

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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Over 30 civil society organisations, led by the National Council for People's Right to Information (NCPRI), have urged the Union government to refrain from diluting the Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005. Their primary concern is an amendment passed in 2023 that, once implemented, would significantly restrict access to government-held information.

Civil society groups call on govt. to not water down RTI Act

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

Over 30 civil society organisations are urging the Union government to avoid gutting the Right to Information Act, 2005, the National Council for People's Right to Information (NCPRI) announced on Friday. An amendment to the RTI Act passed in 2023 – which has not yet come into effect – would drastically limit the amount of information that government agencies would be required to share, activists said, upping pressure on the government to keep the law intact.

The issue is around Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act, which allows government agencies to refuse applications for information if they relate to an individual's personal information. "Studies show that this exemption is among the most common grounds to refuse information", Nikhil Dey, an NCPRI co-convenor, said at a press

The exemption on providing personal information is on track to become a blanket prohibition

conference on Friday.

However, the section has a proviso, which allows for personal information to be disclosed if there is public interest in doing so. In 2023, the Union government, in spite of protests, removed the proviso through an Act of Parliament. This was done through the last section of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023.

Since the subordinate legislation for kicking in the DPDP Act has not yet been notified, the amendment has not kicked in. The draft DPDP Rules, 2025, should not notify this amendment, and Parliament should pass a law undoing the amendment from the Act as well, said Anjali Bhardwaj, co-convenor of the NCPRI.

Key Issue: Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act

- ➔ **Current Provision:** Section 8(1)(j) allows the government to refuse information requests if they pertain to an individual's personal details. However, a proviso permits disclosure if public interest outweighs the right to privacy.
- ➔ **Amendment Impact:** In 2023, the Union government removed this proviso via the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, effectively making the exemption a blanket prohibition on sharing personal information, even if public interest is at stake.
- ➔ **Current Status:** Since the DPDP Act's subordinate legislation has not been notified, the amendment is yet to take effect.

Civil Society Concerns

- ➔ **Transparency at Risk:** The amendment may weaken accountability as government officials could withhold information citing privacy concerns.
- ➔ **Frequent Misuse of Exemptions:** Studies indicate that Section 8(1)(j) is already one of the most commonly used grounds for rejecting RTI applications.
- ➔ **Call for Reversal:** Activists demand that the DPDP Rules, 2025, exclude the amendment, and Parliament must pass a law restoring the proviso.

Conclusion

- ➔ The proposed changes to the RTI Act could curtail access to crucial government information, weakening transparency and accountability. Civil society groups continue to push for legislative intervention to uphold the spirit of the RTI Act and ensure the right to information is not compromised.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Right to Information (RTI) is a crucial tool for ensuring transparency and accountability in governance. Discuss the impact of recent amendments to the RTI Act on citizens' access to information. **(250 words)**

The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court has restrained the Education Ministry and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) from publishing the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) rankings for 2025. The order came in response to a public interest litigation (PIL) filed by a petitioner who challenged the credibility and transparency of the ranking system.

Do not publish NIRF ranking for 2025: HC to Education Ministry

The Hindu Bureau
MADURAI

The Madurai Bench of the Madras High Court on Thursday restrained the Education Ministry and the National Board of Accreditation (NBA) from publishing the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) ranking for 2025.

The court was hearing a public interest litigation petition filed by C. Chellamuthu from Dindigul district of Tamil Nadu.

He claimed that the ranking was without any basis and was misleading students.

The NIRF was launched by the NBA on the direction of the Education Ministry for evaluating higher education institutions.

The NBA publishes the ranking every year. Institutions are evaluated on five broad categories – teaching, learning and resources; research and professional practice; graduation outcomes; outreach and inclusivity; and perception – the petition said.

The NBA directs institutions to upload data on student and staff strength, staff salaries, graduation index, placement details, funds received for re-

NIRF ranking is done based on the data given by institutions without verification, says petitioner

search, and other parameters on its web portal. Based on this data, the ranking is awarded without further verification or auditing, the petitioner said.

Comparing it with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council's (NAAC) Annual Quality Assurance Report (AQAR), the petitioner said the NAAC-AQAR documents were audited and checked by expert committees sent by the NAAC to the institutions.

The petitioner sought a direction to the NBA to publish the NIRF ranking after comparing and verifying the data submitted by the institutions with the data in the government records and to disclose the calculation method.

