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On Wednesday, India marked a significant milestone in its space journey as Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla was launched aboard the Axiom-4 (Ax-4) mission to the International Space Station (ISS). This is the first time in 41 years that an Indian has ventured into space, and notably, it is the first instance of an Indian astronaut visiting the ISS.

Indian astronaut in space after 41-year gap, on mission to ISS

Start of India's human space programme, says Shubhanshu Shukla as Axiom-4 mission is launched from the Kennedy Space Center, U.S., a four-member crew will spend 14 days in orbit conducting science, outreach, and other commercial activities

Hemanth C.S.
BENGALURU

India's human space programme took off on Wednesday as Indian astronaut Shubhanshu Shukla's Axiom-4 mission (Ax-4) to the International Space Station (ISS) was launched from NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida, U.S., after multiple delays.

"This is not the start of my journey to the ISS but the start of India's human space programme. I want my countrymen to become part of this journey, let us join together and start India's human space programme. *Jai Hind Jai Bharat*," Group Captain Shukla said in his first message from the mission.

Group Captain Shukla, the pilot of the Ax-4 mission, began a 28-hour journey to the orbiting labora-

Above and beyond

Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla becomes the first Indian to reach space in 41 years after the Axiom-4 mission lifted off from the Kennedy Space Center in Florida on Wednesday



From left: Tibor Kapu (Hungary), Mission Specialist; Shubhanshu Shukla (India), Pilot; Peggy Whitson (U.S.), Commander; and Sławosz Uznański-Wisniewski (Poland), Mission Specialist



After 40 years we have once again reached space and it was an amazing ride...This is not the start of my journey to the ISS but the start of India's human space programme

GROUP CAPTAIN SHUBHANSHU SHUKLA, Mission Pilot

tory in space along with Commander Peggy Whitson (U.S.), Mission Specialist Sławosz Uznański-Wisniewski (Poland), and

Mission Specialist Tibor Kapu (Hungary).

The SpaceX Dragon crew capsule housing the astronauts is targeting to

International Space Station:

The SpaceX Dragon crew capsule housing the 4 astronauts is targeting to dock at the International Space Station at approximately 4.30 p.m. IST on Thursday after a 28-hour journey



1 Wednesday's mission launch comes after multiple delays from the initial launch planned on May 29

2 The crew members will spend 14 days aboard the ISS conducting science, outreach, and commercial activities

3 The Ax-4 research complement includes nearly 60 studies and activities representing 31 countries



days aboard the ISS conducting science, outreach, and other commercial activities. The Ax-4 research complement includes nearly 60 scientific activities representing 31 countries.

Upon docking, Group Captain Shukla will become the first Indian astronaut aboard the ISS, after having become the first Indian to reach space in 41 years.

Great start

The Falcon 9 rocket carrying the astronauts in a SpaceX Dragon crew capsule lifted off from Launch Complex 39A at the Kennedy Space Center at 12.01 p.m. on Wednesday. Around 10 minutes after lift-off, the Dragon capsule separated from the second stage of the rocket and its nose-cone open sequence began.

Significance of the Event:

- Revival of India's Human Spaceflight Aspirations:** Group Captain Shukla's mission is being hailed not merely as an individual achievement, but as the symbolic beginning of India's full-fledged entry

into human spaceflight. His words from space — “This is not the start of my journey to the ISS but the start of India’s human space programme” — underscore this sentiment.

2. **Strategic Leap Towards Gaganyaan:** India’s indigenous human spaceflight programme, Gaganyaan, aims to send Indian astronauts (Gagannauts) into low Earth orbit. The Ax-4 mission offers valuable operational insights into long-duration human presence in space, serving as a precursor to Gaganyaan, planned for launch in the near future.
3. **Strengthening International Collaborations:** The mission is part of Axiom Space’s commercial venture, with participation from the U.S., Poland, Hungary, and now India. It highlights India’s willingness and capability to partner in global commercial and scientific space initiatives.
4. **Science Diplomacy and Outreach:** With 60 scientific activities from 31 countries, the mission embodies science diplomacy. India’s involvement elevates its profile in global research and innovation in space-based studies like microgravity research, biotechnology, material science, and international cooperation in space education.
5. **Public Inspiration and Soft Power:** Shukla’s participation rekindles public imagination and interest in space exploration, especially among youth. This mission strengthens India’s soft power and its image as an emerging leader in space technology.

Challenges and Way Ahead:

- **Institutional Preparedness:** While ISRO has demonstrated technical excellence in unmanned missions, human spaceflight demands higher safety, life support systems, and crew training. Missions like Ax-4 help bridge the experience gap.
- **Funding and Commercial Viability:** India must ensure adequate funding for its human space programme and explore commercial partnerships to sustain long-term ambitions.
- **Global Standards and Sustainability:** Human space missions require adherence to international norms related to space debris, crew safety, and sustainable orbital practices.
- **Infrastructure Development:** India will need advanced astronaut training facilities, re-entry technologies, and coordination with global space agencies and private players.

Conclusion:

The successful launch of Group Captain Shubhanshu Shukla aboard the Ax-4 mission marks a watershed moment in India’s space history. Beyond its scientific relevance, it signifies India’s arrival as a serious contender in the domain of human spaceflight. The mission is not just a commemoration of past glory — it is a declaration of future intent, ambition, and global partnership. For UPSC aspirants, this development is a testament to India’s space diplomacy, technological progress, and soft power projection on the world stage.

UPSCMainsPractice Question

Ques : "India's participation in the Ax-4 mission marks a new chapter in its human spaceflight journey." Discuss the significance of this development for India's space programme and its implications for Gaganyaan and beyond. (250 Words)

Page 01: GS 3 : Science & Technology

A recent investigation by The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ), in collaboration with The Hindu, has revealed that a significant portion of generic chemotherapy drugs produced by Indian manufacturers have failed quality control tests. These drugs, essential for treating cancers like breast, ovarian, and leukemia, are exported globally to over 100 countries, including developing nations with limited regulatory oversight.

