

## UPSC CURRENT AFFAIRS NOTES 09-12-2023

### PM-USHA

The Union Education Minister urges Odisha CM to implement the PM-USHA scheme, aiming to enhance higher education accessibility and quality in underserved areas.



#### About PM-USHA

- PM-USHA is a centrally sponsored scheme aimed at enhancing higher education in India.
- It's a continuation of the Rashtriya Uchcharat Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA) and aligns with the vision set by the National Education Policy (NEP) of 2020. The primary objectives include improving access, equity, and excellence in higher education, especially in underserved regions.

#### Key Components of PM-USHA

- The scheme prioritizes areas with low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), SC/ST population, and regions affected by left-wing extremism. These areas are identified as focus districts to address educational disparities.
- PM-USHA aims to establish new higher education institutions and upgrade existing ones to improve infrastructure, faculty quality, and overall educational standards.



- It emphasizes implementing reforms such as multiple entry-exit options, an academic bank of credits, the National Higher Education Qualifications Framework (NHEQF), and integrating Indian knowledge systems into the curriculum.

### **Odisha's Role and Pending MoU**

- The Union Education Minister has urged Odisha's Chief Minister to implement the PM-USHA scheme in the state.
- The scheme requires states/UTs to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Centre for its implementation. This MoU outlines responsibilities, planning, implementation, and monitoring mechanisms.
- Odisha's signing of the MoU is crucial to ensure the state doesn't miss out on the benefits of the scheme, including grants-in-aid, as the process for submissions has already begun through a dedicated portal.

### **Long-term Vision and Funding**

- The scheme is approved till March 31, 2026, with a substantial outlay of Rs 12,926 crores.
- **Its long-term vision aligns with NEP 2020**, focusing on holistic educational development, bridging educational gaps, and fostering excellence across higher education institutions.

### **Implications and Benefits for Odisha**

- Implementation of PM-USHA in Odisha can potentially lead to the establishment of new educational institutions, improvements in existing infrastructure, faculty development, and aligning the state's higher education system with national reforms.
- By addressing disparities and focusing on underserved regions, it aims to enhance access to quality higher education for students in Odisha.

## NATIONAL AUTOMATED FINGERPRINT IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM (NAFIS)



The Minister of State for Home Affairs highlighted the significance of the National Automated Fingerprint Identification System (NAFIS) in the Rajya Sabha.

### Details

- The National Automated Fingerprint Identification System (NAFIS) in India stands as a pivotal component of law enforcement, revolutionizing criminal identification and investigation through its multifaceted functionalities and advanced features.

### Foundation of NAFIS

- NAFIS acts as a centralized repository, housing an extensive database of fingerprints and palm prints collected from individuals primarily during their interaction with law enforcement agencies, such as upon arrest or during the immigration process.
- Each person is assigned a unique National Fingerprint Number (NFN) that serves as their distinct identifier within the system.

### Operational Aspects

- When an individual is arrested or has their prints recorded during immigration proceedings, these prints are promptly captured and entered into the NAFIS database. This initiates the creation of a digital record linked to their unique NFN.



- In instances where fingerprints are recovered from a crime scene, NAFIS employs an automated comparison process. It scans the database for potential matches, aiding investigators by providing leads for further examination and analysis.
- NAFIS extends its functionality beyond India's borders by being interoperable with fingerprint databases of other nations, facilitating cross-border investigations.

### Key Features

- **Centralized Database:** NAFIS consolidates fingerprint data from all states and Union Territories in India, enabling seamless access and cross-matching across the nation.
- **Speed and Accuracy:** The automated fingerprint matching system swiftly and accurately provides results, expediting investigations and enhancing their reliability.
- **Scalability:** Designed to handle vast volumes of fingerprint data, NAFIS can readily expand to accommodate the growing influx of criminal records.
- **Security Measures:** Robust security protocols safeguard sensitive data within NAFIS, ensuring protection against unauthorized access or breaches.

### **Benefits and Impact**

- **Enhanced Criminal Identification:** NAFIS significantly bolsters law enforcement agencies' ability to identify criminals, resulting in increased arrest rates and convictions.
- **Crime Solving:** It plays a pivotal role in solving crimes by furnishing investigators with critical leads, effectively reducing crime rates and fortifying public safety.
- **Identity Theft Prevention:** By offering a secure means to verify individuals' identities, NAFIS actively combats identity theft and fraudulent activities.