A Division Bench of Justices J. Nisha Banu and S. Srimathy restrained the authorities from publishing the ranking for 2025. The court sought a counter affidavit and posted the matter to April 24.

Key Issues Raised in the Petition

- **Lack of Verification** – The petitioner argued that institutions self-report data such as student strength, faculty numbers, salaries, research funding, placements, and graduation outcomes without any external audit or verification.
- **Misleading Nature of Rankings** – Without an independent validation process, the ranking may not accurately reflect the quality of institutions, potentially misleading students and stakeholders.
- **Comparison with NAAC Accreditation** – The petitioner pointed out that, unlike NAAC's Annual Quality Assurance Report (AQAR), where expert committees audit data, NIRF rankings rely on unaudited information.
- **Demand for Transparency** – The petitioner sought a verification mechanism that cross-checks submitted data with government records and also called for the disclosure of the calculation method used in the rankings.

Court's Response

- A Division Bench of Justices J. Nisha Banu and S. Srimathy put a temporary hold on publishing the NIRF 2025 rankings.
- The authorities were directed to file a counter affidavit justifying the ranking process.
- The next hearing is scheduled for April 24, 2025.

Way Forward

- Strengthening the verification process for NIRF rankings by incorporating third-party audits.
- Enhancing data transparency by making ranking methodologies and raw data public.
- Ensuring alignment with international best practices in university rankings.
- The court's intervention raises critical questions about the credibility of institutional rankings, reinforcing the need for data validation and transparency in national ranking frameworks.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques :Critically analyze the role of the National Institutional Ranking Framework (NIRF) in assessing the quality of higher education institutions in India. How can its credibility and transparency be improved?(250 words)

The issue of genetically modified (GM) food crops in India has gained renewed attention as the Supreme Court prepares to hear petitions challenging the Environment Ministry's approval of GM mustard in 2022. The Department of Biotechnology (DBT) has stated that progress is being made in this area, even as legal and safety concerns persist.

There is progress on GM food crops, says official

Remark comes amid apprehensions over the Environment Ministry's approval for commercial cultivation of GM mustard in 2022; Supreme Court is set to hear pleas on the same next month

Jacob Koshy
NEW DELHI

Ahead of a fresh series of hearings in the Supreme Court next month over genetically modified (GM) food crops, the Department of Biotechnology (DBT) said there was "progress" on this front.

"The matter is *sub judice* but GM mustard stories are being taken up again," DBT Secretary Rajesh Gokhale said at a biotechnology event on Friday. The DBT, which has for years funded research and development into transgenic and GM food crops, comes under the Ministry of Science and Technology.

At present, Bt cotton is the only genetically modified crop allowed to be cultivated. Though the Environment Ministry gave its conditional go-ahead for commercial cultivation of GM mustard in 2022, it has not taken off as it was challenged in the Supreme Court.

Science Minister Jitendra Singh who was also at the event, said, "There is so much dynamism in bio-



Awaiting hearing: Petitioners have challenged the Environment Ministry's approval for cultivation of GM mustard. R.V. MOORTHY

technology development that we cannot look at tomorrow through the prism of today."

Hearing from April 15

On March 6, a three-judge Bench of the Supreme Court said it will begin hearing from April 15 petitions challenging the Environment Ministry's approval for cultivation of GM mustard. The court has told all parties to file their written submissions within a week.

A two-judge Bench of the top court, on July 23, 2024, gave a split verdict

first transgenic food crop to be approved for farmer fields by the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee, a scientific body. However, it wasn't approved for cultivation following safety objections by activist groups.

However, the use of biotechnology to improve food crops – as in the case of GM mustard – is a key focus of the government's BioE3 policy.

This involves manufacturing new kinds of enzymes, pharmaceuticals and agricultural products while applying techniques, including genetic engineering.

A report released by the DBT at the event on Friday on the current state of India's 'bio-economy' says that bio-agriculture accounts for 8.1% – the smallest share – of the \$165.7 billion bio-economy in India.

"Valued at \$13.5 billion, this segment enhances agricultural productivity and resilience through genetically modified crops like Bt Cotton and precision agriculture technologies," the report notes.

on the validity of the Centre's 2022 decision granting conditional approval for the environmental release of GM mustard crop. However, it also directed the Centre to formulate a "national policy" on GM crops. Mr. Gokhale told *The Hindu* that the DBT had provided "technical inputs" to the Union Environment Ministry, which was formulating the policy and was the "nodal coordinator".

