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Expected EDITORIAL EXPLAINED

for

IAS Mains Examination

06th July *to* 11th July 2026



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1.1. POLITY & GOVERNANCE

1.1.1. SHOULD THE RIGHT TO VOTE BE RECOGNISED AS A FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT?

Why in News?

Supreme Court continues to treat voting as a **statutory right**, its own jurisprudence has progressively constitutionalised several facets of voting, creating a constitutional paradox.

Introduction

Voting is the lifeblood of democracy, enabling citizens to exercise popular sovereignty. While India provides universal adult suffrage under **Article 326**, the Supreme Court regards voting as a **statutory right**. Recent judicial developments, however, have expanded its constitutional character, prompting calls for recognising it as a **fundamental right**.



Constitutional & Legal Framework

- **Article 324** – Vests the **Election Commission of India (ECI)** with the **superintendence, direction, and control** of elections to Parliament, State Legislatures, and the offices of the President and Vice-President.
- **Article 325** – Prohibits exclusion from electoral rolls **on grounds of religion, race, caste, or sex**, ensuring equality in the electoral process.
- **Article 326** – Mandates **Universal Adult Suffrage**, granting every citizen aged **18 years and above** the right to be registered as a voter, subject to constitutional disqualifications.
- **Representation of the People Act, 1950** – Provides for the **preparation and revision of electoral rolls**, allocation of seats, and delimitation-related provisions.
- **Representation of the People Act, 1951** – Regulates the **conduct of elections**, qualifications and disqualifications of candidates, election disputes, corrupt practices, and electoral offences.

Evolution of Judicial Position on the Right to Vote

Phase I: Traditional View – Voting is a Statutory Right

1. **N.P. Ponnuswami v. Returning Officer**: The Supreme Court held that the **right to vote and contest elections is a statutory right**, created by election laws and not guaranteed as a Fundamental or common law right.
2. **Jyoti Basu v. Debi Ghosal**: Justice O. Chinnappa Reddy reaffirmed that **although voting is indispensable to democracy, its legal source lies in statute rather than the Constitution**.
3. **Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India**: The Court held that **democracy is part of the Constitution's Basic Structure**, but the **individual right to vote flows from the Representation of the People Acts, not Part III of the Constitution**.

Phase II: Constitutionalisation of Voting

1. Right to Know

Union of India v. Association for Democratic Reforms: The Court recognised that **voters have a Fundamental Right under Article 19(1)(a) to know the criminal antecedents, educational qualifications, and financial assets of candidates**, enabling informed electoral choices.

2. Informed Voting

People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India: While reaffirming that **the act of voting is statutory**, the Court held that the **freedom to make an informed electoral choice is protected as a Fundamental Right under Article 19(1)(a)**.

3. NOTA Judgment

People's Union for Civil Liberties v. Union of India: The Court introduced **NOTA (None of the Above)** and held that **the right to reject all candidates and maintain ballot secrecy is a form of political expression protected by Article 19(1)(a)**.

4. Recent Shift

Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India: Although the majority did not declare voting a Fundamental Right, **Justice Ajay Rastogi favoured such recognition, and the Constitution Bench's repeated reference to voting as a constitutional right signalled an evolving judicial approach**.

Why Voting Should Be Recognised as a Fundamental Right

- Strengthens Democracy:** Voting is the foundation of representative democracy, ensuring every citizen has an equal opportunity to participate in the governance of the country.
- Consistent with the Basic Structure Doctrine:** Since democracy and free and fair elections are part of the Constitution's Basic Structure, the right to vote the means through which democracy operates deserves constitutional protection.
- Protects Popular Sovereignty:** The right to vote gives practical effect to the principle of "We, the People" by enabling citizens to periodically choose and hold their representatives accountable.
- Provides Stronger Constitutional Protection:** Recognising voting as a Fundamental Right would offer stronger safeguards against arbitrary disenfranchisement and enable greater judicial protection of electoral rights.
- Aligns with Article 326:** As Article 326 guarantees Universal Adult Suffrage, the citizen's entitlement to vote flows from the Constitution, while election laws merely regulate its exercise.
- Enhances Electoral Integrity:** Constitutional recognition of voting would strengthen inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, and public confidence in the electoral process, thereby reinforcing democratic legitimacy.

Arguments Against Recognising the Right to Vote as a Fundamental Right

- Constitutional Intent:** The Constituent Assembly deliberately did not include the right to vote under Part III, indicating that it was intended to remain a statutory right regulated by Parliament.
- Need for Legislative Flexibility:** Keeping voting as a statutory right allows Parliament to modify electoral laws relating to electoral rolls, age, residency, disqualifications, and election procedures in response to changing needs.

- 3. Risk of Excessive Judicial Intervention:** If voting becomes a Fundamental Right, routine electoral disputes could increasingly be challenged under Articles 32 and 226, leading to greater judicial intervention in election administration.
- 4. Practical Challenges in Election Management:** Expanding voting into a Fundamental Right may complicate election management by increasing litigation, delaying electoral processes, and creating administrative uncertainty.
- 5. Existing Constitutional Safeguards Are Adequate:** The Supreme Court has already constitutionalised key aspects of voting such as informed choice, ballot secrecy, and NOTA—providing substantial protection without formally elevating voting to a Fundamental Right.
- 6. Scope for Constitutional Ambiguity:** Recognising voting as a Fundamental Right may blur the distinction between constitutional rights and statutory electoral regulations, creating uncertainty over the extent of judicial review and legislative powers.

