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1. Supreme Court Directives on National Testing Agency (NTA) Reforms

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Institutionalisation over Reaction:** The Supreme Court emphasised that NTA reforms must be institutionalised and sustained over time, rather than serving as knee-jerk responses to exam paper leaks.
- **Continuity of Expert Panels:** The Court cautioned against discarding the findings of previous panels when setting up new committees, highlighting the need to integrate past recommendations seamlessly.
- **Integration of Tech Solutions:** While acknowledging the creation of a Nandan Nilekani-led task force for technological overhauls, the SC stressed building upon the foundational structural reforms suggested by the K. Radhakrishnan committee.
- **Addressing Systemic Vulnerabilities:** Petitions from medical associations pointed to recurring failures in conducting exams like NEET-UG, requiring long-term institutional accountability.

- **Policy Consistency:** A Bench led by Justice P.S. Narasimha observed that reform measures must be vibrant and carried forward consistently by successive administrative officers.
- **Multi-Layered Governance:** Effective examination management requires blending structural governance reforms with advanced, leak-proof technological solutions.

Essential Definitions

- **National Testing Agency (NTA):** An autonomous, self-sustained testing organization established to conduct entrance examinations for admissions/fellowship in higher educational institutions.
- **Institutionalisation of Reforms:** The process of embedding permanent rules, structured protocols, and administrative mechanisms within an agency rather than relying on temporary ad-hoc measures.

- **Systemic Failure:** A breakdown in processes or governance that is widespread and inherent to the operational system, rather than an isolated administrative error.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Article 14 of the Constitution:** Guarantees the Right to Equality. Paper leaks and unfair practices violate equal opportunity for candidates appearing in competitive examinations.
- **Article 21 of the Constitution:** Encompasses the Right to Life with Dignity, extending to fair education access and transparent selection procedures for youth.
- **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024:** Enacted to curb paper leaks, cheating, and fraudulent practices in public recruitment and entrance examinations.
- **Societies Registration Act, 1860:** The legal framework under which the NTA was registered as an autonomous society.

Conclusion Reforming standard testing bodies requires balancing advanced technology with robust administrative oversight. Ensuring policy continuity across expert committees safeguards the integrity of national competitive exams, restoring public trust in the meritocracy of educational selection systems.

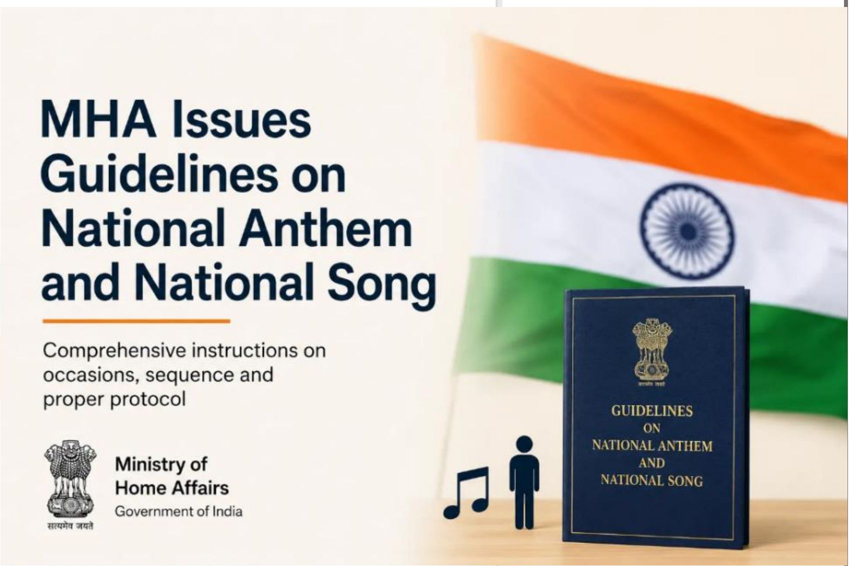
UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Governance, Transparency & Accountability, Important Aspects of Governance, Role of Autonomous Bodies (NTA), Mechanisms for Educational Reforms.
- **GS Paper IV:** Ethics and Human Interface, Integrity in Public Administration, Fairness in Competitive Systems.

