

WHAT IS THE SUPREME COURT COLLEGIUM?

The Supreme Court Collegium recently recommended the elevation of four advocates for appointment as judges of the high courts of Bombay, Karnataka, and Madras.



About Supreme Court Collegium:

- What is it?
 - It is a system under which appointments and transfers of judges are decided by a forum of the Chief Justice of India and the four senior-most judges of the Supreme Court.
- It has **no place in the Indian Constitution.**

What does the Constitution actually prescribe?

- **Article 124** deals with the appointment of Supreme Court judges. It says the appointment should be made by the President after consultation with such judges of the High Courts and the Supreme Court as the President may deem necessary. The CJI is to be consulted in all appointments, except his or her own.
- **Article 217** deals with the appointment of High Court judges. It says a judge should be appointed by the President after consultation with the CJI and the Governor of the state. The Chief Justice of the High Court concerned too should be consulted.
- The collegium makes recommendations to the government for appointment of judges to the SC and of Chief Justices of High Courts, and the transfers of HC judges.
- In case of difference of opinion, the majority view will prevail.
- Executive role:
 - Judges of the higher judiciary are thus appointed only through the collegium system, and the government has a role only after names have been decided by the collegiums.
 - The government's role is limited to getting an inquiry conducted by the Intelligence Bureau (IB) if a lawyer is to be elevated as a judge in a High Court or the Supreme Court.

- The government can also raise objections and seek clarifications regarding the collegium's choices, but if the collegium reiterates the same names, the government is bound to appoint them.

Procedure for appointment of Judges to High Courts:

- For appointments or elevations to the high courts, the HC collegium (The HC Chief Justice + 2 senior-most judges) makes the recommendation to the state government.
- The State Government sends the names to the Centre with its input.
- The Centre gives the names to the Intelligence Bureau (IB) to conduct background checks.
- The IB then sends its report to the Supreme Court Collegium (CJI + 2 Senior-most judges).
- The SC Collegium goes through the IB report and recommends the names to the Centre for appointment.

DEATH OF KUNO CHEETAHS: WHY ARE KUNO CHEETAHS AT EXTRA RISK DUE TO RADIO COLLARS

Why in News?

- Similar injuries have been noted in at least another three animals after two cheetahs in Kuno died of suspected septicemia from neck wounds caused by radio collars.
- Many people who are accustomed to regularly collaring wild cats for monitoring and research both in India and Africa are puzzled by this setback for the reintroduction project.

What is the Cheetah Reintroduction Plan/Project Cheetah?

- Discussions to bring the Cheetah back to India were initiated in 2009 by the Wildlife Trust of India.
- Under the 'Action Plan for Reintroduction of Cheetah in India', 50 cheetahs will be brought from African countries to various national parks over 5 years.

Collaring of Animals:

- Since the 1970s, satellite telemetry has made it possible to monitor individual birds and animals over continental distances.

- **These tracking devices have become lighter and more sophisticated** over time - so much so that there are **VHF radio telemeters** for even insects today.
- Globally, the thumb rule is to **keep the weight of a radio collar to less than 3% of the animal's body weight**.
- **The size of the battery is important** - a lighter one would need replacement sooner, which cannot be done without sedating the animal.
- Most modern collars for wild cats weigh around **400 g**, which is light enough for cheetahs that typically weigh between 20 kg and 60 kg.
- **Cheetahs are hard to fit collars** on as their heads are not much bigger than their necks, especially younger animals.

Reasons for Cheetahs' Neck Injuries in KNP:

- These cheetahs have been wearing these collars for several months in India during the dry periods. **They didn't have any issues until the monsoon arrived.**
- **The bacterial infections** under the collars are **not reported in African conditions** where the skin gets a chance to **dry completely** between spells of rain. Also, rainfall is a lot less in Africa than in India.
- So, monsoon or wet weather can be the reason for neck injuries.

Challenges Ahead:

- **To track, immobilise, and check** all the cheetahs for neck injuries. But putting all the animals **back in Bomas will push the project back by several months.**
- **There is no roadmap yet for the next monsoon.** If these cheetahs are re-released with new radio collars, will they have to be captured again before the next monsoon?
- **It would be irresponsible to release cheetahs without collars.**

WHAT IS THE UNIVERSAL POSTAL UNION (UPU)?

