

27 Mar 2021: UPSC Exam Comprehensive News Analysis

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B. GS 2 Related

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. [Poll bond sale can go ahead: SC](#)

Context:

The Supreme Court refused to stay the sale of [electoral bonds](#) prior to the Assembly elections in crucial states such as West Bengal and Tamil Nadu.

Details:

- A three-judge Bench, led by Chief Justice of India Sharad A. Bobde, said the scheme began in 2018 and continued in 2019 and 2020 without any impediments.
- It said that the court found no reason to stall the sale of the electoral bonds.

Charges against Electoral Bonds and SC's Response:

- The anonymity of the buyers – The scheme provides anonymity but ensures that everything happens through the banking channels alone.
 - They can also be obtained in physical form from the Registrar of Companies upon payment of a prescribed fee.
 - Since the scheme mandates political parties to file an audited statement of accounts and also since the [Companies Act](#) requires financial statements of registered companies to be filed with the Registrar of Companies, the purchase as well as encashment of the bonds, happening only through banking channels, is always reflected in documents that eventually come to the public domain.
- Corporate houses can finance political parties – The court rubbished the charge of electoral bonds facilitating anonymous and hefty donations from corporate houses to political parties. Anyone buying bonds will have to fulfil KYC norms. The money spent will reflect on the expenses sheet of the company.
- Foreign corporate houses can buy bonds and influence electoral politics – The court debunked fears that electoral bonds would help foreign corporate houses influence domestic electoral politics. Bonds can be purchased only by a person who is a citizen of India or incorporated or established in India.
- Bonds bought with white money can be re-purchased with black money – Bonds are not tradable under clause 14. Moreover, the first buyer will not stand to gain anything out of such a sale except losing white money for the black.

For In-depth understanding watch [Explained: Electoral Bonds](#).

2. 40% of RTI rejections did not cite valid reason, says analysis

Context:

Central Information Commission's annual report on [Right to Information \(RTI\)](#) requests.

Details:

- The CIC's annual report covers more than 2,000 public authorities across the Central government as well as the union territories.
- An analysis of CIC macro-data from Central ministries shows that the Home Ministry had the highest rate of rejections, as it rejected 20% of all RTIs received. The Agriculture Ministry's rejection rate doubled from 2% in 2018-19 to 4% in 2019-20. The Delhi Police and the Army also saw increases in rejection rates.

- The Centre has only rejected 4.3% of all Right to Information (RTI) requests in 2019-20, the lowest ever rate.
- However, almost 40% of these rejections did not include any valid reason, as they did not invoke one of the permissible exemption clauses in the RTI Act.
 - This includes 90% of rejections by the Prime Minister's Office.
- In 38.7% of rejections in 2019-20, public authorities failed to cite permissible exemption clauses, and were classified under the 'Others' category in the CIC data. This is an increase from the 33% seen the previous year.

RTI Act:

- The Right To Information Act is one of the most important acts which empowers ordinary citizens to question the government and its working.
 - This has been widely used by citizens and media to uncover corruption, progress in government work, expenses related information, etc.
- The RTI Act allows public authorities to reject RTI requests on a number of grounds, ranging from information that would endanger life and safety to that which involves irrelevant personal information, Cabinet papers, foreign governments, copyrights, or sovereignty, security and intelligence matters.
- Public authorities are expected to cite the relevant clause of the Act to invoke the exemption.

3. 'Move health to Concurrent list'

Context:

Fifteenth Finance Commission's Chairman's address at the NATHEALTH summit.

Suggestions:

Healthcare to be shifted to Concurrent List:

- Chairman of the [Fifteenth Finance Commission](#), N.K. Singh asserted that Health should be shifted to the Concurrent list under the Constitution.
 - He opined that bringing health into the Concurrent list would give the Centre greater flexibility to enact regulatory changes and reinforce the obligation of all stakeholders towards providing better healthcare.

Set up developmental finance institution (DFI) dedicated to healthcare:

- He suggested that a DFI dedicated to healthcare investments be set up.
 - DFI would increase healthcare access in tier-2 and tier-3 cities and also come in with technical assistance that ensures proper usage of funds, he said.