2. Judicial Protocols on State Songs, National Anthem, and State Autonomy

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Discretion to State Governments:** The Madras High Court clarified that the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has left the decision regarding the sequence of rendering State songs during official events to the discretion of State governments.
- **Dismissal of PIL:** The first Division Bench of Chief Justice Sushrut Arvind Dharmadhikari and Justice G. Arul Murugan dismissed a Public Interest Litigation as infructuous following a revised MHA circular issued on July 9, 2026.
- **Scope of MHA Guidelines:** The Centre clarified that its instructions primarily regulate the sequence between the National Song (*Vande Mataram*) and the National Anthem when rendered together, without prohibiting or mandating specific placements for State songs.
- **State Reaffirmation Order:** Following the Central clarification, the Tamil Nadu government issued a Government Order reaffirming its instructions that *Tamil Thai Vazhthu* should be sung at the commencement of official events in educational institutions and government offices.
- **Ceremonial Practice:** The court highlighted that State songs like *Tamil Thai Vazhthu* can be sung first, followed by the National Song and National Anthem, as observed during official judicial events.
- **Federal Harmony:** The ruling preserves state-level cultural autonomy while adhering to Central directives regulating national symbols during formal state functions.



Essential Definitions

- **State Song (Tamil Thai Vazhthu):** An official anthem adopted by a State government to commemorate its linguistic heritage, cultural history, and regional identity during formal state functions.
- **Infructuous Petition:** A legal proceeding or writ petition that has lost its practical purpose, utility, or legal cause of action due to subsequent administrative or legislative developments.
- **Government Order (GO):** An executive directive issued by a State government to enforce policy guidelines, administrative rules, or state ceremonial protocols.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Article 51A(a) of the Constitution:** Mandates a Fundamental Duty for every citizen to abide by the Constitution and respect its ideals, institutions, the National Flag, and the National Anthem.
- **Prevention of Insults to National Honour Act, 1971:** Provides statutory regulations to prevent intentional disrespect toward national symbols, including the National Anthem and National Flag.

- **Article 162 of the Constitution:** Relates to the executive power of the State, which extends to matters with respect to which the State Legislature has power to make laws, including state cultural protocols.

Conclusion The High Court's ruling reinforces administrative federalism by allowing States the authority to establish performance protocols for regional cultural symbols while maintaining due reverence for national symbols during public and constitutional events.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Indian Constitution—Federal Structure, Allocation of Powers, Executive Autonomy of States, Center-State Relations, and Governance.
- **GS Paper IV:** Fundamental Duties, Respect for National and Regional Symbols, Public Administration Ethics.

3. SEBI Proposed Revamp of Settlement Regulations Framework

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Rationalised Settlement Formula:** SEBI proposes linking base settlement amounts to minimum statutory penalties under securities laws, using entity-specific multipliers to enhance predictability.
- **Separation of Disgorgement:** Calculations will exclude wrongful gains or investor losses from the base settlement amount, recovering them separately via disgorgement to prevent double-counting.
- **Structured Interest Rates:** Disgorgement interest is set at 9% per annum from the transaction date until the settlement application or final order, rising to 12% per annum thereafter.
- **Fast-Track Mechanism:** Settlement applications involving amounts up to ₹10 lakh will bypass the High Powered Advisory Committee (HPAC), routing directly from the internal committee to a panel of Whole Time Members.
- **Expanded Mitigating Factors:** The maximum number of mitigating circumstances considered during assessment will increase from three to five, incorporating factors such as management changes.
- **Pre-Notice Settlement Window:** Entities will receive a settlement notice before a show-cause notice (SCN) (except in prosecution cases), offering a 60-day window to apply and avoid long enforcement proceedings.

Essential Definitions

- **Settlement Mechanism:** A regulatory dispute-resolution process allowing entities to resolve alleged securities law violations without admitting or denying guilt, through monetary payments or administrative commitments.

- **Disgorgement:** An equitable remedy requiring a wrongdoer to surrender illegal profits or wrongful gains generated through non-compliant activities.
- **Show-Cause Notice (SCN):** A formal administrative notice issued by a regulatory body requiring an entity to explain why legal or disciplinary action should not be taken against it.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **SEBI Act, 1992 (Section 15JB):** Statutory provision granting SEBI the authority to settle administrative and civil enforcement proceedings.
- **Securities Contracts (Regulation) Act, 1956 & Depositories Act, 1996:** Statutory frameworks governing penalty structures and market intermediary compliance.
- **SEBI (Settlement Proceedings) Regulations, 2018:** The existing legal regime proposed to be replaced by the updated 2026 regulations to streamline dispute resolution.
- **Article 14 of the Constitution:** Principles of non-arbitrariness, proportionality, and equal protection of law embedded within administrative settlement processes.