- **Operational Efficiency:** NAFIS streamlines the criminal identification process, saving valuable time and resources for law enforcement agencies.

### Future Prospects

- **Integration with other Databases:** Potential integration with additional crime databases, such as DNA databases, could provide a more comprehensive view of criminal activities.
- **Advancements in Matching Algorithms:** Continuous development of new algorithms could further enhance the speed and accuracy of fingerprint matching.
- **Expansion into Biometric Technologies:** NAFIS might broaden its scope to encompass other biometric technologies like iris recognition and facial recognition, amplifying its identification capabilities.
- NAFIS stands as a cornerstone in India's law enforcement arsenal, contributing significantly to criminal identification, crime resolution, and public safety enhancement. As it evolves, NAFIS is poised to play an even more impactful role in combating crime through continuous advancements and integrations with cutting-edge technologies.

### ESMA



The Odisha government invoked the Orissa Essential Services (Maintenance) Act (ESMA) on December 6, 2023, to prohibit strikes by paramedical staff in the state.

### Details



- The Odisha Government has invoked the Orissa Essential Services (Maintenance) Act (ESMA), which prohibits strikes by paramedical staff, including nurses, pharmacists, technicians, and Class III and IV employees in the Health Department. This move aims to ensure that medical services are not disrupted.
- According to the State Health Department, the order imposing ESMA and prohibiting strikes will be in force for six months from December 6.
- The decision to invoke ESMA is to prevent strikes in the form of work stoppages by employees associated with medical services in the state, ensuring uninterrupted healthcare services for the population.
- The prohibition order covers staff working at municipality hospitals, ESI hospitals, Acharya Harihar Regional Cancer Centre in Cuttack, Regional Spinal Injury Centre in Cuttack, jail hospitals, and police hospitals.

### **Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA)**

- The Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) is a pivotal legislation enacted in 1968 to safeguard the delivery of essential services crucial for public welfare and national security.
- Initially, different states had their versions of this Act, causing disparities in its implementation. ESMA aimed to standardize and create a uniform framework across the nation.

### **Key Features of ESMA**

- **Prohibition of Strikes:** ESMA grants the government the authority to forbid strikes in essential services for a specified duration, typically around six months. This can be enforced through notifications issued by the central or state government.
- **Defining Essential Services:** The Act defines "essential services" as those vital for maintaining public order, safety, and health. This encompasses services like transportation, communication, power generation and distribution, banking, and sanitation.
- **Penalties for Violations:** Individuals or groups participating in strikes in essential services can face imprisonment or fines. Additionally, property used for organizing or supporting such strikes can be confiscated as per the Act.



## Significance of ESMA

- **Continuity of Essential Services:** ESMA plays a critical role in ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of essential services during periods of labour disputes. This prevents disruptions that could significantly inconvenience the public.
- **Promotion of Industrial Peace:** By providing a structured framework for resolving disputes through negotiation and arbitration, ESMA fosters dialogue between employers and employees. This promotes industrial peace and stability.
- **Protection of Public Interest:** ESMA prioritizes the public interest over the right to strike in crucial sectors, safeguarding citizens' basic needs and well-being.

## Steps Taken

- **Invocation of ESMA:** The Indian government has invoked ESMA on multiple occasions to prevent strikes in various essential sectors like transport, healthcare, and banking.
- **Amendments:** The Act has undergone several amendments to update the definition of essential services and adapt to changes in the industrial landscape.
- **Labour Reforms:** India has implemented labour reforms aimed at improving working conditions and addressing employee grievances, reducing the necessity for strikes and encouraging negotiation.

## Challenges Associated with ESMA

- **Potential for Misuse:** Critics argue that the Act might be misused by the government to suppress legitimate labour rights, stifling workers' voices.
- **Impact on Industrial Relations:** The prohibition of strikes could negatively impact healthy industrial relations, fostering an environment of fear among workers.
- **Effectiveness:** Some doubt ESMA's effectiveness in preventing strikes, suggesting that it might drive workers toward more disruptive forms of protest.

## Potential Way Forward

- **Promoting Collective Bargaining:** Encouraging effective dialogue and collective bargaining between employers and workers could address concerns without resorting to strikes.
- **Independent Dispute Resolution:** Establishing robust and independent dispute resolution mechanisms could facilitate fair and timely resolutions, preventing conflicts from escalating.
- **Addressing Underlying Issues:** Prioritizing improvements in working conditions, wage disparity, and worker safety could mitigate labour unrest and promote industrial peace.
- **Reviewing the Act:** Regular reviews of ESMA are essential to ensure its relevance and effectiveness in a changing industrial and labour landscape.

