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IMPORTANT INSIGHTS

India's Assisted Reproductive Technology Regulatory Framework Strengthens Donor Protection, Clinical Standards and Reproductive Rights Through Legislative Reforms

Recent Developments:

- The **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW)** notified the **Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulations) Amendment Rules, 2023**, under the **ART (Regulation) Act, 2021**, to strengthen regulatory oversight of reproductive healthcare.
- The February 2023 amendment introduced procedures requiring **prior National Board permission** for transferring one's own gametes or embryos within or outside India for personal use.
- The **ART Regulations, 2023**, notified separately in April, prescribed safeguards for **oocyte retrieval and embryo transfer**.
- Further amendments in **June 2026** addressed administrative aspects of ART clinic and bank registration, reflecting continued regulatory development.

Understanding Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART):

- **Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART)** refers to medical techniques involving the handling of human sperm or oocytes outside the body, followed by transferring gametes or embryos into a woman's reproductive system to achieve pregnancy.
- ART addresses infertility and certain reproductive health conditions through specialised medical procedures.

Major ART Techniques:

- **In-Vitro Fertilisation (IVF):** Eggs are fertilised with sperm in a laboratory, and the resulting embryo is transferred into the uterus.
- **Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI):** A single sperm is injected directly into an egg to facilitate fertilisation.
- **Gamete Donation:** Donated sperm or eggs are used when intended parents cannot use their own reproductive cells.
- **Cryopreservation:** Gametes, embryos or reproductive tissues are frozen for future reproductive use.
- **Gestational Surrogacy:** A surrogate carries a pregnancy without having a genetic relationship with the child; surrogacy is separately regulated under the Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021.

Assisted Reproductive Technology (Regulation) Act, 2021:

- The Act came into force on **25 January 2022** to regulate ART clinics and banks, prevent unethical practices and safeguard reproductive healthcare.
- It establishes standards for **registration, donor eligibility, informed consent, medical safety, confidentiality and institutional accountability**.

Registration and Institutional Regulation:

- **Mandatory Registration:** ART clinics and banks must register with the appropriate authority, while the **National Registry** maintains a central database of registered institutions.
- **Registration Validity:** Registration remains valid for **five years** and may be renewed for another five years.
- **Regulatory Action:** Registration may be suspended or cancelled for violations, subject to prescribed procedures.
- **Institutional Oversight:** The **National and State ART and Surrogacy Boards** provide policy guidance, monitor implementation and support regulatory standards.

Eligibility and Donor Regulations:

- **ART Recipients:** Services may be provided to women above 21 and below 50 years, and men above 21 and below 55 years, subject to applicable eligibility requirements.
- **Sperm Donors:** Registered ART banks may obtain semen from men aged **21–55 years**.
- **Oocyte Donors:** Eligible women must be aged **23–35 years**, have been married at least once and have at least one living child aged three years or above.
- **Donation Restrictions:** An oocyte donor may donate only once in her lifetime, while sperm from one donor cannot be supplied to more than one commissioning couple.
- **Donor Screening:** ART banks must conduct prescribed medical examinations to reduce infectious and genetic health risks.

Consent, Insurance and Child Rights:

- **Written Informed Consent:** ART procedures require consent from the concerned parties after appropriate counselling about risks, costs and treatment outcomes.
- **Insurance Protection:** The commissioning couple or woman must provide **12-month insurance coverage for the oocyte donor** against specified complications, injury or death associated with retrieval.
- **Legal Parentage:** A child born through ART is legally recognised as the biological child of the commissioning couple, with corresponding rights and privileges.
- **Donor Rights:** Gamete donors retain no parental rights over children born through their donations.
- **Confidentiality:** Clinics and banks must protect personal information, subject to legally authorised disclosures.

ART Regulations and Procedural Safeguards, 2023:

Oocyte Retrieval and Embryo Transfer:

- **Oocyte Retrieval:** Clinics must endeavour to retrieve no more than **seven oocytes per donor cycle**, while retrieving all formed follicles as provided under the regulations.
- **Medical Safety:** Controlled ovarian stimulation must minimise the risk of **ovarian hyperstimulation syndrome**.
- **Embryo Transfer:** Generally, **one or two embryos** may be transferred during a treatment cycle.
    - Three embryos are permissible only in exceptional medical circumstances, including advanced maternal age, recurrent miscarriage or repeated implantation failure.
- **Maximum Limit:** More than three embryos cannot be transferred during a treatment cycle.

Transfer of Reproductive Material:

- The February 2023 amendment requires **prior permission from the National Board** for transferring one's own gametes or embryos within or outside India for personal use.

- Prescribed application and declaration forms strengthen **traceability, accountability and regulatory supervision**.

Prohibited Practices and Penalties:

- **Prohibited Activities:** Abandonment or exploitation of ART-born children, commercial trading in embryos or gametes, unlawful importation and exploitation of donors or commissioning parents.
- **Other Restrictions:** Transferring human embryos into males or animals and using intermediaries to purchase gamete donors are prohibited.
- **General Offences:** A first contravention under Section 33 attracts a fine of **₹5–10 lakh**; subsequent contraventions attract **3–8 years' imprisonment and a ₹10–20 lakh fine**.
- **Sex-Selective ART:** Advertising sex-selective ART is punishable by **5–10 years' imprisonment, a ₹10–25 lakh fine, or both**.
- These provisions complement India's broader framework against **sex selection and reproductive exploitation**.

