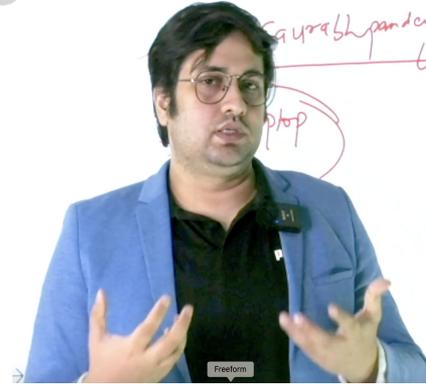


Topics - MINDS MAPS included (Daily current affairs 14th January 2025

- Target UPSC CSE Prelims 2025
- **The Strategic Significance of the Z Morh Tunnel.**
- **Diego Garcia**
- **The Gangasagar Mela**
- **Trichophyton indotineae**
- **Sada Region**
- **UNESCO's Transforming MENTalities.**
- **Introduction: The Need for Transparency in Elections**
- **Chagos Island**
- **Mains**



By saurabh Pandey



THE HINDU

Target Mains -2025/26 -

Q Trust and Transparency are the basis for sustenance of democracy “ Explain the statement in context of recent change in election rule.

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Q. The term Thiruvabharanam often seen in news is associated with which among the following. (The Hindu)

A) Sacred Jewellery

B) Buddhist text

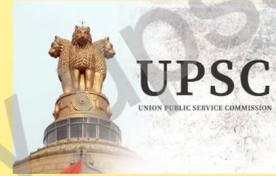
C) Port

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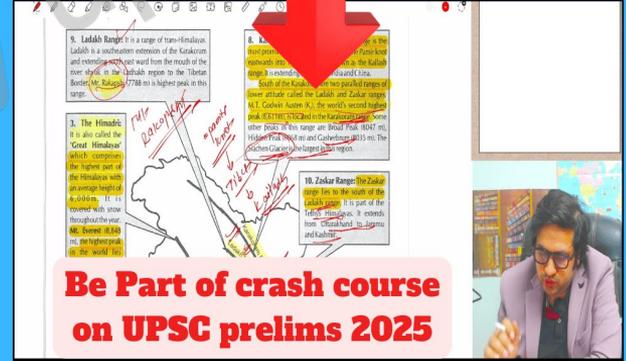
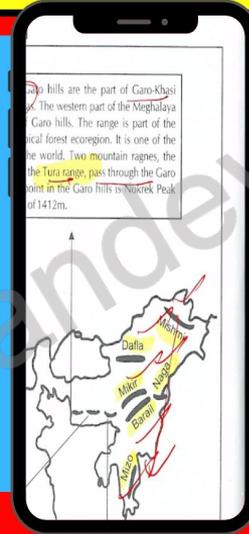
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Prime Minister inaugurates Z-Morh tunnel in J&K; remains silent on Statehood



Peerzada Ashiq
SONAMARG (GANDERBAL)

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who inaugurated the strategic Z-Morh tunnel in Sonamarg area of Ganderbal on Monday, remained non-committal on the timeline of restoration of Statehood to Jammu and Kashmir. But he said the new network of roads and railway lines in the Union Territory has bridged the distance between J&K and New Delhi.

Amid freezing conditions, Mr. Modi inaugurated the state-of-the-art 6.5-kilometre tunnel built at a cost of ₹2,700 crore. The tunnel has made tourist hotspot Sonamarg a round-the-year destination. Mr. Modi said the Z-Morh tunnel and the upcoming Zojila tunnel, connecting Kashmir with Ladakh, will ease the lives of the people in Kargil and Leh.

Referring to the militant attack of October 20, 2024 that left seven workers dead at the construction site, Mr. Modi said, "I salute the dedication of workers who braved harsh weather conditions and even risked their lives to complete this project."

Describing J&K as a destination with the "distinction of having the highest rail and road bridges and rope ways", Mr. Modi said, "The engineering of the Chenab bridge has amazed people across the world. Passenger train trials were completed last week on the bridge. The projects of the Chenani-Nashri tunnel, the Udhampur-Srinagar-Baramulla railway link and the rope ways at the Shankara-



Grand launch: Prime Minister Narendra Modi during the inauguration of a key tunnel in J&K on Monday. IMRAN NISSAR

charya temple, Shiv Khori temple and Baltal-Amar-nath shrine are underway. In all ₹42,000-crore of connectivity projects are being executed in J&K, which include the Katra-Delhi expressway, four national highway projects, two ring roads and 14 Sonamarg-like tunnels. J&K will be the most connected region. Tourists can now reach untouched destinations."

PM's promises

Referring to the upgraded connectivity, the Prime Minister said Viksit Bharat was only possible when all the regions of the country were well developed.

"J&K is the crown of the country and has to be beautiful and strong. I assure you Modi will walk the talk. Any hurdle in your dreams will be removed. 'Dilli ki doori' is already over now. We have to work together to fulfil dreams and have to take pledges together," the Prime Minister added.

