

## Mains Master

**Poll bonds: 22 firms donated over ₹100 crore**

Context: Election Commission Publishes Electoral Bond Data:

- The Election Commission releases data on electoral bonds received from the State Bank of India on March 12, 2024.
- This data sheds light on the flow of funds from corporations to political parties.

Shocking Revelation: Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR Emerges as Largest Donor:

- Despite facing scrutiny from the Enforcement Directorate, Future Gaming and Hotel Services PR, led by Santiago Martin, becomes the single largest donor.
- The firm contributes a staggering ₹1,368 crore through electoral bonds between April 12, 2019, and January 24, 2024.

Angle of Crony Capitalism:

- Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Tops in Encashing Bonds:
- BJP encashes electoral bonds worth ₹6,060.5 crore, representing over 47.5% of the total bonds encashed by all parties.
- This dominance raises concerns about the influence of money in politics.
- Large Donations Highlight Money's Influence:
- Significant contributions from corporations underscore the potential for crony capitalism.
- It emphasizes the power dynamics between big businesses and political parties.

Role of Money:

- Political Parties Receive Substantial Amounts Through Electoral Bonds:
- Major political parties like BJP, Congress, and All India Trinamool Congress receive significant sums through electoral bonds.
- BJP encashes ₹6,060.5 crore, Congress receives ₹1,421.9 crore, and All India Trinamool Congress gets ₹1,609.50 crore.
- Prominent Corporate Donors:
- Companies like Megha Engineering and Infrastructures Limited (MEIL), Western UP Power Transmission Company, Qwik Supply Chain, Haldia Energy, Vedanta, Essel Mining and Industries, Bharti Airtel, and Keventer Foodpark Infra feature among top donors.
- MEIL donates ₹966 crore, while Western UP Power Transmission Company contributes ₹220 crore, Qwik Supply Chain donates ₹410 crore, Haldia Energy contributes ₹377 crore, Vedanta donates ₹375.65 crore, Essel Mining and Industries contributes ₹224.45 crore, Bharti Airtel donates ₹198 crore, and Keventer Foodpark Infra donates ₹195 crore.

Way Forward: Reforms for Transparency and Democratic Integrity:

- Reforms in Campaign Finance Regulations and Electoral Bond Schemes:
- There is a pressing need for comprehensive reforms to enhance transparency and uphold democratic principles.
- Addressing loopholes and strengthening regulations will mitigate the undue influence of money in politics.

**Panel recommends simultaneous polls**

Context:

Former President Ram Nath Kovind heads a high-level committee that has proposed the idea of simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. The committee submitted its report to President Droupadi Murmu, recommending significant electoral reforms.

Background:

Currently, elections in India occur at different times, leading to frequent disruptions and logistical challenges. The proposal aims to streamline the electoral process by synchronizing various elections, starting with Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.

Key Recommendation of Committee:

- Simultaneous Elections: The committee recommends holding Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections simultaneously.
- Sequential Order: Following the general elections, municipal and panchayat polls should be conducted within 100 days.
- Streamlined Electoral Process: Synchronizing various elections aims to streamline the electoral process and reduce disruptions.
- Enhanced Efficiency: Conducting elections in a sequential order minimizes logistical challenges and ensures efficient utilization of resources.
- Promotion of Political Stability: Simultaneous elections promote political stability by providing a consistent electoral cycle and avoiding frequent disruptions in governance.
- Focus on Governance: By aligning election schedules, elected representatives can focus on governance rather than engaging in prolonged campaign activities.
- Cost Savings: Coordinating elections reduces the overall cost incurred by the government, political parties, and other stakeholders involved in the electoral process.
- Clarity and Continuity: A synchronized electoral calendar provides clarity and continuity in the democratic process, fostering trust among citizens and stakeholders.

Idea of Simultaneous Elections:

Simultaneous elections aim to:

- Reduce the frequency of elections, easing the burden on various stakeholders such as the government, businesses, courts, and civil society.
- Streamline the electoral process and governance by ensuring political stability and continuity.