Global Perspective: Right to Vote in Comparative Constitutional Law

Country	Status of Right to Vote	Key Feature
South Africa	Explicit Fundamental Right	Constitution expressly guarantees voting and political participation.
United States	Constitutionally Protected	Voting rights secured through multiple constitutional amendments.
Germany	Constitutional Right	Voting recognised as an essential feature of democratic governance.

Way Forward

- 1. Revisit Judicial Position:** The Supreme Court may reconsider earlier precedents in light of its evolving jurisprudence that has progressively constitutionalised various facets of voting.
- 2. Strengthen Electoral Roll Management:** Adopt technology-driven verification, regular roll revisions, and robust grievance redressal to prevent wrongful inclusion or exclusion of voters.
- 3. Enhance Voter Participation:** Promote voter awareness, accessible polling infrastructure, and inclusive electoral practices to ensure universal and effective participation.
- 4. Balance Constitutional Protection with Legislative Flexibility:** Recognise the core right to vote while allowing Parliament to regulate qualifications, disqualifications, and electoral procedures for efficient election management.
- 5. Strengthen Electoral Institutions:** Enhance the independence, transparency, and institutional capacity of the Election Commission to safeguard free and fair elections.
- 6. Deepen Democratic Accountability:** Promote greater political transparency, informed voting, and electoral reforms to reinforce public trust and democratic legitimacy.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court has progressively constitutionalised key facets of voting, making the distinction between statutory and constitutional rights increasingly blurred. Recognising the **right to vote as a constitutional guarantee** would strengthen India's democratic legitimacy while preserving Parliament's power to regulate electoral procedures.

Q. The right to vote is presently a statutory right in India, yet several of its essential components have received constitutional protection through judicial interpretation. Examine whether the right to vote should be recognised as a fundamental right. 15 marks

1.1.2. TOWARDS A WORKER-CENTRIC AND INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT MODEL

Introduction

The establishment of the **Ministry of Cooperation (2021)** reflects India's renewed focus on strengthening the cooperative movement as a model of **inclusive, worker-centric, and democratic economic development**, balancing market efficiency with social justice.



What are Cooperatives?

A **cooperative** is a **voluntarily formed, member-owned and democratically governed enterprise** established to meet the common economic, social and cultural needs of its members through collective ownership and mutual benefit.

Core Principles of Cooperatives

- 1. Voluntary and Open Membership:** Membership is open to all eligible persons without discrimination, allowing individuals to join or leave the cooperative voluntarily.
- 2. Democratic Control (One Member, One Vote):** Every member has an equal voting right irrespective of the amount of capital invested, ensuring participatory and democratic decision-making.
- 3. Member Economic Participation:** Members contribute equitably to the cooperative's capital and share its benefits, risks, and surplus in a fair and transparent manner.
- 4. Autonomy and Independence:** Cooperatives operate as self-governing institutions, free from undue political or external interference while remaining accountable to their members.
- 5. Cooperation Among Cooperatives:** Cooperatives collaborate with one another at local, national, and international levels to enhance efficiency, bargaining power, and collective growth.
- 6. Concern for Community:** Beyond generating economic benefits, cooperatives work towards sustainable development and the social welfare of the communities they serve.

Significance of the Cooperative Model in India

1. Promotes Inclusive and Equitable Growth

Cooperatives empower **small farmers, artisans, dairy producers, fishermen, women SHGs, and rural entrepreneurs** by enhancing bargaining power, reducing transaction costs, and ensuring equitable distribution of economic benefits.

2. Provides an Alternative to Hyper-Capitalism

By promoting **collective ownership, worker participation, and shared profits**, cooperatives counter market concentration, wealth inequality, and the vulnerabilities of profit-driven economic models.

3. Strengthens the Rural Economy and Employment

Institutions such as **Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS)** have evolved into multi-service rural enterprises, generating employment in agriculture, dairy, fisheries, food processing, and other rural sectors.

4. Improves Market Access and Financial Inclusion

Cooperatives facilitate **collective marketing, branding, value addition, affordable credit, insurance, and savings**, enabling members to access larger markets and formal financial services.

5. Deepens Economic Democracy

Based on the principle of "**One Member, One Vote**," cooperatives ensure democratic ownership and decision-making, preventing the concentration of economic power.

6. Strengthens Community Participation and Women's Empowerment

Member-driven governance enhances **local accountability, social trust, and participatory development**, while women-led cooperatives and SHGs promote entrepreneurship and financial independence.

7. Reinforces Cooperative Federalism and Grassroots Governance

Cooperatives strengthen **decentralisation, local self-governance, and collaboration between the Union, States, and local institutions**, making development more participatory.

8. Promotes Sustainable and Resilient Development

By encouraging **organic farming, sustainable resource management, community-led conservation, and collective action**, cooperatives contribute to environmentally sustainable and resilient economic growth.

Major Initiatives by the Ministry of Cooperation

1. Establishment of the Ministry of Cooperation (2021)

Created with the vision of "**Prosperity through Cooperation**", the Ministry provides a dedicated institutional framework to strengthen, modernise, and expand the cooperative sector.

2. Strengthening Primary Agricultural Credit Societies (PACS)

PACS are being transformed into **multi-service rural institutions** through digitisation, diversification of activities, financial inclusion, and promotion of rural entrepreneurship.