Conclusion The proposed overhaul shifts SEBI's enforcement philosophy toward a predictable, transparent, and non-prohibitive dispute resolution framework. By reducing excessive financial deterrents while preserving disgorgement, the reforms aim to minimize prolonged litigation and strengthen market confidence.

UPSC Relevance

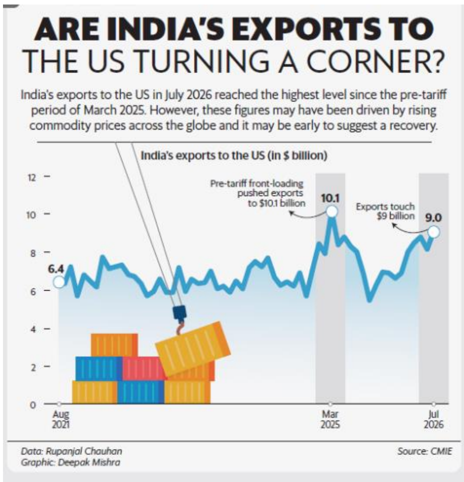
- **GS Paper II:** Statutory, Regulatory, and Quasi-judicial Bodies (SEBI), Governance Reforms, Transparency and Accountability in Capital Markets.
- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy, Capital Market Reforms, Regulation of Financial Intermediaries, Ease of Doing Business.

4. Trends in India's Bilateral Merchandise Exports to the United States

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Export Rebound in July 2026:** India's merchandise exports to the United States reached $9.0 billion in July 2026, marking the highest monthly export value recorded since the pre-tariff high of March 2025.
- **Historical Pre-Tariff Peak:** Exports had previously peaked at $10.1 billion in March 2025, primarily driven by pre-tariff front-loading by importers before trade restrictions took effect.

- **Role of Global Commodity Prices:** Analysts caution that the recent surge in export valuation may be largely inflated by rising global commodity prices rather than a sustained recovery in export volume.



- **Volatility Post-2021 Growth:** Following steady growth from $6.4 billion in August 2021, trade flows experienced sharp fluctuations influenced by changing global demand, tariff shifts, and macroeconomic adjustments.
- **Uncertainty on Long-Term Recovery:** Economists note it remains premature to declare a structural turnaround in India's export trajectories without broader global demand stabilisation.
- **Strategic US Trade Linkages:** The United States continues to be one of India's largest single export destinations, making bilateral trade flows critical for national trade balance management.

Essential Definitions

- **Front-Loading:** An economic practice where buyers accelerate order schedules and import goods ahead of anticipated tariff increases, regulatory shifts, or price hikes.
- **Merchandise Exports:** Tangible goods produced domestically and sold to foreign nations, excluding services, intellectual property, or digital transfers.
- **Trade Balance:** The monetary difference between a country's total value of exports and imports over a given period.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Foreign Trade (Development and Regulation) Act, 1992:** Primary legislation providing the framework for the development and regulation of foreign trade by facilitating imports and augmenting exports in India.
- **Article 246 of the Constitution (Seventh Schedule):** Entry 41 of the Union List grants exclusive legislative competence to the Parliament of India over "Trade and commerce with foreign countries; import and export across customs frontiers."
- **Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) 2023:** Executive framework aimed at promoting export competitiveness, market diversification, and integrating Indian exporters into Global Value Chains (GVCs).

Conclusion While the July 2026 export figures demonstrate resilience in trade with the United States, long-term export growth requires addressing structural barriers, enhancing manufacturing competitiveness, and mitigating risks associated with commodity price volatility and external trade policy shifts.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy, Foreign Trade Trends, Export-Import Policy, Global Value Chains, External Sector and Balance of Payments.
- **GS Paper II:** International Relations, Bilateral Trade Agreements, India-US Strategic Economic Partnership.

