

UPSC CURRENT AFFAIRS NOTES 06-04-2024

POSTAL BALLOT

The Election Commission's decision to introduce postal voting for polling personnel engaged in election duties in Kallakurichi district, Tamil Nadu was a significant step towards ensuring electoral participation among government employees who were unable to vote at their designated polling stations due to official responsibilities.



Details

Postal ballots, also referred to as mail-in ballots, have emerged as a vital mechanism to facilitate voting for registered voters who are unable to physically visit polling stations on election day.

This innovative system enhances inclusivity and accessibility in the electoral process, ensuring that eligible electors can exercise their right to vote irrespective of their circumstances.

What are Postal Ballots?



Postal ballots enable registered voters to cast their votes by mail, eliminating the need to appear in person at a polling station.

This alternative voting method is especially beneficial for individuals facing constraints such as geographical distance from their home constituency, disability, work commitments, or those engaged in essential services on Election Day.

Several categories of electors are eligible to opt for postal ballots

Service Voters: Members of the armed forces, paramilitary forces, and government employees deployed on election duty away from their home constituencies.

Absentee Voters: Individuals unable to vote in person due to work commitments, illness, or disability.

Electors on Election Duty: Government officials and polling staff are assigned duties at polling stations other than their own.

Electors under Preventive Detention: Individuals detained under preventive custody during the election period.

Essential Services Personnel: Media persons authorised by the Election Commission (EC) and those engaged in critical services such as transportation (metros, railways), healthcare, etc., on polling day.

The Ministry of Law and Justice amended the Conduct of Election Rules to include Persons with Disabilities (PwDs) aged 85 and above as eligible voters through postal ballots.

Applying for a Postal Ballot

To apply for a postal ballot, eligible voters must submit Form 12 D to the Returning Officer (RO) of their respective constituency. This application requires personal details, voter identification information, and a valid reason for opting for a postal ballot. The RO verifies eligibility based on the provided criteria and issues the postal ballot if requirements are met.

For service voters, the RO dispatches the postal ballot paper either directly or through the Ministry of External Affairs for those serving outside India. Senior citizens benefit from a special arrangement where polling officials, accompanied by a videographer and security personnel, visit their residences to facilitate the process. Voters are notified of the visit details via SMS.



Process of Postal Voting

Receiving the Postal Ballot: Upon approval, the RO dispatches the postal ballot to the voter's registered address, containing the ballot paper, declaration form, secrecy sleeve, and a pre-paid return envelope.

Marking the Ballot: Voters mark their preferred candidate(s) on the ballot paper within the secrecy sleeve to ensure confidentiality.

Completing the Declaration Form: Voters fill out the declaration form, providing their signature and other relevant details.

Sealing the Envelope: The marked ballot paper and declaration form are sealed inside the secrecy sleeve and placed into the pre-paid return envelope.

Returning the Postal Ballot: Voters affix the required postage stamp and mail the return envelope to the designated address within the specified timeframe.

Counting of Postal Ballots

Postal ballots are counted separately from votes cast at polling stations. On the designated counting day, postal ballots are collected by postal authorities and transported to the counting centre.

The RO and election officials meticulously scrutinise each postal ballot for validity and integrity, ensuring that valid ballots are added to the respective candidate's vote count.

NATIONAL DISASTER RELIEF FUNDS

The recent standoff between Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and the central government over the release of the National Disaster Relief Fund (NDRF) exposes inherent vulnerabilities in India's disaster management framework, causing delays in aid distribution and hindering recovery efforts.

About National Disaster Relief Fund (NDRF)

The NDRF, established under Section 46 of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, provides financial assistance to states facing severe disasters when the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) is inadequate.

National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF)

- Created U/s 46 of DM Act, 2005 to supplement immediate relief in case of calamities of severe nature.
- Procedure for Assistance from NDRF includes -
 - Submission of Memorandum for fund requirement by State Government.
 - Visit of IMCT for on the spot assessment and recommendations.
 - Consideration of IMCT's recommendation by SC-NEC.
 - Consideration of SC-NEC recommendation and approval of HLC.
 - Ministry of Finance releases assistance from NDRF and
 - MHA oversees the utilisation of releases from NDF.