## Girsu

**Archaeologists recently discovered two temples, one buried atop the other, in the ancient megacity of Girsu in Iraq.**



## About Girsu:

Girsu was a city of the **Sumer civilization**.

It was discovered during the 19th century, with the first excavations being conducted in the 1880s by the French archaeologist, **Ernest de Sarzec**.





It was significant in that it first revealed to the world the existence of the Sumerian civilization, as well as bringing to light some of the most vital monuments of Mesopotamian art and architecture.

### **Key Facts about the Sumer Civilization:**

It is one of the earliest known civilizations that flourished between c. **4100-1750 BCE** in the historical region of southern Mesopotamia, in present-day Iraq.

Sumer was never a cohesive political entity, however, but a region of **city-states**, each with its own king.

The Sumerians were responsible for many technological advancements, including measurements of time as well as writing.

They essentially “invented” time by dividing day and night into 12-hour periods, hours into 60 minutes, and minutes into 60 seconds.

They built the **first known cities** as well as creating the first known code of law. According to archaeological evidence, they built about a dozen city-states in the fourth millennium BC.

They advanced the craft of writing, literature, hymns and prayers. The **epic of Gilgamesh**, considered to be the world’s oldest surviving piece of literature, derives from five Sumerian poems.

They also perfected several existing forms of technology, including the wheel, the plough, and mathematics.

They were also notably one of the first civilizations to brew beer, which was seen by the ancient people as a key to a healthy heart and liver.

## **Lok Sabha expels Mahua Moitra**

The Lok Sabha expelled Trinamool Congress member Mahua Moitra over the "cash-for-query" allegation through a voice vote amid chaos.

Union Parliamentary Affairs Minister had moved the motion to expel Ms. Moitra as per the recommendation of Ethics Committee report.



The report found her guilty of sharing her credentials with others, accepted gifts for favours from a businessman.

### **About the Ethics Committee:**

It oversees the moral and ethical conduct of members and examines cases of misconduct referred to it.

### **History:**

A Presiding Officers' Conference, held in Delhi, in **1996** first mooted the idea of ethics panels for the two Houses.

Then Vice President (and Rajya Sabha Chairman) **K R Narayanan** constituted the Ethics Committee of the Upper House in 1997.

**In the case of Lok Sabha**, a study group of the House Committee of Privileges recommended (in 1997) the constitution of an Ethics Committee, but it could not be taken up by Lok Sabha.

The Committee of Privileges finally recommended the constitution of an Ethics Committee during the **13th Lok Sabha**.

The late Speaker, G M C Balayogi, constituted an ad hoc Ethics Committee in **2000**, which became a permanent part of the House only in **2015**.

### **Appointment of members in Lok Sabha Ethics Committee:**

The committee should not contain more than 15 members.

The members of the Ethics Committee are appointed by the **Speaker** for a period of one year.

The Committee is currently headed by the BJP MP Vinod Kumar Sonkar.

### **Function**

The committee can examine every complaint relating to unethical conduct of a member of Lok Sabha referred to it by the Speaker and make such recommendations as it may deem fit.

The committee can formulate a Code of Conduct for members and suggest amendments or additions to the Code of Conduct from time to time.

### **Procedure for complaints**



**Any person** can complain against a Member through another Lok Sabha MP, along with evidence of the alleged misconduct, and an affidavit stating that the complaint is not “false, frivolous, or vexatious”.

**If the Member himself complains, the affidavit is not needed.**

**The Speaker** can refer to the Committee any complaint against an MP.

**The Committee does not entertain complaints** based only on media reports or on matters that are sub-judice.

**The Committee makes a prima facie inquiry** before deciding to examine a complaint. **It makes its recommendations** after evaluating the complaint.

**The Committee presents its report to the Speaker**, who asks the House if the report should be taken up for consideration. There is also a provision for a half-hour discussion on the report.

#### **Action taken on the recommendations by the Ethics Committee**

After the report has been presented, any member of the LS may move that the report be taken into consideration whereupon the Speaker may put the question to the House.

Before putting the question to the House, the Speaker may permit a debate on the motion, not exceeding half an hour in duration.

The House may or may not agree with the recommendations contained in the report.

#### **Ethics Committee vs Privileges Committee:**

The work of the Ethics Committee and the Privileges Committee often overlap.

