

POLITY & GOVERNANCE**VOTING RIGHTS FOR OVERSEAS CITIZENS**

Union Minister for Law and Justice in response to a question in the Lok Sabha stated that the government was exploring the possibility of allowing online voting for non-resident Indians (NRI).

Background

- In 2017, the government proposed to remove the restriction imposed by Section 20A of the Representation of the People Act, which required them to be physically present to vote in their constituencies.
- The Bill provided for overseas voters to be able to appoint a proxy to cast their votes on their behalf, subject to conditions laid down in the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961.
- The Bill was later passed in 2018 but lapsed with the dissolution of the 16th Lok Sabha.
- The ECI then approached the government to permit NRIs to vote via postal ballots similar to a system that is already used by service voters, (a member of the armed Forces of the Union; or a member of a force to which provisions of the Army Act, 1950 which is the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System or ETPBS).

Current Status of Voting for Overseas Citizens

- After the passing of the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 2010: NRIs who had stayed abroad beyond six months have been able to vote, but only in person at the polling station where they have been enrolled as an overseas elector.
- However, only a very low proportion of overseas residents actually registered or turned up to vote.
- The provision of having to visit the polling booth in person has discouraged eligible voters from exercising their mandate.
- The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 was amended in 2016: to allow service voters to use the Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot System (ETPBS).
 - ❖ Under this system, postal ballots are sent electronically to registered service voters.
 - ❖ The service voter can then register their mandate on the ballot and send it back via ordinary mail.
 - ❖ The ECI proposed to extend this facility to overseas voters as well.
- In the case of overseas voters: their address mentioned in the passport is taken as the place of ordinary residence and chosen as the constituency for the overseas voter to enrol in.

Previous mandate

- Prior to 2010: an Indian citizen who is an eligible voter and was residing abroad for more than six months would not have been able to vote in elections.
- This was because the NRI's name was deleted from electoral rolls if he or she stayed outside the country for more than six months at a stretch.

How has the existing facility worked so far?

- From merely 11,846 overseas voters who registered in 2014, the number went up to close to a lakh in 2019.
- But the bulk of these voters (nearly 90%) belonged to just one State, Kerala.
- The Representation of the People Act: envisaged voters as only the "ordinary residents" in a constituency who will choose representatives to represent their local interests while meditating on larger issues in the legislature.
- Some democracies that already allow absentee voting stipulate that overseas electors are eligible to vote provided they are not abroad for a specified period of time and/or if they mention "intent to return".
- Section 20-1A, Part III of the Representation of the People Act addresses this to some extent by qualifying "a person absenting himself temporarily from his place of ordinary residence shall not by reason thereof cease to be ordinarily resident therein".
 - ❖ And in essence provides for NRIs who are temporarily staying abroad to be eligible to vote in their local constituencies.

What is ETPBS and how does it function?

- The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 was amended in 2016 to allow service voters to use the ETPBS.
- Under this system: postal ballots are sent electronically to registered service voters.

- The service voter can then download the ETPB (along with a declaration form and covers), register their mandate on the ballot and send it to the returning officer of the constituency via ordinary mail.
- The post will include an attested declaration form (after being signed by the voter in the presence of an appointed senior officer who will attest it).
- The ECI proposed to extend this facility to overseas voters as well.
 - ❖ For this to commence, the Law Ministry has to amend the Conduct of Election Rules, 1961.
- In the case of NRI voters those seeking to vote through ETPBS will have to inform the returning officer at least five days after notification of the election.
- The returning officer will then send the ballot electronically via the ETPBS.
- The NRI voter can then register her/his mandate on the ballot printout and send it back with an attested declaration in a process similar to the service voter.
- Except in this case: the senior officer would be appointed by the Indian diplomatic or consular representative in the resident country of the NRI.
- The ECI has not specified whether the voter should send in the ballot through ordinary post to the returning officer or drop it off at the Indian consular office/embassy, which will then send the envelopes constituency-wise to the returning officers.

Are postal ballots a viable means of voting?