Arguments in Favor:

- Efficiency: Simultaneous elections reduce the disruption caused by frequent elections, allowing elected representatives to focus on governance rather than campaigning.
- Cost Savings: Conducting multiple elections simultaneously reduces the overall cost incurred by the government, political parties, and other stakeholders.
- Political Stability: Synchronized elections promote political stability by reducing the uncertainty associated with frequent polls and government changes.

Arguments Against:

- Logistical Challenges: Implementing simultaneous elections across diverse regions with varying political landscapes poses logistical challenges.
- Violation of Federal Structure: Critics argue that simultaneous elections may undermine the federal structure by centralizing power and diluting the autonomy of states.
- Impact on Local Issues: Combining various elections may overshadow local issues and dilute the importance of municipal and panchayat elections.

Way Forward:

- The proposal requires careful consideration and consultation with all stakeholders, including political parties, state governments, and the Election Commission of India.
- Amendments to the Constitution and relevant statutes are necessary to implement simultaneous elections effectively.
- An implementation group should oversee the execution of recommendations and address any challenges that arise during the transition process.

## Bhutan's opening move, its Gelephu gambit

### Context:

- In a world increasingly focused on large-scale infrastructure projects to boost economic growth and global interconnectedness, Bhutan's proposal for a unique economic hub in Gelephu, a town bordering Assam in India, stands out as a strategic move.

### Background:

- Bhutan's economy is primarily driven by hydropower generation and tourism. However, the kingdom adheres to a policy of "high value, low volume" tourism to ensure environmental sustainability. This approach limits the potential for significant economic growth solely from the tourism sector.
- The Gelephu project is envisioned as a game-changer for Bhutan, aiming to create a carbon-neutral city focused on attracting foreign investment in key sectors like:
  - Information Technology (IT)
  - Education
  - Healthcare
  - Sustainable tourism

### Bhutan's Proposal:

- The Gelephu Mindfulness City (GMC) is a proposed 1,000 square kilometer special economic zone with a focus on sustainable practices and environmental consciousness.
- The core objective is to attract non-polluting industries that align with the principles of a carbon-neutral city. This could involve businesses in areas such as renewable energy, eco-tourism, and research institutions focused on sustainable development.
- The project also aspires to position Gelephu as a prominent regional wellness hub, offering high-quality healthcare, spa facilities, and centers for holistic well-being.
- Bhutan strategically positions the Gelephu project to complement India's "Act East" policy, which aims to enhance economic and strategic connections between India and Southeast Asian nations. Gelephu's location serves as a potential link towards creating a robust trade and commerce corridor in the region.

### Benefits for the Region:

- The development of Gelephu could significantly improve connectivity between India, Bhutan, and Southeast Asian countries. This would involve:
  - Upgrading transportation infrastructure such as roads and railways to facilitate the movement of goods and people.
  - Streamlining trade policies and regulations to create a more open and business-friendly environment.
- The establishment of Gelephu as a special economic zone has the potential to transform the region into a thriving trade and investment hub in South Asia. This could attract businesses from around the world, leading to:
  - Increased economic activity and job creation.
  - Knowledge sharing and transfer of expertise in various sectors.
  - A boost in the overall economic development of the region.
- Bhutan's strategic location bordering China makes the Gelephu project even more crucial. Success of the project could potentially reduce Bhutan's dependence on China for trade and economic ties. This would provide Bhutan with greater autonomy and bargaining power in the region.

### Challenges and Concerns:

- Gelephu's geographical location presents inherent difficulties. The region experiences:
  - Heavy rainfall and flooding during the monsoon season, requiring significant investment in flood management infrastructure.
  - The presence of surrounding forests and wildlife corridors necessitates careful urban planning to minimize environmental impact.
- Political instability in neighboring regions, particularly in the northeastern states of India and Myanmar, could pose security risks and hinder the smooth functioning of the economic zone.
- Bhutan's landlocked status makes it heavily reliant on India for essential infrastructure like transportation networks and trade routes. This necessitates close cooperation and support from the Indian government for the project's viability.

### India-Bhutan Relations:

- India and Bhutan have traditionally enjoyed strong diplomatic and economic ties. Bhutan is one of the few South Asian nations not currently under China's significant influence.
- To prevent Bhutan from seeking alliances elsewhere, particularly with China, India needs to actively support the Gelephu project by:
  - Providing financial assistance for infrastructure development.
  - Sharing technical expertise and resources.
  - Streamlining cross-border trade and investment regulations.