The Rules (for example, the Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Lok Sabha) applicable to the Committee of Privileges also apply to the ethics panel.

An allegation of corruption against an MP can be sent to either body, but **usually more serious accusations go to the Privileges Committee.**

**The mandate of the Privileges Committee** is to safeguard the “freedom, authority, and dignity of Parliament”.



These privileges are enjoyed by individual Members as well as the House as a whole.

**An MP** can be examined for breach of privilege; **a non-MP** too can be accused of breach of privilege for actions that attack the authority and dignity of the House.

**The Ethics Committee can take up only cases of misconduct that involve MPs.**

### **News Summary: Lok Sabha expels Mahua Moitra**

Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Mahua Moitra was expelled as a Lok Sabha MP after she was found guilty by the ethics panel in the 'cash-for-query' case.

### **Background of the case**

In October 2023, a BJP MP alleged that Ms. Moitra was asking questions in the Parliament in exchange for cash and gifts from businessman Darshan Hiranandani.

In an affidavit to the Ethics Committee on October 19, Hiranandani claimed that Moitra provided him with her Parliament login ID and password so that he could post questions directly on her behalf when required.

### **Power of LS to expel its members**

#### **Complexity involved**

There is absence of explicit rules barring MPs from sharing their Parliament login credentials, as the practice of online question submission is relatively recent.

However, the absence of specific rules does not diminish the gravity of potential breaches of parliamentary conduct.

### **Supreme Court's stand on the issue**

The Supreme Court has offered divergent views on similar cases in the past, reflecting the complexity of parliamentary expulsions.

The Raja Ram Pal case of 2007 highlighted that Parliament possesses the power to expel its members, subject to justiciability.



However, the interpretation of Article 101, which deals with the vacation of seats in Parliament, led to disagreements among the judges.

Minority judgement raised concerns over the exhaustive nature of Article 101 and its silence on expulsion as a ground for vacancy.

In a subsequent case, *Amarinder Singh vs Special Committee, Punjab Vidhan Sabha*, the Supreme Court deemed the expulsion of former Punjab Chief Minister Amarinder Singh unconstitutional.

The verdict underscored the potential misuse of legislative privileges to target political opponents or dissenters, especially concerning their legislative acts from previous terms.

The Supreme Court's stance in this case raises concerns over vague grounds for expulsion, such as conduct unbecoming of a member or lowering the dignity of the House.

Such broad criteria could potentially pave the way for selective application of legislative privileges against political adversaries.

## **Govt further cuts Wheat Stock limits, bans Onion Exports until March 2024**

With an aim to increase domestic availability and keep prices in check, the Union Government has further lowered the limit of wheat that traders can hold.

### **Wheat Production in India:**

- Wheat is one of the main staple crops and is important for the food economy in India. It is the most consumed crop after rice by the Indian population.
- When India gained independence in 1947, wheat output and productivity were extremely low.
- Therefore, India used to import a large quantity of wheat from different nations to meet the country's demands.
- After the **Green Revolution** in the late sixties, wheat production in India became self-sufficient due to various government initiatives.
- Currently, **India is ranked third in global wheat production.**



- The wheat crop is cultivated in the **Rabi (winter) season** and harvested in the spring or summer season.
- Moreover, there are about **448 varieties of wheat** grown in India.

### Wheat Producing States:

- The northern states of **Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana** are the main wheat producers of India.
- About 107 million metric tons of wheat were produced in 2021 across the country.
- In 2022, about 31 million hectares of wheat were cultivated and over 31 million hectares of wheat were harvested in the country.
- Record-high prices and favourable weather conditions encouraged farmers to increase planting acreage and choose high-yielding varieties, leading to a record-high wheat production estimate in 2023.

### Onion Production in India:

- Onion is sown in all the States, however, **Maharashtra** is the leading producer with share of around 43%, Madhya Pradesh 16% , Karnataka & Gujarat contributing around 9% of national production.
- It is **harvested thrice a year**, with cropping seasons reported during Kharif, Late Kharif and Rabi.
- The harvest of Rabi is most important as it contributes nearly 72 -75% of national production and is harvested during March to May months.
- The shelf life of Rabi harvest is highest and store-worthy whereas the Kharif and Late Kharif crop is for direct consumption and not store-worthy.
- The timing of the harvest of onion across the country provides regular supply of fresh / stored onion all over the year.
- But sometimes due to vagaries of weather, either the stored onion is spoilt or the sown area gets damaged leading to supply constraints and rise in the domestic prices.

