

## Current Affairs - 13 March 2025

### CHALLENGES IN INDIA'S ELECTORAL PROCESS AND THE ROLE OF THE ELECTION COMMISSION

#### Key Issues in India's Electoral Process:

- **Electoral roll anomalies:**
  - **The electoral roll** is fundamental to voting rights, as having an EPIC alone does not guarantee the ability to vote if the name is missing from the roll.
  - The **integrity** of electoral rolls has been **questioned** due to **unexplained deletions and additions**.
- **Proposed solution:**
  - **Sukumar Sen**, India's first Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), delayed the first general elections to ensure roll accuracy, setting a precedent that must be upheld.
  - The ECI should mandate **Electoral Registration Officers (EROs)** to publish a list of polling stations where voter changes exceed 2-3% of the previous list.
  - This list should be **accessible on ECI websites**, allowing scrutiny by political parties and the public.

#### Transparency in Form 17C Data:

- **Concerns:**
  - **Form 17C** records the number of votes polled at each booth and is given to polling agents.
  - There have been concerns about the **delay in publishing voter turnout data**.
- **Proposed solution:**
  - Transparency can be improved by **uploading polling station-wise data** on the ECI website after scrutiny by election officials.
  - Ensuring **prompt online publication** of polling data to eliminate doubts and prevent controversy.

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### Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) and Trust Deficit:

- **Concerns:**
  - While courts have largely upheld the reliability of EVMs, **doubts persist among political groups and civil society.**
  - **The distinction between** ‘whether EVMs have been manipulated’ and ‘whether they can be manipulated’ remains a topic of debate.
- **Proposed solutions:**
  - Conducting random **100% Voter Verified Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slip counts** in selected constituencies.
  - **Publishing the source code of EVMs** (a long-discussed proposal) to enhance transparency.
  - **Proactively engaging with critics** rather than dismissing concerns outright.

### The Role of the Election Commission:

- The ECI plays a crucial role in ensuring **free and fair elections.**
- **Its credibility has come under scrutiny** due to allegations of **selective enforcement of the Model Code of Conduct (MCC)** and reluctance to address electoral roll discrepancies.
- **To restore public trust**, the ECI must:
  - Strengthen its commitment to **impartiality.**
  - Enhance **transparency** in voter registration and turnout data.
  - Address concerns over EVMs through proactive engagement and **reforms.**

### Conclusion:

- The ECI is at a **critical juncture** where **addressing systemic electoral concerns** is essential for **upholding democracy.**
- Proactive reforms, increased transparency, and a commitment to questioning and improving its own processes can help the Commission emerge stronger and regain public confidence.

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### THE ONLINE GAMING SECTOR: A GROWING OPPORTUNITY

- The Indian online gaming industry has witnessed remarkable growth in recent years, emerging as a major contributor to the country's digital economy.
- With over **650 million smartphone users** and a predominantly young population, India has the potential to become a global leader in **skill-based gaming**.
- A **PwC report** estimated that the sector, valued at **₹33,000 crore in 2023**, is projected to grow at a **CAGR of 14.5%**, reaching **₹66,000 crore by 2028**.
- The industry is also expected to generate **2-3 lakh new jobs** in the coming years, supplementing the **2 lakh jobs** already created.
- However, despite its potential, **government regulations and taxation policies** have put the sector under significant pressure.

### **The Burden of High Taxation:**

- While some Indian states, such as **Karnataka and Telangana**, have initiated policies to promote the **animation, gaming, and visual effects (AVGC) sector**, the central and state governments have imposed **hefty taxation measures** that threaten the industry's viability.
- A **28% GST** on online gaming has been imposed - similar to taxation on **gambling, alcohol, and tobacco**.
- This classification fails to recognize that skill-based online gaming is distinct from gambling.

### **Legal Confusion: Gaming vs. Gambling:**

- State governments have also attempted to **ban online gaming**, equating it with **gambling**, which led to multiple legal battles.
- Courts have ruled in favour of online gaming companies, stating that **"games of skill"** cannot be classified as gambling.
- However, **ongoing regulatory uncertainty** continues to discourage investment and innovation in the sector.