Safety concerns

GM mustard, developed using public funds, was the

Current Status of GM Crops in India

- Bt Cotton remains the only GM crop approved for commercial cultivation in India.
- The Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC) granted conditional approval for GM mustard in 2022, but cultivation has been delayed due to legal challenges.
- The Supreme Court is set to hear petitions against GM mustard's approval starting April 15, 2025.
- A previous ruling in July 2024 resulted in a split verdict, with the court directing the government to formulate a national policy on GM crops.

Key Issues in the Debate

- **Scientific and Economic Benefits**
 - GM crops can improve agricultural productivity and enhance resilience against pests and climate change.
 - The government's BioE3 policy promotes biotechnology for food crops, enzyme production, and pharmaceuticals.
 - According to the DBT, bio-agriculture contributes only 8.1% to India's \$165.7 billion bio-economy, indicating potential for growth.
- **Safety and Environmental Concerns**
 - Activists and environmental groups have raised concerns about biosafety, potential contamination of native species, and long-term health risks.
 - There are calls for more transparency and independent risk assessments before approving GM crops.
- **Regulatory and Legal Uncertainty**
 - India lacks a clear national policy on GM crops, leading to legal disputes.
 - The Supreme Court's final ruling could determine the future course of GM food crop approvals.

Way Forward

- Developing a comprehensive national policy on GM crops to balance scientific advancements with safety regulations.
- Strengthening independent regulatory mechanisms to ensure thorough biosafety assessments.
- Encouraging public awareness and stakeholder consultations to build trust in GM technology.
- The Supreme Court's decision will be a turning point in India's agricultural biotechnology sector, influencing policy direction, scientific research, and public perception of GM crops.

Ques : Discuss the role of genetically modified (GM) crops in enhancing agricultural productivity in India. What are the key challenges in their adoption?(250 words)



Byadgi chilli farmers are facing financial distress as prices have plummeted due to oversupply, stockpiling, and stricter export regulations.



The plunge: In February 2024, the average price for Byadgi Kaddi, Byadgi Dabbi, and Guntur varieties stood at ₹35,098, ₹38,851, and ₹13,509 a quintal, respectively. On Thursday, they were ₹23,854, ₹25,804, and ₹12,239, a quintal respectively. [PHOTO: IANS](#)

Red-hot Byadgi chilli stings farmers as prices plummet

Byadgi chillies are a must in every kitchen for their special colour and flavour. But the growers of this variety in several parts of north Karnataka are in distress as prices are falling. **Girish Pattanashetti** travelled to the chilli market in Byadgi in Haveri district to talk to the farmers

It's Thursday noon at the APMC yard in Byadgi and police sub-inspector Arvind P.S. is giving instructions to police personnel about the first of the two route marches to be taken out in the market yard. A little later, the yard reverts back to the siren of the police vehicles which take the designated road of the route march. Farmers wait beside their heaps of bags of red chillies and look on anxiously.

"Don't worry, it is a routine exercise," Kanth, who works for a commission agent at the market yard, comforts an anxious farmer. The vehicles are back at the APMC office after the march and the personnel stand guard at vantage points. The exercise is repeated after 3 p.m.

In the market spread across 78 acres in Byadgi town of Haveri district in north Karnataka, the route march is taken out twice on Monday and Thursday when the chilli market is open. The Byadgi variety of chilli is known the world over for its colour and unique flavour.

This has been the practice since March 10, 2024, the day when the APMC (Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee) office was torched and a few vehicles, including a fire engine, were gutted, says a policeman on duty, as several others, including a few who suffered minor injuries during the violence, keep vigil. The APMC office now wears a new look after a fresh coat of paint.

At a distance, sitting under the shade and standing by the roadside, first-time visitors to the market are being told tales of the violent protest a year ago, and the subsequent arrests and losses.

Meanwhile, unsmiling of the siren, Hasvaraj Nayak, who works for the commission agents, and trader B.M. Chattrad are busy assessing the quality of the chilli kept for auction. The files of Basvaraj, who are scattered over the big yard, have already completed the assessment of the quality of the chilli pods and have written down the bids for each lot they assessed. Traders and commission agents Basvaraj Chattrad and Mallesh Chattrad too are busy doing the same. However, their work is limited to the lots in the open space before their office.