### News Summary:



- With an aim to increase domestic availability and keep prices in check, the Union Government has further **lowered the limit of wheat that traders can hold.**
- India has extended **restrictions on the outbound shipments of onions until the end of this fiscal year or March 31, 2024**, as the government seeks to ensure ample supply in the country.

The exception to the ban on onion imports includes permission by the Government based on specific countries' requests.

- Wheat prices have remained elevated despite the Government last year banning exports following a shortfall in production and later imposing restrictions on stock.
- As of November 1, the wheat stock in the central pool stood at 218.76 lakh metric tonnes (LMT), a little higher than 210.46 LMT on the same day last year.

### **What are the Current Permissible Stock Limits?**

- The permissible stock that traders/wholesalers can hold was 3,000 metric tonnes.

It has been **reduced to 1,000 metric tonnes now.**

- Retailers and big chain retailers can hold up to 10 metric tonnes at each of their outlets.

It has been reduced to **5 metric tonnes at each of their outlets.**

- The mentioned entities are expected to declare their stock positions and update them regularly on the Department of Food and Public Distribution's portal.
- If the stock held by them are higher than the limit, they will have 30 days from the day of issue of notification to bring the same under the prescribed limits.



## **RBI monetary policy update**

The Reserve Bank of India's Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) kept the repo rate unchanged for the fifth time in a row at 6.5 per cent.

While announcing various steps, RBI also said that it will lay down guidelines for web aggregators of loan products to bring more transparency to digital lending.

Digital lending is the process of availing credit online.

It involves lending through web platforms or mobile apps, utilising technology in customer acquisition, credit assessment, loan approval, disbursement, recovery and associated customer service.

Its increased popularity amongst new-age lenders can be attributed to expanding smartphone penetration, credit range flexibility and speedy online transactions.

It includes products like Buy Now, Pay Later (BNPL), which is a financing option (or simply a short-term loan product).

BNPL allows one to buy a product or avail a service without having to worry about paying for it immediately.

### **Need to regulate digital lending**

#### **Illegal lending apps in India**

A report by the RBI, published in 2022, says that India has the maximum number of digital loan apps in the world.

The report has marked 600 loan apps illegal and said that the central bank.

#### **Low-income and financial unsavvy Indians are the targets**

These apps mostly lend small sums between Rs 2,000 and Rs 10,000, targeting low-income and financial unsavvy Indians.

These loans come with huge interest rates and extortionate terms and conditions, to which borrowers have no recourse.

This increases the vulnerabilities of these borrowers by exploiting the unmet need for credit.





## Harassment by recovery agents

Such apps are dangerous as the harassment by recovery agents have driven many to suicide in the recent past.

In 2021, at least six people committed suicide in Hyderabad alone due to harassment by agents.

## Breach of privacy

With just one tap, borrowers allow these lenders to access everything on their phone. The lender also get access to information such as PAN and Aadhar details.

The apps, on the pretext of advancing a loan, obtain all information from the customers' phones which could later be used by the company to perpetrate some other financial crime.

## Acts as a tool for money laundering

More than a hundred apps related to loans, betting and dating successfully collected thousands of crores in revenue and repatriated them to China.

This was revealed an investigation conducted by the Enforcement Directorate (ED).

## Steps taken by to regulate digital lending

RBI has been designated as the nodal department for dealing with complaints against unauthorised digital lending platforms as well as mobile apps.

In August 2022, **RBI issued the first set of guidelines for digital lending** in order to combat illegal activities by certain players.

These guidelines were issued in response to the recommendation of the Working Group on Digital Lending (WGDL).

In September 2023, Union Finance Minister chaired a meeting with appropriate officials and launched a **multi-agency crackdown on illegal loan apps**.

To curb the menace of illegal loan apps, the RBI has been asked to prepare a 'whitelist' of legal loan apps.

At the same time, MEITY has been tasked with ensuring only such legal applications (list prepared by RBI) are available on app stores.



The RBI has been entrusted to ensure that the registration of payment aggregators be completed within a time frame.

A payment aggregator acts as a third party responsible for managing and processing merchants' online transactions.

The RBI has also been entrusted with monitoring 'mule or rented' accounts that may be used for money laundering.

RBI has further been asked to review and cancel dormant non-banking finance companies (NBFCs) to avoid their misuse by such app operators.