3. Promotion of National Multi-State Cooperative Societies

New national-level cooperatives have been established to enhance **exports, organic farming, seed production, and value addition**, enabling economies of scale and greater global competitiveness.

4. Formulation of the National Cooperation Policy

The proposed policy aims to provide a **long-term roadmap** through regulatory reforms, professional capacity building, better governance, and digital transformation of cooperatives.

5. Building a Digital Cooperative Ecosystem

The Ministry is promoting **digital governance, online accounting, transparency, e-commerce integration, and stronger market linkages** to improve efficiency and competitiveness of cooperative institutions.

Major Challenges Facing the Cooperative Sector

1. Political Interference and Weak Democratic Governance

Electoral capture, patronage politics, and leadership monopolies often undermine the democratic functioning and autonomy of cooperative institutions.

2. Corruption and Institutional Inefficiency

Financial mismanagement, weak auditing mechanisms, poor accountability, and rising loan defaults reduce the credibility and effectiveness of cooperatives.

3. Balancing Centralisation with Cooperative Federalism

The expansion of multi-State cooperatives has raised concerns among States over the loss of autonomy, necessitating a balance between national coordination and local control.

4. Limited Professional and Technological Capacity

Many cooperatives lack skilled management, financial expertise, digital infrastructure, and modern supply-chain capabilities, affecting their competitiveness.

5. Limited Diversification and Market Competitiveness

The sector remains concentrated in traditional activities such as agricultural credit and dairy, while facing intense competition from large corporates, e-commerce platforms, and global value chains.

6. Inadequate Market Integration and Value Addition

Weak branding, poor market linkages, limited value addition, and insufficient access to modern logistics constrain the growth potential of cooperative enterprises.

Comparison: Cooperative Sector vs Hyper-Capitalist Model

Basis	Hyper-Capitalism	Cooperative Model
Primary Objective	Profit maximisation	Member welfare and collective prosperity
Ownership Structure	Shareholder ownership	Member ownership
Distribution of Wealth	Wealth concentration	Equitable distribution of benefits
Market Structure	Monopoly and market concentration	Decentralised and community-based participation
Role of Labour	Labour viewed as a cost of production	Labour treated as a stakeholder and co-owner
Development Approach	Short-term profit and shareholder returns	Long-term community development and sustainable growth

Best Practices: Successful Cooperative Models in India

1. Amul – A Global Benchmark in Dairy Cooperatives

- **World's Largest Dairy Cooperative:** Amul has successfully integrated millions of small dairy farmers into a cooperative network, making it the world's largest farmer-owned dairy cooperative.

- **Model of Inclusive Growth:** It demonstrates how **member ownership, professional management, value addition, strong branding, and efficient supply chains** can create globally competitive enterprises while ensuring fair returns to producers.
2. **Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad – A Model of Women-Led Cooperative Entrepreneurship**
- **Women-Owned Cooperative Enterprise:** Founded and managed by women, Lijjat Papad has empowered thousands of women through collective ownership, livelihood generation, and decentralized production.
 - **Model of Social and Economic Empowerment:** It showcases how cooperatives can promote **women's entrepreneurship, financial independence, self-employment, and inclusive community development** while maintaining democratic governance and shared prosperity.
3. **IFFCO (Agritech & Input Scale):** One of the world's largest multi-state cooperatives, serving over 5 crore farmers.
- Developed the world's first **nano-liquid urea**, proving that cooperatives can drive cutting-edge R&D, optimize input costs, and enhance national food security.

Way Forward

1. **Ensure Autonomy and Democratic Governance**

Strengthen the autonomy of cooperatives by reducing political interference while preserving the principles of democratic member control and accountability.

2. **Strengthen Cooperative Federalism**

Maintain a balance between national coordination and State autonomy by promoting cooperative institutions through a collaborative federal framework.

3. **Professionalise and Build Institutional Capacity**

Invest in professional management, leadership development, financial literacy, and digital skills to enhance the efficiency and competitiveness of cooperatives.

4. **Accelerate Digital Transformation**

Leverage e-governance, AI-enabled accounting, digital marketplaces, and integrated supply chains to improve transparency, efficiency, and market connectivity.

5. **Diversify and Enhance Market Competitiveness**

Expand cooperatives beyond agriculture into sectors such as healthcare, renewable energy, tourism, housing, and platform-based services while strengthening branding, value addition, exports, and producer-owned enterprises.

6. **Strengthen Transparency and Accountability**

Institutionalise regular financial and social audits, digital disclosures, and independent regulatory oversight to improve governance and build public trust.

Conclusion

The cooperative movement offers a **middle path between State-led socialism and market capitalism**, combining **economic efficiency with social equity**. Strengthened by autonomy, professionalism, and technology, cooperatives can emerge as a powerful driver of **inclusive, democratic, and sustainable development**.

Q. *The cooperative movement offers an alternative model of economic development based on equity and community participation. Discuss the opportunities and challenges in strengthening India's cooperative sector. 15 Marks*

1.1.3. BALANCING PRIVACY, OPEN JUSTICE AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Introduction

The **Delhi High Court's 2026 judgment** has strengthened India's jurisprudence on the **Right to be Forgotten (RTBF)** by recognising it as an extension of **Article 21 (Right to Privacy and Dignity)**. The ruling seeks to balance **informational privacy with freedom of speech, open justice, and the public's right to know** in the digital era.