Significance of ART Regulation:

- **Reproductive Healthcare:** Establishes minimum standards for clinical services, counselling, treatment safety and institutional accountability.
- **Donor Protection:** Medical screening, informed consent and insurance reduce health risks and potential exploitation.
- **Child Welfare:** Legal recognition protects inheritance, identity-related interests and parental responsibilities.
- **Ethical Governance:** Registration and monitoring discourage unregulated clinics, commercial trafficking and medically unsafe practices.
- **Public Health:** Standardised procedures can improve reporting, complication monitoring and evidence-based reproductive healthcare.

Major Concerns and Challenges:

- **Restricted Donor Availability:** Age, marital and reproductive-history requirements reduce the eligible oocyte donor pool.
- **Financial Burden:** Insurance, screening, compliance and limited donor availability may increase treatment expenditure.
- **Limited Donation Opportunities:** Restricting oocyte donation to once per lifetime may create difficulties for patients requiring donor-assisted treatment.
- **Access Inequality:** High costs and concentration of specialist facilities in urban areas may disadvantage economically weaker and rural populations.
- **Reproductive Autonomy:** Eligibility restrictions raise questions concerning unmarried individuals, LGBTQ+ persons and diverse family structures.
- **Clinical Uncertainty:** ART does not guarantee pregnancy; success depends on age, infertility causes, embryo quality and underlying health conditions.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Constitutional and Ethical Dimensions:

- **Article 21:** Reproductive decision-making engages constitutional protections relating to personal liberty, dignity, privacy and bodily autonomy, although ART access remains subject to statutory restrictions.

- **Article 14:** Eligibility restrictions may be evaluated against principles of equality and reasonable classification.
- **Medical Ethics:** ART regulation involves **autonomy, informed consent, beneficence, non-maleficence and distributive justice**.
- **Gender Justice:** Donor safeguards must be balanced against women's reproductive choices and protection from commercial exploitation.

Important Legal and Institutional Linkages:

- **ART (Regulation) Act, 2021:** Regulates fertility clinics, ART banks and assisted reproduction procedures.
- **Surrogacy (Regulation) Act, 2021:** Establishes a separate legal framework for surrogacy arrangements.
- **PCPNDT Act, 1994:** Prohibits sex selection and regulates prenatal diagnostic techniques to prevent misuse.
- **National ART and Surrogacy Board:** Supports policy development, monitoring and ethical standards.
- **GS Paper II:** Health governance, social justice, women's rights and regulatory institutions.
- **GS Paper III:** Biotechnology applications, scientific regulation and ethical challenges.

Way Forward:

- **Improve Affordability:** Strengthen access to evidence-based infertility treatment and transparent clinical pricing.
- **Review Eligibility Rules:** Evaluate restrictions using medical evidence, constitutional principles and equity considerations.
- **Strengthen Oversight:** Ensure effective inspections, digital recordkeeping, donor safety monitoring and grievance redressal.
- **Promote Ethical Innovation:** Balance reproductive autonomy and technological advancement with donor protection, child welfare and public health.

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National Commission for Women Highlights Women's Property Rights, Distributive Justice and Economic Empowerment for Inclusive Development

Recent Developments:

- The **National Commission for Women (NCW)** organised a consultation on **women's right to property and access to social and economic justice**, highlighting persistent inequalities in ownership, inheritance and control over productive assets.
- The consultation brought attention to the gap between **legal equality and substantive equality**, particularly where patriarchal practices restrict women's ability to exercise statutory property rights.
- The discussion is relevant to India's transition from **women's development to women-led development**, which emphasises women's participation in economic decision-making and institutional leadership.

Understanding Women's Empowerment and Women-Led Development:

- **Women's Empowerment:** The process of enabling women to exercise constitutional and legal rights, access resources, make independent decisions and participate equally in social, economic and political institutions.

- **Women-Led Development:** A development approach that recognises women as **decision-makers, economic contributors and institutional leaders**, rather than merely beneficiaries of welfare programmes.
- **Economic Empowerment:** Ownership and control over land, housing, financial resources and productive assets strengthen women's bargaining power, livelihood security and economic independence.

Importance of Women's Property Rights:

- **Economic Security:** Property ownership provides collateral for institutional credit, supports entrepreneurship and reduces dependence on family members.
- **Social Empowerment:** Independent ownership can strengthen women's negotiating position within households and improve their ability to resist economic exploitation.
- **Intergenerational Equality:** Equal inheritance rights can reduce gender-based wealth disparities and improve women's long-term financial security.
- **Agricultural Participation:** Women's land rights strengthen livelihood security, particularly where women contribute substantially to agricultural production without formal ownership.

Distributive Justice and Compensatory Justice:

Distributive Justice:

- **Distributive Justice** concerns the equitable allocation of resources, opportunities, capabilities and institutional benefits to reduce structural inequalities.
- It promotes **substantive equality** by recognising that identical legal treatment may not produce equal outcomes when individuals face unequal social and economic conditions.
- **Examples:** Equal inheritance rights, access to education, financial inclusion and equitable distribution of productive resources.