Earlier, Mr. Abdullah, in his speech, made a case for

fulfilling the promise of restoration of Statehood. "On his previous visit to Kashmir on International Yoga Day, Prime Minister talked about three promises, which included eliminating the 'Dil ki doori aur Dilli ki doori [Distance of hearts and distance between Delhi-Srinagar]. People have started trusting you. You [PM Modi] have already fulfilled the promise of holding Assembly elections [in J&K], where no rigging or misuse of official machinery was reported. However, the third promise of Statehood is yet to be fulfilled," Mr. Abdullah said.

In response to Chief Minister Omar Abdullah's speech, where he referred to the Statehood demand, Mr. Modi remained silent on divulging any timeline. "When Modi makes a promise, he fulfils it. Every time has its right time. Right things will take place at the right time," he said.

NC MOBILISES PEOPLE

» PAGE 4

Saurabh Pandey upsc



Topic → The Strategic Significance of the Z Morh Tunnel:

The Z Morh Tunnel is more than just an engineering marvel; it serves as a crucial link between Kashmir and Ladakh. Here's why its importance cannot be overstated:

Enhanced Connectivity: The tunnel significantly reduces travel time between the two regions, transforming the way people and goods move.

All-Weather Access: By ensuring year-round access, the tunnel promotes economic activity even during harsh weather conditions.

Boosting Defense Logistics: Strategically located, it facilitates quicker deployment of resources and troops, enhancing national security.

Tourism Growth: With improved accessibility, tourism in the picturesque regions of Sonamarg and Ladakh is expected to flourish.

Economic and Social Implications:



The Z Morh Tunnel is set to usher in a new era of development in the region. Here's how:

Job Creation: Construction and tourism-related jobs will flourish, benefiting local communities.

Cultural Exchange: Enhanced connectivity fosters cultural interactions between the regions.

Infrastructure Development: It paves the way for further infrastructural projects, creating a ripple effect of growth.

15 Kanniyakumari fishermen detained near Diego Garcia

The Hindu Bureau

KANNIYAKUMARI

Fifteen fishermen who had ventured into the sea from the Thengapattinam fishing harbour in Kanniyakumari district were reportedly detained near the Diego Garcia island, part of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), on January 9 for allegedly crossing the maritime boundary.

Sources said eight of the fishermen were from Thoothoor in Kanniyakumari, while the remaining were from other parts of the country.

They would usually go deep-sea fishing and return to the shore only after a long haul.

The fishermen had put out to sea on December 29, 2024, from Thengapattinam on a mechanised boat owned by J. Paul Surgen of Thoothoor.



The fishermen had put out to sea on December 29 from the Thengapattinam harbour on a mechanised boat.

The news of the detention left the families of the fishermen in a state of shock. They urged the district administration to intervene and secure the fishermen's release.

A Fisheries Department official said more details of the detained fishermen could be disclosed only when a formal communication was received from the department.

upsc

Topic → Diego Garcia



- Diego Garcia is an atoll located in the Indian Ocean.
- It is part of the British Indian Ocean Territory.
- The atoll is home to a significant U.S. military base.
- Diego Garcia is known for its diverse wildlife and marine life.
- The atoll has a strategic location for military and logistical operations.
- It features beautiful beaches and is surrounded by coral reefs.
- The island has a complex history involving the displacement of its indigenous population.

Summary: Diego Garcia is a strategically important atoll in the Indian Ocean, known for its U.S. military base and diverse ecosystems



Gangasagar Mela: three people die in West Bengal



The Hindu Bureau

SAGAR

Three people have died at the Gangasagar Mela in West Bengal this year, which includes one person who drowned while taking a dip at the ghats on Sagar Island in front of the Kapil Muni temple.

The NDRF officials said a body was recovered at 7 a.m. on Monday. Five persons were airlifted from the mela after falling ill over the past three days.

The organisers announced on Monday that the holy dip for Makar Sankranti will begin on Tuesday at 6.58 a.m. on Tuesday and continue till 6.58 a.m. on Wednesday.

Topic → The Gangasagar Mela



- The Gangasagar Mela is an annual pilgrimage and fair held at Sagar Island in West Bengal, India.
- It takes place at the confluence of the Ganges River and the Bay of Bengal, making it a significant spiritual site.
- The event attracts millions of devotees who come to take a holy dip in the Ganges, believed to cleanse sins.
- The Mela typically occurs in January, coinciding with the Makar Sankranti festival.
- Pilgrims often travel long distances, with many walking for days to reach the site.
- The fair features various cultural programs, stalls, and religious discourses, enhancing the spiritual atmosphere.
- Authorities implement extensive arrangements for safety, sanitation, and crowd management due to the large influx of visitors.

Summary: The Gangasagar Mela is a major annual pilgrimage in West Bengal, attracting millions for spiritual cleansing at the Ganges' confluence

Doctors from 14 nations seek change in India-linked name of a hard-to-treat fungus



Bindu Shajan Perappadan
NEW DELHI

Dermatologists from India and 13 other countries, including Germany, have objected to the region-specific name given to a novel species of fungus – *Trichophyton (T.) indotineae* – that causes widespread and hard-to-treat skin infections and is resistant to most anti-fungal medicines.

