

COMMON UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE TEST (CUET)

Context

- The article discusses the questionable serving of student's interests by CUET owing to toll taken by this year's glitches and delays in the conduct of the examination.

Background

- The **debut edition** of Common University Entrance Test (CUET), which has been split into **six phases**, has been marred by **glitches** so far causing exam cancellations at multiple centres and postponement of exams for several candidates.
- The National Testing Agency (NTA), which was set to complete the exams by August 20, has now said that they will conclude on August 28 because of the postponement and rescheduling of some tests due to technical snags and **administrative errors**.

Driving logic of the uniform test in CUET

- **History:** Common entrance tests for admission to **professional courses** emerged in the **late 1980s** to regulate student input for creating a standardised skill set and professional acumen.
- **Ineffectiveness of Board exams:** The validity of board exam results began to crumble when it came to measuring **scholastic aptitude** even as an unhealthy '**coaching culture**' was born.
- **Enhancing objectivity:** Universities added entrance exams for admission in the hope that additional filters would enable them to objectively strain and control the huge numbers that flow from schools into a higher education system of inadequate capacity.
 - Since then, filters have continuously been added at every level which has made it seem that Indian students today are **more 'tested' than 'educated'**.
 - Hence, the proponents of CUET principally argue in terms of the student empowerment. A single country-wide platform offers as each student now can choose from a seemingly unending buffet of programmes and universities.
- **Revamped version:** CUET is a revamped version of Central Universities Common Entrance Test (CUCET), launched in 2010 which failed to gather steam since only 14 central universities had adopted it until last year.

- **Rationale:** In pursuance of the **National Education Policy, 2020**, CUET has been decided as a common entrance test for admission in central universities to reduce the burden on students, universities and the entire education system.

About CUET

- **Description:** It is a computer-based test (CBT), conducted in **13 languages** namely Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, Urdu, Assamese, Bengali, Punjabi, Odia and English.
 - CUET UG - 2022 may also be adopted by the State / Private / Deemed Universities.
 - It is the **common gateway for undergraduate admissions** in all central universities and is now the **second biggest entrance exam** in the country, **surpassing JEE-Main's average** registration of nine lakh.
 - NEET-UG is the biggest entrance test in India with an average of 18 lakh registrations.
- **Components:** CUET will essentially have three parts as follows:
 - First part tests **language** which will consist reading comprehension, questions on vocabulary.
 - Second part of CUET is focused on testing a candidate's **domain-specific knowledge** (27 domains on offer, student chooses at least one and maximum of six).
 - The third part will be a **general test** with questions on general knowledge, current affairs, general mental ability, numerical ability, quantitative reasoning.
- **Registrations:** Over 1.4 million students have registered for admissions to undergraduate courses in 44 central universities, 12 state universities, 11 deemed, and 19 private universities.
- **Magnanimous exercise:** With an aspirant being allowed to appear in up to nine papers, resulting in more than 50,000 subject combinations, the CUET conducted in more than 550 cities in the country and 13 foreign centres is a much bigger exercise than the entry tests to the IITs or medical institutions.
- **Exemption:** International students are exempted from CUET and their admissions will be carried out on the existing **supernumerary basis**.
- **Conducting body:** The National Testing Agency has been entrusted with the responsibility of conducting the Undergraduate entrance tests for all the Central Universities (CUs) in CUET.

- **About NTA:** In pursuance of the **Budget Announcement 2017-18**, the Union Cabinet, in November 2017, approved creation of the National Testing Agency (NTA) as an **autonomous** and **self-sustained** premier testing organization to conduct entrance examinations for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country. NTA will be chaired by an **eminent educationist** appointed by Ministry of Education

Significance of CUET

- **Common platform:** CUET will allow all students to appear for the exam and put everyone at one common level as compared to the merit lists and cut off system on UG admissions in the past. Hence, with CUET UG - 2022, sky-high cut-off marks will be a thing of the past.
- **Equity:** The CUET will provide equal opportunities to candidates across the country, especially those from rural and other remote areas and help establish better connect with the Universities.
- **Reduced costs:** Students may apply to **more than one university** as per their choice with **one application form** thereby reducing financial burden and increasing access.
- **Standardize benchmarks :** CUET would avoid multiple entrance tests, thereby providing uniform quality in the exam pattern and process and minimize corruption and irregularities in admissions to courses.