Nothing much seems to have changed after the violence in the Byadgi APMC yard a year ago over the sudden dip in prices of different varieties of red chillies.

Downward trend
What has caused concern yet again this year is the further dip in the prices, leading to sporadic protests not in Byadgi but in far-off places like Ka-



Workers unloading chilli bags at the Byadgi APMC yard on Thursday. [PHOTO: IANS](#)

laburagi and Raichur, where the Guntur variety has seen much lower bids. The series of meetings officials and Minister of Textiles, Sugarcane Development and Agricultural Marketing, Shivnand Padli, had with farmers and APMC merchants, don't seem to have made any impact so far except for the increase in police bandwidth. Cold storage in Byadgi promised by the Minister has not materialised as suitable land couldn't yet be found.

In February last year, the average prices for Byadgi Kaddi, Byadgi Dabbi and Guntur stood at ₹35,098, ₹38,851 and ₹13,509, a quintal respectively. In February this year, the average prices for the same varieties were ₹27,008, ₹29,208 and ₹13,900 a quintal respectively.

On Thursday, Byadgi recorded arrivals of 2,47,886 bags and the average prices for Kaddi and Dabbi varieties were ₹22,359 and ₹25,869 a quintal respectively, and the Guntur variety fetched average price of ₹12,209.

Last year, Byadgi yard recorded arrivals of 68,36,363 bags recording a turnover of ₹1,87,73



Vehicles on fire after a mob, comprising mainly farmers, resorted to violence following the sudden fall in the prices of different varieties of chillies, at the APMC yard in Byadgi in March 2024. [FILE PHOTO](#)

ture and this year, it seems to cross last year's arrivals. However, the narrower is less due to low prices.

Byadgi has not witnessed any protest over the prices this year but the pain is palpable on the faces of farmers who have travelled covering over 250 km carrying their produce in anticipation of a good price.

Last week, Parameshappa U. from Tungaradonna in Karnool district of Andhra Pradesh brought 50 bags of Byadgi Kaddi variety, which fetched ₹1,00,000 per quintal. On Thursday, he was back in Byadgi with 10 bags, but not sure about fetching the same price. His friend from the same village, Brahmanand Reddy, was too not hopeful.

"They say there is no demand and last year's stock is still in the cold storage," Parameshappa said. He has been coming to Byadgi since 1996 and the highest price he got was ₹48,000 for the native Byadgi Kaddi variety three years ago. But this year, he has incurred a loss of ₹1 lakh.

Sitting on the pile of bags and waiting for the bids to be made, Mounesh Acharya from Dommar village in Haveri district is also not that optimistic. "The cost of bringing one bag of red chilli to the Byadgi market is around ₹200. The expenditure per acre is between ₹1 lakh to ₹1.5 lakh. I'll get ₹12,000 per quintal that will meet the expenses", he said.

Problem of plenty
Like last year, record arrivals and the problem of plenty have resulted in prices falling particularly for varieties developed by seed companies. What has added to the problems of farmers and traders is the stock of the previous two years.

"Nearly 40% of the previous year's stock has been carried over to this year and is still lying in the cold storage because of low prices," said Basvaraj Chattrad, president of the dispute redressal committee of the APMC Merchants Association.

"Old stock is the biggest problem and what has affected the traders is that the crop they brought at a higher price and kept in cold storage, is now fetching even lower price," said trader and commission agent Ganesh Acharya.

Shivaraj Chattrad, who has returned to Byadgi to join his father in the trade, after his MBA in London, cites three reasons for the drop in prices. "One, the problem of old stock left with the traders. Two, the spice companies also have excess stock. And three, increased coverage for export in exports due to stringent test parameters introduced last year."

Tougher testing parameters
Western countries have made the testing parameters stringent after traces of cancer-causing agents were found in exported consignments. While Asian countries have less strict testing parameters, they too have problem of plenty, he says.

Secretary of APMC Merchants Association, Byadgi V.S. Morgeri (Bajji) believes the use of banned pesticides by farmers is the major reason for the rise in the instances of rejection of export consignments. "50% of the chillies procured in

Byadgi APMC Market are exported in different forms like destemmed pods, extracted colour and Oleoresin capsicum. However, because of good stock, the companies involved are demanding high quality pods at lower prices this year," he said.