What is the Right to be Forgotten (RTBF)?

The **Right to be Forgotten (RTBF)** is the right of an individual to **seek removal, erasure, or de-indexing** of personal information from the digital public domain when its continued availability causes disproportionate harm and no longer serves a legitimate public interest.

Evolution of the Right to be Forgotten (RTBF)

1. Global Recognition (2014)

- **Google Spain SL v. AEPD and Mario Costeja González (2014):** The **European Court of Justice (ECJ)** recognised the **Right to be Forgotten**, allowing individuals to request the removal of outdated or irrelevant personal information from search engine results.
- **GDPR, 2018:** The right was subsequently codified under **Article 17 of the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)** as the "**Right to Erasure.**"

2. Constitutional Recognition in India (2017)

- **Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (Retd.) v. Union of India (2017):** The Supreme Court declared the **Right to Privacy** as a **Fundamental Right under Article 21**, laying the constitutional foundation for the RTBF through the concept of **informational privacy**.

3. Divergent Judicial Approaches (2017–2025)

- Various High Courts adopted **inconsistent approaches**, with some allowing anonymisation or masking of personal information, while others prioritised the principles of **open justice** and **freedom of expression**.

4. Structured Jurisprudence by the Delhi High Court (2026)

- **Laksh Vir Singh Yadav v. Union of India (2026):** The Delhi High Court recognised the **RTBF as part of Article 21**, introduced the **proportionality test**, and favoured **masking or de-indexing names** over deleting judicial records.

Key Highlights of the Delhi High Court Judgment (2026)

1. RTBF as a Constitutional Right

The Court held that the **Right to be Forgotten flows from Article 21**, protecting an individual's informational privacy and dignity.

2. Adoption of the Proportionality Test

The Court directed that every RTBF claim must balance **privacy, public interest, legitimate purpose, and the least restrictive means** before granting relief.

3. Preference for Masking over Deletion

Instead of deleting judicial records, the Court preferred **masking or de-indexing parties' names** while preserving the judgment for public access.

4. Time-bound Compliance

Legal databases and online platforms must **implement court directions within two weeks** to ensure timely protection of privacy rights.

5. Balancing Privacy with Open Justice

The Court preserved the principle of **open justice** by allowing judgments to remain searchable through **case numbers and keywords**, while restricting only **name-based searches**.

Significance of the Right to be Forgotten (RTBF)

1. Protects the Right to Privacy

RTBF safeguards **informational privacy under Article 21** by enabling individuals to control the continued accessibility of their personal data.

2. Upholds Human Dignity

It protects individuals from **permanent digital stigma**, allowing them to move beyond past incidents and preserve their dignity.

3. Facilitates Social Rehabilitation

RTBF enables **acquitted persons, victims, or those who have resolved past disputes** to reintegrate into society without lifelong reputational harm.

4. Promotes Responsible Digital Governance

It encourages the **ethical retention and processing of personal data**, ensuring that outdated or irrelevant information is not stored indefinitely.

5. Balances Privacy with Constitutional Values

RTBF harmonises the **right to privacy with freedom of expression, open justice, and the public's right to know** in the digital age.

Major Challenges in Implementing the Right to be Forgotten (RTBF)

1. Balancing Privacy with Open Justice

Protecting informational privacy must be balanced with the principles of **judicial transparency, freedom of expression, and the public's right to know**.

2. Technological Limitations

De-indexing cannot completely erase digital footprints, as information may persist through **archives, mirror websites, and social media platforms**.

3. Weak Institutional Framework

The absence of a fully functional **Data Protection Board** limits the effective implementation and enforcement of RTBF.

4. Limitations of the DPDP Act, 2023

The Act provides only a **limited consent-based right to erasure** and does not adequately address judicial records, public archives, or the broader RTBF framework.

5. Procedural and Regulatory Uncertainty

The lack of a clear statutory mechanism for processing erasure or de-indexing requests leads to inconsistent judicial and administrative outcomes.

6. Platform Compliance and Enforcement

Delayed or inconsistent compliance by search engines and digital platforms reduces the practical effectiveness of court-ordered de-indexing.

Way Forward

1. Establish a Multi-Tier Redressal Mechanism

Create a **tiered framework** where digital platforms handle routine de-indexing requests, the **Data Protection Board** decides appeals, and the **Judiciary** adjudicates constitutional and judicial record-related cases, ensuring **efficiency, accountability, and due process**.

2. Develop a Uniform Legal Framework

The **Supreme Court** should lay down comprehensive guidelines to ensure consistent and uniform implementation of the Right to be Forgotten across India.

3. Operationalise the DPDP Act, 2023

Notify the pending rules and strengthen the **Data Protection Board** to provide an effective statutory mechanism for enforcing RTBF.

4. Standardise De-indexing and Strengthen Platform Accountability

Prescribe transparent de-indexing procedures and ensure timely compliance by search engines and digital platforms with judicial directions.

5. Balance Privacy with Other Constitutional Rights

Implement RTBF in a manner that protects **privacy and dignity** without undermining **freedom of expression, freedom of the press, public interest, and the principle of open justice**.

6. Promote Privacy-by-Design

Encourage digital platforms to integrate **privacy safeguards, data minimisation, and user-centric data protection measures** into their systems by design.