Compensatory Justice:

- **Compensatory Justice** addresses historical or existing disadvantages through corrective measures, targeted assistance, legal remedies and compensation for established harm.
- It seeks to overcome barriers created by **systemic discrimination, social exclusion and unequal access to opportunities**.
- **Examples:** Special protective provisions for women, targeted livelihood assistance, legal remedies and compensation for rights violations.
- **Key Distinction:** Distributive justice focuses on equitable allocation, while compensatory justice addresses identifiable disadvantages or injuries; both contribute to substantive equality.

Constitutional Framework for Women's Property Rights:

Fundamental Rights:

- **Article 14:** Guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, providing the constitutional foundation for gender-equal property rights.
- **Article 15(1):** Prohibits State discrimination on specified grounds, including sex.
- **Article 15(3):** Permits the State to enact special provisions for women and children to address disadvantages.
- **Article 21:** Protects life and personal liberty, including dignity and aspects of personal autonomy relevant to women's economic independence.
- **Article 300A:** Provides that no person shall be deprived of property except by authority of law; property is a **constitutional right rather than a Fundamental Right**.

Directive Principles and Fundamental Duties:

- **Article 38:** Directs the State to promote social welfare and minimise inequalities in income, status, facilities and opportunities.
- **Article 39(a):** Calls for adequate means of livelihood for men and women equally, while **Article 39(d)** provides for equal pay for equal work.
- **Article 39(b):** Directs policy towards distributing community material resources to serve the common good.
- **Article 46:** Promotes the educational and economic interests of weaker sections, particularly Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
- **Article 51A(e):** Establishes the duty to renounce practices derogatory to women's dignity.

Legal Framework Governing Women's Property Rights:

Inheritance and Ownership Laws:

- **Hindu Succession Act, 1956:** Governs succession among persons covered by the Act, including Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs, subject to statutory exceptions.
    - The **2005 Amendment** granted daughters equal coparcenary status by birth in Mitakshara joint family property, with rights and liabilities equivalent to sons.
    - **Section 14** generally recognises property possessed by a female Hindu as her absolute property, subject to statutory exceptions.
- **Indian Succession Act, 1925:** Regulates succession for several categories of persons, including many Christians and Parsis, subject to applicable provisions and exceptions.
- **Muslim Personal Law:** Inheritance is generally governed by applicable Muslim personal law, under which women's prescribed shares vary according to family relationships.
- **Hindu Marriage Act, 1955 and Special Marriage Act, 1954:** Provide matrimonial remedies and maintenance-related protections but do not establish an automatic equal division of all spouses' property upon divorce.
- **Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005:** Recognises women's right to reside in a shared household under statutory conditions, without automatically conferring ownership.

Important Supreme Court Judgments:

- **Consumer Education and Research Centre v. Union of India (1995):** The Supreme Court linked workers' health, human dignity and socio-economic justice with the protection of life under **Article 21**.
- **Air India Statutory Corporation v. United Labour Union (1996):** The Court emphasised **distributive justice and constitutional social welfare objectives**, particularly the principles reflected in the Preamble and Directive Principles.
- **Vineeta Sharma v. Rakesh Sharma (2020):** The Supreme Court clarified that daughters acquire **coparcenary rights by birth**, irrespective of whether their fathers were alive on 9 September 2005.
    - The judgment protected qualifying earlier transactions and partitions recognised under the amended statute.
- **Mary Roy v. State of Kerala (1986):** The Supreme Court clarified the applicability of the Indian Succession Act to the relevant Christian community in the former Travancore region, strengthening women's inheritance rights.

Challenges in Realising Women's Property Rights:

- **Patriarchal Social Norms:** Women may face pressure to surrender inheritance claims in favour of male relatives to preserve family relationships.

- **Ownership Gap:** Legal entitlement does not necessarily ensure actual ownership, possession, access to property records or independent control over assets.
- **Administrative Barriers:** Complex land records, mutation procedures, documentation requirements and inadequate awareness restrict effective enforcement.
- **Access to Justice:** Litigation expenses, procedural delays, limited legal assistance and dependence on relatives discourage women from pursuing inheritance claims.
- **Financial Exclusion:** Limited asset ownership restricts collateral-based credit, investment opportunities and entrepreneurial expansion.
- **Intersectional Inequality:** Rural women, women from disadvantaged communities and women with limited literacy may experience overlapping barriers to property ownership.

Government Initiatives Supporting Women's Empowerment:

- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao:** Addresses gender-biased sex selection and promotes the survival, protection, education and participation of girls.
- **National Legal Services Authority (NALSA):** Facilitates free legal services for eligible persons, with **women entitled to legal aid under Section 12 of the Legal Services Authorities Act, 1987**, irrespective of income.
- **Mission Shakti:** An umbrella programme of the Ministry of Women and Child Development comprising **Sambal** for safety and security and **Samarthya** for empowerment.
- **NAVYA Initiative (2025):** Launched on **24 June 2025** to provide vocational training to girls aged **16–18 years** with at least a Class 10 qualification under **PMKVY 4.0**.
    - The initiative targets **3,850 girls across 27 Aspirational and North-Eastern districts in 19 states**, focusing on cybersecurity, digital marketing, AI-enabled services and green jobs.
- **Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana:** Provides eligible beneficiaries **₹5,000 for the first child** and **₹6,000 for the second child if the child is a girl**, subject to scheme conditions.
- **Vigyan Jyoti:** Encourages girls from **Classes IX–XII** to pursue science, technology, engineering and mathematics through mentoring, exposure and academic support.
- **SVAMITVA Scheme:** Facilitates property documentation in rural inhabited areas through technology-based surveys, with potential benefits for women's tenure security and joint ownership where recorded.