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### Challenges Faced by the Industry:

- **Excessive Taxation:** The 28% GST makes Indian gaming companies less competitive than their global counterparts.
- **Legal Uncertainty:** Frequent bans and judicial battles create an unpredictable business environment.
- **Lack of Distinction Between Gaming and Gambling:** The government's failure to differentiate between skill-based gaming and gambling causes regulatory confusion.
- **Threat to Small Startups:** Many small and mid-sized gaming firms are struggling to survive under the financial burden of high taxation and compliance costs.
- **Growth of Offshore Illegal Gambling:** Harsh regulations on legitimate gaming companies could push users towards illegal **offshore betting platforms**, which are beyond the reach of Indian regulators.

### The Way Forward: A Balanced Regulatory Approach

- Instead of burdening the industry with excessive taxation and legal uncertainty, the government should **adopt a more collaborative approach**.
- Policymakers should work alongside industry leaders to create a **clear regulatory framework** that supports innovation while addressing concerns like addiction and financial transparency.

### Key Recommendations:

- **Rationalize GST rates** to make taxation fair and sustainable.
  - **Create a clear legal distinction** between online skill-based gaming and gambling.
  - **Drop the retrospective tax demand**, which threatens to collapse the industry.
  - **Encourage responsible gaming practices** with in-app safeguards against excessive usage.
  - **Strengthen monitoring mechanisms** to curb illegal gambling rather than penalizing legitimate businesses.
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### NASA SUCCESSFULLY LAUNCHES TWIN MISSIONS TO STUDY SUN, HISTORY OF UNIVERSE

- Spectro-Photometer for the **H**istory of the Universe, Epoch of **R**eionization and Ices **E**xplorer (SPHEREx) entered a sun-synchronous orbit 650 km above Earth.
- This mission will collect data from 450 million galaxies and 100 million stars to create a detailed 3D sky map and study the universe's history.
- **Creating the Most Colorful Map of the Cosmos**
  - SPHEREx will map the universe using both optical and infrared light.
  - While the human eye can see optical light, infrared reveals hidden details like distant galaxies, star formation, and galactic structures.
  - Unlike the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), which focuses on specific regions, SPHEREx will scan the entire sky every six months in 102 infrared colors, providing an unprecedented view of the cosmos.
- **Studying Cosmic Inflation**
  - SPHEREx aims to shed light on cosmic inflation, a rapid expansion of the universe that occurred 14 billion years ago.
  - By mapping the 3D positions of 450 million galaxies, the telescope will help scientists test theories about this mysterious phenomenon, improving our understanding of the universe's origins.
- **Identifying Life-Forming Molecules in the Milky Way**
  - SPHEREx will search for biogenic molecules, such as carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen, frozen in icy particles across the Milky Way.
  - These molecules are essential for life and may have travelled to Earth from deep space.
  - By mapping their locations, scientists hope to uncover how these molecules contributed to the formation of life.

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### Key Highlights of the PUNCH Mission

- The **Polarimetry to Unify the Corona and Heliosphere (PUNCH)** mission, a solar mission comprising four small satellites, was deployed 10 minutes after launch.
- It will capture detailed 3D images of the solar corona, study solar winds, and improve space weather predictions.
- **First 3D Imaging of the Solar Corona Using Polarized Light**
  - PUNCH is the first solar mission designed to use polarized light to measure the solar corona and solar wind in 3D.
  - The mission will provide overlapped **heliospheric-coronagraphic imaging**, allowing scientists to study the continuous flow of solar winds without distinct boundaries.
- **Importance for Space Weather Prediction**
  - Solar winds and coronal mass ejections (CMEs) can disrupt satellite communications, GPS navigation, and power grids on Earth.
  - PUNCH's data will enhance space weather predictions, helping protect Earth's technology and space missions.
- **High-Resolution 3D Imaging Using Four Cameras**
  - PUNCH consists of three Wide Field Imagers (WFI) and one Narrow Field Imager that capture images of the sun's corona every four minutes using polarizing filters.
  - These images will be combined to create a detailed 3D map of the solar wind's structure and evolution.
- **Understanding Solar Wind and Coronal Mass Ejections (CMEs)**
  - PUNCH will help scientists identify where solar winds and CMEs originate, how they accelerate, and their journey through interplanetary space.
  - This will improve timely space weather forecasting and help understand the forces acting in the corona.