Conclusion

The **Right to be Forgotten** strengthens **informational privacy and human dignity** while preserving **open justice and free speech**. A clear legal framework and effective institutional mechanisms are essential for its meaningful implementation.

Q. *The Right to be Forgotten reflects the evolving relationship between privacy, technology and constitutional freedoms. Discuss the significance of the recent Delhi High Court judgment and examine the challenges in implementing this right in India. 15 Marks*

1.1.4. REGULATING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS INSTEAD OF BANNING CHILDREN

Why in News?

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently appreciated Australia's decision to ban social media access for children below 16 years. Similar proposals have also been considered by Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, reigniting the debate on balancing **child safety, digital rights, and platform accountability**.



Introduction

The rapid expansion of social media has transformed communication, education and social interaction among adolescents. While growing evidence links excessive social media use with mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression and cyberbullying, there is limited evidence that **age-based bans alone improve children's well-being**. The real governance challenge lies not in regulating children's access but in making digital platforms safer and more accountable.

Significance of Social Media

- 1. Strengthening Social Connectivity:** Social media enables adolescents to maintain friendships, build social networks, and stay connected with family and peers irrespective of geographical boundaries.
- 2. Access to Education and Knowledge:** Digital platforms provide access to educational content, online courses, skill development resources, and awareness on diverse subjects, enhancing learning opportunities.
- 3. Mental Health Awareness and Support:** Social media facilitates access to counselling resources, awareness campaigns, and peer support groups, helping reduce stigma surrounding mental health issues.
- 4. Identity Formation and Self-Expression:** Online platforms allow adolescents to express their views, explore personal identities, and develop creativity through art, writing, music, and digital content creation.
- 5. Support for Marginalised Communities:** Social media creates safe spaces for vulnerable groups, including LGBTQIA+ youth and persons with disabilities, fostering inclusion and emotional support.
- 6. Civic Participation and Social Awareness:** It encourages youth participation in public discourse by spreading awareness about social issues, environmental campaigns, democratic values, and community initiatives.
- 7. Innovation and Digital Economy:** Social media promotes entrepreneurship, digital marketing, creator economies, and employment opportunities, contributing to India's growing digital economy.

How Does Social Media Affect Adolescent Mental Health?

1. Psychological Impact

- **Anxiety and Depression:** Constant social comparison, online validation, and cyber interactions can increase stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms among adolescents.
- **Poor Self-esteem and Body Image:** Exposure to idealised lifestyles and edited images often creates unrealistic standards, lowering self-confidence and body satisfaction.
- **Sleep Deprivation:** Excessive screen time, particularly before bedtime, disrupts sleep patterns and reduces sleep quality.
- **Reduced Attention Span:** Continuous exposure to short-form content and constant notifications weakens concentration and sustained focus.
- **Fear of Missing Out (FOMO):** Frequent updates on others' activities create anxiety about being excluded from social experiences.

2. Exposure to Harmful Content

- **Cyberbullying:** Online harassment and abusive interactions can adversely affect emotional well-being and academic performance.
- **Self-harm and Suicide-related Content:** Algorithmic recommendations may expose vulnerable adolescents to content that normalises self-harm and suicidal behaviour.
- **Eating Disorder Communities:** Harmful online communities often promote unhealthy dieting practices and distorted body image.
- **Online Predators:** Children are vulnerable to grooming, exploitation, and abuse by anonymous individuals on digital platforms.
- **Misinformation and Hate Speech:** Exposure to false information and extremist or hateful content can shape harmful beliefs and behaviours.

3. Addictive Platform Design

- **Algorithm-driven Recommendations:** AI-powered algorithms continuously suggest personalised content to maximise user engagement and screen time.
- **Infinite Scrolling:** Endless content feeds encourage prolonged usage by removing natural stopping points.
- **Autoplay Videos:** Automatic playback keeps users engaged without requiring active choices, increasing time spent online.
- **Push Notifications:** Frequent alerts are designed to draw users back to the platform repeatedly throughout the day.
- **Dopamine-based Reward Mechanisms:** Likes, comments, shares, and other social rewards trigger dopamine release, reinforcing habitual and compulsive platform use.

Challenges in Regulating Social Media and Protecting Adolescents

1. Uncertain Causal Relationship

Most research linking social media with poor mental health is observational, making it difficult to establish a direct cause-and-effect relationship. Mental health issues may both influence and be influenced by social media use.

2. Dual Nature of Social Media

While social media exposes children to cyberbullying and harmful content, it also facilitates learning, peer support, and access to mental health resources. Therefore, blanket restrictions ignore its constructive role.

3. Lack of Evidence for Age-Based Bans

There is little empirical evidence that prohibiting children from using social media significantly improves mental health outcomes. Policy decisions should therefore be guided by evidence rather than assumptions.

4. Enforcement and Technological Challenges

Age verification mechanisms remain unreliable, and children can easily bypass restrictions through fake accounts or VPNs. This reduces the practical effectiveness of blanket bans.

5. Migration to Unsafe Digital Spaces

Restricting access to mainstream platforms may push adolescents towards unregulated or underground digital spaces with weaker safety standards and greater risks.

6. Impact on Digital Rights

Age-based bans may restrict children's freedom of expression, access to information, and opportunities for education and social participation in an increasingly digital society.

7. Platform-Centric Business Models

Most social media platforms rely on engagement-driven algorithms that prioritise user attention over user well-being, making harmful content and addictive features structurally embedded.