Way Forward:

- **Effective Legal Enforcement:** Strengthen implementation of inheritance laws, resolve pending disputes and ensure timely updating of property records.
- **Legal Literacy:** Mobilise **Self-Help Groups, Panchayati Raj Institutions and District Legal Services Authorities** to spread awareness of inheritance, ownership and legal remedies.
- **Simplified Procedures:** Improve access to land records, digitise documentation and reduce administrative barriers in inheritance and mutation processes.
- **Gender-Responsive Land Governance:** Encourage accurate recording of women's ownership and legally recognised joint titles, alongside gender-disaggregated monitoring.
- **Economic Inclusion:** Link women's property rights with affordable credit, financial literacy, entrepreneurship support and livelihood opportunities.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Constitutional and International Linkages:

- **Substantive Equality:** Requires addressing structural disadvantages rather than relying exclusively on formally identical treatment.

- **CEDAW, 1979:** The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women promotes equality in economic, social and family-related rights.
- **Sustainable Development Goal 5: Target 5.a** calls for reforms ensuring women's equal rights to economic resources, including ownership and control over land and other forms of property.
- **Sustainable Development Goal 1: Target 1.4** addresses equal rights to economic resources, basic services, property ownership and financial services.

Important Concepts and Data:

- **Coparcenary Property:** Joint family property in which eligible coparceners acquire interests by birth under the applicable Mitakshara legal framework.
- **Stridhan:** Property belonging to a woman under applicable personal law, over which she has legally recognised ownership rights.
- **NFHS-5 (2019–21):** Approximately **43% of women aged 15–49 years** reported owning a house and/or land, alone or jointly; this is a survey-reported measure and not equivalent to verified land-title ownership.
- **Gender Budgeting:** Incorporates gender considerations into public expenditure and policy assessment to improve equitable outcomes.

UPSC Examination Relevance:

- **GS Paper I:** Role of women, patriarchy, social inequalities and changes in family institutions.
- **GS Paper II:** Constitutional safeguards, social justice, women's empowerment, legal services and government interventions.
- **GS Paper III:** Inclusive growth, land governance, financial inclusion and women's economic participation.
- **GS Paper IV:** Distributive justice, compensatory justice, equality, dignity and fairness in public administration.

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India's Ramsar Network Expands to 103 Sites with Sukhna Wetland and Sauj Jheel, Strengthening Wetland Conservation and Biodiversity

Recent Developments:

- On **15 October 2026**, India's total number of **Ramsar Sites increased to 103** following the designation of Sukhna Wetland in Chandigarh and Sauj Jheel in Uttar Pradesh as **Wetlands of International Importance**.
- The designations highlight the importance of wetland conservation for **biodiversity protection, water security, climate resilience and sustainable livelihoods**.

Newly Added Ramsar Sites:

Sukhna Wetland, Chandigarh:

- **Location:** Situated at the foothills of the **Shivalik Hills**, Sukhna is a peri-urban reservoir that regulates water and sediment flows from its surrounding catchment.
- **Ecological Significance:** Its habitats include open water, littoral vegetation, scrub and forests, supporting feeding, breeding, roosting and wintering grounds for resident and migratory waterbirds along the **Central Asian Flyway**.

- **Key Species:** The wetland supports the **Vulnerable Common Pochard**, the **Endangered Pallas's Fish Eagle** and the endangered Black Pond Turtle.
- **Conservation Challenges:** Soil erosion, sedimentation and invasive species threaten ecological integrity, requiring catchment restoration, invasive-species management and water-quality monitoring.
- **Ramsar Identification:** It is listed as **Ramsar Site No. 2602**.

Sauj Jheel, Uttar Pradesh:

- **Location:** This shallow lake lies within the **Ganga River floodplain**, is surrounded by agricultural fields and is located near Saman Bird Sanctuary, another Ramsar Site.
- **Ecological Significance:** It forms part of an interconnected wetland network and regularly supports more than **30,000 waterbirds**, providing important feeding, nesting and breeding habitats.
- **Key Species:** Important species include the **Vulnerable Sarus Crane** and **Vulnerable Greater Spotted Eagle**, while wetland vegetation includes Sacred Lotus and Wild Sugarcane.
- **Conservation Recognition:** The wetland has been recognised as an **Important Bird and Biodiversity Area (IBA)** by BirdLife International.
- **Management Priorities:** Proposed measures include seasonal fishing restrictions, regulation of fine-mesh fishing nets and controlled cattle access.

Ramsar Convention and International Recognition:

Origin and Objectives:

- The **Convention on Wetlands**, commonly known as the **Ramsar Convention**, is an intergovernmental environmental treaty adopted on **2 February 1971** in Ramsar, Iran, and entered into force on **21 December 1975**.
- The treaty was not established by UNESCO; UNESCO serves as its depositary.
- Its central objective is the **conservation and wise use of wetlands** through national action and international cooperation.
- A Ramsar Site is a wetland designated for inclusion in the **List of Wetlands of International Importance** because it meets at least one of the nine prescribed criteria.
- **India joined the Convention on 1 February 1982**, and its growing Ramsar network strengthens international cooperation in wetland conservation.