Another reason for the lesser demand for the Byadgi Dabbi and Kaddi varieties is that the high prices these varieties fetched during the previous years made the companies switch to other affordable varieties with less colour.

Is there a solution?
As of now, there seems to be no immediate solution as the arrivals continue to swell day after day with more farmers across the country getting in to chilli cultivation. The price drop has already resulted in the Centre announcing market intervention steps in Andhra Pradesh.

Chief Minister of Karnataka Siddaramaiah has now written to Union Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare Shivraj Singh Chaudhary for a similar step for chilli growers in Karnataka.

I wrote you a year with deep concern for the habits of red chilli farmers in Karnataka, particularly in the Kalyana Karnataka region, who are facing an unprecedented crisis due to the drastic fall in market prices," he said in his letter.



Chilli bags kept for auction at the Byadgi APMC yard. [PHOTO: IANS](#)

He pointed out that the Government of India had approved the Price Deficiency Payment scheme under the Market Intervention Scheme for Red Chillies (Guntur Variety) in Andhra Pradesh, fixing the Minimum Intervention Price (MIP) at ₹1,784 per quintal with coverage for up to 25% of production. "While this is a welcome step, the distress faced by Karnataka's red chilli farmers remains unaddressed," he wrote.

The Chief Minister demanded an increase in MIP to ₹13,500 per quintal terming the current MIP of ₹1,784 per quintal as inadequate considering the rising input costs and the significantly higher cost of production in Karnataka. He also demanded expanding coverage to at least 75% of production.

Former Chief Minister Basavaraj Bommai also wrote a similar letter to Mr. Chaudhary soon after. Chaturama Malgalal, Honorary President of Karnataka Kitta Sangha, demanded that the government fix MIP up to ₹5,000 and above per quintal to help farmers. "We will raise this issue during Chief Minister's future scheduled meeting," he said.

There are other initiatives in the offing too. "The State government earmarked ₹25 crore to establish a red chilli market in 10 areas of land in Raichur and tender was floated. The work is expected to be completed by the end of December 2025. Farmers can sell the product at the same price as in the Byadgi and Guntur markets. They can save transportation and vehicle halting charges and other labour expenditures," says Adappa, additional Director, APMC Raichur.

Long-term solution
But Morgeri believes that in the long run, only a reduction in arrivals and shifting to other crops, resulting in quality yield may see an increase rise in the prices in the coming years.

(With inputs from Raskumar Naraholi in Yadgi)

- Grown primarily in Byadgi, Karnataka, and surrounding regions.
- Cultivated in well-drained red and black soil under warm climatic conditions.

➤ **Characteristics:**

- Known for its deep red color and wrinkled appearance.
- Mild in spiciness but rich in color due to high pigment content (Capsanthin).

➤ **Agricultural Practices:**

- Requires moderate irrigation and well-managed pest control.
- Harvesting takes place from December to March.

➤ **Economic Importance:**

- Widely used in spice blends, oleoresin extraction, and food coloring.
- Major export commodity, but recent price fluctuations have affected farmers.

➤ **Challenges:**

- Export rejections due to pesticide residue concerns.
- Price volatility due to oversupply and stockpiling.

In News : ASEAN

The 14th ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) Experts' Working Group on Counter-Terrorism (EWG on CT) was recently held in New Delhi.

About the Meeting

- Table-top counter-terrorism exercise to be held in Malaysia (2026) and a field training exercise in India (2027) under the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus) Experts' Working Group on Counter-Terrorism (EWG on CT).
- India and Malaysia have assumed co-chairmanship of EWG on CT (2024-2027).
- The European Union (EU) hosted a workshop in New Delhi on preventing and countering violent extremism, emphasising India-EU counterterrorism cooperation.

What is ASEAN?

- The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is a regional intergovernmental organisation aimed at political, economic, and security cooperation.
 - **Established:** August 8, 1967, in Bangkok, Thailand with the signing of the ASEAN Declaration (Bangkok Declaration) by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand.
 - **Motto:** "One Vision, One Identity, One Community."
 - **Headquarters:** Jakarta, Indonesia.
 - **Member States (10 Nations):**
 - **Founding Members (1967):** Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand.
 - **Later Additions:** Brunei (1984), Vietnam (1995), Laos & Myanmar (1997), Cambodia (1999).
 - **Economic & Demographic Strength:**
 - **Total Population:** 662 million (2022).
 - **Combined GDP:** \$3.2 trillion (2022).