Chemotherapy drugs made by Indian companies fail quality tests: study

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Vital chemotherapy drugs used around the world have failed quality tests, leaving cancer patients in more than 100 countries at risk of ineffective treatments and fatal side effects, the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) can reveal.

The drugs in question form the backbone of treatment plans for numerous common cancers including breast and ovarian cancers and leukaemia. Over the past six years, they have been shipped to countries such as Nepal, Ethiopia, the U.S., the U.K., and Saudi Arabia.

The test findings come from a study by researchers at the University of Notre Dame in the U.S. who analysed 189 samples

of various cancer drugs. About one-fifth failed.

The worst-performing drug in the study is made by Indian manufacturer Venus Remedies. All eight samples of the company's cyclophosphamide product failed.

Venus Remedies told TBIJ that the test results were "not scientifically plausible" given the company's "validated manufacturing systems and quality controls". It said it has received no complaints or concerns about the batches in question and shared the results of its own testing that indicated they were of a good standard.

Faulty storage blamed

The manufacturer said storage conditions in the supply chain – which can impact drug quality – might have affected the re-

searchers' test results. However, the absence of similar quality issues across the entire data set suggests this is not the case.

Venus Remedies is one of three companies or regulators that queried the methodology used by the lab, saying it deviated from international standards or could give erroneous results. However, Maria Lieberman, who led the research, said her researchers' methods follow international standards as closely as possible and employ similar standards to a regulatory lab. Both the findings and methods have been scrutinised by independent academics.

Two other manufacturers whose products failed the testing, Zuvius Lifesciences and GLS Pharma, have supplied failed brands to over 40 coun-



Marya Lieberman, the Notre Dame professor who led the research, at work in her lab. UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME

tries. Of the 17 companies that manufactured failed drugs, 16 are based in India.

Some drugs contained so little of their key ingredient that pharmacists said giving them to patients would be like doing nothing.

Other drugs, containing too much active ingredient, put patients at risk

of severe organ damage or even death. "Both scenarios are horrendous," said Shereen Nabhani-Gebara, vice-chair of the British Oncology Pharmacists Association.

Zuvius Lifesciences, GLS Pharma, and Zee Laboratories did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

Doctors from multiple

countries told TBIJ of the drugs in question not working as expected, leaving patients suddenly unresponsive to treatment. Other patients suffered side effects so toxic they could no longer tolerate the medicine.

The findings expose holes in the global safety nets intended to prevent profit-seeking manufacturers from cutting corners and to protect patients from bad drugs. More than two in three countries around the world are reportedly unable to ensure the quality of medicines their populations are exposed to.

Nepal was one of the biggest importers of the failed chemotherapy brands in this investigation. The country's medicines regulator does not have the capacity to test cancer drugs. Although it

can recall cancer drugs based on external evidence, it has never done so.

"Neither patients nor their families have any way of knowing the quality of these drugs," said Smriti Pokharel of the Wish Nepal Foundation. "No one seems willing to take responsibility for ensuring proper treatment for cancer patients."

Much of the global demand for cancer treatment is met by generic drugs – which the low-quality drugs found in this investigation were.

In India, the world's largest producer of generic drugs, questions have been raised over whether manufacturers are properly punished for producing such bad drugs.

"The Indian government's interest is in trying to protect the industry,"

said public health activist Dinesh Thakur.

India's drug regulator defended the oversight system, saying that failing drugs are recalled and manufacturers face "either administrative penalties or legal prosecution in court".

Thakur pointed to limitations in the World Health Organization's means of ensuring people across the world have access to safe effective drugs. The WHO did not respond to several requests for comment.

One cancer pharmacist in Ethiopia estimated that it could take over a year for a patient to save for cancer treatment. If that medicine then turns out to be faulty, they simply might not be able to afford to pay for another.

(This article is jointly published by The Hindu and TBIJ)

Key Issues Highlighted:

- Public Health Risk:** The failure of vital chemotherapy drugs poses life-threatening risks. Drugs with too little active ingredient render treatments ineffective, while those with excess dosage can cause fatal toxicity. This directly endangers cancer patients, many of whom are already vulnerable due to the cost and stress of treatment.
- Reputational Damage to Indian Pharma Industry:** India, as the world's largest supplier of generic medicines, enjoys a strong global position in the pharmaceutical sector. Incidents like this undermine the credibility of the Indian pharmaceutical industry, raising doubts over quality, regulatory oversight, and ethical manufacturing practices.
- Regulatory Failures:** Although India's drug regulator claims to enforce quality through recalls and legal prosecution, the ground reality, as shown by repeated international test failures, reveals significant loopholes in enforcement, post-marketing surveillance, and accountability mechanisms.

4. **Global Equity in Healthcare:**Countries like Nepal and Ethiopia heavily depend on imported Indian generics due to affordability. However, lack of testing infrastructure and weak regulatory mechanisms in these countries mean that substandard drugs reach the most marginalized populations — deepening global health inequities.
5. **Ethical Dimensions of Pharmaceutical Trade:**The export of low-quality chemotherapy drugs to developing countries reflects an ethical failure. It suggests profit motives taking precedence over human lives and highlights a need for stricter international regulations, ethical business practices, and transparency in pharmaceutical supply chains.
6. **Role of International Institutions:**The findings question the effectiveness of international institutions like the WHO in ensuring global drug safety. The WHO's lack of response to the issue raises concerns about global accountability frameworks and the protection of patients in low- and middle-income countries.

Challenges and Systemic Flaws:

- Inadequate post-manufacturing testing and pharmacovigilance.
- Absence of patient-level awareness or legal recourse.
- Lack of transparency and reluctance of manufacturers to accept accountability.
- Weak coordination between international regulatory bodies and national drug control authorities.
- Overdependence of LMICs (Low and Middle-Income Countries) on a few suppliers without alternatives.