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The entire contribution to the NDRF comes from the Central Government. The allocation of funds is based on the recommendations of successive Finance Commissions.

The NDRF covers disasters of severe nature, including cyclones, droughts, earthquakes, fires, floods, tsunamis, hailstorms, landslides, avalanches, cloudbursts, pest attacks, frost, and cold waves.

Contributions to the NDRF can be made by individuals or institutions through physical instruments, or the Bharatkosh portal.

About State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF)

The SDRF constituted under Section 48(1)(a) of the Disaster Management Act, 2005, is the primary fund available to State Governments for immediate responses to notified disasters.

The SDRF is funded jointly by the Central Government and State Governments in a ratio of 75:25 for general category states/UTs and 90:10 for special category states/UTs (North-Eastern and Himalayan States).

The SDRF allocation includes both the State Disaster Response Fund (80% of SDRMF) and the State Disaster Mitigation Fund (20% of SDRMF), as recommended by the 15th Finance Commission.



SDRF covers a range of disasters, and states can also use up to 10% of the funds for local disasters not included in the notified list, subject to specified conditions.

Significance of NDRF/SDRF

Timely Response: It ensures a swift and coordinated response to disasters, enabling governments to deploy resources promptly to save lives and alleviate suffering.

Resource Availability: Having dedicated funds for disaster relief minimises delays in mobilising critical resources, such as emergency supplies, equipment, and personnel.

Recovery and Reconstruction: It supports the initial recovery phase by facilitating rapid restoration of infrastructure, livelihoods, and essential services.

Resilience Building: Investing in disaster response and recovery, contributes to building resilience within communities and strengthening disaster preparedness.

NDRF encounters several challenges

Funding Adequacy: Ensuring sufficient and sustainable funding for NDRF to address diverse and escalating disaster risks is a persistent challenge, especially amid the increasing frequency and intensity of disasters.

Allocation and Utilisation: Efficient allocation and utilisation of NDRF funds require robust governance mechanisms to prevent mismanagement, corruption, or inefficient spending.

Equitable Distribution: Ensuring equitable distribution of NDRF resources across regions and vulnerable populations, particularly in large and diverse countries, poses logistical and administrative challenges.

Interagency Coordination: Coordinating efforts among multiple agencies, including government departments, NGOs, and international partners, to optimise resource deployment and avoid duplication of efforts.

Steps Taken to Strengthen NDRF

Policy Reforms: Regular review and update of disaster management policies and funding mechanisms to align with evolving risks and priorities.

Capacity Building: Investing in training, technology, and infrastructure to enhance disaster response capabilities and preparedness.



Risk Reduction Strategies: Emphasising disaster risk reduction measures, such as early warning systems, community-based planning, and resilient infrastructure development.

Public Awareness and Engagement: Educating communities about disaster preparedness and response protocols to foster a culture of resilience and self-reliance.

The Fifteenth Finance Commission has outlined specific allocation breakdowns for SDRF utilisation:

40% for response and relief works.

30% for recovery and reconstruction efforts.

10% for preparedness and capacity-building initiatives.

Way Forward for NDRF

Increased Funding Allocation: Advocating for greater budgetary allocations to NDRF to enhance readiness and capacity for disaster response.

Transparent Governance: Implementing transparent and accountable governance frameworks for fund allocation, utilisation, and monitoring.

Integrated Approach: Adopting an integrated approach to disaster management that prioritises prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery.

Partnership and Collaboration: Fostering partnerships with international organisations, private sector entities, and civil society organisations to leverage resources and expertise.

National Disaster Relief Funds (NDRF) play a vital role in enabling effective disaster response and recovery. Despite challenges, ongoing efforts to strengthen NDRF through enhanced funding, governance reforms, and community engagement are essential for building resilient societies capable of mitigating and responding to diverse disaster scenarios. By investing in disaster preparedness and response, governments can reduce human suffering, protect livelihoods, and promote sustainable development in disaster-prone regions.

Washington Treaty

NATO Foreign Ministers recently gathered at NATO Headquarters to mark 75 years since the signing of the Washington Treaty.