- **The ETPBS method allowed** for greater turnout among service voters in the 2019 Lok Sabha election.
- **With increasing mobility of citizens** across countries for reasons related to work, the postal ballot method has been recognised by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (an intergovernmental organization that works to support democratic processes and institutions) as a means to allow overseas voters to exercise their right, subject to certain conditions normally related to the time spent abroad or the work carried out abroad.
- **A postal ballot mechanism** that allows for proper authentication of the ballot at designated consular/embassy offices and an effective postal system should ease this process for NRIs, but rules must be clearly framed for eligibility on the basis of time spent away from the country.

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

SAUDI ARABIA-YEMEN CONFLICT

- Recently, Saudi-led coalition fighting Yemen's Houthi rebels launched airstrikes targeting the country's capital, Sanaa.

About

- The strikes came amid heavy fighting around the city of Marib and after coalition forces withdrew from areas around the key port city of Hodeida.

History about the issue

About:

- The Iranian-backed Houthis have held Yemen's capital since September 2014.
- Though the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition halted their march south in 2015, the war has slogged on for years and created the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

How did it start?

- Seven years ago, Saudi Arabia launched a military intervention against the Houthis in Yemen.
- The Saudi-led coalition's intervention was supposed to be a quick victory against an upstart Iranian-backed group and a feather in the cap of the newly named Saudi defence minister.
- That victory remains elusive. Instead, Saudi Arabia is now in a worse strategic situation than when it entered the Yemen conflict in March 2015.

2014:

- Yemen has been mired in a civil war since late 2014 when the Iran-backed Houthi militia seized control of several northern provinces and forced the Saudi-backed Yemeni government of President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi out of Sanaa.
- The Saudi-led Arab coalition intervened in the Yemen conflict in 2015 to support Hadi's government.

Who are Houthis?

- The Houthis, officially known as Ansar Allah (Partisans of God), are an Iranian-backed, Shiite Muslim military and political movement in Yemen.

- Its members, who subscribe to the minority Zaidi sect of Shiite Islam, advocate regional autonomy for Zaidis in northern Yemen.
- They fought a series of rebellions against Saleh during the previous decade and took advantage of the new president's weakness by taking control of their northern heartland of Saada province and neighbouring areas.

Implications of Conflict

Yemen:

- The city's fall could also lead to a humanitarian disaster, as vast numbers of civilians displaced from fighting elsewhere have sought refuge in the area.
- Around 140 camps have sprung up in the surrounding desert to provide basic shelter for up to two million displaced.

World:

- It can greatly exacerbate regional tensions. It also worries the West because of the threat of attacks - such as from al-Qaeda or IS affiliates - emanating from the country as it becomes more unstable.
- Yemen is also strategically important because it sits on a strait linking the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden, through which much of the world's oil shipments pass.

India:

- One of India's most important shipping routes passes through the Gulf of Aden, accounting for imports of \$50 billion and exports of \$60 billion every year.
- Indian nationals, including Hindus, Muslims and Parsis, have lived in Aden since the mid-1880s.
- 8 million expats living in the region with more than \$80 billion of incoming remittance annually.
- Therefore the crisis in Yemen can affect the remittances and destroy the shipping routes.

IMPORTANT FACTS FOR PRELIM

1. Bamiyan Buddhas

- 21 years after destroying Bamiyan Buddhas, Taliban now seek to preserve Buddhas

The legacy of the Bamiyan Buddhas

- In their Roman draperies and with two different mudras, the Bamiyan Buddhas were great examples of a confluence of Gupta, Sassanian and Hellenistic artistic styles.
- They are said to date back to the 5th century AD and were once the tallest standing Buddhas in the world.
- Salsal and Shamama, as they were called by the locals, rose to heights of 55 and 38 metres respectively, and were said to be male and female.
 - ❖ Salsal means "light shines through the universe"
 - ❖ Shamama is "Queen Mother".
- The statues were set in niches on either ends of a cliff side and hewn directly from the sandstone cliffs.