Way Forward:

1. **Strengthening Domestic Regulation:**India must upgrade its drug surveillance system, ensure random batch testing, enforce strict punitive measures, and enhance transparency in drug approval and recall processes.
2. **Global Accountability Framework:**There is an urgent need for an international platform to evaluate drug safety across borders, preferably under the UN/WHO framework, with binding responsibilities for exporting nations.
3. **Technology-enabled Quality Control:**Use of blockchain, AI-based monitoring, and real-time batch verification systems can reduce the risk of substandard drugs in supply chains.
4. **Strengthening Local Capacity in Importing Nations:**LMICs must invest in their own testing labs, adopt stricter import regulations, and create regional alliances for drug quality assurance.
5. **Public Reporting and Whistleblower Protection:**Encourage transparency by protecting whistleblowers, like researchers and pharmacists, who report on unsafe drugs or unethical practices.

Conclusion:

This incident is not an isolated failure but a systemic alarm. The safety and efficacy of medicines, particularly those meant for critical illnesses like cancer, must never be compromised. For a country like

India aspiring to be a global pharmacy, the credibility of its drugs must rest not just on low prices but also on assured quality and ethical responsibility. UPSC aspirants should view this as a case study on health governance, regulatory ethics, global public health justice, and the intersection of science, policy, and diplomacy.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: "Regulating pharmaceutical supply chains is as important as producing affordable medicine." Examine the technological, legal, and policy measures needed to strengthen drug quality control in India's pharmaceutical sector. (250 words)

Page : 08 : GS 2 : International Relations

The recent conflict between **Israel and Iran**, escalated by **U.S. airstrikes on Iranian nuclear sites**, has sparked intense global debate about emerging power blocs. The idea of a coordinated anti-West alliance—termed the Axis of Upheaval (Iran, Russia, China, and others)—has come under scrutiny, particularly as key players like Russia and China have distanced themselves from directly aiding Iran.

The 'Axis of Upheaval' in the West Asia conflict

As the war between Israel and Iran has resulted in a ceasefire after being layered with America's bombing of Iran's nuclear sites, the narrative of the world being divided into power blocs like those during the Cold War era stands punctured. With Iran having suffered a political and military decapitation of leadership and capacity alike, its main partners, China and Russia, have maintained a distance. Before the conflict, Iran had been central to the narrative of the global order's perceived fracturing between palatable West-led alliances against a Moscow- and Beijing-knitted axis, dubbed as the 'Axis of Upheaval' by American scholars Richard Fontaine and Andrea Kendall-Taylor.

In Russia's war against Ukraine, Iranian drone technologies have played a critical role, while Moscow and Tehran, despite certain regional differences, once joined hands to stabilise the government of the now ousted Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad. Meanwhile, as sanctions have gnawed at Iran's economic depth over the years, China has gained much by continuing to buy cheap oil from the country. This has been helpful to Beijing in powering its stagnating growth while giving Tehran much needed cash inflows in a polity and society that is starved of steady financial streams.

No treaties

However, all this balancing has strategic limitations as well. The axes, at best, are a narrative construct. There are no treaties that bind these states into military blocs, where charters can be mobilised to push the others to join a war if a partner country is attacked. The underpinnings of these partnerships nonetheless go deeper, spilling over into a reconstruction of institutions, currencies, multilateralism and how the world operates today. They want de-dollarisation, alternatives to western payments gateways such as SWIFT, and a strengthening of organisations such as BRICS and



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The narrative of the world being divided into power blocs like those during the Cold War era has been punctured

the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as well as fundamental anti-West ecosystems. But there is no military treaty to anchor all these, which marks a critical gap in taking on western influence which is pinned using both treaties and understandings.

Russia and China, nonetheless, have made statements in favour of Iran as a way of support. Moscow has criticised those backing Israel's actions, including the ambiguity of positions taken by the International Atomic Energy Agency and attempts to manipulate international non-proliferation regimes. Russia's President Vladimir Putin in a telephone call offered mediation, which was sidelined by United States President Donald Trump. The noticeable part was this: it was not that Mr. Putin wanted to mediate, but political and diplomatic support may be the only thing Russia may be able to offer Iran at this stage.

Tehran has comprehensive strategic partnerships that it signed with Mr. Putin (2025) and China's President Xi Jinping (2021), which are almost exclusively economic in nature. While aligning with Iran as part of an axis in the long term makes sense if one considers the country's vast energy reserves (many of which remain untapped due to technology-led roadblocks aided by international sanctions), the fact is that neither Russia nor China have the intent or the bandwidth to come to Tehran's aid in a military sense even though the suitability of the current political system under Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is critical to their own individual interests.

Where Russia stands

For Moscow, its war against Ukraine has tied down most of its political and military capabilities. The other opaque member of the axis, North Korea, is already providing soldiers to Russia to arrest its depleting military depth. This denies it any capabilities to tactically help

Tehran. Previously, with its bases and assets in Syria, providing some air power assistance could have been possible, at least theoretically. However, with the fall of the Assad regime, which has now been replaced by former al-Qaeda leader Ahmed Al Sharaa – ironically, he is prioritising relations with the West pushed by Arab partners – Moscow has lost the only military footing it had in West Asia.

China too has come out in support of Iran. While its Foreign Minister Wang Yi in a call with his Israeli counterpart highlighted how Israeli strikes were violating international law, a readout after a call between Mr. Xi and Mr. Putin interestingly demanded that the U.S. (without referencing it directly) orchestrate a de-escalation. While both Russia and China are worried about the wider implications of this conflict, it benefits their strategic postures in many ways. With the U.S. now having joined Israel in attacking Iran, a decision Mr. Trump took while keeping even his closest advisers in the dark, it would bog the White House down once again in West Asia, potentially relocating critical military assets away from the Indo-Pacific and from Ukraine. This would free-up space in both Beijing and Moscow's immediate geographies of interest while also potentially sowing self-inflicted discord within the Trump administration. For now, a brittle U.S.-backed ceasefire is holding Tehran and Tel Aviv at bay.