Enhance government spending on health:

- He made a case for increasing the government's spending on health to 2.5% of GDP by 2025.
- He said primary healthcare should be a fundamental commitment of all States in particular and should be allocated at least two-thirds of such spending.

Universalising healthcare insurance:

- He emphasised the importance of universalising healthcare insurance as a large section of the society still remained uncovered.
 - While the PMJAY covers the bottom two income quintiles, commercial insurance largely covers the top-income quintile, thereby creating a missing middle class.
 - This refers to people in the middle two income quintiles, where the population is not rich enough to afford commercial insurance and not poor enough to be covered under government-sponsored health insurance schemes.

Category: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1. Japan to fund A&N, metro expansion

Context:

In the first-ever official development assistance (ODA) project in Andaman & Nicobar (A&N), Japan has approved grant aid worth ₹265 crore, to improve the power supply in the islands.

Details:

- This is the first-ever ODA project in the strategic islands of Andaman & Nicobar (apart from humanitarian emergency assistance).
- While approving the grant, Japan stressed the strategic geopolitical location of the islands for a free, open and inclusive Indo-Pacific.
 - India is key to the Quad and the Indo-Pacific region.
- Cooperation between Japan and India on these crucial islands demonstrate the commitment of both countries to realising a stable, peaceful and prosperous Indo-Pacific.
- The grant would be used to procure 15MWh batteries as well as power system stabilisers to allow better utilisation of solar power generated in South Andaman.

Note:

- Japan has also extended yen loans worth ₹16,186 crore, for executing four projects, including Delhi Metro's Phase 4 and Bengaluru Metro's Phase 2 expansion plans.
- Loan agreements have been signed between the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) and the government.
- A loan of ₹807 crore was extended for crop diversification in Himachal Pradesh and ₹3,272 crore in loans to rural water supply with a focus on mitigating fluorosis in Rajasthan's Jhunjhunu and Barmer districts.

2. Eritrea will pull out troops from Tigray: Ethiopian PM

Context:

Eritrea will pull its troops out of Ethiopia's northern Tigray region, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed said.

Background:

- Abiy sent troops into Tigray in November 2020 after accusing the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF), of attacks on Army camps.
 - TPLF was previously a dominant ruling party in the region.

Read more on the conflict between the Ethiopian government and Tigray rebels, covered in 17th November 2020 Comprehensive News Analysis.

Details:

- The recent announcement is a potential breakthrough in a drawn-out conflict that has seen atrocities carried out against civilians.
- It comes as Mr. Abiy (winner of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize) faces mounting pressure to end fighting.
 - Both Eritrean and Ethiopian troops stand accused of abuses, including mass killings and rapes.

Note:

- Ethiopia and Eritrea fought a border war beginning in 1998.
- The war left tens of thousands dead and resulted in a two-decade stalemate.
- Abiy won his Nobel in large part for initiating a rapprochement with Mr. Afwerki after taking office in 2018, but Eritrea and the TPLF remained bitter enemies.
 - Isaias Afwerki is an Eritrean politician who has been the first and current President of Eritrea since the country's independence in 1993.

C. GS 3 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

D. GS 4 Related

Nothing here for today!!!

E. Editorials

Category: POLITY AND GOVERNANCE

1. Dormant Parliament, fading business

Context:

The 2021 Budget session of Parliament ended two weeks ahead of the original plan.

Concerns:

Trend of the last few sessions:

- The Budget session of 2020 was curtailed ahead of the lockdown imposed following the novel coronavirus pandemic.

- A short 18-day monsoon session ended after 10 days as several Members of Parliament and Parliament staff got affected by COVID-19.
- The winter session was cancelled.
- The fiscal year 2020-21 saw the Lok Sabha sitting for 34 days (and the Rajya Sabha for 33), the lowest ever.
- The casualty was proper legislative scrutiny of proposed legislation as well as government functioning and finances.
- Parliament could have adopted remote working and technological solutions, as several other countries did.

