of Simultaneous Elections

- **First Annual Report of the Election Commission of India, 1983:** The report recommended holding simultaneous elections for the House of the People and the Legislative Assemblies of States, for the following significant reasons:
  - o **Cost Savings:** Simultaneous elections would result in considerable savings by avoiding redundant administrative expenses incurred in separate elections.
  - o **Efficient Voter Roll Updates:** Conducting electoral roll revisions simultaneously would lead to substantial cost savings and increased efficiency.
  - o **Minimising Disruption:** Simultaneous elections would reduce the disruption caused by deploying a massive number of civilian and police personnel for extended periods during elections.
  - o **Enhancing Governance:** The simultaneous election approach would help maintain a more stable administrative setup, preventing the sidelining of normal government functions and developmental work during election periods, ultimately benefiting the common citizen.
- **The Law Commission of India in its 170th Report (1999)** also recommended simultaneous election.
- **In 2015, the Parliamentary Standing Committee** on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice in its 79th Report suggested holding simultaneous elections for long-term good governance.
- **In January 2017, NITI Aayog prepared a working paper** titled "Analysis of Simultaneous elections: The What, Why and How" in which it worked out a framework for the conduct of simultaneous elections.

Rationale for Simultaneous Elections (Based on High-Level Committee Report)

- **Promotes Consistency in Governance:** Frequent elections divert the focus of political parties, leaders, and governments from governance to election preparation. Simultaneous elections would enable continuous focus on development and public welfare.
- **Prevents Policy Paralysis:** The enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC) during elections disrupts administration and welfare programs. Simultaneous elections reduce the duration of MCC enforcement, minimizing governance disruptions.
- **Mitigates Resource Diversion:** Frequent elections require significant personnel and resources for election duties. Conducting elections simultaneously would reduce the need for repeated deployments, allowing officials to focus on core responsibilities.
- **Preserves Regional Party Relevance:** Simultaneous elections allow regional parties to address local issues effectively. This ensures that regional concerns are not overshadowed by national campaigns, maintaining the relevance of regional voices.
- **Enhances Political Opportunities:** Simultaneous elections create more opportunities for diverse leaders within political parties. This reduces the dominance of a few leaders and promotes inclusivity in political representation.
- **Focus on Governance:** Ongoing elections distract parties from governance. Synchronizing elections would allow more time for addressing public needs, reducing conflicts and aggressive campaigning.
- **Reduces Financial Burden:** Multiple elections are costly in terms of manpower, security, and logistics. Simultaneous elections streamline expenses, leading to better fiscal management and economic efficiency.

Arguments Against of Simultaneous Elections

- **Difficult to Synchronise:** Maintaining synchronised elections in a diverse democracy like India could be challenging, especially if governments lose confidence in their assemblies.

- **Impact on Voter Behavior:** Simultaneous elections might lead to voters confusing national and state issues, potentially undermining the distinctiveness of state elections.
- **Impact on Regional Parties:** Simultaneous elections might favour large national parties, potentially disadvantaging regional parties.
- **Accountability:** Regular elections force governments to stay responsive to the will of the people. Fixed terms without the fear of recall could lead to a lack of accountability and more autocratic tendencies.
- **Constitutional and Federalism Concerns:** Implementing simultaneous elections may require changes to the constitution and could potentially infringe on the federal nature of the Indian political system.

What is Hung Parliament?
- When no party or pre-poll alliance is able to secure a majority in the election, this leads to a hung Parliament.
  - The total number of seats in the Lok Sabha is 543.
  - A party or coalition needs to win one seat above the 50% mark, or 272 seats, in order to form the government.
  - If it is unable to do so, the President may invite the leader of the single largest party/alliance in the House to try to secure the confidence of the House.
  - In the alternative, the President may invite a combination of parties who, in his opinion, might be in a position to command a majority in the House.

International Perspective on Simultaneous Elections

South Africa	- In South Africa, elections are held for **National Assembly, Provincial Legislature and Municipal Councils in a five-year cycle.** - The electoral system for National and Provincial Assemblies is based on **"party-list proportional representation",** which means that parties are represented in the proportion of electoral support to them.
Sweden	- Elections to Sweden's **County Councils and Municipal Councils** occur simultaneously with the general elections (elections to Riksdag every four years). - Whereas, the elections of the **Municipal Assemblies** occur generally on the second Sunday of September after every five years.
Belgium	- In Belgium, **one can vote in five different types of elections.** **Elections for the Federal Parliament** are normally held every five years, coinciding with the European (and consequently also regional) elections.

Sources:
- **Indian Express: One Nation One Election Bill Explained**
- **PIB: One Nation, One Election**