Questionable outcomes of CUET

- **Snap-decision:** The hurry and speed with which the decision for a single admission test was taken throughout the 40-odd central universities was disturbing.
- **Discrepancy:** The validity of unifying diverse institutions and programmes in one single test without regard to **natural regional variations** in institutional cultures and structures
- **Ignoring university specific testing:** Every central university in the country has special characteristics enshrined in its Act and Statutes which CUET ignores.
- **Unfair common testing:** Every state has its own syllabus and exam pattern till higher secondary level. Putting all students then for single entrance would be unfair for many.
- **Coaching bias:** The students from rural and under-privileged who cannot afford private coaching would find it difficult to compete with urban students in CUET.

- **Federal issues:** A centralized exam keeps the state government out of the admission process. Also state reservation rules will not apply to CUET.
 - Tamil Nadu Assembly has passed a resolution, urging Centre Govt to withdraw CUET.
- **Limited languages:** Exam is not conducted in all official languages of India.

Concerns of recent postponements in CUET

- **Consequence of delay:** As per media reports, many aspirants, after months of agony and suspense in CUET-2022, have decided to take **admissions into private universities** that are still largely non-participating institutions.
- **Overlapping dates:** With dates for their CUET and **CBSE compartment papers** overlapping, a section of students finds themselves in a tense situation.
- **Confusion over exam dates:** Several CUET-UG aspirants are claiming that the exam dates mentioned on their admit cards have already passed while the date intimated to them earlier was different.
- **Administrative error:** The students at some centres who were to take exams in the three subjects complained that they received question papers of other subjects.
- **Lack of manpower:** The NTA conducts 15 different exams without adequate manpower. It does not have a full-time director-general.
- **Distorted academic calendar:** Earlier, every university used to decide its academic calendar. However, now, the academic calendar is dependent on when the NTA holds entrance tests. The academic freedom of the universities is in a way getting subverted

WHAT ARE CLOUDBURST INCIDENTS AND ARE THEY RISING ACROSS INDIA?

In News:



- Over 20 people have been killed in destruction caused by cloudbursts and flash floods in different parts of Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand over the last three days.

In Focus: Cloudbursts

- A cloudburst is a localised but intense rainfall activity. Short spells of very heavy rainfall over a small geographical area can cause widespread destruction.
- Not all instances of very heavy rainfall, however, are cloudbursts. A cloudburst has a very specific definition.
- Rainfall of 10 cm or more in an hour over a roughly 10 km x 10-km area is classified as a cloudburst event.
- By this definition, 5 cm of rainfall in a half-hour period over the same area would also be categorized as a cloudburst.

Occurrence of Cloudburst

- It occurs when **moisture-carrying air** moves up a hilly terrain, forming a vertical column of clouds known as ‘cumulonimbus’ clouds.
- Such clouds usually cause rain, thunder and lightning. This **upward motion of the clouds is known as an orographic lift.**
- These **unstable clouds cause an intense rainstorm over a small area** after becoming heavy enough and locked in the ridges and valleys between the hills.
- The **energy necessary for the cloudburst comes from the upward motion of air.**
- It mostly occurs at elevations between 1,000-2,500 metres above sea level.
- The moisture is usually provided by a low-pressure system (associated with cyclonic storms in the ocean) over the Gangetic plains associated with low level winds flowing in from the east.
- Sometimes **winds flowing in from the north-west also aid the occurrence of cloudbursts.**
- The many factors that have to come together to make a cloudburst event happen make them highly unlikely.

How common are cloudbursts?

- Cloudbursts are common events, particularly during the monsoon months.

- Most of these happen in the Himalayan states where the local topology, wind systems, and temperature gradients between the lower and upper atmosphere facilitate the occurrence of such events.

Consequence of cloudburst

- Because of the nature of terrain, the heavy rainfall events often trigger landslides and flash floods, causing extensive destruction downstream.
- These take place in very small areas which are often devoid of rainfall measuring instruments. The consequences of these events, however, are not confined to the small areas.