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Ramsar Designation Criteria:

- **Criterion 1 — Representative Wetland Types:** The site contains a representative, rare or unique example of a natural or near-natural wetland type.
- **Criterion 2 — Threatened Species:** The site supports vulnerable, endangered or critically endangered species or threatened ecological communities.
- **Criterion 3 — Regional Biodiversity:** The site supports species populations important for maintaining biological diversity within a biogeographic region.
- **Criterion 4 — Critical Life-Cycle Stages:** The site supports species during critical life-cycle stages or provides refuge during adverse conditions.
- **Criterion 5 — Waterbird Numbers:** The site regularly supports **20,000 or more waterbirds**.
- **Criterion 6 — Waterbird Population:** The site regularly supports at least **1% of the individuals in a population of one waterbird species or subspecies**.
- **Criterion 7 — Fish Diversity:** The site supports significant indigenous fish diversity, including subspecies, life-history stages and ecologically important populations.
- **Criterion 8 — Fish Life Cycles:** The site serves as an important fish food source, spawning ground, nursery or migration route.

- **Criterion 9 — Other Wetland-Dependent Animals:** The site regularly supports at least **1% of the individuals in a population of one wetland-dependent non-avian animal species**.

Wetlands: Definition, Types and Ecological Significance:

Definition and Types:

- **Wetlands** are natural or artificial ecosystems that remain permanently or seasonally saturated with water, including freshwater, brackish water and saline environments.
- Major types include **lakes, rivers, marshes, mangroves, floodplains, deltas, peatlands, flooded forests, rice fields and coral reefs**, along with certain marine areas not exceeding 6 metres in depth at low tide.
- Human-made wetlands include reservoirs, wastewater-treatment ponds and other artificial water bodies.
- Wetlands are among the world's most productive ecosystems and provide habitats, food resources, water purification and essential ecological services.

Climate Regulation and Carbon Sequestration:

- **Climate Change Mitigation:** Wetlands influence carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide cycles, although their net greenhouse-gas effects vary according to wetland type, water conditions and management.
- **Carbon Storage:** Wetland vegetation and waterlogged soils can accumulate organic carbon, reducing its release into the atmosphere.
- **Peatlands:** Covering approximately **3% of the global land surface**, peatlands store substantial carbon, estimated at roughly twice the amount held in the world's forests.
- **Disaster Risk Reduction:** Wetlands absorb excess rainfall, moderate flood peaks, recharge groundwater and, in coastal areas, help reduce erosion and storm impacts.

Biodiversity and Migratory Birds:

- **Habitat Connectivity:** Wetlands provide feeding, breeding and resting grounds for resident and migratory species.
- **Migratory Routes:** Sites along the **Central Asian Flyway** support seasonal movements of waterbirds between breeding and wintering grounds.
- **Aquatic Biodiversity:** Wetlands sustain fish, amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates and specialised vegetation, maintaining food webs and ecological balance.

Cultural and Economic Importance:

- **Livelihoods:** Fisheries, agriculture, livestock, tourism and other wetland-dependent activities support local economies.
- **Cultural Heritage:** Loktak Lake is closely associated with communities in Manipur, while Khecheopalri Lake is culturally significant in Sikkim.
- **Tourism:** Dal Lake, Nainital Lake and Kodaikanal Lake illustrate the recreational and economic importance of wetland landscapes.

Threats to Wetlands:

Human-Induced and Environmental Pressures:

- **Urbanisation:** Construction, land reclamation, sewage discharge and infrastructure expansion degrade wetlands near growing urban centres.

- **Pollution and Eutrophication:** Agricultural runoff, untreated wastewater and industrial effluents can cause excessive nutrient enrichment, oxygen depletion and biodiversity loss.
- **Climate Change:** Rising temperatures, altered rainfall, droughts, floods, extreme storms and sea-level rise affect wetland hydrology and ecological functioning.
- **Invasive Species:** Non-native plants and animals may displace native species, alter habitats and obstruct water flows.
- **Maladaptation:** Infrastructure intended to improve water storage or flood protection can unintentionally damage wetlands; upstream freshwater regulation, for example, may increase salinity in downstream coastal wetlands.
- **Unsustainable Extraction:** Excessive fishing, groundwater withdrawal and encroachment undermine wetland productivity and ecosystem resilience.

Conservation Framework and Way Forward:

Indian Policy and Institutional Measures:

- **Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017:** Provide the principal regulatory framework for identifying, conserving and managing notified wetlands, with restrictions on specified harmful activities.
- **National Plan for Conservation of Aquatic Ecosystems:** Supports the conservation and restoration of wetlands and lakes through integrated management measures.
- **Amrit Dharohar Initiative:** Promotes the conservation of Ramsar Sites through biodiversity enhancement, sustainable tourism and livelihood opportunities for local communities.
- **Integrated Catchment Management:** Reducing erosion, controlling sediment inflows, restoring natural drainage and improving wastewater treatment can protect wetland health.

