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School of Research Based Learning & Competition

Current Affairs - 31 July 2026

PUBLIC EXAMINATION AMENDMENT BILL 2026

- To tackle paper leaks and organised exam fraud, Parliament enacted the **Public Examination (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024**.
- The law aimed to address unfair practices in major public examinations conducted by bodies such as:
 - Union Public Service Commission (UPSC)
 - Staff Selection Commission (SSC)
 - Railway Recruitment Board (RRB)
 - Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS)
 - National Testing Agency (NTA), including the NEET exam
- The Lok Sabha passed the **Public Examination Amendment Bill, 2026** by voice vote, and the Rajya Sabha also cleared it by voice vote. The Bill strengthens the 2024 law in four important ways.
- **Tougher Punishments**
 - Punishment of 3 to 5 years and fine up to Rs 10 lakh has now been raised to 5 to 10 years imprisonment and fine up to Rs 50 lakh.
 - Punishment involving fine up to Rs 1 crore and a ban of four years has been enhanced to fine up to Rs 5 crore and a ban of eight years.
 - Punishment of at least 3 years imprisonment and Rs 1 crore fine has been raised to at least 5 years imprisonment and Rs 5 crore fine.
 - Punishment of 5 to 10 years imprisonment and Rs 1 crore fine has been strengthened to at least 7 years imprisonment and Rs 10 crore fine.
- **Statutory Backing for Fast-Track Courts**
 - Once the amendment comes into force, all future offences under the Act can be tried by fast-track courts.
 - The government has already announced that such courts would initially be set up in the four High Courts where NEET-related cases are ongoing.

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- **Five-Month Timeline for Investigation and Trial**
 - Another major feature is the imposition of a strict time frame:
 - Investigation must be completed within two months.
 - Trial must be completed within three months.
 - This means that a paper leak case should, in principle, reach a conclusion within five months.
- **Provision for a Special Task Force**
 - The Bill also empowers the Union government to establish a Special Task Force to investigate offences under the Act.
 - This is aimed at strengthening coordination, especially where paper leak networks operate across states or involve organised criminal syndicates.

Significance of the Bill

- The Amendment Bill is important because it attempts to address both substantive weakness and procedural delay.
- On the substantive side, it raises punishment sharply, especially in cases involving organised crime. On the procedural side, it introduces:
 - Fast-track adjudication
 - Statutory time limits
 - A Special Task Force

Concerns and Challenges

- Even with stronger penalties, the real effectiveness of the law will depend on implementation.
- Some important challenges remain:
 - Whether investigations can genuinely be completed within two months.
 - Whether fast-track courts will have the capacity and staffing to meet the deadline.
 - Whether states and investigating agencies can coordinate effectively.
 - Whether digital and logistical vulnerabilities in examination systems are also corrected.

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THE NEXT DPI — HOW INDIA CAN COMMODITISE AI

- India has emerged as a global leader in **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** by integrating Aadhaar, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and DEPA/Account Aggregator into an interoperable ecosystem.
- Unlike countries that excel in individual digital systems, India has combined digital identity, payments, and data-sharing at an unprecedented scale.
- The next step is to **extend this model to Artificial Intelligence (AI)** by making intelligence a foundational public utility that is affordable, accessible, and interoperable.

AI as the Fourth Digital Public Infrastructure

- AI is becoming the **next essential infrastructure** after identity, payments, and data.
- Instead of competing with global technology giants in expensive AI model training, India should focus on making AI inference inexpensive and widely accessible.
- The objective is to **reduce the cost of using AI** through public infrastructure, enabling innovation across education, healthcare, agriculture, governance, and industry.

Building India's National AI Token Economy

- **Affordable Compute Infrastructure**
 - The **IndiaAI Mission**, with an allocation of around ₹10,372 crores, seeks to build AI infrastructure through public-private partnerships.
 - More than 38,000 GPUs have been on boarded, with a target of 1,00,000 GPUs, providing subsidised compute access to startups and researchers.
- **Open-Source Foundation Models**
 - AI systems created using **public funding** should be released under open-weights licences, encouraging innovation and reducing dependence on foreign platforms.
- **Unified Intelligence Interface (UII)**
 - Government agencies, educational institutions, start-ups, and businesses could access multiple AI services through a single platform, reducing costs and encouraging competition.