The outlook

For Iran, the news on any of the axes front is not good. While Russia and China may prioritise their own positions, the proverbial 'Axis of Resistance' made up of Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis among others is down for the count as Iran's first line of defence and offence in the region. Finally, the future of Iran, irrespective of what kind of political reality prevails, even in a moderate system, may be shaped by the point that only nuclear power can hereon guarantee sovereignty.

Key Themes and Issues:

1. **Erosion of Strategic Alliances:** Despite existing strategic and economic partnerships, the Iran conflict exposed the non-binding and non-military nature of alliances among Russia, China, and Iran. Unlike NATO-style security pacts, these relationships lack enforceable collective defense mechanisms.
2. **Realpolitik over Rhetoric:** Though Russia and China expressed diplomatic sympathy for Iran, neither offered military aid. Moscow is overstretched by the Ukraine war, while Beijing remains risk-averse and focused on domestic economic stability and geopolitical containment of the U.S. through subtler means.
3. **Limits of the 'Axis':** The so-called "Axis of Upheaval" or "Axis of Resistance" (including non-state actors like Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis) has been significantly weakened. Sanctions, leadership decapitations, and regional realignments have blunted Iran's strategic depth.
4. **Geopolitical Implications for the U.S.:** The U.S.'s re-engagement in West Asia, now entangled in both Ukraine and the Middle East, may dilute its focus on the **Indo-Pacific strategy**, inadvertently benefiting both Russia and China in their immediate strategic theatres.
5. **Iran's Strategic Isolation:** Iran now faces increased **military vulnerability, economic fragility, and diplomatic solitude**. Even traditional allies are unwilling to escalate support. This may push Tehran toward a **more aggressive nuclear posture**, viewing nuclear capability as the only viable guarantee of sovereignty.
6. **Middle East Realignments:** Syria's new leadership and its West-leaning stance, North Korea's military support to Russia, and Arab states' tactical shifts away from Iran indicate a **fragmenting regional order**, with uncertain consequences for stability and alliances.

Broad Strategic and Diplomatic Insights:

- The absence of **formal military alliances** in the so-called Eastern axis (Russia–China–Iran) makes it fragile and narrative-driven rather than action-oriented.
- Strategic balancing by Russia and China highlights **economic interdependence** and **political caution**, not shared military commitments.
- The event underscores the **fluid nature of contemporary geopolitics**, where hard alliances of the Cold War era are being replaced by temporary, interest-based alignments.
- **Iran's geopolitical future**, including its posture on nuclear weapons, will shape not just West Asian security but also global non-proliferation debates.

Conclusion:

The 'Axis of Upheaval' has been revealed more as a conceptual construct than a functioning alliance. Iran's isolation in its most critical hour reflects the fragility of its strategic calculations and the transactional nature of modern geopolitics. For India and the wider international community, this highlights the need to reassess regional engagements, strategic autonomy, and the risks of overreliance on informal global power.

structures. In the evolving post-conflict landscape, diplomatic agility and strategic clarity will be paramount.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: "The Iran-Israel conflict exposes the fragility of emerging global power blocs." Critically examine the nature and limitations of the so-called 'Axis of Upheaval' comprising Iran, Russia, and China. (250 Words)

Page 09 : GS 2 : Indian Polity

A significant number of internal migrants in India, particularly those from States like Bihar, are effectively disenfranchised during elections. Despite several discussions and proposals, a comprehensive mechanism to ensure voting rights for migrant workers is yet to be implemented. The low voter turnout in Bihar during the 2024 Lok Sabha elections (56%) underscores the urgency of this issue.

Enabling voting rights for migrants

Bihar, a State with one of the largest out-migration populations in India, is going to the polls later this year. This time, again a significant proportion of the State's population will be unable to exercise their franchise.

In the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, voter turnout in Bihar was 56%, significantly lower than the national average of 66%. Since more than half the households in Bihar are exposed to migration in some form, a likely factor to have significantly influenced low voter turnout was the large migrant population, which was unable to return home to vote.

Patterns of migration

In 2021, the overall migration rate in India was 28.9%. A significant portion of migration in India is for marriage, especially among women. Around 10%, however, migrate for work. This number is significantly higher in certain northern and eastern States such as Bihar. With an ever-increasing number of migrants travelling from poorer to richer areas in search of employment, the number of those effectively disenfranchised will only increase, unless mechanisms are put in place to facilitate voting by migrants. In an attempt to solve the issue, public discussions have been held. The Election Commission of India (ECI) put forth a concrete proposal in 2024. But no single mechanism for voting for migrants has been implemented.

Different kinds of policies and mechanisms are needed to enable voting for different kinds of migrants (intra and inter-State migrants). Intra-State migrants (around 85% of migrants) working in the informal sector could be encouraged to travel relatively shorter distances to vote in their original place of residence. However, they would need a measure of support from the government. Stricter enforcement of the statutory holiday on polling



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day would ensure that these workers are able to travel to vote without loss of wages. Special bus services could also be scheduled on the eve of and on polling day.