About Washington Treaty:

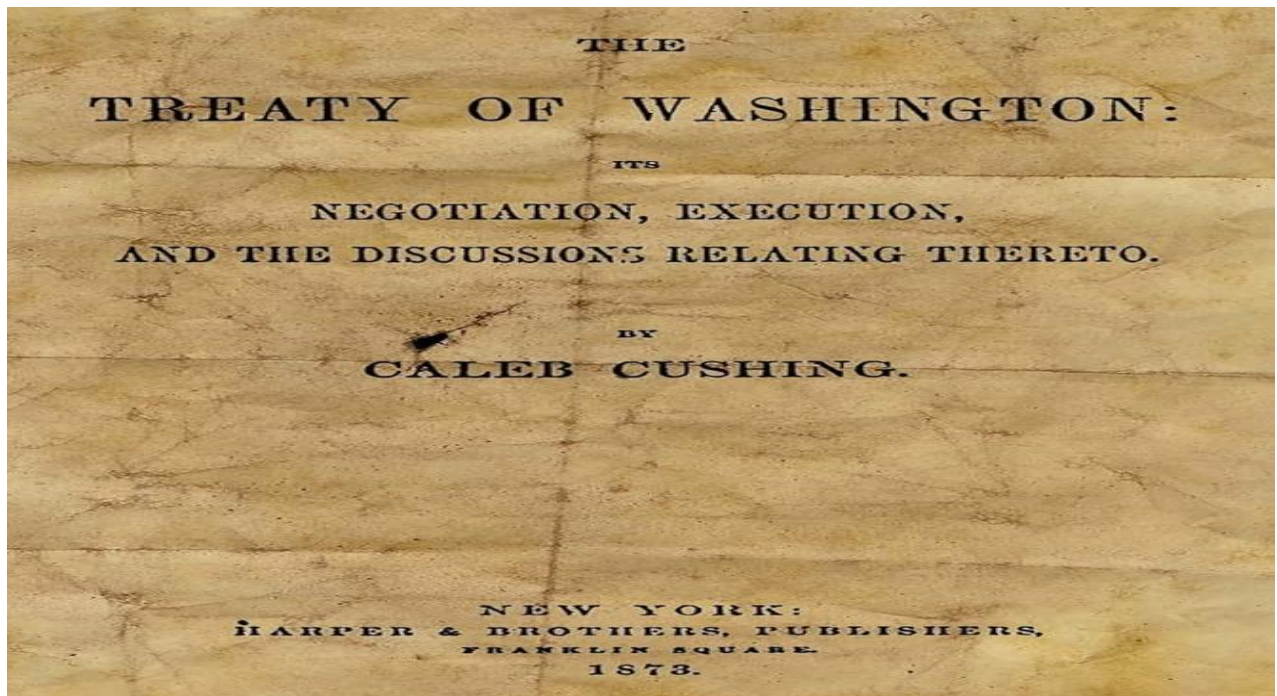
The Washington Treaty, or North Atlantic Treaty, forms the basis of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

The Treaty was signed in Washington D.C. on 4 April, 1949, by 12 founding members.

The Treaty derives its authority from Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which reaffirms the inherent right of independent states to individual or collective defence.

Collective defence is at the heart of the treaty and is enshrined in Article 5. It commits members to protect each other and sets a spirit of solidarity within the Alliance.

The treaty is short, containing only 14 articles, and provides for in-built flexibility on all fronts.





Despite the changing security environment, the original treaty has never had to be modified, and each ally has the possibility to implement the text in accordance with its capabilities and circumstances.

Key Facts about NATO:

NATO is a military alliance established by the North Atlantic Treaty.

It currently has 32 alliance members from North America and Europe.

NATO's fundamental goal is to safeguard the Allies' freedom and security through political and military means.

It is a system of collective defence where independent member states agree for mutual defence in case of any attack by an external party.

Article 5 of the Washington Treaty states that an attack against one ally is an attack against all.

This article forms the core of the Alliance, a promise of collective defense.

Functions:

Political: NATO promotes democratic values and enables members to consult and cooperate on defence and security-related issues to solve problems, build trust, and, in the long run, prevent conflict.

Military: NATO is committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes. If diplomatic efforts fail, it has the military power to undertake crisis-management operations.