The fungal species, named *Trichophyton indotineae*, has turned up in over 40 countries and its origin currently remains unknown.

Japanese dermatologists, who had spotted the fungus in patients from India and Nepal, proposed in 2020 that this fungus should be considered a new species and named

The doctors' group says that prejudicial naming impacts the perceptions of clinicians and public

Trichophyton indotineae, in line with a historical tradition of linking new infectious agents to specific locations.

The doctors' group said that prejudicial naming impacts the perceptions of clinicians and public alike, ignoring the exhortations of the World Health Organization, the American Society of Microbiology, and others, not to do so.

In this case, the species name *T. indotineae* was introduced based on isolates from just two patients, one Indian and one Nepalese, in whom the isolated fun-

gus had previously been identified as “*Trichophyton mentagrophytes* Internal Transcribed Spacer (ITS) genotype VIII/T. interdigitale”.

Unclear origin

“This has been proven to be demonstrably incorrect and often leads to considerable misinformation, stigma, and racial prejudice. This can ultimately harm science by politicising it and tarnish whole countries or regions and their populations for no fault of theirs, especially when their origin is unclear,” the group of doctors notes in a paper.

“Naming the fungus after India is unjustified and incorrect,” Kabir Sardana, Professor and Head of Dermatology at the Ram Manohar Lohia Hospital said.



-
- **Topic → Trichophyton indotineae**

- **Fungal Species:** Trichophyton indotineae is a species of fungus belonging to the Trichophyton genus.
- **Geographical Relevance:** This species has been identified in various regions, indicating its potential global distribution.
- **Pathogenicity:** T. indotineae is known to be a dermatophyte, which means it can cause skin infections in humans.
- **Clinical Significance:** It is associated with conditions such as tinea (ringworm), which affects the skin, hair, and nails.
- **Research Interest:** The emergence of T. indotineae has garnered attention in medical mycology due to its implications for public health.
- **Resistance Patterns:** There may be concerns regarding antifungal resistance in this species, necessitating further study.
- **Identification Methods:** Laboratory techniques are essential for the accurate identification of T. indotineae in clinical samples.

Summary: Trichophyton indotineae is a dermatophyte fungus linked to skin infections, with growing significance in public health and research



A mass blooming of *Ipoccai* plants on a sada. www.zele.com

A Konkani secret, the flat-top sada is a freshwater paradise

Manali Rane

The Konkani region located between the Arabian sea on one side and the Western Ghats on the other is well known for its beaches and temples.

As one travels across the Western Ghats towards Ratnagiri district, the landscape slowly transitions from mountain ranges standing a thousand metres tall, with steep slopes, to rolling hills with well flat tops locally called *sada*, meaning a large flat area. They are the result of centuries of erosion.

The sada are barren most of the year but become transformed during the monsoons. They are similar to the plateaux, locally called *patbar*, in the Satara district of Maharashtra, of which the Kasa Plateau is a well known example.

The sada, like the *patbar*, are rocky and harbour unique endemic flora that cover it in the monsoon season. A study undertaken in the southern part of Ratnagiri district between 2022 and 2024 explored the habitat and documented the biodiversity and the ecosystem services they provide. (The author was part of the study group.)

The biodiversity survey recorded 499 plant species, of which 89 are endemic to the Konkani region. The team recorded 31 species of reptiles, 41 species of amphibians, 86 species of birds, and 41 species of mammals in the region.

During the monsoons, the locals use small patches of *sadto* grow rice and millets (like *marchant*, *Eleusine coracina*) with traditional practices that don't require the use of pesticides and chemical

A survey recorded 499 plant species, of which 89 are endemic. The team recorded 31 species of reptiles, 41 species of amphibians, 86 species of birds, and 41 species of mammals

fertilisers.

This said, the sada itself is far more interesting for its biodiversity and culture.

The analysis of ecosystem services, in a study to be peer reviewed by hydrologist Renie Thomas and Divyanshu Fawar, revealed the villages in the sada have access to fresh water all year round even though they are located between dry, rocky open land and valleys of meandering saline creeks straddled with mangroves.

This was found to be due to the sada's geology. The highly weathered laterite soil layer on the top acts as a catchment for the rainwater and recharges the groundwater.

The communities here have access to freshwater through open step or dug wells, springs, and perennial streams that are conserved and maintained as part of rituals the locals have dedicated to deities. These observances also involve community rules regarding the residents' hygiene and the cleanliness of the natural ecosystem.

The area is also host to works of art called *geophytes*, dated to roughly 80,000 years ago.)

These waterbodies have also become habitats for freshwater turtles such as the vulnerable Indian flapshell turtle (*Geomyza punctata*) as well as water sources for leopards, jackals, hyenas, barking deer, and migratory birds, among others.

The land-use patterns of this region are changing. The open land and some of the croplands are increasingly being converted to orchards or residential areas, with various developmental projects set to come up. Mining for laterite stones is another threat.

The fact that the sada is also classified as a 'watershed' in the Wasteland Atlas makes matters worse.

(Manali Rane is a scientific officer with the Bombay Environmental Action Group.



Topic -- Sada Region



Geographical Features: The Konkan region is bordered by the Arabian Sea and the Western Ghats, known for its beaches and temples.