Different mechanisms

Inter-State migrants working in the informal sector are a large, growing and vulnerable population and need a different set of voting mechanisms. Three possibilities can be explored for this section. The first is an option designed to cater to the large population of migrants in irregular and low-paying jobs, such as in the construction sector. Workers in these jobs may not have permanent residences with address proofs. In 2023, the ECI showcased a pilot project of remote electronic voting machines (RVMs). Each of these was an EVM modified to cater to up to 72 constituencies. Political parties objected to this project. They said there was ambiguity over its functioning. They also cited issues such as problems in identification of migrants and the Code of Conduct being in place in the constituency where the migrant was residing. The project also appeared to be administratively difficult to implement at scale: when a large State with a large out-migration population goes to the polls, migrants from the State who currently reside across the country would be required to notify the ECI months in advance so that the ECI can make the necessary arrangements on polling day. If the ECI finds that in a given city, there are migrants from all 243 constituencies of Bihar, it would need to set up at least four RVMs across the city. The administrative difficulties would only be compounded during the Lok Sabha elections. As a complex and challenging as the RVM proposal seems, it was the first major attempt by the ECI to facilitate voting for migrants. With more consultation and fine-tuning, this system could benefit many. Another option is postal ballots. This system is already being

implemented by the ECI for members of the armed forces. An extension of this model could help many migrants. Here, too, the ECI would require migrants to register with the body well in advance, so the postal ballots can be issued. Operationally, this appears to be the easier form of remote voting to implement. However, the ECI would have to organise registration, issue ballot papers, and despatch these ballots to counting centres after voting – all major administrative efforts.

The last option – switching voting constituencies – is suitable for the longer term for more permanent migrants who can prove their residence in a constituency for at least six months. The argument here is that longer-term migrants of an area would likely be more concerned about the politics and policies of their current place of residence. The ECI should also take extra effort to enrol longer-term migrants of the informal sector in their current place of residence. This will empower them to pressure governments to implement more migrant-friendly policies. While this move may face significant opposition from longer-term residents of the area, it would empower one of the most vulnerable sections of the population.

Separately, as a significant number of migrant populations across the country are women who migrate after marriage, voting drives could also be carried out to enrol these women on the voter lists of their new place of residence.

A mixed approach

Each of these options has its advantages and disadvantages. Enabling voting by migrants is a complex task and is made more complex by the heterogeneity of migrants. Therefore, an approach that uses all these options will enable a significant share of both inter- and intra-State salaried and casual migrants to exercise their right to vote.

An approach that combines several options will enable a significant share of inter- and intra-State migrants to exercise their right to vote

Key Issues:

1. **Scale and Diversity of Migration:** With a national migration rate of nearly 29% (2021), and nearly 10% migrating for work, India's internal migrant population is vast and varied. Migrants include both inter-State and intra-State categories, with differing levels of mobility, residence, and access to identification and address documentation.
2. **Effective Disenfranchisement:** Migrants, especially those working in the informal sector, often lack the logistical or economic means to return home during elections. Many lose wages or face travel barriers, leading to systemic underrepresentation.
3. **Inequity in Electoral Participation:** The inability of migrants to vote violates the principle of **universal adult franchise**. It marginalizes a highly mobile and economically vulnerable population, weakening the inclusivity of Indian democracy.

Proposed Solutions and Their Challenges:

1. **Remote Electronic Voting Machines (RVMs):**
 - Proposed by the Election Commission (2023–24) to enable voting for migrants across multiple constituencies.
 - **Challenges:** Technical complexity, identification issues, political resistance, and logistical burden on ECI to set up RVMs for multiple constituencies in cities with high migrant density.
2. **Postal Ballots:**
 - Already in use for armed forces and certain categories. Can be extended to migrants.
 - **Challenges:** Requires early registration, efficient ballot dispatch, and robust systems for ensuring ballot security and timely counting.
3. **Switching Voting Constituencies (Re-registration):**
 - For long-term/permanent migrants who can prove residence of 6+ months. Encourages political engagement at the place of work/residence.
 - **Challenges:** Verification difficulties, resistance from local residents, and potential politicization.
4. **Support for Intra-State Migrants:**
 - Government-enforced polling-day holidays, special transport services to native places.
 - **Challenges:** Policy implementation, employer cooperation, and lack of awareness among migrants.
5. **Gender Dimension:**
 - A large number of migrant women (especially post-marriage) remain unregistered. Targeted voter drives can help include them in electoral rolls of new residences.
 - **Challenges:** Social norms, documentation gaps, and lack of awareness.

Significance:

- Enabling migrant voting rights enhances **electoral equity and democratic participation**.
- Ensures **political visibility** of informal and marginalized workers, pressuring governments to frame **migrant-inclusive policies**.
- Upholds **constitutional values** of representation and equality before law.

Way Forward:

- Adopt a **multi-pronged, context-specific approach** combining postal ballots, RVMs, and voter re-registration.
- Conduct **pilot programs**, build institutional infrastructure, and foster **inter-State coordination**.
- Engage civil society, employers, and local administrations in **awareness campaigns** and logistical support.
- Prioritize **electoral inclusion in urban governance frameworks**, especially for cities hosting high migrant populations.

Conclusion:

Migrant disenfranchisement represents a critical democratic deficit in India's otherwise robust electoral system. As internal migration continues to grow, addressing this gap is both a policy necessity and a moral imperative. By embracing innovative, inclusive, and adaptive mechanisms, India can uphold the spirit of universal adult suffrage and ensure that no citizen is left unheard due to mobility or economic vulnerability.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : "Migrants are politically invisible despite being economically essential." Analyze this paradox in light of India's current electoral framework and suggest ways to make political representation more inclusive. **(250 Words)**

The Union Government has announced that the **next Census will be conducted in 2027**, and for the first time since 1941, it will include **caste enumeration**. This decision has reignited debate over whether India's current Census structure is capable of producing meaningful caste-based socio-economic data, or if **serious restructuring** is needed to serve the goal of **mainstreaming marginalised communities**.

Should the method of counting caste change?

What are the two phases of the Census? Why has caste enumeration been included in the upcoming Census, according to the Union government? What are the reforms the Census should undertake in order to facilitate data that will be helpful for bringing the marginalised to the mainstream?

EXPLAINER

K. Narayanan Unni

The story so far

The Central Government has announced that the next Census would take place in 2027 and that it would collect information on castes. Can such a massive data exercise be made more useful through a restructuring of the existing Census process?