The significance of Bamiyan

- Bamiyan is situated in the high mountains of the Hindu Kush in the central highlands of Afghanistan.
- The valley, which is set along the line of the Bamiyan River, was once integral to the early days of the Silk Roads, providing passage for not just merchants, but also culture, religion and language.
- When the Buddhist Kushan Empire spread, acting as a crucible of sorts, Bamiyan became a major trade, cultural and religious centre.
- As China, India and Rome sought passage through Bamiyan, the Kushans were able to develop a syncretic culture.
- In the rapid spread of Buddhism between the 1st to 5th centuries AD, Bamiyan's landscape reflected the faith, especially its monastic qualities.
- The two colossal Buddhas were only a part of several other structures, such as stupas, smaller seated and standing Buddhas, and wall paintings in caves, spread in and around surrounding valleys.
- **Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas**
 - ❖ In 2001, the Taliban declared its intention to destroy Bamiyan Buddhas despite condemnation and protest from governments and cultural ambassadors world over.

- Following the fall of the Bamiyan Buddhas, UNESCO included the remains in its list of world heritage sites in 2003, with subsequent efforts made to restore and reconstruct the Buddhas in their niches with the pieces available.

2. UNESCO 'CITY OF LITERATURE'

- Recently, Kozhikode was proposed by the Kerala Institute of Local Administration (KILA) to be branded as a 'City of Literature' with the help of UNESCO.

About

- It is among the six places that the KILA plans to develop as 'Creative Cities'.
 - ❖ Thiruvananthapuram is vying for the title 'City of Peace', Kollam 'City of Biodiversity', Kochi 'City of Design', Thrissur 'City of Learning', and Kannur 'City of Craft and Folk Arts'.
- The branding would help Kozhikode get a global reach. Innovative literary events could be organised here showcasing writers from foreign countries.
- The credentials for this are being readied now so that the proposal can be submitted in 2023.
- The Kozhikode Corporation has already started preliminary steps for the purpose.
- The civic body is preparing the proposal with the help of the University of Prague in the Czech Republic.
 - ❖ Prague got the tag in 2014.

About City of Literature'

- A city designated as Creative City of Literature must have a sufficient number of institutions taking care of the high level of its literary life and promoting literature.
- Literature is supposed to play an essential part in the city's life and be given significant support.
- The city should have the ability and experience to organise different kinds of literary events, and an appropriate level of literary education should be provided along with quality, quantity and diversity of literary activities.

DAILY ANSWER WRITING PRACTICE

Q1. The national tele-mental health programme is a welcome step in main streaming mental health and wellness. But its success will depend on its ability to reach masses and destigmatise mental disorders in the society. Discuss. (250 words)

Introduction

- According to the World Health Organization, over 90 million Indians, or 7.5% of the population, suffer from mental health issues. A study published in Lancet in December 2019, titled "The burden of mental disorders across the states of India: the Global Burden of Disease Study 1990–2017", also highlights the scale of the challenge. The COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in mental health-related problems among people of all age. Global research has highlighted the increased rates of depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, etc., in individuals affected by the virus.

Body

State of Mental healthcare in India

- WHO has labelled India as the world's 'most depressing country'
- The National Mental Health Survey (NMHS) 2015–2016 conducted by NIMHANS revealed that one in five individuals suffer from some sort of mental health disorder and only 15% of those affected receive the treatment required.
- This amounts to a massive untreated 'mental health burden' in our country.
- There is just one qualified psychiatrist for 10 lakh people in India, the number of psychologists and psychiatric social workers being even fewer.

Importance of national tele-mental health programme

- During her Budget 2022-23 Speech in the Parliament, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a National Tele Mental Health Programme.
- The programme, which has been hailed by all sectors of people for having the potential of changing mental health care in the country, is proposed to consist of 23 tele mental health centres with NIMHANS (National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences Bangalore) acting as the nodal centre.
- Meanwhile, for this, International Institute of Information Technology-Bangalore (IIIT-B) would be providing the technological expertise.