No Bill scrutiny:

- Many high impact Bills were introduced and passed within a few days.
 - The Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill, 2021, which is the Bill to change the governance mechanism of Delhi — shifting governance from the legislature and the Chief Minister to the Lieutenant Governor was passed by both houses.
 - Another Bill, the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Bill, 2021, which amends the Mines and Minerals Act, 1957 to remove end-use restrictions on mines and ease conditions for captive mines, was also passed by both houses.
 - The National Bank for Financing Infrastructure and Development (NaBFID) Bill, 2021 — to create a new government infrastructure finance institution and permit private ones in this sector was passed within three days of introduction.
 - The Insurance (Amendment) Bill, 2021, the Bill to increase the limit of foreign direct investment in insurance companies from 49% to 74% also took just a week between introduction and passing by both Houses.
- An important development of this session has been the absence of careful scrutiny of Bills.
- During the session, 13 Bills were introduced, and not even one of them was referred to a parliamentary committee for examination.
- In all, 13 Bills were introduced in this session, and eight of them were passed within the session.
- This quick work would be seen as avoidance of Parliament's duty to scrutinise Bills and certainly not as a sign of efficiency.

Consulting House panels:

- The percentage of Bills referred to committees declined from 60% and 71% in the 14th Lok Sabha (2004-09) and the 15th Lok Sabha, respectively, to 27% in the 16th Lok Sabha and just 11% in the current one.
- This development also highlights the decline in the efficacy of committees.
- Parliamentary committees have often done a stellar job.
 - The committee that examined the [Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code](#) suggested many changes to make the Code work better, and which were all incorporated in the final law.
 - Similarly, amendments to the Motor Vehicles Act were based on the recommendations of the Committee.

Money Bill classification:

- The Finance Bill has made major amendments to the Life Insurance Corporation Act, 1956.
 - As this is a Money Bill, the Rajya Sabha cannot make any amendments, and has only recommendatory powers.
- The last few years have seen the dubious practice of marking Bills as 'Money Bills' and getting them past the Rajya Sabha.
- Some sections of the Aadhaar Act were read down by the Supreme Court of India due to this procedure.
 - However, with a dissenting opinion that said that the entire Act should be invalidated.
- The Finance Bills, over the last few years, have contained several unconnected items such as restructuring of tribunals, the introduction of electoral bonds, and amendments to the foreign contribution act.
- It would be useful if the Court can give a clear interpretation of the definition of Money Bills and provide guide rails within which Bills have to stay to be termed as such.

Budget passed without elaborate discussion:

- During this session, the Union Budget was presented, discussed and passed.
- The Lok Sabha had listed the budget of just five Ministries for detailed discussion and discussed only three of these; 76% of the total Budget was approved without any discussion.
- This behaviour was in line with the trend of the last 15 years, during which period 70% to 100% of the Budget have been passed without discussion in most years.
- The Constitution requires the Lok Sabha to approve the expenditure Budget (in the form of demand for grants) of each department and Ministry.

The missing Deputy Speaker:

- A striking feature of the current Lok Sabha is the absence of a Deputy Speaker. By the time of the next session of Parliament, two years would have elapsed without the election of a Deputy Speaker.
- Article 93 of the Constitution states that "... The House of the People shall, as soon as may be, choose two members of the House to be respectively Speaker and Deputy Speaker...."
- Usually, the Deputy Speaker is elected within a couple of months of the formation of a new Lok Sabha.
- The issue showed up starkly this session when the Speaker was hospitalised. Some functions of the Speaker such as delivering the valedictory speech were carried out by a senior member.

Conclusion:

- The deterioration in Parliament's functioning is not a recent phenomenon.
- While over the last few years most Bills have been discussed in the House and have had less disruptions, the scrutiny of Bills has suffered as they are not being referred to committees.
- Parliament has a central role in our democracy as the representative body that checks the work of the government.

- It is also expected to examine all legislative proposals in detail, understand their nuances and implications of the provisions, and decide on the appropriate way forward.
- In order to fulfil its constitutional mandate, it is imperative that Parliament functions effectively.
- This will require making and following processes such as creating a system of research support to Members of Parliament, providing sufficient time for MPs to examine issues, and requiring that all Bills and budgets are examined by committees and public feedback is taken.
- In sum, Parliament needs to ensure sufficient scrutiny over the proposals and actions of the government.