How is the Census conducted?

The first phase of the Census, called house-listing, would probably be conducted between April to September in 2026. This stage lists all the dwelling units in the country where people live, along with several characteristics of the houses and households.

The second phase called the population enumeration phase would be conducted in 2027, wherein information on several key socio-economic characteristics of the population would be collected. This is also the stage where caste would be recorded.

Why is caste being recorded?

The recording of an individual's caste was last done in the 1941 Census. However, that data could not be processed due to economic constraints of the Second World War. Thus, effectively, the last Census to provide data on caste has been the 1931 Census that has become too outdated to use for any purpose.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is reported to have said that caste enumeration as part of the Census is a step the government is taking to bring the marginalised and those left behind in every field into the mainstream. However, given the limitations of the Census as a method of data collection as well as the design of the Census questionnaire, it is doubtful whether this objective can be fulfilled. A restructuring of the Census questionnaires could make more useful data be made easily available to further the objectives indicated by the Union government.

What are the problems with the questionnaires?

It is presumed that the questions that were included in the draft questionnaires for the 2021 Census may more or less remain the same for the 2027 Census. In the 2021 draft, the question on caste was restricted to those belonging to Scheduled Castes (SC) as in the past Censuses.

By making this question applicable to all castes, except Scheduled Tribes (ST), and with consequent changes in instructions and the software used for electronic data collection, data on castes can be collected. The practical difficulties of collecting data on castes is not within the scope of this article. Information on specific castes can be ascertained through literacy/educational levels, age at marriage; mother tongue and other languages known; status of the individual as the main worker, marginal worker or non worker; seeking/available for work; broad classification of industry/occupation of the workers; place of birth/previous residence; and data on child birth and survival.

While the data on 'mother tongue and other languages known' may not be of much importance in assessing the socio-economic status of various castes, information on participation in economic activity and its broad classification may be of use. However, the data on



Numbering citizens: A teacher collects details from a woman as part of the State caste census at Kandi in Sangareddy district, Telangana in 2024. FILE PHOTO

unemployment derived using the response to the question "whether seeking/available for work" suffers from conceptual issues and lack of attention in data collection. For example, this question has a reference period of one year. However, it is not clearly mentioned as to how long a person should be seeking/or be available for work to be classified as unemployed. Though this question has been asked in every Census starting from 1981, it could never give useful data.

Information on 'child births and survival' collected in the Census suffers from serious quality issues. These questions, included in the Census from 1981, have outlived their utility as similar information is better collected through the National Family Health Surveys. Getting any reliable caste-wise data from these questions is almost impossible.

Information on migration may be an important aspect to assess whether people of certain castes are more prone to migration. However, data from previous Censuses seem to indicate that a large percentage of migrants are not counted or are not recorded as migrants.

Thus, the only information that would be available to classify castes are those of education, age at marriage and participation in economic activity. While the Census does collect other information that would help in moving towards the objectives stated by the Union government for the inclusion of caste in the Census, it would need some serious restructuring of the Census questionnaires and process.

How should the Census questionnaires be restructured?

The main objective of the house listing phase is to prepare a list of all dwelling units where people are living or are likely

to be living at the time of the Census. This framework helps in carving out new enumeration blocks as required and thus helps balance the workload of the enumerators. Several questions relating to quality of housing, amenities available to households and assets owned, have been asked during this phase from the 1991 Census onwards.

However, in the 1981 Census, these questions were in the household schedule canvassed during the second phase of the census, that is the population enumeration phase.

Transferring these questions from the house-list schedule to the household schedule would help linking information on quality of housing, amenities and assets to other aspects of the population easier. As there is a time gap of six to nine months between the house-listing and population enumeration phases, linking the information on the basis of house number, name of the head of the household etc. may bring about error. Such errors may seriously impact the reliability of data, especially for small communities.

Taking the questions out of the house-listing schedule would also help enumerators to concentrate on the listing of all buildings, be it residential, partly residential or non-residential along with the number of people living in them. Improved house-lists would help in better coverage of the Census. This is very important in urban areas which have higher omission rates in most Censuses.

Such linkages or transfer of questions have not been adopted in either the 2011 Census or in the planning of the 2021 Census (which was advanced due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

Without such data in the Census, it is not possible to answer questions like, "What is the literacy rate of persons living

in kutchra house without electricity and whether this is significantly lower than that of others" or "What proportion of the workforce in urban areas live in kutchra houses?", etc.

The Census should be able to provide answers to the above questions, disaggregated by caste. Then only can the data be used for identifying marginalised communities and the extent of disparities between them. Though collecting accurate data through a Census on many of these variables is not an easy process, and though the quality of data might suffer, it is the best alternative as of now.

Should some questions be omitted?

There is a need to make the Census leaner by dropping unnecessary questions. Several questions on amenities available to the household or assets owned by them may have become redundant. For example, ownership of mobile phones or that of computers may not be as important now as it was five years ago. Similarly, questions on access of households to bank accounts might be omitted. A shorter questionnaire would help the enumerator concentrate on getting more accurate responses to the questions.

The Census has been providing caste/tribe wise data on several socio-economic variables. It is doubtful whether this data have been used to identify the most backward castes/tribes for similar exercises that could aid policy/program formulation. Hopefully, caste-wise data thrown up by the upcoming Census would be used better in policy and program formulations, and be used beyond decisions regarding the percentages for reservation.

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THE GIST

Prime Minister Narendra Modi is reported to have said that caste enumeration as part of the Census is a step the government is taking to bring the marginalised and those left behind in every field into the mainstream.

Information on migration may be an important aspect to assess whether people of certain castes are more prone to migration. However, data from previous Censuses seem to indicate that a large percentage of migrants are not counted or are not recorded as migrants.