In addition to collective defence and key values, the principle of consensus decision-making and the importance of consultation define the spirit of the Organization, together with its defensive nature and flexibility.

Headquarter: Brussels, Belgium.

The Charter of the United Nations is the founding document of the United Nations. It was signed on 26 June 1945, in San Francisco, at the conclusion of the United Nations Conference on International Organization, and came into force on 24 October 1945. The United Nations can take action on a wide variety of issues due to its unique international character and the powers vested in its Charter, which is considered an international treaty. As such, the UN Charter is an instrument of international law, and UN Member States are bound by it. The UN Charter codifies the major principles of international relations, from

sovereign equality of States to the prohibition of the use of force in international relations.

BIRD FLU

A Texas dairy worker contracted H5N1 avian influenza after exposure to infected cows, raising concerns about the virus's potential adaptation to mammalian hosts.

Over 500 Adélie penguins were found dead on an island in the Antarctic Peninsula region, with suspicions of high-pathogenicity avian influenza.

Details

Recent Studies: Research indicates that the avian influenza A virus subtype H5N1 has entered a significant panzootic phase, posing risks to both animal and human health.



The avian flu virus has been on the radar of experts since its emergence in 1997 in Hong Kong. Predictions of potential pandemics underscore the need for continued vigilance and preparedness efforts.

Implications

The discovery suggests the virus may be spreading rapidly, posing a threat to wildlife populations.



Human Health Risk: The mutation detected in the infected dairy worker, PB2 E627K, raises concerns about the virus's potential to infect humans. However, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that the current human health risk remains low.

Pandemic Potential: Some experts warn of the potential for a bird flu pandemic, citing the virus's virulence and mortality. Concerns are raised about the virus mutating to become more easily transmissible among humans.

About Bird Flu

Bird flu, also known as avian influenza, is a viral infection primarily affecting birds but can occasionally infect humans and other animals.

Types: The most common strains are H5N1 and H7N9, known for their severity in birds and potential transmission to humans.

Origins: Bird flu viruses occur naturally among wild aquatic birds worldwide and can infect domestic poultry, which can lead to outbreaks among birds kept for commercial farming.

Causes and Transmission

Virus Source: Influenza A viruses are responsible for bird flu, with wild birds acting as natural hosts.

Transmission to Humans: Direct contact with infected birds, their droppings, or contaminated surfaces can lead to human infection.

Human-to-Human Transmission: While rare, certain strains of bird flu have shown limited human-to-human transmission, raising concerns about potential pandemics.

Symptoms

Bird Symptoms: Birds infected with bird flu may exhibit symptoms such as sudden death, decreased egg production, respiratory distress, and neurological signs.

Human Symptoms: In humans, symptoms may range from mild flu-like illness to severe respiratory distress and pneumonia.

Complications: Severe cases can lead to respiratory failure, organ failure, and death, especially in individuals with compromised immune systems or underlying health conditions.



Diagnosis and Treatment

Diagnostic Tests: Laboratory tests, including PCR (polymerase chain reaction) and viral culture, are used to confirm bird flu infection in both birds and humans.

Antiviral Medications: Prescription antiviral drugs, such as oseltamivir (Tamiflu) and zanamivir (Relenza), may be effective in treating bird flu in humans if administered early.

Prevention: Vaccination of poultry, strict biosecurity measures on farms, and surveillance programs are essential for preventing outbreaks in birds.

Global Impacts

Economic Losses: Bird flu outbreaks in poultry can lead to significant economic losses for the poultry industry and related sectors.

Public Health Threat: The potential for bird flu viruses to mutate and acquire the ability for sustained human-to-human transmission poses a significant public health threat and requires continuous monitoring and preparedness.

Pandemic Preparedness: Global health organizations, including the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), collaborate on surveillance, research, and pandemic preparedness efforts to mitigate the risks associated with bird flu.

RBI Retail Direct scheme

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is planning to launch a mobile application aimed at facilitating seamless investment in government securities by retail investors under the RBI Retail Direct Scheme.

About RBI Retail Direct Scheme:

It was initially introduced in November 2021.

It gives access to individual investors to maintain gilt accounts with the RBI and invest in government securities.