Forecasting of cloudbursts

- India Meteorological Department (IMD) forecasts rainfall events well in advance, but it does not predict the quantum of rainfall — in fact, no meteorological agency does.
- The forecasts can be about light, heavy, or very heavy rainfall, but weather scientists do not predict exactly how much rain is likely to fall at any given place.
- Also, the forecasts are for a relatively large geographical area, usually a region, a state, a meteorological sub-division, or at best a district.

Are cloudburst incidents increasing?

- There is no long-term trend that suggests that cloudbursts, as defined by the IMD, are rising.
- However, incidents of extreme rainfall, as also other extreme weather events, are increasing — not just in India but across the world.
- While the overall amount of rainfall in India has not changed substantially, an increasing proportion of rainfall is happening in a short span of time.
- That means that the wet spells are very wet, and are interspersed with prolonged dry spells even in the rainy season.
- This kind of pattern, attributed to climate change, does suggest that cloudburst events might also be on the rise.

[NO MOVE TO LEVY CHARGES ON UPI SERVICES: FINMIN](#)

In News:

- The finance ministry has clarified that there is no move in the government to levy any charges on UPI (Unified Payments Interface) transactions.

Unified Payments Interface (UPI)

- UPI is a system that powers multiple bank accounts into a single mobile application (of any participating bank).
- It does so by merging several banking features, seamless fund routing & merchant payments into one hood.
- In other words, UPI is an interface via which one can immediately transfer money between bank accounts across a single window round the clock 24*7 and 365 days
- Launched in 2016, it is the brainchild of the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI), the umbrella organisation that oversees retail payment systems in India.
 - The NPCI is governed by the RBI, and its primary goal is to drive India towards becoming a digital economy.
- Hassle free transactions as customers are not required to enter the details such as Card no, Account number, IFSC etc.

Benefits

- **For Banks**
 - A universal application for transactions;
 - A single click Two Factor authentication;
 - Safer and more secure; Enables easy transactions;
 - Unique Identifier
- **For Merchants**
 - Easier fund collection; In-App Payments (IAP)
 - No risk of storing the customer's virtual address;
 - Tap customers not having credit/debit cards
- **For Customers**
 - Single application for accessing various bank accounts;

- Round the clock availability;
- One can easily raise a complaint from the mobile app directly;
- Use of Virtual ID is secure

UPI Transaction: Statistics

- As of July 2022, the UPI transactions included:
 - Volume of transaction - 6,288.40 million
 - Value of total transaction - 10,62,991.76 Cr.

Background:

- Recently, the RBI came out with a discussion paper on charges in payment systems.
- In this paper, the RBI had asked stakeholders if the merchant discount rate (MDR) should be brought back for UPI transactions.
 - MDR is the rate charged to a merchant for payment processing services on debit and credit card transactions.
 - It is usually paid by the merchants to the acquiring bank.
- MDR on UPI transactions has been a long-standing demand of the payments industry.
 - Most other modes of digital retail payments attract a charge on transactions.
 - However, currently, the government has mandated a zero-charge framework for UPI transactions, with effect from January 1, 2020.

Key highlights

- **UPI services: a digital public good**
 - The ministry said that the UPI is a digital public good with immense convenience for the public & productivity gains for the economy.
- **Cost recovery to be met through other means**
 - The ministry has also clarified that the concerns of the service providers for cost recovery have to be met through other means.

[NATIONAL AUTOMATED FINGERPRINT IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM \(NAFIS\)](#)

Union Home Minister Amit Shah inaugurated the National Automated Fingerprint Identification System (NAFIS) on August 17, at the two-day National Securities Strategies (NSS) Conference 2022 held in New Delhi.



About:

- It is conceptualized and managed by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) at the Central Fingerprint Bureau (CFPB) in New Delhi.
- NAFIS project is a country-wide searchable database of crime- and criminal-related fingerprints.
- The web-based application functions as a central information repository by consolidating fingerprint data from all states and Union Territories.
- According to a 2020 report by the NCRB, it enables law enforcement agencies to upload, trace, and retrieve data from the database in real time on a 24×7 basis.
- In April 2022, Madhya Pradesh became the first state in the country to identify a deceased person through NAFIS.

EAM Dr. S JAISHANKAR VISITS PARAGUAY

External Affairs Minister Dr S Jaishankar has unveiled a bust of Mahatma Gandhi in Asuncion, Paraguay. The Minister also visited the historic Casa de la Independencia, from where Paraguay's Independence movement started more than two centuries ago.