### Way Forward:

- The success of the Gelephu project hinges on India's active involvement and support. This would require:
  - Financial investments in crucial infrastructure projects like transportation networks, power grids, and communication systems.
  - Sharing technical expertise in areas like urban planning, sustainable development, and industrial development.
  - Streamlining cross-border trade regulations to create a more conducive environment for attracting foreign investment.
- Overcoming the geographical challenges of Gelephu's location will necessitate:
  - Implementing robust flood control measures.
  - Ensuring sustainable urban planning practices that minimize ecological disruption.
- Addressing regional security concerns requires:
  - Collaborative efforts between India and Bhutan to maintain stability in the border regions.
  - Fostering closer cooperation with neighboring countries to address potential security threats.

## CAA and status of judicial proceedings

### Context:

- The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), passed in December 2019, offers a fast-tracked path to Indian citizenship for undocumented immigrants belonging to specific religious communities facing religious persecution in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh.

### Background:

- The CAA sparked significant controversy and legal challenges due to concerns surrounding:
  - Potential Violation of Article 14: The Act seemingly discriminates against individuals based solely on their religion, potentially violating the Indian Constitution's guarantee of equality before the law.
  - Contradiction with the Assam Accord: The CAA establishes a cut-off date of December 31, 2014, for eligibility, contradicting the Assam Accord's 1971 cut-off date for determining Assamese citizenship.

### What is CAA:

- The CAA provides a mechanism for expediting citizenship applications for individuals belonging to specific religious minorities (Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Parsi, Christian, Jain) from neighboring countries who entered India on or before December 31, 2014.
- Certain areas in India's Northeast region, including Assam, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Tripura, are exempted from the purview of the CAA. This exemption aims to protect the indigenous populations in these regions.

### CAA and Judicial Proceedings:

- Numerous petitions challenging the CAA's constitutionality are currently pending before the Supreme Court of India.
- The Indian government argues that the CAA is a "benign" piece of legislation designed to address the issue of religious persecution faced by these specific minority communities in the neighboring countries.
- The Supreme Court has yet to deliver a final verdict on the CAA's validity.



## Challenges:

- Article 14 Violation: Critics argue that by excluding Muslims from the benefits of the CAA, the Act blatantly violates the fundamental right to equality enshrined in Article 14 of the Indian Constitution.
- Conflict with Assam Accord: The CAA's 2014 cut-off date directly contradicts the Assam Accord, signed in 1985, which established March 24, 1971, as the cut-off date for determining Assamese citizenship. This discrepancy raises concerns about potential demographic shifts in the region.
- Newly Notified Rules: Petitioners argue that the government bypassed established procedures and implemented the CAA by notifying rules before the Supreme Court delivered a final judgment on the Act's constitutionality. This raises concerns about the government potentially pre-empting the Court's decision.

## Way Forward:

- The Indian legal system awaits the Supreme Court's final judgment on the constitutionality of the CAA. This verdict will determine the Act's legal standing.
- The Court's decision on the validity of Section 6A of the Citizenship Act (related to the Assam Accord) will also significantly influence the CAA's fate. Section 6A establishes the 1971 cut-off date for determining citizenship in Assam. If the Court upholds the validity of this section, it could render the CAA incompatible with the existing legal framework.

## Current Status:

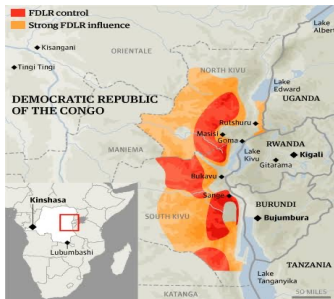
- The Ministry of Home Affairs notified rules to streamline the application process for obtaining citizenship under the CAA.
- Petitions challenging the newly formed rules and seeking a stay on their implementation are currently underway before the Supreme Court.

In essence, the CAA remains under legal scrutiny. The Supreme Court's verdict and the resolution of the legal challenges surrounding Section 6A of the Citizenship Act will ultimately determine the future of the CAA.