There is a need to make the Census leaner by dropping unnecessary questions.

Key Issues:

1. **Historical Gap in Caste Data:**The last comprehensive caste data was collected in **1931**, making any policy built on it outdated. Although a Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) was conducted in 2011, its data was not released due to quality concerns. The upcoming Census presents a new opportunity to fill this critical data gap.
2. **Objective of Caste Enumeration:**The government argues that **enumerating caste will help bring marginalised communities into the mainstream**. However, critics question whether the current Census design can deliver granular and actionable data to support such a goal.

Structural Limitations in Current Census Design:

1. **Limited Questionnaire Scope:**In the draft 2021 Census schedule, caste data was restricted to **Scheduled Castes**, excluding OBCs and other categories. To capture the full caste spectrum, **questions need to be extended to all castes** except Scheduled Tribes (already enumerated).
2. **Question Quality Issues:**Some existing questions suffer from **conceptual ambiguity and outdated relevance**, such as:
 - **Unemployment:** The question "whether seeking/available for work" lacks specificity and yields poor data.
 - **Childbirth and survival:** These are better addressed by surveys like **NFHS**, not the Census.
 - **Asset ownership or mobile/bank access:** May no longer indicate meaningful socio-economic status.
3. **Data Linking Challenges:**There is a **6–9 month gap** between the house-listing phase and population enumeration. Because data is collected in two separate stages, **linking household assets with population data (e.g., caste, education, employment)** often leads to errors, especially among smaller or vulnerable communities.
4. **Urban Undercoverage:**Urban areas often face higher rates of **omission errors**, making caste and socio-economic correlation data even more unreliable in cities where marginalised communities may be more mobile or undocumented.

Suggestions for Reform:

1. **Restructuring the Questionnaire:**
 - Shift questions on **housing quality, amenities, and assets** to the **population enumeration phase** for better data correlation.
 - Drop outdated questions to make the schedule **shorter and more focused**.
 - Refine employment and migration-related questions for clarity and usefulness.
2. **Caste-wise Data Linkage:**The Census should aim to **correlate caste with key socio-economic indicators** (education level, occupation, type of housing) to better identify deprivation and target policy measures.

3. **Improved Use of Data:** While the Census has long provided caste/tribe-wise data on various parameters, it is rarely used for **policy targeting** beyond determining reservation quotas. Future use must extend to **identifying most backward communities** and **designing social inclusion programs**.

Significance:

- A better-designed caste enumeration exercise will help:
 - Map **inter-caste disparities** in employment, education, housing, and migration.
 - Enable **targeted policies** for inclusive development.
 - Shift the debate on caste from **identity-based politics to evidence-based policymaking**.

Conclusion:

While the decision to include caste in the 2027 Census is a step towards inclusivity, the **current structure of the Census is inadequate** for delivering meaningful and usable caste data. A **comprehensive restructuring** of the questionnaire, methodology, and data use practices is essential. Without it, caste enumeration risks becoming a **symbolic gesture** rather than a tool for **social transformation and justice**.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: "The Census must evolve from being a demographic exercise to a tool for social transformation." Discuss in the context of the inclusion of caste enumeration in the upcoming 2027 Census. (250 words)

Page : 08 Editorial Analysis

A lofty concept, a Governor and unwanted controversy

A picture of 'Bharat Mata' (Mother India) has triggered a confrontation between the Governor of Kerala and the State government. At a recent function, the Governor had placed a painting of Bharat Mata in the form of a female figure clad in a saffron colour sari with a spear in one hand and standing with a lion behind her against a backdrop of the map of India. The painting had been placed in a room where official functions are held at Raj Bhavan. A tall brass lamp was placed before this garlanded picture. Before any official function begins, the Governor bows before it, offers flowers and lights the lamp. The Chief Minister and other Ministers had raised objections on the grounds that this picture of Bharat Mata is not recognised by the Constitution or any law unlike the national anthem of India or the national flag or other national symbols. Therefore, the government seems to have taken a position that it will not participate in any official function organised by the Governor where this picture is displayed.

The slogan, 'Bharat Mata ki Jai', was the emotional cry of freedom fighters which would electrify the minds of people who were fighting for freedom from colonial rule. And, they used to raise this slogan at the highest pitch when they were subject to lathi blows. Thus, Bharat Mata is one that deeply resonated with the countless millions during India's freedom struggle.

But the question in this issue in Kerala is not whether we should pay obeisance to this image of Bharat Mata. There is no doubt that Indians have a deep and emotional bond with the concept of Bharat Mata. However, in the Kerala episode, the issue is that the Governor has used a picture of what is claimed to be Bharat Mata at the venue where official functions organised by the government are held and offers floral tributes to it as a part of the official function.

The conduct of the Governor

Since no picture of Bharat Mata in any form has been recognised by either the Constitution or any law or adopted like the national anthem, the national flag, the national emblem or even the national symbols, such a picture cannot be a part of any official function organised by the government. It may be noted here that this picture of Bharat Mata is used only by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Bharatiya Janata Party in their functions. The Governor,



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There is a deep and emotional bond with the concept of Bharat Mata, but all constitutional authorities are bound by the framework of the Constitution

being the constitutional head of the state, is expected to conduct himself in accordance with the Constitution. The Governor cannot take independent decisions in the performance of his duties and functions but can act only in accordance with the advice of the elected government. So, if the government decides that such pictures should not be placed at the venue of official meetings organised by the government, the Governor is required to go by that decision.

The personification of Bharat Mata as a mother figure was first done by renowned Bengali novelist, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, in his late 19th century work, *Anandamath*. But the mother symbol he created was Banga Mata (Mother of Bengal) – and not Bharat Mata – and it became the powerful symbol of Bengali nationalism.