Landscape Transition: The landscape shifts from steep mountain ranges to rolling hills called sada, formed by centuries of erosion.

Monsoon Transformation: The sada, typically barren, flourish during the monsoon season, similar to the rocky plateaux in Satara district.

Biodiversity Findings: A study recorded 459 plant species (105 endemic), 31 reptiles, 13 amphibians, 169 birds, and 41 mammals in the Ratnagiri district.

Traditional Agriculture: Locals cultivate rice and millets on small patches of sada using traditional, chemical-free practices.



- The sada are barren most of the year but become transformed during the monsoons.
- They are similar to the plateaux, locally called pathar, in the Satara district of Maharashtra, of which the Kaas Plateau is a well-known example.
- The sada, like the pathar, are rocky and harbour unique endemic flora that cover it in the monsoon season.
- 💧 **Water Access:** The geology of the sada allows for year-round freshwater access through wells and springs, maintained by local rituals.
- 🏠 **Land Use Changes:** Increasing conversion of land for orchards and residential areas, along with mining threats, poses risks to the ecosystem.

Summary: The Konkan region's unique biodiversity and cultural practices are threatened by land-use changes and mining activities

Transforming 'men'-talities, redefining masculinity



As another International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women passes by (November 25), we face a stark truth: despite decades of advocacy, nearly one in three women worldwide has endured violence at the hands of men. While men are often the perpetrators, they can also be key agents of change. Addressing violence against women requires addressing men's roles and questioning traditional notions of masculinities based on strength, aggression and control. These notions need to be replaced by a culture where equality, empathy, and non-violence define alternative notions of manhood.

Violence against women can be seen, somewhat paradoxically, as a quintessential "men's issue" – a societal issue that demands the active engagement of men. From early childhood, boys are influenced by norms that tell them strength is dominance, that emotions are a weakness, and that asserting control is the way to protect their status. These deeply entrenched ideas not only harm women but also limit men's lives and their relationships, trapping them in cycles of suppressed emotions and aggressive behaviours. Recognising and reshaping these norms is essential for creating healthier relationships and a safer world.

The subject of men and masculinities has become a prominent focus within the development sector. Over the past two decades, academic research and grass-root efforts have revealed the importance of engaging with men, highlighted strategies that work, and shown how men are increasingly stepping out to challenge traditional gender norms. This growing shift reflects a recognition among men of their role in advancing gender equality.

An India report

UNESCO's Transforming MENTalities initiative has aimed to shift the way men engage with gender issues – not just as allies but as active participants in social transformation. This initiative challenges rigid and stereotyped ideas of masculinity and



Tim Curtis

Director, UNESCO South Asia Regional Office, part of Team UN in India



Ravi Verma

Executive Director, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) Asia

A UNESCO initiative with the goal of changing the way men engage with gender issues is making progress

fosters positive, supportive roles for men, engaging them as champions for gender equality. As we inch closer to Agenda 2030 – working to create an inclusive and equal world – UNESCO, in collaboration with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), is proud to present the report, "Engaging Men and Boys: A Report on Pathways to Gender Equality in India". This report documents 10 pioneering programmes across India that engage men and boys to address gender inequality.

Some of the interventions

Through impactful initiatives, these programmes encourage critical dialogues that are aimed at questioning traditional gender norms, reshaping concepts of masculinity, and fostering inclusive attitudes. By emphasising education, open discussions, and community-driven actions, these programmes empower participants to become advocates for gender equity within their household and within communities and institutions they are part of.

For example, 'Mardon Wali Baat (A man's thing)', an initiative by The YP Foundation, uses storytelling and social media to foster conversations around positive masculinities with young men on campuses and in communities. This intervention helps young men critically examine the limiting narratives they have grown up with, empowering them to embrace values of respect and equality. Similarly, Gender Equity Movement in Schools (GEMS), a collaboration between the ICRW and the Department of Education in the State of Rajasthan, uses interactive classroom activities to help adolescent boys see the harm in toxic masculinity and adopt more equitable gender attitudes. In one session, a boy reflected, "I used to think boys should only do outdoor chores. Now, I believe we should work alongside women at home." These moments of transformation create ripple effects that can reshape entire communities.

Initiatives such as 'Dekh Rekh (caring for each other)' and 'Hamari Shaadi (our marriage)'

encourage men's active participation in family nutrition and planning, tackling gender bias through small, everyday actions. These interventions prove that when men and boys are invited to engage with gender equality as a part of their lives, rather than as an abstract idea, change becomes possible.

The defining role of public figures

Change also becomes possible when men and boys have positive role models demonstrating equitable behaviours. These initiatives underscore the importance of role models who actively participate in household and care-giving responsibilities, reject violence as a solution, practise empathy, and embrace vulnerability. Public figures, in particular, can help normalise gender equality. For instance, a well-known Indian cricketer recently sparked a national conversation on shared parenting and responsibility by publicly committing to paternity leave. Actions such as these highlight how equitable relationships are rooted in care, respect, and partnership, redefining what it means to "be a man" in ways that uplift both individuals and communities.