Priorities for Sustainable Management:

- **Mainstream Wetlands into Planning:** Integrate wetland ecosystem services into urban development plans, climate strategies and infrastructure decisions, including relevant interventions under the Smart Cities Mission and Atal Mission for Rejuvenation and Urban Transformation.
- **Strengthen Scientific Monitoring:** Maintain inventories, map wetland boundaries, monitor water quality and biodiversity, and assess changes in ecological character.
- **Promote Community Participation:** Involve local communities, fishers, farmers and urban residents in conservation, restoration and sustainable livelihood programmes.
- **Improve Enforcement:** Prevent encroachment, regulate pollution, control invasive species and ensure compliance with applicable conservation rules.
- **Adopt Nature-Based Solutions:** Restore floodplains, protect mangroves, conserve peatlands and preserve natural water-retention areas to strengthen climate adaptation and disaster resilience.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Facts and Examination Linkages:

- **Current Affairs:** India has **103 Ramsar Sites as of 15 October 2026**, following the addition of Sukhna Wetland and Sauj Jheel.
- **Largest Ramsar Site in India:** The **Sundarban Wetland in West Bengal** is India's largest Ramsar Site.
- **International Framework:** The Ramsar Convention promotes conservation and wise use; designation does not automatically convert a wetland into a national park or confer a uniform domestic protected-area status.
- **GS Paper I:** Physical geography, ecosystems, biodiversity and human–environment interactions.
- **GS Paper II:** Environmental governance, international conventions and institutional cooperation.

- **GS Paper III:** Climate change, conservation, disaster management, sustainable development and environmental impact assessment.
- **Sustainable Development Goals:** Wetland conservation contributes to **SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 13 (Climate Action), SDG 14 (Life Below Water)** and **SDG 15 (Life on Land)**.
- **Core Concept:** Effective wetland conservation requires moving beyond designation to **ecological-character maintenance, wise use, catchment-level management and community participation**.

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Supreme Court Examines Challenge to Section 16's Lifelong Immunity for Chief Election Commissioner and Election Commissioners

Recent Developments and Legal Context:

- In October 2026, the **Supreme Court of India** issued notice to the Union Government and the Election Commission on a petition filed by the **Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR)** challenging Section 16 of the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023.
- The petition questions the **constitutional validity of statutory immunity** granted to serving and former Chief Election Commissioners (CECs) and Election Commissioners (ECs) for acts performed or purportedly performed in the discharge of official duties.
- The Court has linked the challenge with related pending proceedings. Issuing notice initiates judicial examination but does not mean that the provision has been declared unconstitutional.

Section 16 of the 2023 Act: Scope and Purpose

Legal Provisions and Legislative Background:

- The **Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023** regulates appointments, service conditions, tenure and related functioning of the Election Commission of India.
- **Section 16** provides that courts shall not entertain or continue civil or criminal proceedings against a person who is or was a CEC or EC for an act, deed or words connected with the discharge, or purported discharge, of official duties.
- The provision therefore continues to apply after an individual leaves office, creating a form of **continuing statutory protection** for conduct falling within its stated scope.
- The provision was introduced through an amendment during the legislative process rather than appearing in the original Bill. Its insertion raised questions about the justification and parliamentary scrutiny behind the protection.
- The Union Government has defended the measure on the ground that election officials must be able to perform their functions independently, without being obstructed by frivolous or vexatious litigation.

Central Legal Issue:

- The central question is whether broad protection against civil and criminal proceedings is a **reasonable safeguard for institutional independence** or an excessive restriction on legal accountability.
- The constitutional assessment must consider the scope of official-duty protection, the possibility of abuse, the availability of remedies and whether less restrictive safeguards could achieve the same objective.

Constitutional Principles Governing Immunity:

Article 14 and Equality Before the Law:

- **Article 14** guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws. It prohibits arbitrary state action while permitting reasonable classifications that satisfy constitutional requirements.
- Under the **reasonable classification test**, a distinction must rest on an intelligible differentia and that differentia must have a rational connection with the objective of the law.
- The constitutional challenge is whether CECs and ECs can legitimately receive a level of protection that differs from safeguards available to other public authorities, and whether the breadth of Section 16 is proportionate to its stated purpose.
- Equality does not prohibit every form of special protection. However, a classification that is arbitrary, unjustified or excessively broad may face constitutional scrutiny.

Article 324 and Election Commission Independence:

- **Article 324** vests the superintendence, direction and control of elections to Parliament, State Legislatures, and the offices of President and Vice-President in the Election Commission of India, subject to the Constitution.
- The Commission's independence is essential to **free and fair elections**, electoral neutrality and public confidence in democratic institutions.
- Article 324 provides the constitutional foundation for the institution, but it does not expressly establish a general lifelong immunity from civil and criminal proceedings for election commissioners.
- Parliament may enact laws governing the Commission, but statutory protections remain subject to constitutional limitations.

Comparison with Other Immunities:

- **Article 361:** The President and Governors enjoy specified constitutional protections during their terms, including immunity from criminal proceedings and arrest. Civil proceedings concerning personal acts are subject to prescribed notice requirements.
- **Articles 105 and 194:** Members of Parliament and State Legislatures receive privileges, including constitutional protection for speech and votes within the relevant legislative framework.
- **Judges' protection:** The Judges (Protection) Act, 1985 provides protection for judicial acts while retaining a statutory mechanism for certain actions against judges. ADR argues that Section 16 adopts similar language without equivalent safeguards.
- **Diplomatic immunity:** The Vienna Convention framework provides defined protections for diplomatic functions, subject to the applicable rules and exceptions.
- These arrangements are not legally identical. Their scope, purpose, duration and exceptions must be compared before drawing conclusions about the validity of Section 16.