International Best Practices

European Union

- **Digital Services Act (DSA)**
- Greater platform accountability
- Risk assessment obligations
- Transparency in recommendation algorithms

United Kingdom

- **Online Safety Act**
- Duty of care on digital platforms
- Child safety obligations
- Strong regulatory oversight

Way Forward of Platform Regulation

1. **Strengthening the Duty of Care:** Governments should impose a statutory duty of care on social media companies, making them legally responsible for preventing foreseeable harms to children.
2. **Regulating Addictive Platform Design:** Platforms should be required to reduce addictive features such as infinite scrolling, autoplay, and personalised recommendation algorithms that encourage excessive screen time.

3. **Strengthening Content Moderation:** Technology companies must proactively detect and remove cyberbullying, self-harm content, child sexual abuse material, and other harmful content before it reaches vulnerable users.
4. **Enhancing Privacy Protection:** Children should be provided stronger privacy safeguards through data minimisation, default privacy settings, and restrictions on behavioural profiling and targeted advertising.
5. **Promoting Digital Literacy:** Schools should integrate digital literacy into curricula to equip children with skills related to cyber safety, responsible online behaviour, critical thinking, and misinformation detection.
6. **Empowering Parents and Guardians:** Platforms should provide robust parental control tools, including screen-time management, content filters, and activity reports, enabling families to guide children's digital engagement.
7. **Adopting a Risk-Based Regulatory Framework:** Rather than regulating who can access social media, governments should regulate how platforms operate by ensuring algorithmic transparency, child-safe design, and accountability for online harms.

Conclusion

Social media governance should focus on regulating platforms rather than restricting users. A safe digital ecosystem requires accountable platform design, stronger safeguards, and evidence-based regulation instead of blanket bans.

Q. Age-based restrictions on social media are an inadequate solution to the complex challenges posed by digital platforms. Critically examine. 15 Marks

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Prelims Test Series

2.1. ENVIRONMENT

2.1.1. HOME FOR ASIATIC LIONS

Why in News?

India has successfully increased the population of the Asiatic lion to around **891 individuals**. However, conservation experts continue to stress the urgent need to establish a **second geographically isolated population**, as directed by the Supreme Court of India in **2013**, to safeguard the species from catastrophic risks.



Introduction

While the Asiatic lion population has recovered significantly, its long-term survival remains uncertain due to its concentration in a single habitat, increasing the risk of disease, disasters, and genetic bottlenecks.

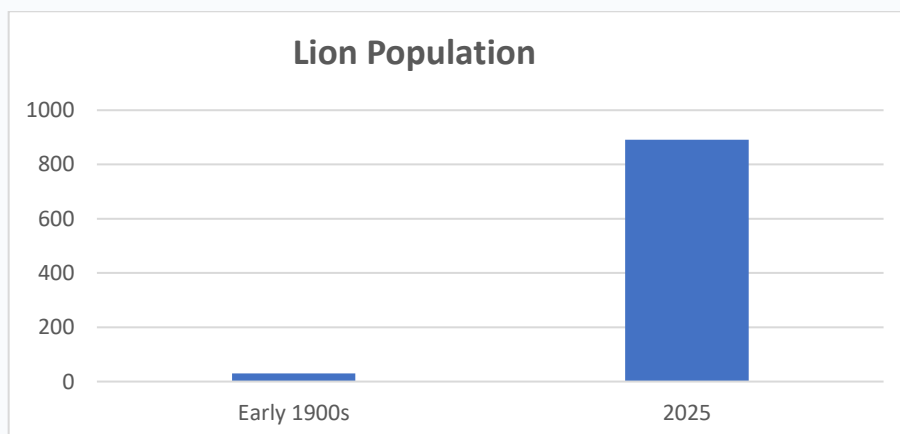
Background

While the Asiatic lion population has recovered significantly, its long-term survival remains uncertain due to its concentration in a single habitat, increasing the risk of disease, disasters, and genetic bottlenecks.

Constitutional & Legal Dimensions

- **Article 48A** – Directs the State to protect and improve the environment and safeguard forests and wildlife as part of its Directive Principles.
- **Article 51A(g)** – Imposes a Fundamental Duty on every citizen to protect and improve the natural environment and show compassion for all living creatures.
- **Concurrent List** – Places forests and wildlife under the shared legislative responsibility of both the Union and State Governments, promoting cooperative conservation.
- **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972** – Provides the primary legal framework for the protection of wildlife, establishment of protected areas, and conservation of endangered species in India.

Population Recovery Data



This recovery has largely resulted from

- **Strong legal protection** – Strict enforcement of wildlife laws and protected area management safeguarded the Asiatic lion from hunting and habitat destruction.
- **Community participation** – Active involvement of local communities fostered coexistence and strengthened conservation efforts.
- **Habitat conservation** – Protection and restoration of the Gir ecosystem ensured a secure and suitable habitat for lion populations.
- **Anti-poaching efforts** – Enhanced surveillance, patrolling, and law enforcement significantly reduced illegal hunting and wildlife crimes.
- **Prey base improvement** – Conservation of herbivore populations ensured an adequate food supply, supporting the growth and stability of the lion population.

Why is a Second Home Necessary for the Asiatic Lion?

1. Risk of Single Population Extinction

With nearly the entire global population confined to the Gir landscape, a single catastrophic event could threaten the survival of the species. Establishing a second population spreads the risk and enhances long-term conservation security.