The path to true equality is long, and the active participation of men is crucial in this journey. Beyond rejecting violence, men can challenge the stereotypes and cultural norms that perpetuate it. They must see themselves as essential contributors to change, helping dismantle toxic ideas of manhood. This requires a willingness to question the privileges that patriarchy grants the world and to explore ways to address the pressures and expectations that accompany these privileges. By reflecting on and reshaping their roles, men can play a transformative part in building a more equitable society for all.

In the new year, let us celebrate those men and boys who are "Transforming MEN'talities" and championing equality. Together, by redefining masculinity, we can create a world where every individual, regardless of gender, is free from violence and empowered to thrive.



Topic → UNESCO's Transforming MENTalities

- UNESCO's initiative focuses on transforming societal attitudes and behaviors related to gender equality.
- The program aims to challenge and change harmful stereotypes and norms that perpetuate gender-based violence.
- It promotes collaboration among various stakeholders, including governments, civil society, and educational institutions.
- The initiative emphasizes the importance of education in fostering gender equality and empowering individuals.
- It seeks to create sustainable change by engaging communities in discussions and actions around gender issues.
- The initiative aligns with UNESCO's broader goals of promoting peace, sustainable development, and human rights.
- It utilizes research and data to inform strategies and measure the impact of its efforts.
- Summary: UNESCO's Transforming MENTalities initiative aims to reshape gender norms and promote equality through education and community engagement

Resisting transparency, eroding public trust



Last year, presiding officer Anil Masih was caught on CCTV camera manipulating votes in the Chandigarh mayoral elections to help the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secure victory. The incident underlined the importance of infusing transparency in the electoral process to detect and prevent election fraud. It is ironic then that even before the year ended, the Central government brought an amendment to Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict public access to election-related records.

The amendment came days after the Punjab and Haryana High Court directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to provide information under Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules. Copies of Form 17C and CCTV footage of the Assembly elections in Haryana were among the records sought by the petitioner.

Rule 93 of the Conduct of Election Rules provides a framework for people to obtain information related to elections. Rule 93(2) originally stated that other than the records specifically exempt under Rule 93(1), all papers relating to elections shall be available for people to inspect and take copies of. The amendment to Rule 93(2) narrows the scope of people's right to information by adding a qualification that only "papers as specified in these rules relating to the election shall be open to public inspection". Records related to the electoral process, including Form 17C, video recordings and CCTV footage, will potentially get caught in the cross hairs of the new amendment.

Delays that led to doubts

The role of the ECI in the matter is particularly disconcerting. One of the safeguards in the Representation of the People Act, 1951, to prevent the ruling party from arbitrarily misusing its power to frame rules is that the rules can be made only "after consulting the



Anjali Bhardwaj

Transparency activist associated with the Satark Nagrik Sangathan and the National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information



Amrita Johri

Transparency activist associated with the Satark Nagrik Sangathan and the National Campaign for Peoples' Right to Information

The amendment to Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, to restrict public access to election-related records, has no place in a democracy

Election Commission". It is baffling why the institution vested with the responsibility of ensuring free and fair elections is opposed to transparency, especially at a time when serious questions have been raised about the sanctity of the electoral process.

In the general elections of 2024, the ECI did not put out voter turnout figures in absolute numbers after the completion of voting in the initial phases. This, coupled with an unusually high revision of 6% in voter turnout in some phases of the election, without any explanation, prompted a public demand for disclosure of Form 17C. Part I of this Form is filled by the Presiding Officer of each polling station at the close of voting and is submitted to the Returning Officer of the constituency. It contains information on the voter turnout and the number of votes recorded in the Electronic Voting Machine (EVM). Part II is filled on the day of counting by noting the votes secured by each candidate as recorded in the EVMs. The documents reveal whether or not voter turnout tallies with the votes polled and counted.

Several political parties also sought copies of Form 17C after the general elections, claiming an abnormally large increase in voter turnout between the figures declared by the ECI at the close of polls on the day of voting and the final turnout declared a few days later. For instance, an ally of the BJP, the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), claimed a massive increase between the two figures in some constituencies in Odisha, raising doubts about the integrity of the election process. In the Assembly elections held in Haryana and Maharashtra, similar concerns were raised and applications were again filed seeking copies of Form 17C and other election records.

Refusal to disclose information

Unfortunately, all these requests were stonewalled by the ECI. In a petition to the ECI, the BJD complained that even its

candidates were denied copies of Form 17C, despite making requests under the Representation of the People Act and the Right to Information Act, 2005.