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AI Token Entitlements for Inclusive Growth

- A national freemium AI model could provide free monthly AI tokens to verified students, researchers, and startups through Aadhaar authentication.
- Larger enterprises could pay commercial rates, creating a sustainable funding model.
- AI support for schools, research institutions, and public services would accelerate innovation and reduce barriers to technology adoption.

Socio-Economic Benefits of Near-Free Intelligence

- Affordable AI can significantly improve healthcare, education, agriculture, MSMEs, and governance.
- **AI-assisted healthcare** can expand medical access, personalised tutoring can benefit millions of students, multilingual AI **can assist farmers** in accessing government services, and small businesses can utilise AI for accounting, marketing, and compliance.
- AI-powered governance can further enhance efficient citizen service delivery.

Challenges

- Key challenges include **high infrastructure costs**, dependence on imported semiconductor technologies, data privacy, cybersecurity, algorithmic bias, responsible AI governance, and sustainable financing.

Way Forward

- India should **expand** the IndiaAI Mission, promote open-source AI, invest in AI-specific energy infrastructure, develop Indic AI models.
- Also, India should establish the Unified Intelligence Interface, strengthen AI governance under the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, and encourage collaboration among government, academia, startups, and industry.

Conclusion

- India's success with Digital Public Infrastructure demonstrates how public digital goods can reduce costs and expand participation.
- Extending this model to AI can **democratise intelligence** through affordable compute, open-source models, AI token entitlements, and a Unified Intelligence Interface.

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THE BAY OF BENGAL AS INDIA'S SHANTI ANCHOR

- The Bay of Bengal has emerged as a strategic centre of the Indo-Pacific, linking South Asia, Southeast Asia, and major global trade and energy routes.
- Alongside increasing **geopolitical competition**, the region faces **climate-induced disasters**, illegal fishing, cyber threats, marine pollution, and supply chain disruptions.
- India's **SHANTI (Securing Holistic Advancement through Norms, Trust and Integrity)** initiative seeks to establish a rules-based, trust-driven framework for maritime governance.

Why the Bay of Bengal Matters?

- Historically, the Bay connected civilizations through commerce and cultural exchange.
- Today, it is central to India's **Act East Policy**, provides access to the strategic Malacca Strait, and connects the eastern Indian Ocean with global maritime routes.
- China's expanding regional presence, driven by its Malacca Dilemma, has intensified strategic competition.
- Consequently, the Bay has become a vital arena where **maritime security**, **economic connectivity**, and regional governance converge.

Evolution of India's Maritime Vision

- **SAGAR (2015)** introduced the vision of Security and Growth for All in the Region, promoting inclusive maritime cooperation and equitable development.
- **MAHASAGAR (2025)** expanded this vision to the wider Indo-Pacific and the Global South, recognising the interconnected nature of maritime security.
- **SHANTI (2026)** provides the operational framework built on Norms, Trust, and Integrity.
 - It shifts the focus from military competition to demand-driven cooperation, institution-building, long-term resilience, and governance of the **shared maritime commons**.

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Bay of Bengal as the Ideal Laboratory

- The Bay of Bengal is well suited for implementing SHANTI because it is relatively cooperative compared to the conflict-prone western Indian Ocean.
- Its littoral states share common environmental, economic, and security challenges, while institutions such as **BIMSTEC** already provide a foundation for collaboration.
- Rather than creating new organisations, SHANTI aims to strengthen coordination among existing mechanisms, with India acting as a regional convener through **regional stewardship** instead of dominance.

From Principles to Practice

- Progress towards implementing SHANTI is already visible.
- At the **2026 BIMSTEC** National Security Advisers' Meeting, member states adopted common principles for maritime law enforcement and HADR.
- And they agreed to conduct the first joint maritime security exercise in November 2026, and continued discussions on a White Shipping Information Sharing Agreement.
- These initiatives strengthen maritime domain awareness, build confidence, and promote rules-based cooperation across the Bay.

Benefits and Challenges

- SHANTI can strengthen **maritime governance**, improve disaster preparedness, enhance climate resilience, safeguard critical maritime infrastructure, promote the Blue Economy, and deepen trust among regional partners.
- However, challenges remain, including strategic rivalry among major powers, institutional fragmentation, varying national priorities, limited financial and technological capacities, and the need to ensure that India's **leadership remains inclusive**.

Way Forward

- India should institutionalise regular **BIMSTEC** maritime exercises, expand maritime information-sharing networks.
- Additionally, India should establish regional disaster response mechanisms, promote joint Blue Economy projects, strengthen environmental protection.