The scheme enables investors to buy securities in primary auctions as well as buy/sell securities through the NDS-OM platform.



Negotiated Dealing System - Order Matching system (NDS-OM) means RBI's screen based anonymous electronic order matching system for trading in Government securities in the secondary market.

It provides the following facilities to retail investors in government securities market through an online portal:

Open and maintain a 'Retail Direct Gilt Account',

Access to primary issuance of government securities,

Access to NDS-OM.

Eligibility: Retail investors can register under the scheme and maintain an RDG account, if they have the following:

Rupee savings bank account maintained in India,

PAN, any officially valid document for KYC purpose,

Valid email-ID and registered mobile number.

Payments for transactions can be done conveniently using saving bank account through internet-banking or Unified Payments Interface (UPI).

Investor services include provisions for transaction and balance statements, nomination facility, pledge or lien of securities and gift transactions. No fees will be charged for facilities provided under the scheme.

Government Security is a tradable instrument issued by the Central government or the state governments. It acknowledges the government's debt obligation. These securities are either short term (known as treasury bills with original maturities of less than one year) or long term.

Kumittipathi Rock Paintings

Miscreants have caused damage to the rock art paintings at the cave at Kumittipathi, a village near Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu.

About Kumittipathi Rock Paintings:

These paintings are believed to be around 3,000 years old and are among the important rock arts in the Kongu region.

Theme: The paintings depict an elephant, ther (chariot, some say it is a peacock), and the lives of early dwellers of the region.

There are small pits and holes in the cave, which are believed to have been used to store water and other belongings.

Material used: They used an inorganic white pigment, along with natural gum to paint the figures.

While most of the rock painting sites in Tamil Nadu are found on rock shelters, those at Kumittipathi are drawn inside a cave.



Geoglyphs are a form of prehistoric rock art, created on the surface of laterite plateaus. They are made by removing a part of the rock surface through an incision, picking, carving or abrading.

Rakhigarhi

The NCERT recently introduced certain revisions to the history syllabus of Class 12 students, highlighting that Harappans were based out in Rakhigarhi.

About Rakhigarhi:

Location: It is an archaeological site located in Hisar district, Haryana, just 27 km from the Ghaggar river, in the Ghaggar-Hakra river plain.

It is one of the oldest and largest cities of the subcontinent's earliest known Bronze Age urban culture the Indus Valley or Harappan Civilization, going back to about 6500 BCE.

It is one of the five known biggest townships of Harappan civilization on the Indian sub-continent. The other four are Harappa, Mohenjodaro, and Ganveriwala in Pakistan, and Dholavira (Gujrat) in India.

Findings:

The exploration around this site has clearly identified seven archaeological mounds spread over an area of approximately 350 ha.

Rakhigarhi primarily yields evidence of occupation during the Early and Mature Harappan periods, with the site being completely abandoned during the Late Harappan period.

The archaeological excavations revealed the mature Harappan phase, represented by a planned township with mud-brick as well as burnt-brick houses with a proper drainage system.

The ceramic industry represented by red ware, which included dish-on-stand, vase, jar, bowl, beaker, perforated jar, goblet, and handis.

Animal sacrificial pits lined with mud bricks and triangular and circular fire alters on the mud floor have also been excavated, that signifies the ritual system of the Harappans.

A cylindrical seal with five Harappan characters on one side and a symbol of an alligator on the other is an important find from this site.

Other antiquities included blades; terracotta and shell bangles; beads of semiprecious stones, terracotta, shell and copper objects; animal figurines, toy cart frame and wheel of terracotta; bone points; inscribed steatite seals, and sealings.

The excavations have yielded a few extended burials, which certainly belong to a very late stage, may be the medieval times.

The Bronze Age was the time from around 2,000BC to 700BC when people used bronze. In the Stone Age, flint was shaped and used as tools and weapons, but in the Bronze Age, stone was gradually replaced by bronze. Bronze was made by melting tin and copper, and mixing them together. The bronze could then be poured into moulds to create useful items. The Bronze Age marked the



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first time humans started to work with metal. Humans made many technological advances during the Bronze Age, including the first writing systems and the invention of the wheel.