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### BEHIND ASHA PROTESTS IN KERALA - DEMAND FOR HIKE IN HONORARIUMS, OTHER BENEFITS

#### **Role of ASHAs in Rural Healthcare**

- ASHA stands for Accredited Social Health Activist.
- ASHAs are community health workers who are part of India's National Rural Health Mission (NRHM).
- The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) employs them.
- **Launch of ASHAs**
  - NRHM launched ASHAs in 2005 as community health functionaries working alongside Anganwadi workers under the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS).
  - In 2013, NRHM and the National Urban Health Mission were merged into the National Health Mission (NHM).
- **Responsibilities of ASHAs**
  - Serve as the first point of contact for marginalized communities, particularly women and children, for healthcare needs.
  - Promote awareness of good health practices and assist in accessing public health services.
  - Support maternal and childcare, immunization drives, family planning, and disease prevention programs.
  - Conduct periodic home visits and maintain health records.
- **Selection Criteria**
  - Women aged 25-45, preferably married, widowed, or divorced.
  - Minimum education qualification of Class 10.
  - Selection involves gram panchayats, Anganwadi institutions, community groups, and self-help groups.

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### Coverage and Workforce

- One ASHA is assigned per 1,000 people.
- As of 2022-23, India had 9.2 lakh rural ASHAs and approximately 79,900 urban ASHAs.
- The highest number of ASHAs are in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh.

### Earnings of ASHAs

#### • Volunteer Status and Payment Structure

- Initially, ASHAs were considered honorary volunteers whose work was designed not to interfere with their livelihood.
- However, many now work full-time as they serve as the first point of contact for marginalized households.
- Despite this, the NHM still classifies them as volunteers, making them ineligible for fixed salaries beyond task-based incentives.

#### • Monthly Incentives and Honorarium

- ASHAs receive a **monthly incentive of ₹3,000**, shared between the Centre and the state.
- Payment is tied to completing specific tasks and is often not fully disbursed.
- Kerala ASHAs get **₹500 for the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram** (early childcare scheme), but its applicability is limited in areas with low childbirth rates.

#### • State-Specific Honorarium and Task-Based Earnings

- In **Kerala**, ASHAs receive a **monthly honorarium of ₹7,000**, funded by the state.
- Payment depends on completing **10 tasks**, such as running clinics and maintaining ward reports, each valued at ₹700.
- Additional **task-based incentives vary** depending on different national health schemes and their applicability in specific areas.



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### WHAT THE RECENT GDP DATA REVISIONS REVEAL

- The National Statistical Office (NSO) released its latest national accounts data on **February 28, 2025**, presenting crucial insights into India's economic growth.
- Amid these reports, **it is important to examine the key trends, sectoral performances, annual revisions, and future growth prospects** based on the data.

#### Concerns Regarding Quarterly Data

- A key question arising from the quarterly data is the sharp drop in Q2 growth to **5.6%** and the feasibility of achieving an estimated **7.6% growth in Q4**.
- The primary driver behind the Q2 decline was the slowdown in **Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE)**, whose contribution fell from **4.3 to 3.3 percentage points**.
- Achieving the projected Q4 growth requires **PFCE growth of 9.9%**, a level not witnessed in recent years.
- Similarly, investment contributions also fluctuated, falling from **2.3 percentage points in Q1 to 1.8 in Q3**, which contributed to slower GDP growth.

#### The Way Forward

- Looking ahead, **2025-26 growth prospects appear stable at around 6.5%**, contingent on **robust government investment** and **gradual recovery in private investment**.
- The long-term strategy should focus on **enhancing savings and investment rates**, ensuring that India maintains its growth momentum amidst global economic uncertainties.

#### Conclusion

- India's GDP growth trajectory in **2024-25** reflects both **strengths and challenges**. While **Q3 growth of 6.2%** showed improvement, achieving the projected **7.6% growth in Q4** remains uncertain due to potential shortfalls in **government investment spending**.
- Annual GDP revisions highlight **strong past performance**, particularly in **2023-24**, but a significant slowdown in **2024-25** raises concerns.