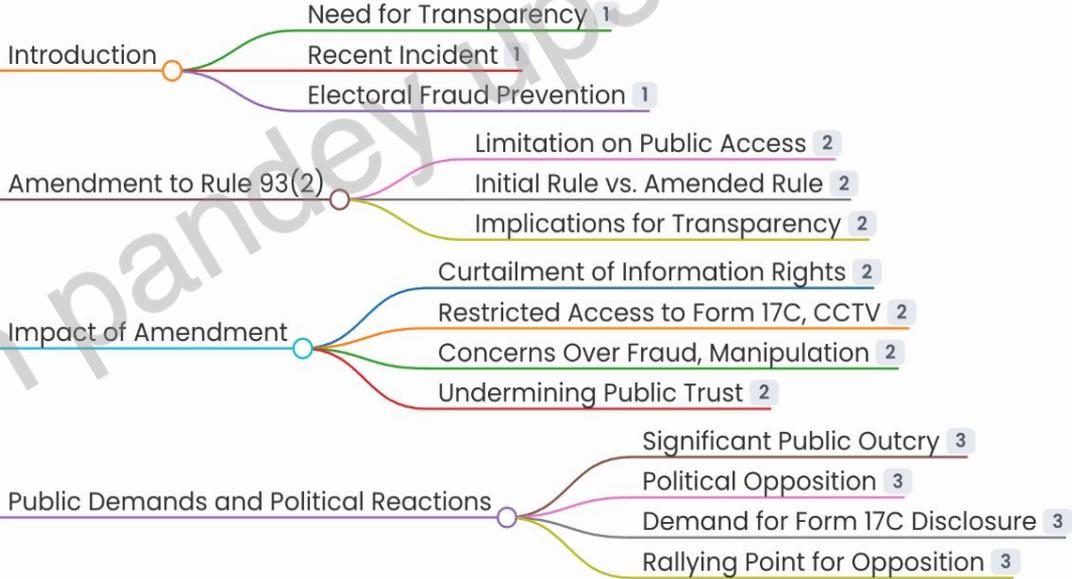
Further, when the matter of proactive disclosure of Form 17C was agitated in the Supreme Court, the ECI opposed it on the specious grounds that there is no legal mandate to share Form 17C with anyone other than the candidates and political parties through their designated polling agents. In fact, it claimed that there is a "one-to-one relationship between each Form 17C and its possessor" and its unrestricted disclosure is amendable to mischief as people may morph the images. Further, it argued that there is no technical facility to scan the documents.

The ECI's reluctance to share copies of Form 17C is inexplicable. Copies of Part I of Form 17C are given to polling agents who are present at the booth and there is no prohibition on their further dissemination. In Digital India, the claim that Returning Officers don't have the technical facility to scan and upload a couple of thousand pages is scarcely credible.

On December 26, 2024, more than six months after the general elections, the ECI released a set of 42 statistical reports terming it a "Treasure Trove for stakeholders including academicians, researchers, election watchers worldwide". This too had no data from Form 17C, which would conclusively resolve the vexed issue of difference between votes polled and counted.

Transparency is key to ensure public trust and participation in the electoral process. In 2024, the Supreme Court struck down the electoral bonds scheme as being violative of a voter's fundamental right to information. A challenge to the new amendment has already reached the apex court. Rather than wait for the verdict of the judiciary, the ECI and the BJP would do well to realise that this amendment has no place in a democracy and withdraw it.

Transparency in Elections: Challenges and Reactions



Saurabh Pandey UPSC

Topic→ Introduction: The Need for Transparency in Elections



Transparency is the bedrock of a robust electoral process. The recent incident surrounding the amendment to Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, has ignited a fervent debate. The amendment, which restricts access to crucial election-related documents, highlights the pressing need for transparency to detect and prevent electoral fraud.

Saurabh Pandey UPSC

The Amendment to Rule 93(2)



The amended Rule 93(2) introduces a significant limitation on public access to electoral records. Initially, the rule stated that all papers related to elections were available for public inspection, save for specific exemptions. However, the amendment narrows this access considerably, stating that only “papers as specified in these rules relating to the election shall be open to public inspection.”

This change has profound implications for the transparency of the electoral process.

Key Points:

The amendment curtails the public's right to information, especially impacting access to records like Form 17C and CCTV footage from polling stations.

This restriction has provoked concerns over potential electoral fraud and manipulation of voter turnout figures.

Critics argue that this amendment is a step backward for democracy, undermining public trust in the electoral process.



Public Demands and Political Reactions

The public outcry following the amendment has been significant. Various political parties have raised their voices against this move, demanding immediate re-evaluation. The demand for disclosure of Form 17C—a document vital for verifying voter turnout numbers—has become a rallying point for opposition parties.

Key Reactions:

Political parties, including the Biju Janata Dal (BJD), have formally requested access to Form 17C to validate discrepancies in voter turnout.

Claims of substantial increases in voter turnout figures have prompted inquiries into the integrity of the election process.

The Election Commission of India (ECI) has faced criticism for seemingly prioritizing operational secrecy over public accountability

ECI's Reluctance: A Matter of Concern



The Election Commission of India (ECI) has been under scrutiny for its refusal to disclose vital electoral documents such as Form 17C. This reluctance raises alarming questions about the integrity of the electoral process and the ECI's commitment to transparency.

Reasons for ECI's Reluctance:

Legal Justifications: The ECI claims there is no legal mandate to share Form 17C beyond designated polling agents, arguing that unrestricted disclosure could lead to potential mischief.

Technical Limitations: The ECI contends it lacks the technical capability to scan and upload thousands of pages, which many critics find dubious in today's digital age.

Public Trust Erosion: As the ECI stands firm in its decision, public trust in the electoral process continues to wane, leading to suspicions about the legitimacy of electoral outcomes.