5. Inflation Pressures and Monetary Policy Stance of the RBI

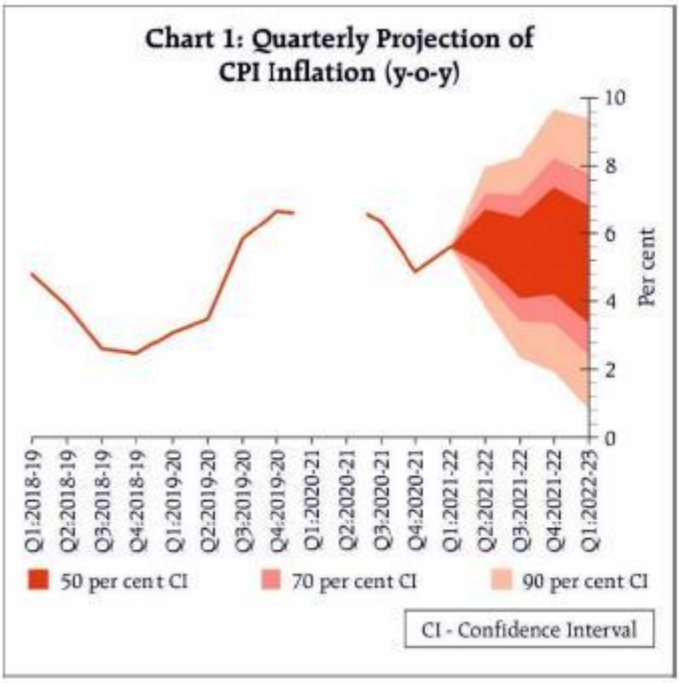
Key Highlights & Summary

- **Repo Rate Maintenance:** The Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) unanimously decided to keep the benchmark repo rate unchanged at 5.25%, maintaining a neutral monetary policy stance.
- **Uptick in Retail Inflation:** Consumer Price Index (CPI) based retail inflation rose steadily from 2.74% in January to 4.45% in July, driven primarily by costlier food and fuel items.
- **Modest Core Inflation:** Core inflation, which excludes volatile food and energy prices to reflect underlying demand dynamics, remained controlled at 3.9% in July.
- **Persistent Risk Factors:** RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra noted that persistent price pressures in input commodities could pass through into broad-based headline inflation, necessitating future monetary tightening.
- **Average Inflation Levels:** Headline inflation averaged 3.93% between January and July, remaining within the statutory inflation-targeting tolerance band.
- **Data-Dependent Approach:** The central bank opted to await clearer macroeconomic indicators regarding whether inflationary pressures will remain localized or spread across broader consumption categories before recalibrating policy rates.

Essential Definitions

- **Monetary Policy Committee (MPC):** A statutory 6-member committee constituted by the Central Government under the RBI Act to fix the benchmark interest rate needed to contain inflation.
- **Core Inflation:** A measure of inflation that excludes highly volatile components like food and fuel, offering a clearer picture of long-term underlying inflation trends.
- **Repo Rate:** The key policy interest rate at which the central bank lends short-term money to commercial banks against government securities to manage liquidity and control inflation.

Legal and Constitutional Framework



- **Reserve Bank of India Act, 1934 (Section 45ZB):** Provides the statutory mandate for the constitution and functioning of the Monetary Policy Committee.
- **Flexible Inflation Targeting (FIT) Framework:** Enacted via a 2016 amendment to the RBI Act, setting a statutory target of 4% retail CPI inflation, with an allowable tolerance band of +/-2% (2% to 6%).
- **Article 246 (Seventh Schedule - Union List):** Entry 38 grants exclusive legislative jurisdiction to Parliament over matters relating to Reserve Bank of India, currency, coinage, and legal tender.

Conclusion The MPC’s decision highlights a cautious balancing act between supporting economic growth and containing supply-side inflationary shocks. Maintaining rate stability while signaling vigilance ensures financial market predictability while keeping open the option for policy tightening if food and fuel prices trigger secondary inflation effects.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy, Monetary Policy Framework, RBI and Monetary Governance, Inflation Control, Consumer Price Index (CPI).
- **GS Paper II:** Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (RBI), Governance Mechanisms, Macroeconomic Stability Frameworks.

6. SHANTI Act 2025 and Private Participation in India's Civil Nuclear Sector

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Enactment and Enforceability:** The Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Act came into force on 20 December 2025, modernising the legal structure for civil nuclear energy.

- **Single Composite Licensing:** The Act introduces a single unified licensing framework that enables private players like NTPC, Adani Power, and Tata Power to build, own, operate, and decommission nuclear facilities.
- **Beyond Power Generation:** Expands nuclear applications into non-power sectors, including captive power generation, industrial process heat, and green hydrogen production.

- **Strategic State Control:** Retains exclusive government control over sensitive fuel cycle operations, including uranium enrichment, heavy water production, and spent fuel reprocessing.
- **Support for Advanced Tech:** Facilitates domestic deployment of Small Modular Reactors (SMRs), attracting private engineering and procurement contractors like L&T and BHEL.
- **Implementation Timeline:** The draft SHANTI Rules, 2026, undergo public consultations, with standard operating procedures and site allocations expected over a 12 to 18-month timeline.

