

Mains Master

Average annual sitting days in LS down to 55

Context:

- The 17th Lok Sabha, India's lower house of Parliament, concluded its term with an average of only 55 sitting days per year, a significant drop from the 135 days under Prime Minister Nehru's era.
- This decline is partly attributed to the pandemic, but early adjournments also played a role.

Key Findings:

- Fewer Sitting Days:** The 17th Lok Sabha held just 274 sittings in five years, compared to previous terms with more.
- Hasty Bill Passing:** 58% of bills were passed within two weeks, with some like the J&K Reorganisation Bill rushed through in two days.
- Limited Debate:** 35% of bills saw less than an hour of discussion in Lok Sabha, raising concerns about scrutiny.
- Standing Committee Neglect:** Only 16% of bills went to committees, lower than recent Lok Sabhas.
- Private Member Bills Ignored:** Only 2 out of 729 PMBs were discussed, highlighting limited space for individual MP initiatives.

Implications:

- Reduced Scrutiny:** Fewer sittings and quick bill passage raise concerns about proper legislative oversight and debate.
- Representation Concerns:** Limited PMB discussion undermines opportunities for individual MPs to raise regional or specific issues.
- Constitutional Breach:** The absence of a Deputy Speaker for the entire term raises questions about adherence to constitutional mandates.

Overall:

The declining number of sitting days and rushed bill passages in the 17th Lok Sabha raise concerns about the effectiveness of Parliament as a deliberative body and its ability to represent diverse voices.

Conjuring a catharsis

Context:

- The Indian Finance Ministry presented a White Paper in Parliament, outlining the economic performance of the previous UPA government (2004-2014) under Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. It paints a picture of mismanagement, corruption, and missed opportunities, claiming responsibility for subsequent repair and reform under the current NDA government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.
- This move was immediately countered by the opposition Congress party, which released a Black Paper titled "10 years of Anyay Kaal (Era of Injustice)". This document criticizes the NDA government's economic policies, highlighting issues like demonetization, the Goods and Services Tax (GST) implementation, unemployment, farmer distress, and high inflation.

Background:

- Both the White and Black Papers serve as political tools aimed at influencing public perception of their respective economic records before upcoming elections.
- The White Paper conveniently avoids mentioning controversial NDA policies like demonetization, which many economists believe had a negative impact on the economy.

Key Findings:

- UPA (White Paper):**
 - Accused of botching the economy through policies leading to slow growth and high inflation.
 - Blamed for perpetuating a culture of corruption, citing examples like coal, 2G spectrum, and Commonwealth Games scandals.
 - Pointed out missed opportunities for reforms, specifically in Aadhaar and GST implementation.
- NDA (White Paper):**
 - Claimed credit for lifting India's economy to become the world's fifth largest, emphasizing achievements like GST and Aadhaar adoption.
 - Presented themselves as reformers who addressed UPA's shortcomings and accelerated economic progress.
 - Underlined their commitment to transparency and cleaner governance compared to the UPA.

How Good is the Government's Claim?

- The White Paper's narrative is heavily biased, omitting crucial data like real GDP growth and employment rates for both UPA and NDA periods.
- It conveniently ignores internal opposition within the NDA regarding Aadhaar and GST implementation, showcasing them as solely NDA initiatives.
- The document fails to address critical pending reforms in land and labor sectors, which have stagnated under the NDA's rule.

What the Government Missed:

- Honesty and Transparency:** Recognizing both successes and failures of both UPA and NDA governments would promote trust and a more balanced view.
- Data-Driven Analysis:** Replacing finger-pointing with objective data and analysis would strengthen arguments and allow for informed public discourse.
- Addressing Current Challenges:** Instead of dwelling on the past, focusing on solutions for pressing issues like unemployment, stagnant wages, and farmer distress would demonstrate a commitment to genuine progress.

Overall Outlook:

- Both the White and Black Papers are partisan documents aimed at winning political mileage, lacking objectivity and genuine analysis.
- This reduces voters' ability to make informed decisions based on a holistic understanding of economic performance under both governments.
- The Indian public deserves a more nuanced and evidence-based discussion on economic policy, shifting the focus from political blame games to finding solutions for present and future challenges.

What are the changes in the new Water Act?

Context

The Lok Sabha passed the Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Amendment Act, 2024, sparking debate and concerns about its potential impact on water pollution control in India. This legislation amends the 1974 Act, which established the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) to regulate industrial water discharge and prevent pollution of water bodies.



Background:

The Water (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1974, played a crucial role in environmental protection by:

- Mandating industries to obtain permission from their respective SPCB before setting up factories. This ensured compliance with pollution control norms and proper treatment of industrial effluents before discharge into water bodies.
- Authorizing SPCBs to monitor industrial activities and enforce regulations. Failure to comply could result in fines or even imprisonment for up to six years, acting as a significant deterrent against environmental violations.
- However, no industries in India have actually faced imprisonment for environmental violations despite the provision existing in the original Act. This raises questions about the effectiveness of the deterrence factor and the implementation of penalties.