Key Implications:

The refusal to disclose Form 17C may result in a significant erosion of public confidence in the electoral system.

Continued secrecy can create an environment ripe for electoral fraud, undermining the principles of democracy.

The Supreme Court's Role and Future Implications



The Supreme Court's intervention in electoral transparency has become increasingly pivotal. With ongoing challenges to the amendment and the ECI's practices, the judiciary could play a crucial role in shaping the future of electoral transparency in India.

Current Legal Landscape:

Supreme Court Ruling: The court recently struck down the electoral bonds scheme, affirming voters' fundamental right to information. This precedent could influence future rulings regarding transparency in elections.

Pending Challenges: Various petitions challenging the amendment to Rule 93(2) have reached the apex court, highlighting the urgent need for judicial oversight in electoral matters.

Potential Outcomes:

A favorable ruling could reinstate public access to essential electoral documents, thereby enhancing transparency.

Conversely, if the court upholds the amendment, it may further entrench secrecy, leading to increased public distrust and calls for electoral reform.

Public Demand for Transparency



The growing public outcry for transparency in electoral processes is a significant factor influencing the current political climate. Citizens, activists, and political parties alike are advocating for greater access to electoral information, underscoring the importance of accountability in democracy.

Key Drivers of Public Demand:

Recent Elections: Discrepancies in voter turnout figures and the refusal to disclose Form 17C have sparked widespread protests and demands for transparency.

Civil Society Engagement: Activists and non-governmental organizations are actively campaigning for electoral reform, emphasizing the need for transparency to ensure fair elections.

Informed Electorate: A well-informed electorate is crucial for a functioning democracy; citizens are demanding access to information that allows them to make informed decisions.

Strategies for Advocacy:



Grassroots Movements: Initiatives focused on educating the public about their rights and the importance of transparency in elections are gaining momentum.

Legal Challenges: Political parties and civil society organizations are increasingly resorting to the courts to challenge amendments and demand transparency.

Public Awareness Campaigns: Utilizing social media and traditional media platforms to raise awareness about the significance of electoral transparency is essential.

Conclusion

The recent developments surrounding the ECI's amendment to Rule 93(2) underscore the critical need for transparency in the electoral process. As public demand for accountability intensifies, it is essential for the ECI and political entities to recognize that transparency is not just a legal obligation but a cornerstone of democracy. The judiciary's role in this context will be crucial, and the outcome of ongoing challenges will likely shape the future of electoral integrity in India.

U.K., Mauritius cite progress in Chagos Islands discussions

Reuters
LONDON

Britain and Mauritius said on Monday there had been good progress in talks to finalise a deal over sovereignty of the Chagos Islands, including a U.S.-British military base, with London hoping for sign-off before Donald Trump's inauguration.

Britain struck a deal in October to hand over control of the Chagos Islands to Mauritius while retaining control of the military base on Diego Garcia, the largest island of the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean, under a 99-year lease – an agreement that needs to be ratified.

Since then, an ally of U.S. President-elect Donald Trump and new Mauritian Prime Minister



U.K.-based Chagos Islanders protest over the planned ceding of sovereignty of the islands by Britain to Mauritius in October. REUTERS

Navin Ramgoolam have publicly criticised the deal.

Mr. Ramgoolam said last month his government wanted to renegotiate the deal. Britain has said the deal works for all sides.

British media have reported that London has offered to frontload a tranche of payments to Mauritius for the lease of

the strategically important military base.

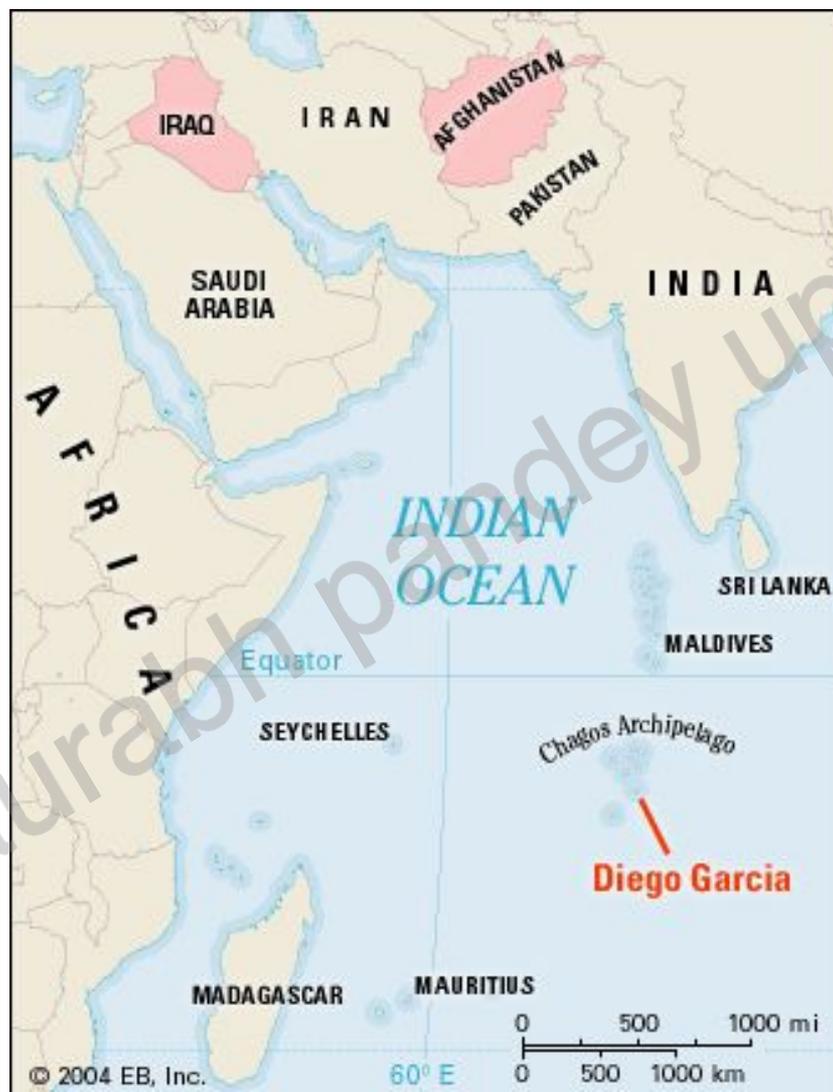
Mr. Trump takes office on January 20. Marco Rubio, his pick as Secretary of State, has said the deal poses a threat to U.S. security by ceding the archipelago – with its base used by U.S. long-range bombers and warships – to a country allied with China.