Essential Definitions

- **SHANTI Act, 2025:** Integrated legislation replacing legacy statutes to regulate nuclear energy, streamline operator liabilities, and enable private entry into civil nuclear generation.
- **Small Modular Reactors (SMRs):** Advanced nuclear reactors producing up to 300 MW per unit, built using modular factory manufacturing for flexible grid integration.
- **Composite Licence:** A streamlined regulatory authorization consolidating site selection, construction, operation, and decommissioning into a unified approval framework.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Atomic Energy Regulatory Board (AERB):** Granted full statutory status under the SHANTI Act to strengthen independent regulatory oversight and safety standards.
- **Statutory Repeals:** Consolidated the legislative framework by replacing the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 and the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage (CLND) Act, 2010.
- **Article 246 (Seventh Schedule - Union List):** Entry 6 reserves "Atomic energy and mineral resources necessary for its production" under the exclusive legislative domain of Parliament.
- **Appellate Forum:** Establishes the Atomic Energy Redressal Advisory Council, designating the Appellate Tribunal for Electricity (APTEL) as the judicial appellate authority.

Conclusion The SHANTI Act marks a pivotal transition from a state-monopolised framework to a competitive civil nuclear energy market. Addressing long-term operational challenges like fuel supply security, technology adoption, and skilled talent availability will determine its contribution to India's net-zero transition.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper III:** Infrastructure (Energy Sector), Science and Technology (Nuclear Technology), Energy Security and Net-Zero Clean Energy Goals.

- **GS Paper II:** Statutory and Regulatory Bodies (AERB), Legislative Overhauls, Policy Reforms in Energy Governance.

7. Relocation of the Budget Press under the Central Vista Redevelopment Project

Key Highlights & Summary

- **New Facility Allocation:** The secure printing facility for the annual Union Budget and Economic Survey is being relocated to the under-construction Kartavya Bhawan 9 on Maulana Azad Road.

- **Structural Limitations at KB 1:** Floor load-bearing limitations at Kartavya Bhawan 1 prevented the installation of heavy post-press machinery, such as paper-cutters and trimmers, necessitating an upgraded venue.
- **Interim Printing Operations:** Due to technical trials of newly procured lighter machinery, the Union Budget 2026-2027 was printed in the North Block premises.
- **Historical Precedent of Secrecy:** The dedicated Budget Press was originally shifted to the North Block basement following a leak of the 1956-1957 Budget taxation proposals from the Rashtrapati Bhavan press.
- **Strict Lock-In Protocol:** Administrative security rules require involved officials to remain locked inside the printing press without external communication until the Finance Minister presents the Budget in Parliament.
- **Infrastructure Modernization:** CPWD's updated plans, approved by the Delhi Urban Art Commission, align executive housing needs with modern administrative infrastructure under the Central Vista project.

Essential Definitions

- **Budget Press:** A specialized, high-security facility under the Finance Ministry where confidential Union Budget documents and official economic reports are printed.
- **Lock-In Period:** A mandatory quarantine protocol confining key officials within the printing venue to ensure complete confidentiality until the budget speech begins.
- **Central Vista Project:** The ongoing redevelopment scheme aimed at modernizing India’s central administrative area in New Delhi, including new secretariat complexes named Kartavya Bhawan.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Article 112 of the Constitution:** Mandates the presentation of the Annual Financial Statement to Parliament for every financial year.

- **Official Secrets Act, 1923:** Statutory framework protecting official secrets and government confidences, under which unauthorized disclosures like the 1956 Budget leak are prosecuted.
- **Article 265 of the Constitution:** Establishes that no tax shall be levied or collected except by authority of law, reinforcing the need for strict confidentiality of taxation proposals prior to legislative intro.

Conclusion The relocation of the Budget Press to Kartavya Bhawan 9 resolves long-standing structural constraints while preserving institutional memory. Upgrading infrastructure balances administrative efficiency with the strict operational secrecy required for fiscal policy presentation.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Central Secretariat Organizations, Governance, Central Vista Project, Institutional Security Practices.
- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy, Annual Financial Statement (Budget) Process, Public Finance Management.