2. Disease Outbreaks

The 2018 **Canine Distemper Virus (CDV)** outbreak highlighted how diseases can spread rapidly within a concentrated lion population, causing significant mortality. A geographically separated population would reduce the likelihood of a single epidemic affecting the entire species.

3. Limited Genetic Diversity

The Asiatic lion population originated from a small number of surviving individuals, resulting in low genetic diversity and increased vulnerability to diseases and inbreeding. A second population, supported by scientific translocation, can help maintain healthier genetic diversity over time.

4. Climate and Environmental Risks

Climate-induced events such as forest fires, droughts, heat waves, and habitat degradation can severely impact a single habitat. Distributing lions across multiple landscapes enhances their resilience to environmental uncertainties.

5. Scientific Recommendation: Metapopulation Approach

Conservation scientists advocate a **metapopulation approach**, where geographically isolated populations are managed as a single conservation unit. This reduces extinction risk, facilitates genetic exchange, and strengthens the species' long-term ecological resilience.

Why Kuno National Park?

1. **Suitable habitat** – Kuno provides ecological conditions similar to the Gir landscape, making it suitable for sustaining a free-ranging lion population.
2. **Adequate prey base** – The park supports a healthy population of herbivores, ensuring sufficient food availability for lions.
3. **Large forest landscape** – Its extensive and contiguous forest area offers ample space for territorial movement, breeding, and long-term population growth.
4. **Villages relocated** – The relocation of villages has reduced human disturbance and created an undisturbed habitat for wildlife conservation.

5. **Habitat restoration completed** – Scientific habitat improvement measures have enhanced the park's ecological suitability for lion reintroduction.
6. **Long-term management planning** – Kuno has been prepared with comprehensive conservation and monitoring plans to support the successful establishment of a second lion population.

Major Challenges in Establishing a Second Home for Asiatic Lions

1. Political Resistance and Regional Identity

Gujarat's pride in its successful lion conservation and concerns over losing its conservation identity have led to resistance against translocating lions outside the State.

2. Centre-State Coordination and Federal Challenges

Wildlife conservation is a shared responsibility under the Concurrent List, but differences between the Union and State Governments have delayed consensus and implementation.

3. Gap Between Science, Judiciary and Policy

Despite scientific recommendations and the Supreme Court's 2013 directive, political considerations have hindered evidence-based implementation of the translocation project.

4. Habitat Suitability and Site Selection

Concerns over the ecological suitability of alternative habitats, along with the limitation of nearby sites like Barda Wildlife Sanctuary, have complicated the selection of a truly secure second home.

5. Ecological and Operational Challenges

Translocation involves habitat management, continuous monitoring, disease surveillance, and ensuring the successful adaptation of relocated lions in a new ecosystem.

6. Human Dimensions and Conflict Management

Potential human-wildlife conflicts, interstate coordination issues, and the need for community participation and acceptance remain significant challenges to establishing a second lion population.

Supreme Court Judgment (2013): Key Observations

- **Conservation should be guided by ecological science** – Wildlife management decisions must be based on scientific evidence and ecological principles rather than political or regional considerations.
- **Asiatic lions are National Heritage, not the property of one State** – The Court held that Asiatic lions belong to the entire nation, making their conservation a collective national responsibility.
- **A second free-ranging population is essential** – Establishing a geographically separate lion population is necessary to reduce extinction risks and ensure the species' long-term survival.
- **Delay would increase extinction risk** – Prolonged inaction in implementing translocation increases the species' vulnerability to diseases, natural disasters, and other catastrophic events.

Way Forward

1. Implement Scientific Translocation

Implement the Supreme Court's 2013 judgment by establishing **Kuno National Park** as the second free-ranging habitat and gradually develop additional suitable landscapes to strengthen species resilience.

2. Strengthen Cooperative Environmental Governance

Enhance Centre–State coordination through evidence-based policymaking, independent scientific oversight, and a time-bound mechanism for implementing conservation decisions.

3. Adopt Adaptive Scientific Management

Use modern conservation tools such as radio-collar tracking, GIS-based monitoring, and periodic genetic diversity assessments to ensure the long-term viability of lion populations.

4. Build a Robust Wildlife Health System

Establish comprehensive disease surveillance, strengthen veterinary infrastructure, and develop early warning and emergency response systems to prevent and manage wildlife epidemics.

5. Promote Community-Centred Conservation

Encourage local participation through eco-tourism, benefit-sharing, fair compensation for wildlife-related losses, and active involvement of communities in conservation programmes.

6. Develop a National Metapopulation Strategy

Create multiple geographically isolated yet scientifically managed lion populations across suitable habitats to reduce extinction risks and ensure long-term ecological resilience.

Conclusion

The success of Asiatic lion conservation must now evolve into **long-term ecological resilience**. Establishing a geographically separate second population is essential to reduce extinction risks and secure the future of this national heritage through science-based conservation and cooperative federalism.

Q. Successful species recovery requires ecological resilience rather than mere population growth. In the context of the Asiatic lion, examine why establishing geographically separated populations is essential for long-term biodiversity conservation. 15 Marks

2.1.2. DEVELOPMENT VS. ECOLOGY: RETHINKING MEGA-PROJECTS IN WAYANAD

Context

On July 7, a fatal debris slide at the Kalladi twin-tunnel construction site in Wayanad resulted in six deaths. The Kerala government has suspended the project pending investigations into environmental compliance and the geomorphological triggers of the disaster.