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NAKSHA PROJECT



- NAKSHA (National Geospatial Knowledge-based Land Survey of Urban Habitations) is a modern, GIS-based urban land parcel mapping initiative.

- It aims to revolutionize urban land records across Urban

Local Bodies (ULBs) in States and Union Territories.

- The program operates under the broader framework of the **Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme (DILRMP)**.
- **Technology:** NAKSHA specifically leverages **cutting-edge technology** to create highly accurate digital maps across states and U T's, ensuring our cities are future-ready.
- **Implemented by:** The initiative is being implemented with the technical support of **Survey of India** and National Informatics Centre Services Inc. (NICSI).
- **Nodal Ministry:** It was launched by the **Department of Land Resources (DoLR)**, Ministry of Rural Development.
- **Objectives of NAKSHA Programme:**
 - To create a comprehensive geospatial database for urban land records
 - To use **aerial and field surveys** integrated with GIS technology
 - To enhance land governance, streamlines property records, and supports urban planning
 - Improve decision-making, ensures efficient land use, facilitates smoother property transactions



CLOUSBURST

- A cloudburst is an extreme weather phenomenon characterized by an intense and sudden downpour of rain.

- While it can also occur in plains, the phenomenon is most common in hilly regions.
- According to the **India Meteorological Department (IMD)**, a cloudburst occurs when a small area, around 20-30 sq. km, receives 10 cm or more of rain in an hour.

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- **How does a cloudburst form?**
 - It typically **begins with convection**, when warm, moist air rises rapidly into the atmosphere.
 - In mountainous areas, this is **called orographic lifting**, where monsoon winds are forced upwards by steep slopes.
 - As the air rises, it **cools and condenses into towering cumulonimbus clouds**, which can be up to 15 km tall. Water droplets begin **to form inside these clouds** and, as they get heavier, they would normally fall as rain.
 - However, if the **currents of warm air moving upwards are very strong**, they can keep the raindrops suspended in the air for longer.
 - Eventually, the weight of the water droplets becomes too great for gravity and the updrafts to hold, or the updrafts weaken, sending the water plummeting down like an ocean descending on the ground.

ARCTIC COUNCIL



- It was established by the **Ottawa Declaration in 1996**.
- It is an intergovernmental forum for addressing **issues related to the Arctic Region**.
- It is **not a treaty-based international organization** but rather an international forum that operates on the basis of consensus, echoing the peaceful and cooperative nature of the Arctic Region.
- **Member Countries:** Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden, the Russian Federation, and the United States
- It has **six Permanent Participants (PP) groups representing the indigenous people of the Arctic**.
- **Observer States:** Observer status in the Arctic Council is open to **non-arctic states, inter-governmental and inter-parliamentary organizations, global and regional and non-governmental organizations**.

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- **India is currently one of the 13 observer countries** (France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, U.K., India, China, Japan, Singapore, South Korea, Italy and Switzerland) of the Arctic Council.
- Observer countries do not have decision-making powers or voting rights.
- **Function:** The Council focuses its work on matters related to sustainable development, the environment, and scientific cooperation.
- Traditionally, the **Council is chaired** by the **foreign minister of the country** holding the chairmanship.



WHO ARE THE MOKEN PEOPLE?

- Often called **sea nomads** or **sea gypsies**, the Moken are **seafaring people** who have been living **off the coast of Thailand and Myanmar** on the **Andaman Sea**.
- Their name, in their own language, means "**sea drowned**."
- The Moken have lived **across the Andaman Sea for centuries**, moving between the roughly **800 islands** that stretch **along the coastlines of Myanmar and Thailand**.
- They are **one of the last sea nomad peoples** in the world. Traditionally, they **travel in wooden vessels called kabang**, moving with the seasons and tides.
- **Fishing, diving, and gathering shellfish** form the backbone of their subsistence lifestyle, and from a **very young age**, Moken children are **immersed in the marine environment**.
- Possessing a **rich knowledge** of the reefs, the Moken have **exceptional underwater skills** such as **free diving** and **spear hunting**.
- **Most Moken are stateless** as a result of their nomadic lifestyle. They have no citizenship in Thailand or Myanmar.
- They came into the **international spotlight** following the **2004 Indian Ocean tsunami** because they **managed to sense warning signs from nature** in the form of the sea receding, **allowing them to move to higher ground** away from dangerous areas.