8. Palestine Endorsement of India’s UNSC Seat and Bilateral Aid

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Support for UNSC Bid:** Palestinian Ambassador to India Abdullah Abu Shawesh publicly endorsed India’s candidature for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council for the 2028-29 term.
- **High-Level Diplomatic Visit:** MEA Secretary Sripriya Ranganathan visited Ramallah and met Palestinian Foreign Minister Varsen Aghabekian Shahin, marking the first high-level Indian visit to the region since October 2023.
- **Reaffirmation of Two-State Solution:** India reiterated its consistent foreign policy stance backing a negotiated two-state solution for peace and stability in West Asia.
- **Infrastructure and Healthcare Support:** Finalization of modalities for constructing a new hospital in the West Bank alongside ongoing operations for a vocational training centre.
- **Humanitarian Assistance to Gaza:** India is providing critical medical aid, including dialysis machines routed via Jordan and artificial limbs for amputees in Gaza.
- **Global South Leadership:** Palestine acknowledged India’s emerging role as a major economic power capable of brokering regional peace through balanced ties with both Israel and Palestine.

Essential Definitions

- **Non-Permanent UNSC Seat:** A temporary seat on the UN Security Council elected by the UN General Assembly for a two-year term, distributed according to regional representation without veto power.
- **Two-State Solution:** A proposed diplomatic framework to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by establishing two independent states, Israel and Palestine, living side-by-side in peace and security.

- **Global South:** A collective term for developing, emerging, and low-income countries located primarily in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, emphasizing shared economic and geopolitical priorities.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Article 51 of the Constitution:** Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSP) mandate the State to promote international peace and security, maintain just and honorable relations between nations, and foster respect for international law.
- **UN Charter (Chapter V):** Sets out the composition, powers, and electoral procedures of the United Nations Security Council under Articles 23 and 27.
- **UN General Assembly Rules of Procedure:** Governs the election of non-permanent UNSC members, requiring a two-thirds majority of members present and voting in the UNGA.

Conclusion Palestine's endorsement highlights India's diplomatic goodwill and credibility across West Asia. By pairing development assistance with constructive dialogue, India continues to strengthen its strategic footprint while positioning itself as an effective voice for the Global South in global security governance.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** India and its Neighborhood- Relations, Effect of Policies and Politics of Developed and Developing Countries on India's Interests, Important International Institutions (UNSC).
- **GS Paper IV:** Human Values and International Ethics, Humanitarian Assistance in Conflict Zones.

9. Judicial Stand on Execution by Hanging and Right to Dignity

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Constitutional Validity Upheld:** The Supreme Court dismissed a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) challenging hanging as a method of execution, affirming its constitutional validity under Article 21.
- **Adherence to Precedent:** The Court relied on the three-judge bench precedent in *Deena vs. Union of India* (1983), which held that hanging by the long-drop method is quick, certain, and causes no greater pain than other methods.
- **Parliamentary Intent:** The Bench noted that Parliament consciously retained hanging under Section 393(5) of the newly enacted Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), 2023.
- **Evolutionary Judicial Scope:** The SC clarified that the issue is not closed forever, leaving room for future challenges if compelling scientific, medical, or empirical evidence emerges.

- **Comparison with Global Methods:** Petitioners highlighted alternatives like lethal injection, shooting, and nitrogen hypoxia, but failed to establish that these methods offer a distinct advantage over hanging without risk of failure.

- **Capital Punishment Statistics:** India has recorded 8 executions since 2001 (most recently four convicts in 2020), while over two-thirds of nations worldwide have abolished capital punishment in law or practice.

Essential Definitions

- **Long-Drop Hanging:** A calibrated execution technique where the drop length is calculated based on the convict's weight and height to cause immediate cervical fracture and unconsciousness.
- **Right to Die with Dignity:** A constitutional extension of Article 21 ensuring that if the State deprives a person of life according to procedure established by law, the process must be free from torture or barbarity.
- **Nitrogen Hypoxia:** An execution method involving the inhalation of pure nitrogen gas, inducing asphyxiation without triggering suffocative panic.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Article 21 of the Constitution:** Guarantees the Right to Life and Personal Liberty, requiring any legal procedure for execution to be fair, just, reasonable, and non-barbaric.
- **Section 393(5) of the BNSS, 2023:** Mandates that when a sentence of death is awarded, the judgment shall direct that the person "be hanged by the neck till he be dead".
- **Bachan Singh vs. State of Punjab (1980):** Established the landmark "rarest of rare cases" doctrine governing the imposition of capital punishment in India.
- **187th Law Commission Report (2003):** Recommended amending the law to allow lethal injection as an alternative method of execution.

Conclusion The Supreme Court's ruling strikes a balance between judicial deference to legislative authority and human rights mandates. While upholding hanging based on existing scientific benchmarks, the judiciary leaves open the possibility of future reforms as scientific, medical, and administrative standards evolve.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Indian Constitution—Fundamental Rights (Article 21), Criminal Justice System Reforms, Judicial Precedents, Role of the Judiciary.
- **GS Paper IV:** Ethics and Human Rights, Capital Punishment Ethics, Moral Dilemmas in State-Sanctioned Executions.