Changes:

The 2024 Amendment introduces several key changes, including:

- Replacing imprisonment for "minor" violations with fines: This removes the potential for jail time for certain non-severe offenses, aiming to reduce "harassment" of businesses and citizens. However, the definition of "minor" remains unclear and raises concerns about potential leniency towards polluters.
- Empowering the Central government to exempt specific categories of industries from SPCB consent: This grants the Centre significant discretion in exempting certain industries from obtaining permission before setting up plants, potentially impacting pollution control measures in those sectors.
- Giving the Centre authority to issue guidelines for SPCB consent processes and select their chairpersons: This increases central control over pollution control boards, potentially raising concerns about state autonomy and potential for political influence.
- Introducing penalties for tampering with monitoring devices: This aims to prevent interference with equipment used to assess industrial compliance with pollution norms, ensuring accurate data collection for enforcement purposes.

Implications:

The potential consequences of these changes are multifaceted:

- Reduced "harassment" of businesses: Streamlining processes and replacing imprisonment with fines could incentivize compliance and ease administrative burdens for industries.
- Increased compliance through financial penalties: Replacing jail time with fines might motivate timely action and investment in pollution control measures due to financial repercussions.
- Weaker enforcement and potential for increased pollution: Exemptions for certain industries and reduced fear of imprisonment could lead to lax enforcement and increased pollutant discharge if not carefully managed.
- Centralization of control and potential lack of transparency: Granting the Centre more power over SPCB consent and selection of chairpersons might raise concerns about state autonomy and potential for lack of transparency in exemption processes.

Concerns:

Several concerns have been raised regarding the amendments:

- Opposition parties argue that the changes weaken environmental protection: They believe removing imprisonment weakens deterrence and could lead to increased water pollution, particularly from exempted industries.
- Environmental activists express similar concerns: They fear that reduced penalties and centralized control could hinder effective enforcement and accountability, ultimately harming water quality and endangering ecosystems.

Way forward:

Ensuring effective water pollution control in India requires:

- Clear and well-defined guidelines for classifying "minor" violations: Precise definitions are crucial to prevent misuse and ensure proper enforcement for serious offenses.
- Robust monitoring and enforcement mechanisms: Continuous monitoring of industrial activities and prompt action against violators are essential to deter non-compliance and maintain water quality.
- Transparency and accountability in exemption processes: Clear criteria and public scrutiny are vital to prevent misuse of exemptions and ensure responsible decision-making.
- Public engagement and awareness: Raising public awareness about water pollution and its consequences can encourage citizens to hold authorities accountable and advocate for stricter environmental protection.

Finding a balance between streamlining industrial processes and ensuring effective water pollution control remains a key challenge. Careful implementation, robust monitoring, and transparency are crucial to ensure the amended Act does not weaken India's environmental protection efforts.

Prelims Booster

Brumation

- 🦎 Brumation is a state of dormancy or reduced activity specific to reptiles, serving as a survival strategy during colder months when environmental conditions become challenging.
- 🐢 This phenomenon is comparable to hibernation in mammals but is adapted to the unique physiology of reptiles, triggered by dropping temperatures and diminishing food availability.
- 🏠 Reptiles exhibit various behaviors during brumation, such as retreating to underground burrows, rock crevices, or other sheltered areas that offer more stable temperatures.
- ⏱️ One of the key adaptations during brumation is a significant slowing of metabolism, enabling reptiles to endure prolonged periods without consuming food, ranging from weeks to several months.
- 🐢 The observed instances of brumation span across different reptilian species, including box turtles and painted turtles, which burrow into the mud at the bottom of ponds or lakes.
- 🏠 Snakes may seek refuge in underground dens or caves, while lizards often hide under rocks or within vegetation to ride out the challenging conditions.
- ⚡ Brumation is a critical survival mechanism, allowing reptiles to conserve energy and minimize resource requirements until more favorable conditions return, ultimately enabling them to endure adverse environmental conditions and emerge when temperatures rise.

The patterns of global warming are more important than its levels

- 🌡️ The 1.5 degrees C threshold's significance is questioned, highlighting its origin in political negotiations rather than scientific precision.
- 🌐 A new study, relying on palaeo proxies, suggests Earth's surface has exceeded the 1.5 degrees C warming threshold, but it uses data from only one location, limiting its global representativeness.
- 🪸 Palaeo proxies utilize chemical evidence from organic matter like corals, stalactites, and stalagmites to estimate past temperatures, providing local temperature anomaly estimates rather than global trends.
- 🌪️ The lack of clear explanations for the patterns associated with the 1.5 degrees C threshold and global warming levels is highlighted, particularly concerning location-specific disasters like wildfires, cyclones, droughts, and floods.
- 🌩️ The complexities of the 2023 monsoons are discussed, attributing them to a combination of El Niño, its unusual pattern, and global warming, with specific emphasis on the unclear explanation for the cooling experienced in the Indian subcontinent.
- 🌊 El Niño is described as a warming paradigm, influencing global warming patterns, and its impacts on monsoons and other regions are highlighted, showcasing the importance of understanding patterns for effective climate management.
- 📊 The article underscores the need for accurate predictions of warming patterns to adapt to changing seasons and mitigate the harms caused to lives, livelihoods, and economies, challenging the focus on arbitrary temperature thresholds without a strong scientific basis.