Introduction

Recurring landslides in Wayanad highlight the severe ecological vulnerability of the Western Ghats. Consecutive disasters expose the high risks associated with aggressive infrastructure expansion in fragile terrains, emphasizing the urgent need to balance development with strict climate-resilient planning.

Seismic Zone of Wayanad

- Wayanad falls under **Seismic Zone III** (moderate earthquake risk) according to the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) seismic zoning map.
- While earthquakes are not the primary landslide trigger in the region, minor seismic activity combined with heavy rainfall and steep slopes dramatically increases the risk of terrain failure.

- This classification necessitates mandatory earthquake-resistant construction protocols and stringent land-use planning for all infrastructure projects.

What Caused the Wayanad Landslide?

- **Extremely Heavy Rainfall:** Continuous monsoon downpours saturated the soil, significantly increasing pore pressure and triggering slope failure.
- **Fragile Geology & Steep Terrain:** The deeply weathered rocks and steep gradients of the region are naturally predisposed to movement under intense rainfall.
- **Deforestation:** The systematic removal of natural forest cover has severely weakened the soil's binding capacity, leaving slopes highly vulnerable.
- **Unplanned Development:** Anthropogenic interventions, including tunneling, road construction, and unscientific hill cutting, disrupted the natural stability of the terrain.
- **Climate Change:** A rise in short-duration, high-intensity rainfall events acts as a primary trigger multiplier for such geological disasters.
- **Poor Drainage:** Inadequate surface drainage systems allowed rainwater to accumulate, exponentially increasing soil weight and structural instability.

Impacts of the Disaster

- **Loss of Lives and Displacement:** The disaster caused tragic casualties and forced thousands into relief camps as homes were destroyed or declared structurally unsafe.
- **Infrastructure Destruction:** Extensive damage occurred to critical public assets, including roads, bridges, power lines, and water supply networks.
- **Agricultural and Economic Losses:** Mud and debris buried lucrative plantations (coffee, tea, spices), devastating local agrarian economies and tourism revenues.
- **Environmental Degradation:** The landslide led to severe soil erosion, river siltation, destruction of local forest cover, and a localized loss of biodiversity.
- **Disruption of Connectivity:** Collapsed transport networks isolated entire villages, severely delaying emergency rescue and relief operations.

Gadgil and Kasturirangan Committees recommendations:

- **Gadgil Committee (2011):** Recommended classifying the entire Western Ghats into three Ecologically Sensitive Zones (ESZs). It proposed strict bans on mining, quarrying, and large-scale construction, prioritizing decentralized, environmentally sustainable governance.
- **Kasturirangan Committee (2013):** Formed to review the Gadgil report, it adopted a more development-accommodating approach, recommending that only 37% of the Western Ghats be declared as Ecologically Sensitive Areas (ESAs). While prohibiting mining in ESAs, it permitted regulated sustainable agriculture and economic activities in non-sensitive zones.

Way Forward

- **Strengthen Early Warning Systems (EWS):** Deploy hyper-local, real-time alerts utilizing automated rain gauges, inclinometers, and acoustic sensors to predict slope failures.
- **Scientific Land-Use Planning:** Enforce strict zoning regulations to prohibit heavy infrastructure construction and human settlements in highly susceptible landslide zones.
- **Ecological Restoration:** Prioritize the protection of existing forest cover and implement bio-engineering techniques to physically and naturally stabilize vulnerable slopes.

- **Regulate Development:** Enforce absolute restrictions on quarrying and unscientific hill cutting in ecologically sensitive regions, ensuring strict Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs).
- **Implement Committee Frameworks:** Operationalize the core sustainable development recommendations of the Gadgil and Kasturirangan Committees to protect the broader ecosystem.
- **Enhance Drainage Infrastructure:** Mandate disaster-resilient construction techniques and improve surface drainage on hill slopes to prevent localized water accumulation.

Conclusion

The Wayanad disaster highlights that infrastructure development must respect environmental limits. To protect human lives and the Western Ghats, we must shift from merely reacting to disasters to actively preventing them through scientific, climate-resilient planning.

Q. Describe the various causes and the effects of landslides. Mention components of the important components of National Landslide Risk Management strategy. 15 Marks

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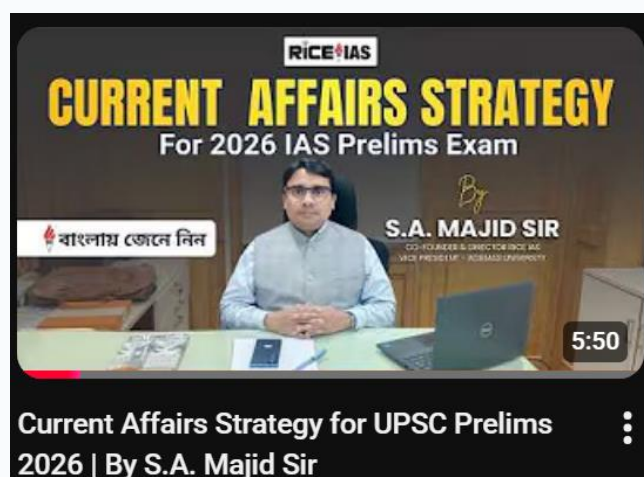
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