- It is a **United Nations specialized agency** and the postal sector's **primary forum for international cooperation.**



UPU

- It was established by the **Treaty of Bern of 1874**.
- UPU is the **second oldest international organization** worldwide.
- **Mandate:** To ensure **universal access to postal services**.
- **Headquarters:** Bern, Switzerland
- **Functions:**
 - It **coordinates postal policies among member nations** in addition to the **worldwide postal system**.
 - It **sets the rules for international mail exchanges** and makes **recommendations to stimulate growth in mail, parcel and financial services** volumes and improve the quality of service for customers.
 - It helps to **ensure a truly universal network** of up-to-date products and services.
 - It fulfils an **advisory, mediating and liaison role** and **provides technical assistance** where needed.

Member countries:

- **Any member country of the United Nations may become a member** of the UPU.
- **Any non-member country of the United Nations may become a UPU member**, provided that its request is approved by **at least two-thirds of the member countries of the UPU**.
- The UPU now has **192 member countries**.

Structure: UPU consists of **four bodies**,

- **The Congress:** It is the **supreme authority** of the UPU and **meets every four years**.
- **The Council of Administration:** It ensures the **continuity of the UPU's work between Congresses**, **supervises its activities** and studies regulatory, administrative, legislative and legal issues.
- **The Postal Operations Council:** It is the **technical and operational mind** of the UPU and **consists of 48 member countries** elected during Congress.
- **The International Bureau:** **Fulfilling a secretariat function**, the International Bureau **provides logistical and technical support** to the UPU's bodies.

WHAT IS BHARAT BILL PAYMENT SYSTEM (BBPS)?

CEO of Bharat Bill Pay recently said Bharat Bill Pay has witnessed a threefold business growth in just two years.



About Bharat Bill Payment System (BBPS):

- BBPS is an **integrated bill payment system** or a platform which acts as a **connect between various billers and users.**
- It is a **one-stop ecosystem for payment of all bills** providing an interoperable and accessible “Anytime Anywhere” Bill payment service to all customers across India with certainty, reliability and safety of transactions.
- It offers customers the **convenience of payment by cataloguing various utility providers under one platform.**
- It acts as a **central reference for a customer who wants to make different payments** — whether utility bills, loan repayments, FasTag recharge, and so on.

Different Payment Channels:

- Bharat BillPay transactions can be **initiated through multiple payment channels like Internet, Internet Banking, Mobile, Mobile-Banking, Mobile Wallets Bank Branch, Agents and Business Correspondents etc.**
- It provides **instant confirmation of payment via an SMS or receipt.**

Who are the stakeholders?

- BBPS was **conceptualised by the Reserve Bank of India in 2013** and is a **product of the National Payments Council of India (NPCI).**
- It was **piloted in 2016** and went live a year later.
- **By 2019, BBPS onboarded all recurring payments.**

DIGITAL TIME VOUCHERS

Recently, the Election Commission of India has decided to issue digital time vouchers to National & State political parties for campaigning on Doordarshan & All India Radio during elections.



About Digital Time Vouchers:

- The Election Commission of India has amended the existing scheme for the use of Government-owned electronic media by political parties.
- This has been done by introducing a provision to issue **digital time vouchers** through an **Information Technology (IT) platform**.
- Each party shall be given **time Vouchers of different denominations** of, 5 minutes and 10 minutes, equal to the total time allotted to it for telecasts on Doordarshan and broadcasts on AIR.
- That party shall have the discretion to choose any representatives and allow them to use those time vouchers provided that **no such individual representative shall be allowed to use more than 20 minutes** of the total time allotted to that party, either on Doordarshan or on AIR.

Background

- The scheme was initially notified on 16th January 1998, holds a statutory basis under Section 39A of the **Representation of People Act, 1951**.
- It aimed at ensuring equitable access to government-owned electronic media during elections for campaigning.
- Under this Scheme, an equitable base time is allotted to **each National Party and Recognized State Party of the state** concerned uniformly on DD & AIR.
- The additional time to be allotted to the parties is decided on the basis of the poll performance of the parties in the last assembly elections from the respective States/UT or in the last general Elections to Lok Sabha, as the case may be.
- The actual date and time during which the above telecasts/broadcasts will be made by the authorised representatives of any party is predetermined, by a lot, by the **Prasar Bharati Corporation in consultation with ECI** and in the presence of political party representatives.

GM CROPS

GM (Genetically Modified) Crops and GM Mustard

- **GM Crops**

- GM crops are **quite different from conventional varieties and hybrids**, such as those developed by farmers, agricultural research institutions and companies.
- Biotechnologists **insert select genes at a random location in the DNA of a plant to develop a GM crop.**
- The insertion makes a GM crop **express traits that it ordinarily would not.** For instance, **GM mustard has been altered to withstand the broad-spectrum plant-killer or herbicide glufosinate.**
- This makes it easier to develop hybrid mustard seeds for higher yields. And farmers growing GM mustard can spray the herbicide to kill all plants except the mustard.