Topic → Chagos Island

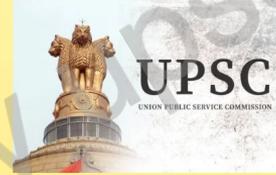
- **Largest Island:** Diego Garcia is the largest island in the Chagos Archipelago, located in British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT).
- **Military Base:** The island has served as a joint UK–U.S. military base since the 1970s.
- **Chagossian Expulsion:** The establishment of the military base followed the expulsion of the Chagossians by the UK government.
- **British Overseas Territory:** The Chagos Islands have been classified as a British overseas territory.
- **Sovereignty Transfer:** In October 2024, the UK agreed to transfer sovereignty of the islands to Mauritius.
- **Military Lease:** The military base will remain under a 99-year lease, pending treaty ratification.
- **Future Uncertainty:** The situation reflects ongoing geopolitical negotiations and the rights of the Chagossian people.

Summary: Diego Garcia, the largest island of the Chagos Archipelago, has been a UK-U.S. military base since the 1970s, and in 2024, the UK agreed to transfer sovereignty to Mauritius while maintaining a military lease



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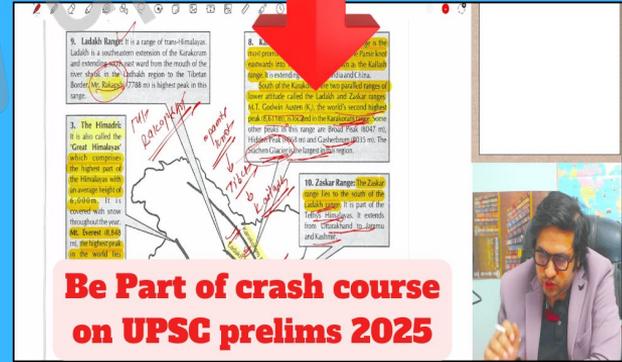
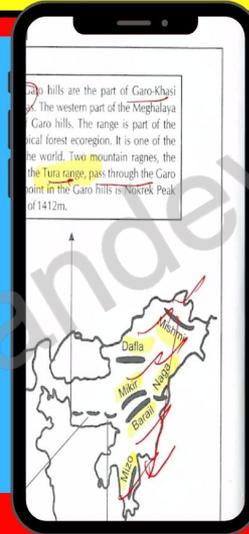
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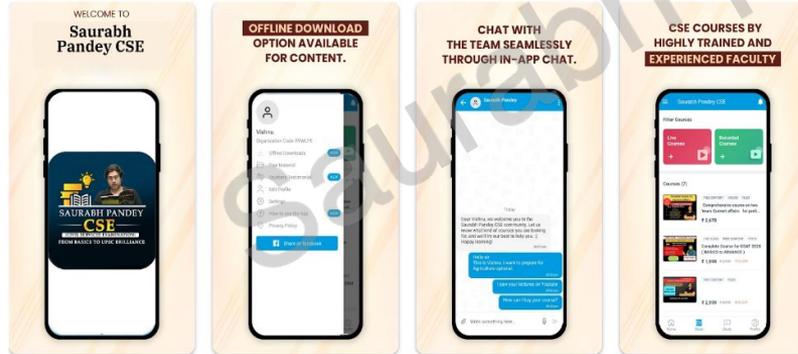
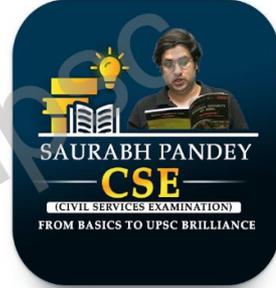
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