- Lack of awareness and sensitivity about mental health is one of the biggest issue. There is a big stigma around people suffering from any kind of mental health issues.
- They are often tagged as ‘lunatics’ by the society. This leads to a vicious cycle of shame, suffering and isolation of the patients.
- Tele-mental healthcare can bridge the gap by connecting people from remote areas to health professionals in times of need but also help train general physicians and community health workers in mental healthcare.
- They form the backbone of our health infrastructure, and the ability to provide mental health services at a primary level under the tele guidance of psychiatrists is a fruitful and cost-effective exercise.
- The national tele-mental health programme is expected to help people get easier access to quality counselling and care services related to mental health.

Challenges to National tele-mental healthcare

- Mental health issues in India are hugely complex. Data on mental illness is remarkably patchy. Most data is based on self-reporting of conditions and extrapolation.
- Like any other legal document, implementation is the key and a challenge at the same time. The Mental Healthcare Act (2017) came in with a lot of promises by revamping the old act of 1987.
- Digital illiteracy, limited data connectivity, network glitches, ethical and legal lacunae related to tele-psychiatry guidelines, limitations in medical assessment through a virtual medium and data safety are the main concerns that riddle tele-mental healthcare.
- As the Covid threat reduces with time, the inherent tendency of the masses to prefer in-person consultation will be on the rise rendering virtual consultations redundant.
- Affordability issues related to telemedicine should also be borne in mind to prevent health inequalities.

Way forward

- Human wellness is about body and mind. Lasting change is possible only through a collaborative effort of policy-makers.
- Invest in institutional support mechanisms like hospitals, treatment centres, qualified health care support and community support mechanisms.
- Implementation of tele-mental healthcare cannot be decoupled from efforts to improve digital literacy, data security and enhanced accessibility to services.
- Advocacy by mental health professionals, media and policymakers are likely to make a lasting impact in this area.
- We need large scale social security support or insurance to cover costs.
- Mental illnesses should be covered in health insurance policies.
- The government must ensure that treatment is widely available and costs are regulated.
- India must draw lessons from other countries as well as draw upon its own ancient wisdom to holistically treat mental health.

Conclusion

This rare but apt mention of mental health in the national Budget holds true promise of delivering tele-mental health services in the post-Covid future. The proposed Tele-Mental Health Programme is a timely and much-needed move but whether it delivers in the long run depends on its implementation, advocacy and dealing with the associated digital challenges.

DAILY QUIZ

Q1. Which of the following is true regarding Kuki tribes of Tripura ?

1. They are very much experts in hunting wild animals.
2. They have their own customary laws and village council.
3. They were Christian Traditionally .
4. They arrange marriage alliances outside their community

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 4 only
- (c) 1, 3 and 4 only
- (d) only 1

Q2. Bamiyan Buddhas recently seen in the news, they are related to which of the following countries?

- (a) Japan

(b) Indonesia

(c) India

(d) Afghanistan

Q3. With reference to Voting rights, consider the following statements

1. The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961 was amended to allow service voters and Overseas Citizens to use the postal ballots.

2. Postal ballots are sent and received electronically.

3. As per the Indian Constitution, all Indian citizens above the age of 18 years who have registered themselves as voters are eligible to vote.

Which of the above given statements is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 3 only

(b) 3 only

(c) 1 and 2 only

(d) only 1

Q4. With reference to Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (Urban), consider the following statements

1. It is a flagship of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment.

2. The mission seeks to address the housing requirement of urban poor including slum dwellers.

3. The ownership of houses is provided in the name of a female member only.

Which of the given above statements is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 3 only

(b) 2 only

(c) 1 and 2 only

(d) only 1

Q5. Which of the following is correct regarding Saudi Arabia-Yemen conflict

1. The Iranian-backed Houthis have held Yemen's capital since September 2014.

2. Though the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition halted their march south in 2015, the war has slogged on for years and created the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

(a) None

(b) 2 only

(c) 1 only

(d) Both 1 and 2