But it was Abanindranath Tagore, the nephew of Rabindranath Tagore who first did a painting of the Banga Mata in 1905. This depiction, with four arms, in some ways resembled a Hindu goddess. It was sister Nivedita, a prominent disciple of Swami Vivekananda, who popularised this painting as Bharat Mata. Later, 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' became the most powerful slogan of the national freedom movement but without any visual representation. The national movement never adopted any picture of the Bharat Mata.

A lofty concept

No one has defined the concept of Bharat Mata as brilliantly as Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. He explains it in his inimitable style in his *Discovery of India*: "...sometimes as I reached a gathering a great roar of welcome would greet me: Bharat Mata ki Jai-Victory to Mother India. I would ask them unexpectedly what they meant by that cry, who was this Bharat Mata, whose victory they wanted..... The mountains and the rivers of India and the forest and the broad fields which gave us food were all dear to us, but what counted ultimately were the people of India, people like them and me who were spread out all over this vast land. Bharat Mata, Mother India, was essentially these millions of people and victory to her meant victory to these people."

It is rather unfortunate that this lofty concept of Bharat Mata has triggered an unseemly controversy involving the Governor of Kerala. Obviously the picture of a female figure in a saffron sari, with a spear in hand and a lion

behind her, cannot be a symbol of Bharat Mata. The display of such a picture is a throwback to 19th century nationalism which has no relevance in modern times. Indian nationalism under Gandhi had a strong secular core and was inclusive. Anthropomorphisation of a country is an outdated idea. The diversities, the divisions of Indian society, multiple religions, races, and different levels of cultural developments cannot be represented by such a figure.

Governor versus the government

The country has witnessed too many unseemly fights between Governors and State governments. The Supreme Court of India has intervened in some cases and tried to set things right. Nevertheless the Governor-government spats continue to occur. The Constitution and the interpretations thereon by the Supreme Court have clearly laid down the limits of a Governor's powers and functions. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had said emphatically in the Constituent Assembly, "the governor under the constitution has no functions which he can discharge by himself, no functions at all."

The Raj Bhavan Kerala controversy, deliberate or otherwise, was absolutely unnecessary. It sours the relationship between the Governor and the elected government. In official functions, symbols or logos or other visual representations used by private organisations cannot be used. Raj Bhavan does not merely consist of the private chambers of the Governor. There are rooms and halls where government functions are held such as a swearing-in ceremony as it is done in Rashtrapati Bhavan.

The Governor is bound by the advice of the government on, for example, the placing of photographs, portraits in such places and also of performing various actions in an official function such as the lighting of the lamp as in protocol approved by the government. The Governor, for example, cannot order that the picture of Bharat Mata should be placed in all government offices. It is a decision only the government can take. All constitutional authorities are bound by the disciplines of the Constitution. The government has the constitutional right to advise the Governor not to place the picture of Bharat Mata at venues used to conduct official meetings on the ground that such a picture has not been recognised by the Constitution or statutes.

Paper 02 : Indian Polity

UPSC Mains Practice Question: "The Governor is a constitutional head, not a political figure." In the light of recent controversies involving Governors and State governments, critically examine the constitutional limitations on the Governor's powers. (250 words)

Context :

A recent controversy erupted in Kerala when the Governor placed a picture of 'Bharat Mata' in an official room at Raj Bhavan and began official ceremonies by offering floral tributes to it. The elected State government objected to this act, arguing that such a symbol is not constitutionally recognised, sparking a debate on the limits of gubernatorial powers and the use of unofficial symbols in public institutions.

Key Issues:

1. **Constitutional Recognition of Symbols:** Unlike the national flag, national anthem, and national emblem, there is no legal or constitutional recognition for any particular image of Bharat Mata. While the slogan 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' holds emotional and historical resonance, it was never accompanied by a standardised visual representation in the freedom movement or adopted by the State officially.
2. **Governor's Conduct and Constitutional Boundaries:** As per Article 163 and judicial interpretation, the Governor is bound by the aid and advice of the elected State Council of Ministers. The Supreme Court and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar have clearly articulated that the Governor has no independent executive authority in matters of governance. Thus, the unilateral decision to install and honour a non-official symbol at a government venue violates constitutional norms of neutrality.
3. **Use of Religious/Cultural Symbols in Official Settings:** The anthropomorphic image of Bharat Mata depicted in Hindu goddess-like form is associated with specific cultural and ideological groups (e.g., RSS, BJP), and not with the inclusive, secular fabric of India's polity. Its display in State functions raises questions about the secular character of the State, potentially alienating communities in a pluralistic society.
4. **Historical Evolution of Bharat Mata as a Concept:** The term "Bharat Mata" has deep roots in literature and the freedom movement, starting from Bankim Chandra's Banga Mata and later Abanindranath Tagore's painting, popularised by Sister Nivedita. However, it remained a metaphorical concept, not a visual or legal symbol adopted by the Indian state.
5. **Impact on Federal Relations:** The dispute reflects a growing trend of conflict between Governors and elected State governments, often along political lines. Such confrontations erode cooperative federalism and bring into question the impartiality and non-partisanship of constitutional authorities like the Governor.

Constitutional and Governance Implications:

- The Governor is a nominal head, expected to function within the limits prescribed by the Constitution and not act in a politically provocative manner.
- Public institutions must maintain symbolic neutrality, using only constitutionally or statutorily recognised emblems or rituals in official settings.
- The controversy underscores the need for clearer norms or guidelines on the conduct of Governors and the use of religious or cultural symbols in official events to preserve secularism and administrative neutrality.

Conclusion:

The Bharat Mata controversy in Kerala is not just a cultural debate but a serious constitutional and federal issue. While emotional and symbolic expressions are part of democratic life, public institutions must uphold constitutional discipline and symbolic impartiality. The Governor, as a constitutional authority, is not above the elected government's advice in such matters and must act as a neutral bridge, not a disruptive force. Upholding this balance is essential to maintain secularism, cooperative federalism, and respect for constitutional roles.