About:

- Paraguay is a landlocked country in South America. It is bordered by Argentina to the south and southwest, Brazil to the east and northeast, and Bolivia to the northwest.
- It is a founding member of Mercosur, the United Nations, the Organization of American States, the Non-Aligned Movement and the Lima Group.
- Asunción is the capital and the largest city of Paraguay.

FOREVER CHEMICALS

A recent study published in Environment Science and Technology has found that rainwater from many places across the globe is contaminated with “per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances,” (PFAs), which are called “forever chemicals” because of their tendency to stick around in the atmosphere, rainwater and soil for long periods of time.



About:

- PFAs are man-made chemicals used to make non-stick cookware, water-repellent clothing, stain-resistant fabrics, cosmetics, firefighting forms and many other products that resist grease, water and oil.
- PFAs can migrate to the soil, water and air during their production and use. Since most PFAs do not break down, they remain in the environment for long periods of time. Some of these PFAs can build up in people and animals if they are repeatedly exposed to the chemicals.
- Variety of health risks are attributed to PFA exposure including decreased fertility, developmental effects in children, interference with body hormones, increased cholesterol levels and increased risk of some cancers.

CREATE MORE WOMEN-CENTRIC NREGS WORK, SAYS PARLIAMENTARY PANEL

In News:

- Recently, a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj has submitted its recommendations w.r.t. Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee scheme.
- In its report, the committee has recommended to emphasise more on women-centric work under the scheme.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS):

- The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) was notified in September, 2005.
- In 2009, through an amendment, the name of the Act was changed to Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).
- **Mandate:** To provide at least 100 days of guaranteed wage employment in a financial year to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do **unskilled manual work**.
- The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme was created as the means to implement the Act so that the guarantee comes into effect.
- MGNREGS is a Centrally-Sponsored Scheme i.e. the scheme is jointly funded by the Central government and the State governments.
- **Concerned Ministry:** Ministry of Rural Development

Salient Features of the Scheme:

- **Legal Right to Work:**
 - The MGNREGA provides a legal guarantee for wage employment.
 - Every rural household has the right to register under MGNREGA.
 - Also, at least one-third of the beneficiaries of the scheme have to be women.
 - There are legal provisions for allowances and compensation both in cases of failure to provide work on demand and delays in payment of wages for work undertaken.
- **Demand-Driven:**
 - It is a demand-driven programme where provision of work is triggered by the demand for work by wage-seekers.
- **Decentralized mode of implementation:**
 - The State governments have powers to make rules and amend the concerned State scheme.
 - Gram Panchayats (GPs) are to implement at least 50 per cent of the works in terms of cost.
 - Plans and decisions regarding the nature and choice of works to be undertaken etc. are all to be made in open assemblies of the Gram Sabha and ratified by the GP.
- **Annual Report tabled in the Parliament:**

- An Annual Report prepared by the Central Employment Guarantee Council (CEGC), on the outcomes of MGNREGA is required to be presented annually by the Central Government to Parliament.
- CEGC is a statutory body set up under Section 10 of the MGNREGA.
- It is chaired by the Union Minister for Rural Development.
- The MGNREGA covers the entire country with the exception of districts that have a hundred percent urban population.

News Summary:

- Recently, a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Rural Development and Panchayati Raj has submitted its recommendations w.r.t. MGNREGS.

Major Recommendations:

- **Women-centric work –**
 - The committee noted that the average percentage of women’s participation in the workforce under the MGNREG scheme, for more than 5 years, has been around 50% mark which is way higher than the stipulated one-third mark.
 - This data reveals that the scheme is clearly seen by women as a route to a livelihood as compared to men.
 - The committee has suggested that the government must take measures for better promotion of “women-centric works” through creation or linking of existing livelihood projects under the scheme.
- **Wage parity –**
 - The committee reiterates that the Ministry of Rural Development needs to bridge the wage disparity among states by notifying a uniform wage rate structure.
 - The report highlights the fluctuation in wage rates ranging from Rs 193 to Rs 318 across different states and UTs to emphasis its point.
 - The committee has proposed that the long-standing demand for increasing wages must be address through suitable linkage to the inflation index.