Institutional Mechanism of ASEAN

- **ASEAN Summit:** Meets annually to discuss regional issues and set policy directions. Chaired by a rotating presidency.
- **ASEAN Coordinating Council (ACC):** Oversees implementation of ASEAN agreements and decisions.
- **ASEAN Secretariat:** Supports and facilitates ASEAN's activities and initiatives.
- **ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF):** Platform for dialogue on political and security issues among ASEAN members and their dialogue partners. India joined in 1996.
- **Decision-Making Process:** Based on consultation and consensus.

ASEAN-India Relations

- India became a Sectoral Dialogue Partner of ASEAN in 1992 and a Full Dialogue Partner in 1996.
- Joined the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996.
- India-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was signed in 2009 (Goods) and 2014 (Services & Investments).
- ASEAN-India Strategic Partnership was established in 2012.
- India actively participates in ADMM-Plus (ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus).

ASEAN Future Forum

- Proposed by Vietnam in 2023 (43rd ASEAN Summit).
- A common platform for ASEAN member states and partners to share ideas and policy recommendations.
- India is a founding member.

India's marginalised Parliament in budgetary affairs

The Budget is more than just a financial statement, as it reflects a nation's priorities, economic vision and governance philosophy. Across democracies, parliaments exercise the power of the purse, which is critical in shaping national budgets, ensuring fiscal discipline, and promoting transparency. However, in India, parliamentary influence over the Budget remains minimal. The executive-driven process sidelines legislators, leaving them with little opportunity to effectively shape or scrutinise financial policies. Parliament must evolve from being a mere approver of the government's financial proposals to actively shaping economic policy. This requires critical institutional reforms, including pre-Budget discussions and establishing a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO).

The Budget, a pillar of democracy

Budgeting is a fundamental democratic exercise that allocates public resources and defines the government's social and economic priorities. Historically, the power of the purse has been hard-won, with legislatures across the world asserting their right to oversee public finance. From the British Parliament's financial control in the 19th century to the fiscal policies of modern democracies, legislative scrutiny has been essential in preventing executive overreach.

Globally, the degree of legislative influence over budgets varies. Some parliaments actively draft and modify budget proposals, while others act as rubber stamps. Certain legislatures hold in-depth committee discussions on budgetary allocations, whereas others rely on centralised finance committees. However, one common thread remains – Budget transparency and parliamentary engagement correlate with better social outcomes and economic stability.

Parliament's role in Budget formulation and scrutiny in India is mainly ceremonial. The Finance Ministry single-handedly crafts the Budget, keeping even Cabinet Ministers uninformed until its presentation in the Lok Sabha. Unlike other legislative Bills, the Budget proposal is not subjected to thorough cabinet discussions before being introduced in Parliament. The executive monopoly over financial planning results in fragmented debates and limited oversight, weakening the core tenets of representative democracy.



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The existing budgetary process diminishes the role of elected representatives, undermining democratic accountability

Moreover, the Rajya Sabha, despite its democratic credentials, has no substantive role in Budget discussions. Ironically, while India permits a Finance Minister to be a Rajya Sabha member, they lack the ability to vote on their (own) Budget proposals in the Lok Sabha. This absence of budgetary bicameralism contrasts sharply with the British House of Lords, which wields some influence over financial legislation despite being an unelected body.

The decline of parliamentary authority over budgetary matters is evident in the poor quality and brevity of debates and the ineffective scrutiny by subject committees. Parliamentarians lack the power to amend or significantly influence budget proposals, effectively reducing their role to passive approval. This status quo is neither democratic nor conducive to accountability.

Pre-Budget discussions

Two key reforms must be implemented for Parliament to reclaim its rightful role in Budget-making: introducing pre-budget discussions and creating a Parliamentary Budget Office.

Parliament should institutionalise pre-Budget discussions during the monsoon session to ensure meaningful engagement in the Budget process. A dedicated five to seven-day discussion period would allow legislators to assess the nation's fiscal health, outline Budget priorities, and present a broad economic framework for the government's consideration. Such discussions would also encourage better coordination among subject committees, enhancing their ability to provide informed input.