F. Prelims Facts

Nothing here for today!!!

G. Tidbits

1. Suez Canal blocked, India eyes Cape of Good Hope

What's in News?

A huge container ship has blocked the Suez Canal which is likely to take weeks to free. Officials have stopped all ships from entering the channel.

This topic has been covered in the 26th March 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis.

- More than 200 vessels are waiting on the North and South sides of the Suez Canal and about 60 vessels are joining this queue daily.
- \$200 billion of India's trade flows with Europe, North America and South America are at risk due to the blockage of the Suez Canal.
- The Department of Commerce has worked out an action plan to cope with the crisis, including possibly re-routing shipments through the Cape of Good Hope.
 - Export promotion agencies have been asked to identify cargo with perishable items that need priority movement.
 - They have been advised to explore the option of re-routing ships via the Cape of Good Hope.

2. India, Pak. hold brigade commander-level meet

What's in News?

A brigade commander-level meeting between the Indian and the Pakistani armies was held in J&K's Poonch district.

- The meeting comes amid a complete peace maintained by the two armies along the Line of Control (LoC).
- It is the first such meet since the joint statement by the two countries reaffirming their commitment to abide by the 2003 ceasefire agreement.

Read more on this topic covered in 26th February 2021 Comprehensive News Analysis.

H. UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Q1. Arrange the following from West to East:

1. Cape Agulhas
2. Cape Hanglip
3. Cape of Good Hope
4. Cape Point

Choose the correct option:

- a. 3, 4, 2, 1
- b. 3, 2, 1, 4
- c. 1, 2, 4, 3
- d. 3, 4, 1, 2

Answer: a

Explanation:

West to East: Cape of Good Hope, Cape Point, Cape Hanglip, Cape Agulhas.

Q2. The Tigray region, recently in news, is located in which country?

- a. Ethiopia
- b. Eritrea
- c. Sudan
- d. Somalia

Answer: a

Explanation:

The Tigray Region is the northernmost region of Ethiopia.

Q3. Consider the following statements with respect to the SVEEP Program:

1. It is the flagship program of the Election Commission of India.
2. The program has been launched to tackle the menace of paid news and fake news during elections.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

- a. 1 only
- b. 2 only
- c. Both 1 and 2

d. Neither 1 nor 2

Answer: a

Explanation:

- Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation program, better known as SVEEP, is the flagship program of the Election Commission of India for voter education, spreading voter awareness and promoting voter literacy in India.
- SVEEP's primary goal is to build a truly participative democracy in India by encouraging all eligible citizens to vote and make an informed decision during the elections.

Q4. Consider the following statements with respect to Electoral Bonds:

1. While the buyer of the Electoral bonds must fulfil KYC norms, electoral bonds don't carry the name of the buyer.
2. Electoral bond can be received only by a registered political party that has secured at least 1 per cent vote in the last general election to an Assembly or Parliament.
3. They do not carry interest rate and cannot be traded in the secondary market.

Which of the given statement/s is/are correct?

- a. 1, 2 and 3
- b. 2 and 3 only
- c. 1 and 2 only
- d. None of the above

Answer: a

Explanation:

All the statements are correct.

- While the buyer of the Electoral bonds must fulfil KYC norms, electoral bonds don't carry the name of the buyer.
- The bonds are issued by the SBI in denominations of Rs 1,000, Rs 10,000, Rs 1 lakh, Rs 10 lakh and Rs 1 crore.
- Political parties registered under Section 29A of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which have secured not less than 1% of the votes in the last general election to an Assembly or Parliament, are eligible to open current accounts for the redemption of electoral bonds.
- They do not carry interest rate and can't be traded in the secondary market.

I. UPSC Mains Practice Questions

1. The Parliament must function effectively and ensure sufficient scrutiny over the proposals and actions of the government in order to fulfil its constitutional mandate. Elucidate. (15 Marks, 250 Words) [GS-2, Polity and Governance]
2. What do you understand by Electoral Bonds Scheme? Critically evaluate the role of the electoral bonds in ensuring transparency in political funding. (15 Marks, 250 Words) [GS-2, Polity and Governance]