GM Mustard

- **The DMH-11**, developed by scientists at Delhi University's Centre for Genetic Manipulation of Crop Plants (CGMCP), **contains two alien genes (namely 'barnase' and barstar' genes)** isolated from a soil bacterium called *Bacillus amyloliquefaciens*.
- Mustard varieties in India have a narrow genetic base. The barnase-barstar system enables breeding of hybrids from a wider range of mustards, including those of East European origin such as 'Heera' and 'Donskaja'.
- **DMH-11 is also claimed to have shown an average 28% yield increase over Varunain** contained field trials carried out by the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR).
- New hybrid GM seeds **could potentially raise mustard yields to 3.0-3.5 tonnes per hectare**, up from around 1.3 tonnes now.

Evolution of GM Crops in India

- First GM crop was released **under Vajpayee government with the slogan of Jai Vigyan.**
- Indian farmers started cultivating **Bt cotton**, a pest-resistant, GM version of cotton, in **2002-03.**

- Bt modification is a type of genetic modification where the Bt gene obtained from the soil bacterium **Bacillus thuringiensis** is introduced into the target crop - in this case, cotton.
- Bt cotton is resistant to bollworm, a pest that destroys cotton plants.
- **By 2014, around 96%** of the area under cotton cultivation in India was Bt cotton, making India the **fourth-largest cultivator of GM crops by acreage and the 2nd largest producer of cotton.**

Ongoing Debate on GM Crops in India

- **Safety and Efficiency:** Environmentalists, scientists, politicians, farmers, consumers, and the higher judiciary have asked probing questions about the safety, efficacy and even the very necessity of GM food.
- **Experience with Bt Cotton**
 - Many have been alarmed by the experience with Bt cotton, the first and only GM crop approved in the country.
 - Long-term research suggests that Bt cotton has provided only fleeting benefits to farmers, **while enormously increasing their costs of cultivation and risk.**
 - On the other hand, some seed companies have profited handsomely from the expensive GM seeds.
- **Potential Emergence of Increased Pesticides:** Experience from enhanced sucking pest damage in Bt cotton; Environmentalists fear increase in secondary pests such as mired bugs and Spodoptera; and the emergence of pest resistance.
- **Impact on environment and human health:** There are concerns over environmental and health implications in terms of toxicity and allergenicity that can cause hematotoxin reactions in the human body.

Conclusion

- The opposition to GM food crops is not new and is ongoing on the issue of advantages and disadvantages of GM crops.
- For now, the ongoing battle in the SC stands between GM food and Indian farmers and consumers.

- If the SC allows GM mustard to go through, it will likely pave the way for the release of other HT crops such as cotton, rice, and maize.
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RUDRAGIRI HILLOCK

Recently, a fascinating combination of prehistoric rock paintings from the Mesolithic period and exquisite artwork from the Kakatiya dynasty were discovered in the Rudragiri hillock.



About Rudragiri hillock:

- It is located in Guntur district of **Andhra Pradesh**.
- Two natural caves at the **southern end** of the hillock exhibit exceptional murals from the renowned **Kakatiya kingdom**.
- **Key findings:**
 - The **first cave** presents a narrative mural portraying the intense battle between the **Vanara brothers, Vali and Sugriva**. Both figures stand on the battlefield wielding maces, their faces displaying fierce determination. Rama, positioned behind Sugriva, shoots arrows at Vali.
 - A **Ramayana fresco depicting Hanuman** lifting the Sanjeevani hill with his right-hand painted A conch and fire altars can be seen to his right and another prehistoric painting to the left.
 - In the **middle cave**, a grand sketch of Hanuman is depicted carrying the Sanjivani hill in his right hand, symbolising his mission to save Lakshmana's life.
 - The **third cave** houses the **prehistoric rock paintings** from the **Mesolithic** era.

What is the Mesolithic period?

- It is also called **Middle Stone Age** which existed between the Palaeolithic (Old Stone Age) and the Neolithic (New Stone Age).
 - **Timeframe:** This period is generally considered to have occurred between **approximately 12,000-10,000 years ago**
 - **Lifestyle:** During the Mesolithic period, human societies were **predominantly hunter-gatherer communities**.
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