Pre-Budget debates would democratise the Budget-making process, allowing elected representatives to voice public concerns, suggest equitable resource allocation, and engage in policy deliberations. More importantly, they would facilitate greater public involvement, fostering transparency and trust in financial governance.

Scepticism about active legislative involvement in budgeting often stems from concerns over fiscal discipline. Some economists argue that empowering legislatures may lead to populist spending and weakened financial prudence. However, placing unchecked faith in the executive to act in the public interest is naive.

Regardless of ideology, no government has ever voluntarily ensured economic justice without oversight. A balanced approach, where the executive retains financial discretion but remains answerable to Parliament, is the hallmark of a healthy democracy.

A crucial aspect of Budget reform is in strengthening Parliament's analytical and research capabilities. India lacks an institutional mechanism that provides legislators with independent and non-partisan Budget analysis. Establishing a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO) would bridge this gap as there would be data-driven insights and expert economic forecasts. Modelled on institutions such as the U.S. Congressional Budget Office and similar bodies in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom, a well-structured PBO in India would play a vital role in analysing government spending, revenue projections, and fiscal policies. It would conduct independent economic forecasts, assess the fiscal impact of proposed policies, and evaluate medium-term and long-term budgetary trends.

Additionally, the PBO would offer policy briefs to parliamentarians, enhancing informed decision-making. Rather than encroaching upon the executive's role, it would complement it by ensuring legislative scrutiny is backed by objective research. Such an institution would significantly enhance Parliament's capacity to hold the government accountable and foster evidence-based policy discussions.

Reclaiming parliamentary authority

The current budgetary process diminishes the role of elected representatives, undermining democratic accountability. By integrating pre-Budget discussions and establishing a PBO, Parliament can transition from being a passive recipient of financial proposals to an active budget-influencing institution.

These reforms are procedural adjustments and fundamental steps towards strengthening representative democracy. They would ensure public finance decisions reflect collective deliberation rather than executive fiat. A robust parliamentary engagement in budgeting would ultimately lead to more equitable economic policies, greater transparency, and a financial governance framework that genuinely serves the people's interests.

Paper 03: Indian Polity

UPSC Mains Practice Question: Critically examine the role of Parliament in India's budgetary process. How does the executive-driven nature of budget-making impact fiscal transparency and democratic accountability?

Context :

- A national budget is far more than a mere financial statement; it is a reflection of a country's economic vision, governance philosophy, and policy priorities.
- In democratic systems, the principle of parliamentary control over public finance is fundamental, ensuring fiscal discipline, transparency, and accountability.
- However, in India, the role of Parliament in shaping the Budget remains minimal, with an executive-driven process that sidelines legislators.
- To rectify this imbalance, critical institutional reforms, such as pre-Budget discussions and the establishment of a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO), must be implemented to enhance legislative oversight and ensure a more democratic financial governance framework.

The Budget as a Pillar of Democracy

- The Budget serves as the financial blueprint of a nation, determining the allocation of resources and setting the government's economic and social priorities.
- Historically, legislative control over public finance has been a cornerstone of democratic governance, preventing executive overreach.
- Across the world, different democracies have varying degrees of legislative influence over budget-making, some parliaments actively draft and modify budget proposals, while others merely approve government proposals with limited scrutiny.
- Despite these differences, one principle remains consistent: greater parliamentary engagement in budgetary matters correlates with improved economic stability and social outcomes.
- An Analysis of Structural Weakness in India's Budgetary Process

Executive Monopoly Over Budget Formulation

- Unlike other legislative proposals, the Budget is drafted almost entirely within the Finance Ministry, with minimal input from Parliament.
- The executive, particularly the finance minister and senior bureaucrats, play the dominant role in budgetary planning, while even Cabinet Ministers remain largely uninformed until the final presentation.

- This secrecy stands in contrast to democratic practices in many developed nations where the legislature is actively engaged in budget formulation. For example:
- In the United States, congressional committees engage in extensive pre-Budget discussions, and the President's budget proposal is subjected to rigorous debate and scrutiny before approval.
- In Germany and Sweden, parliamentary committees assess budget proposals well before they are finalised, ensuring that lawmakers have a meaningful role in shaping financial policies.
- In India, however, the absence of legislative involvement in the early stages of budget-making weakens Parliament's ability to shape fiscal policies.
- By the time the Budget is presented, its core framework is already established, leaving little room for meaningful amendments or deliberations.