Major Concerns Regarding Section 16:

Accountability and the Rule of Law:

- **Potential restriction on judicial remedies:** A broad prohibition on proceedings may limit the ability of affected individuals to seek civil or criminal remedies for conduct covered by the provision.
- **Unclear limits of official conduct:** The inclusion of acts performed or purportedly performed in official duties raises questions about how courts should distinguish legitimate official decisions from alleged misconduct.

- **Risk of unequal treatment:** Providing special protection to election commissioners requires a clear constitutional and legislative justification, particularly when other independent institutions also require protection from external pressure.
- **Institutional credibility:** Independence without adequate accountability may weaken public trust, while unrestricted litigation can expose officials to harassment and undermine effective administration.

Legislative Process and Earlier Framework:

- The absence of an equivalent provision in the **Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business) Act, 1991** marks a significant change in the statutory framework.
- The late introduction of Section 16 during the passage of the 2023 legislation has prompted questions about legislative deliberation and the evidentiary basis for granting such extensive protection.
- The lack of a detailed explanation in the original Statement of Objects and Reasons has further strengthened demands for a transparent justification.

Implications for Electoral Governance:

Institutional Independence versus Accountability:

- Election commissioners make decisions that can affect electoral rolls, election schedules, political competition and public confidence in the electoral process.
- Protection against **frivolous or malicious litigation** can prevent powerful individuals or political actors from obstructing election administration through repeated legal proceedings.
- However, overly broad immunity may weaken deterrence against unlawful conduct and restrict access to judicial remedies, potentially undermining the rule of law.
- The objective should be to protect bona fide official decisions while retaining effective mechanisms for examining serious allegations of misconduct.

Reform Priorities and the Way Forward:

Constitutional and Legislative Safeguards:

- **Constitutional scrutiny:** The Supreme Court must assess Section 16 against Article 14, the constitutional scheme governing the Election Commission and applicable principles of judicial review.
- **Clear legislative rationale:** Parliament should provide a transparent justification for special immunity, supported by evidence of the problems the protection is intended to address.
- **Proportionate protection:** Lawmakers could examine safeguards against vexatious litigation, including appropriate preliminary scrutiny, without automatically barring all proceedings within an excessively broad category.
- **Defined scope:** Clear standards should distinguish good-faith decisions made in official duties from conduct alleged to fall outside legitimate official functions.
- **Institutional consistency:** Immunity provisions should be evaluated against safeguards applicable to other constitutional and statutory authorities, while recognising differences in their functions.
- **Judicial oversight:** Courts should retain the ability to determine the legal scope of immunity and examine whether the conduct concerned falls within the protection granted by law.
- **Transparent accountability:** Appropriate complaint-handling, investigation and review mechanisms can help reconcile operational independence with public confidence in electoral administration.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims Facts and Mains Linkages:

- **Constitutional provisions:** Article 14 — equality before the law; Article 324 — powers and responsibilities of the Election Commission; Article 361 — specified protections for the President and Governors; Articles 105 and 194 — legislative privileges.
- **Key legislation:** Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023; Section 16 concerns protection of CECs and ECs.
- **Institutional role:** The Election Commission of India administers elections to Parliament, State Legislatures, and the offices of President and Vice-President.
- **GS Paper II:** Constitutional bodies, electoral reforms, separation of powers, judicial review, rule of law and accountability of public institutions.
- **Core analytical theme:** Democratic institutions require independence to perform their constitutional functions, but independence must be balanced with transparency, accountability and access to justice.
- **Mains conclusion:** A constitutionally sound framework should protect election commissioners from politically motivated harassment without creating immunity so broad that legitimate legal scrutiny becomes ineffective.

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World Food Day 2026 Highlights Agrifood Innovation as India Balances Foodgrain Access, Nutrition, Climate Resilience and Digital Delivery

Recent Developments and Significance:

- **World Food Day**, observed annually on **16 October**, commemorates the establishment of the **Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)** in 1945 and mobilises action against hunger and malnutrition.
- The 2026 theme, **"Innovate today. Nourish tomorrow."**, highlights the role of science, digital technologies, improved agricultural practices and inclusive financing in building resilient agrifood systems.
- According to the 2026 World Food Day message, approximately **645 million people** faced hunger, while nearly **2.69 billion people** could not afford a healthy diet. Conflict, economic instability and climate shocks continue to disrupt production, supply chains and food affordability.
- India's experience demonstrates the importance of combining large-scale foodgrain distribution and digital delivery with nutrition-sensitive policies, climate-resilient agriculture and stronger rural livelihoods.

Understanding Food Security and Agrifood Innovation:

Dimensions of Food Security:

- **Availability:** Sufficient food must be produced or procured through domestic agriculture, imports and public stocks.
- **Accessibility:** Individuals must have the physical and economic means to obtain food, supported by social protection and functioning distribution networks.
- **Utilisation:** Food must provide adequate nutrition and be safe to consume, supported by dietary diversity, sanitation, clean water and healthcare.
- **Stability:** Availability, access and utilisation must remain reliable despite seasonal shortages, price fluctuations, disasters and economic disruptions.