# Prelims Booster

## What are the causes of the flare-up in eastern Congo?

- Renewed clashes in eastern DRC between the Congolese army and Rwandan-backed M23 rebels have intensified, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis with increased fatalities, displacements, and food security risks.
- The conflict stems from historical tensions following the Rwandan genocide in 1994, leading to a cycle of violence and displacement of millions across borders, fueled by ethnic militias and power struggles in the region.



- The M23 rebels, formed in 2012 to defend Tutsi interests, have resurged in 2022, citing attacks by Hutu militias, prompting accusations of Rwandan support and straining relations between DRC and Rwanda.
- The escalation in violence has raised global concerns, with calls for immediate cessation of hostilities to prevent further casualties and alleviate the deepening humanitarian crisis in the region.

## China lithium boom slows as sagging prices batter high-cost miners

- Softening EV demand and a supply glut have led to a significant drop in spot lithium carbonate prices in China, impacting the mining sector and prompting a reassessment of output growth and new project plans.
- The high cost of extracting lithium from lepidolite, a hard rock ore, has made production unsustainable amid the prolonged price slump, causing a slowdown in mining activities and new projects in China and globally.
- China, a key player in the global lithium market, has seen a shift in focus towards more cost-effective lithium mining methods, such as brine deposits and spodumene, as lepidolite mining faces economic challenges.
- Analysts forecast a decrease in China's mined lithium output growth due to the lepidolite slowdown, with a shift towards more economically viable lithium sources, impacting the overall global lithium output growth projections.
- The challenging market conditions have forced many lithium producers to shut down production and cut jobs, with concerns over negative margins and production curtailment, particularly in regions like Jiangxi, where high-cost lepidolite projects are facing significant risks.

## Why govts. are seeing red on Rhodamine B in street food

- Governments are cracking down on the use of Rhodamine-B in street food due to its harmful effects on health, as it is a fluorescent dye used in industries like cosmetics, textiles, and leather, but not safe for consumption.
- Rhodamine-B has been found in cotton candy, sweets, manchurian items, and pakodas, posing serious health risks including allergies, cell death, damage to brain and organ tissues, and an increased risk of cancer with long-term consumption.
- The presence of Rhodamine-B in food items has prompted states like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka to ban its use, highlighting the importance of adhering to approved food colors and flavors deemed safe by regulatory authorities like FSSAI to protect public health.

## Panel formed to reform prices of drugs and medical devices

- The Department of Pharmaceuticals (Pricing Division) has established a committee to revamp the pricing framework for drugs and medical devices, with a report expected within three months.
- The committee's focus includes proposing institutional reforms within the NPPA, ensuring a balance between the pricing and availability of essential medicines, and offering incentives to support growth and exports in the pharmaceutical sector.
- The committee comprises three members: the Secretary of the Department of Pharmaceuticals, the Chairman of NPPA, and the Senior Economic Adviser of the Department of Pharmaceuticals, indicating a collaborative effort to address pricing challenges in the industry.

## Tamil Nadu tops illegal trade in shark body parts

- Tamil Nadu has been identified as the hub for illegal trade in shark body parts, accounting for nearly 65% of seizures between January 2010 and December 2022, according to a joint analysis by TRAFFIC and WWF-India.
- The analysis revealed that approximately 16,000 kg of shark fins were seized during this period, representing around 80% of all shark-derived products confiscated, with significant amounts of shark cartilage and teeth also intercepted.
- Following Tamil Nadu, states like Karnataka, Gujarat, Kerala, and Maharashtra were identified as key contributors to the illegal shark trade, as highlighted in the factsheet titled "Netted in illegal wildlife trade: Sharks of India."
- TRAFFIC, the Trade Records Analysis of Flora and Fauna in Commerce, is a global non-governmental organization dedicated to monitoring the trade in wild plants and animals to preserve biodiversity and promote sustainable legal wildlife trade, while combatting unsustainable illegal wildlife trade.
- Established in 1976 as a specialist group of the Species Survival Commission of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), TRAFFIC has evolved into a strategic alliance between the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and the IUCN, emphasizing the importance of wildlife conservation and responsible trade practices.