Limited Time for Debate and Review

- Once the Budget is presented in the Lok Sabha, it is expected to be debated, scrutinised, and approved within a limited timeframe.
- However, parliamentary discussions on budgetary allocations are often rushed and superficial.
- The government typically presents the Budget in early February, and Parliament is expected to pass it before the end of March.
- Given the extensive details of financial allocations across various sectors, this short window leaves little opportunity for rigorous analysis.

Weak Role of Parliamentary Committees

- While parliamentary standing committees are intended to provide oversight, their influence over the Budget remains limited.
- The Departmentally Related Standing Committees (DRSCs) do review demands for grants from various ministries, but their recommendations are not binding.
- The government is free to disregard their suggestions, rendering committee scrutiny largely ineffective.
- In contrast, legislative committees in countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom play a stronger role in budget analysis.
- These nations have dedicated budget offices that provide legislators with independent economic research, ensuring that parliamentary committees can offer informed recommendations.

The Marginal Role of Rajya Sabha

- Another structural weakness in India's budgetary process is the limited role of the Rajya Sabha (Upper House) in financial matters.
- While the Rajya Sabha is a key legislative body responsible for reviewing laws and policies, it has little authority over budgetary decisions.
- According to Article 110 of the Indian Constitution, the Budget is classified as a Money Bill, meaning it is primarily the domain of the Lok Sabha (Lower House).

- Once the Lok Sabha passes the Budget, the Rajya Sabha can only discuss it but cannot amend or reject it.

No Power to Modify the Budget

- Perhaps the most significant limitation on Parliament's role is the inability to modify or amend the Budget in any meaningful way.
- While members of Parliament (MPs) can raise objections and suggest changes, they cannot directly alter expenditure or taxation proposals.
- Unlike in countries such as France and Sweden, where legislators have the authority to propose alternative spending allocations, Indian MPs lack such power.
- Even within the Lok Sabha, opposition parties often find it difficult to push for budgetary amendments, as the ruling party typically enjoys a majority and can pass the Budget with minimal resistance.

Required Reforms to Address these Structural Weaknesses

The Need for Pre-Budget Discussions

- One crucial reform to enhance parliamentary involvement in budgeting is the institutionalisation of pre-Budget discussions.
- These discussions, held during the monsoon session, would allow legislators to assess the nation's fiscal health, outline budget priorities, and contribute to economic planning.
- A dedicated five to seven-day debate period would enable parliamentarians to voice public concerns, advocate for equitable resource allocation, and provide policy recommendations for the government's consideration.
- Pre-Budget discussions would also encourage better coordination among subject committees, fostering informed and holistic decision-making.

Establishing a Parliamentary Budget Office (PBO)

- Currently, India lacks an institutional mechanism that provides parliamentarians with independent and non-partisan budgetary analysis.
- A PBO, modelled after institutions such as the U.S. Congressional Budget Office and similar bodies in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, would bridge this gap by offering data-driven insights and expert economic forecasts.
- A well-structured PBO would play a crucial role in analysing government expenditures, revenue projections, and fiscal policies.
- It would conduct independent economic assessments, evaluate medium- and long-term budgetary trends, and provide parliamentarians with research-backed policy briefs

Reclaiming Parliamentary Authority in Budget-Making

- The current budgetary process in India diminishes the role of elected representatives, undermining democratic principles.

Daily News Analysis

- By integrating pre-Budget discussions and establishing a PBO, Parliament can transition from being a passive approver of financial proposals to an active participant in economic policy-making.
- These reforms are not just procedural improvements but fundamental steps toward strengthening representative democracy.
- They would ensure that budgetary decisions reflect collective deliberation rather than executive fiat, leading to more equitable economic policies and greater public trust in financial governance.

Conclusion

- A truly democratic budgetary process requires more than just executive efficiency; it demands active legislative participation and oversight.
 - The current system in India, which marginalises Parliament's role, needs urgent reforms to restore balance and accountability.
 - Institutionalising pre-Budget discussions and establishing a PBO would significantly enhance Parliament's capacity to shape economic policy, ensuring a more transparent, democratic, and effective governance framework.
 - By reclaiming its rightful authority over public finance, Parliament can reinforce its role as the guardian of India's economic and democratic integrity.
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