10. Methodology and Historical Challenges in Caste Enumeration

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Open-Ended Methodology:** The Registrar General of India decided to use an open-ended question for caste enumeration in the census without supplying a predetermined list of castes.

- **Risk of Data Fragmentation:** Enumerators are bound to record responses exactly as stated by respondents, leading to subjective entries like surnames or misspelt names being recorded as separate caste entries.
- **Pitfalls of Past Exercises:** The 2011 Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) generated over 46.7 lakh distinct caste names due to open-ended entries, rendering the raw dataset unusable compared to 4,147 castes recorded in 1931.
- **Historical Precedents:** Colonial censuses up to 1931 faced similar challenges, including groups consolidating under broader terms like "Yadav" or adopting new religious identities like "Aad Dharmis".

- **Expert Recommendations:** Former ICSSR chairman S.K. Thorat advocated using a predetermined reference list across all categories to minimize administrative errors.
- **Targeted Questionnaires:** Experts suggest separate questionnaires focusing on specific exclusions faced by Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes to better capture social hierarchies.

Essential Definitions

- **Open-Ended Caste Enumeration:** A census collection method where respondents self-report their caste without choosing from a standardized dropdown list or pre-approved code frame.
- **Predetermined List:** A standardized reference registry of officially recognized castes used by enumerators to categorize self-reported entries accurately.
- **Registrar General of India (RGI):** An office under the Ministry of Home Affairs responsible for conducting the Decennial Population Census and managing vital statistics.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Article 340 of the Constitution:** Empowers the President to appoint a commission to investigate the conditions of socially and educationally backward classes.
- **Article 341 & 342 of the Constitution:** Authorize the President to specify the lists of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes for each State and Union Territory.
- **Census Act, 1948:** The statutory framework governing the conduct of population censuses and defining the duties of census officers and respondents.
- **Indra Sawhney v. Union of India (1992):** The Supreme Court upheld the constitutional validity of reservation for Other Backward Classes, emphasizing the need for empirical data to identify backwardness.

Conclusion Accurate caste enumeration requires balancing self-identification with structured administrative methodology. Implementing predetermined registries and standardized protocols is crucial to transforming raw social responses into reliable data for policymaking while preventing data fragmentation.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Welfare Schemes for Vulnerable Sections, Governance and Policy Interventions, Constitutional Bodies, Role of RGI.

- **GS Paper I:** Social Empowerment, Communalism, Regionalism, Secularism, Indian Society and Caste Systems.

11. India's Arctic Narrative and Geopolitical Strategy

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Need for Clear Arctic Strategy:** A Parliamentary Standing Committee report highlighted a widening gap between India's expanding Arctic ambitions and its actual operational capabilities.
- **Climate Security & Teleconnection:** Scientific studies demonstrate Arctic-Indian monsoon teleconnection, where rapid Arctic warming directly alters monsoon dynamics vital for domestic agriculture.
- **Geopolitical & Mineral Significance:** The Arctic is emerging as a critical geopolitical hotspot, offering strategic access to shipping routes like the Northern Sea Route and reserves of critical minerals.

- **Historical Legacies:** India was an original signatory to the 1920 Svalbard Treaty, granting visa-free access and commercial rights in the Svalbard archipelago.
- **Institutional & Diplomatic Gaps:** India currently lacks a dedicated senior official or "Polar Ambassador" for polar diplomacy, unlike other Asian observer nations such as China and Japan.
- **Infrastructure & Resource Deficit:** India faces a shortfall in dedicated capital funding and awaits an indigenous Polar Research Vessel (PRV) to expand beyond its Himadri station.

Essential Definitions

- **Monsoon Teleconnection:** The indirect meteorological linkage where environmental changes in polar cryospheres influence climatic patterns like the South Asian southwest monsoon.
- **Svalbard Treaty (1920):** An international treaty recognizing Norway's sovereignty over Svalbard while granting equal non-discriminatory commercial and scientific access to signatory nations.
- **Polar Research Vessel (PRV):** A specialized ice-class vessel equipped with ice-breaking capabilities designed for scientific navigation and data collection in polar oceans.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Indian Antarctic Act, 2022:** Domestic legislative framework fulfilling India's obligations under the Antarctic Treaty System, serving as a model for polar governance.
- **UNCLOS (1982):** United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, governing maritime jurisdictions, seabed resource exploitation, and navigation rights in polar waters.
- **Article 51(c) of the Constitution:** Directive Principles of State Policy encouraging respect for international law and treaty obligations in global commons management.

Conclusion Translating India's Arctic Policy 2022 into tangible capability requires bridging structural, financial, and diplomatic gaps. Establishing dedicated polar governance mechanisms and polar-capable infrastructure will safeguard national climate security and ensure an active voice in Arctic governance.

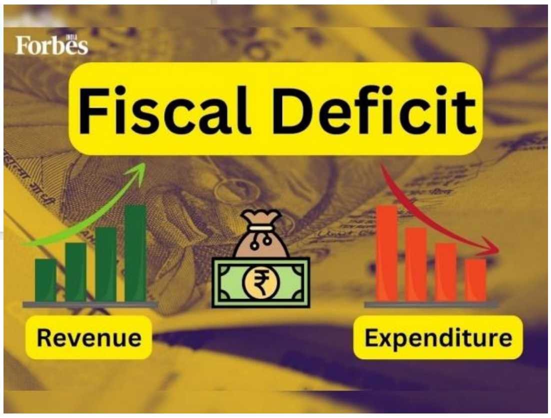
UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Bilateral, Regional, and Global Groupings, Effect of Policies of Developed and Developing Nations on India's Interests (Arctic Council), International Treaties.
- **GS Paper III:** Environment, Climate Change Mitigation, Impact of Global Warming on Monsoon Patterns, Science and Technology Developments.

12. Public Expenditure Management and Fiscal Discipline in State Finances

Key Highlights & Summary

- **Fiscal Pressure and Revenue Gaps:** Tamil Nadu faces structural fiscal constraints characterized by high debt, revenue account deficits, and committed liabilities like pensions and salaries, highlighting the need for enhanced collection efficiency over immediate taxation.
- **CAG Audit Findings:** Comptroller and Auditor General reports revealed a net underspend of ₹33,302.53 crore in 2023-24, alongside ₹1,078 crore in unnecessary supplementary grants across 26 grants where original funds remained unexhausted.
- **Unreconciled Expenditure and Revenue:** Audit figures showed 2.89% of revenue expenditure and 6.14% of revenue receipts were not reconciled with the Accountant General's records, indicating systemic gaps in accounting discipline.
- **Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB):** The adoption of Zero-Based Budgeting mandates that budget allocations are not automatically carried forward from previous years but must be freshly justified based on need and cost-efficiency.
- **Outcome-Oriented Spending:** Transitioning to Performance-Based Budgeting shifts the focus from financial outlays to tangible physical metrics, such as cost per kilometre of road or household connections established.



- **Revenue Leakage Control:** CAG flagged ₹1,538.18 crore in GST irregularities across 337 cases, underscoring the imperative of exhausting compliance gaps and broadening the tax base before introducing new levies.

Essential Definitions

- **Zero-Based Budgeting (ZBB):** A budgeting methodology requiring every line item of expenditure to be justified from a zero base for each new financial period, rather than relying on incremental adjustments.

- **Performance-Based Budgeting:** A financial allocation model that links public funding directly to measurable physical outcomes and performance benchmarks of administrative programs.
- **Reconciliation of Accounts:** An accounting process matching official department expenditure and revenue statements against records maintained by the Accountant General to ensure financial accuracy.

Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Article 202 of the Constitution:** Mandates the presentation of the Annual Financial Statement before the State Legislature for every financial year.
- **Article 205 of the Constitution:** Regulates Supplementary, Additional, or Excess Grants, requiring that supplementary provisions be sought only when initial appropriations prove genuinely insufficient.
- **Article 151 of the Constitution:** Requires CAG audit reports on state finances to be submitted to the Governor for laying before the State Legislature.
- **State Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management (FRBM) Act:** Establishes statutory targets for state revenue deficits, fiscal deficits, and debt-to-GSDP ratios.

Conclusion Improving public financial management in state governments hinges on institutionalizing fiscal discipline through outcome-based budgeting, rigorous reconciliation, and sealing GST compliance leakage. Prioritizing expenditure rationalization over premature taxation ensures optimal utilization of public funds while maintaining long-term debt sustainability.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy, Government Budgeting, Fiscal Federalism, Public Expenditure Management, Resource Mobilization and Revenue Leakage.
- **GS Paper II:** Role of CAG in Public Accountability, Governance Reforms, Financial Relations Between Center and States.