Role of Agrifood Innovation:

- **Digital technologies**, including mobile-based agricultural advisories, satellite monitoring, artificial intelligence and data systems, can improve farm decisions, weather preparedness and supply-chain management.
- **Scientific and agricultural innovations**, including improved seeds, biofortification, efficient irrigation and climate-resilient crop varieties, can enhance productivity and nutritional quality.
- **Institutional and financial innovations**, including farmer cooperatives, Farmer Producer Organisations and blended finance, can connect smallholders with markets, affordable credit and processing facilities.
- Traditional knowledge, local food diversity and farmer experience must complement modern technology to ensure that innovation remains accessible, affordable and inclusive.

Evolution of Food Security in India:

From Food Aid Dependence to Legal Entitlements:

- **Green Revolution:** During the 1960s and 1970s, high-yielding wheat and rice varieties, irrigation, fertilisers and public procurement strengthened domestic production and reduced dependence on imported food assistance, including supplies under the United States' Public Law 480 programme.
- **Targeted Public Distribution System:** Introduced in 1997, it focused subsidised foodgrain distribution on eligible households. The **Antyodaya Anna Yojana**, launched in 2000, targeted the poorest households.
- **National Food Security Act, 2013:** The Act shifted food assistance towards a rights-based framework by establishing statutory entitlements to subsidised foodgrains through the Targeted Public Distribution System.

Coverage and Entitlements under the National Food Security Act:

- The Act provides for coverage of up to **75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population**, corresponding to a maximum national coverage of approximately **81.35 crore people** based on Census 2011.
- **Priority households** are entitled to 5 kg of foodgrains per person per month, while households under the **Antyodaya Anna Yojana** receive 35 kg per household per month.
- The **Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana** provides free foodgrains to eligible beneficiaries under the Act. The continuation announced in 2023 covers five years from 1 January 2024, extending through December 2028.

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Digital Transformation and International Cooperation:

Digital Public Distribution System:

- Digitised ration cards, Aadhaar-enabled authentication, electronic point-of-sale devices and beneficiary databases can improve transparency, reduce duplicate records and strengthen delivery monitoring.
- **One Nation One Ration Card** enables eligible beneficiaries to access their foodgrain entitlements through portability across participating states, particularly benefiting migrant workers and mobile households.
- Digital delivery requires reliable connectivity, accessible grievance redressal and alternative arrangements for eligible beneficiaries facing authentication failures or other technological barriers.

Roles of International Agencies:

- **Food and Agriculture Organization:** Provides technical assistance on agricultural productivity, sustainable resource management, food safety, nutrition and reducing food loss and waste.

- **International Fund for Agricultural Development:** Supports rural development, smallholder livelihoods, market access and financing for inclusive agricultural value chains.
- **World Food Programme:** Provides humanitarian food assistance and technical support for supply-chain efficiency, emergency preparedness and nutrition-sensitive interventions.
- Cooperation among these institutions, governments, research organisations and farmers can help scale affordable technologies and strengthen food systems against shocks.

Major Challenges to Food and Nutrition Security in India:

Nutritional Deficiencies and Dietary Diversity:

- Foodgrain entitlements improve access to calories but cannot independently eliminate deficiencies of iron, vitamin A, other micronutrients and protein.
- Persistent anaemia among women and children demonstrates the need to complement food distribution with diverse diets, fortified foods where appropriate, nutrition education and effective health services.

Climate Change and Agricultural Volatility:

- Heatwaves, irregular monsoons, unseasonal rainfall and extreme weather events can reduce crop yields, disrupt procurement and increase food-price volatility.
- Terminal heat stress can reduce wheat productivity in the Indo-Gangetic plains, while recurrent droughts and floods can undermine smallholder incomes and food availability.

Storage, Logistics and Food Waste:

- Inadequate cold chains, warehousing, processing facilities and rural transport can cause post-harvest losses and distress sales of perishable produce.
- Food waste at household, retail and food-service levels creates avoidable economic losses and greenhouse gas emissions while nutritious food remains unaffordable for many households.
- Better forecasting, decentralised storage, processing infrastructure and improved market linkages can reduce losses and improve farmers' returns.

Unsustainable Resource Use and Unequal Access:

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- Assured procurement incentives and subsidised electricity can encourage water-intensive paddy cultivation in regions facing groundwater depletion, particularly Punjab and Haryana.
- Smallholders, women farmers and remote communities may lack access to affordable credit, digital tools, extension services and remunerative markets.
- Technology-driven reforms can widen existing inequalities if devices, connectivity, skills and financing remain inaccessible to vulnerable groups.

Way Forward:

Building Nutrition-Sensitive and Climate-Resilient Food Systems Conclusion:

- **Diversify food assistance:** Complement cereal-based support with pulses, millets and appropriately fortified foods through suitable nutrition and welfare programmes, based on nutritional needs and programme design.
- **Strengthen digital delivery:** Improve ration portability, grievance redressal, data security and offline alternatives to ensure that technological failures do not exclude eligible beneficiaries.

- **Expand climate-resilient farming:** Promote micro-irrigation, direct-seeded rice where suitable, crop diversification, regenerative practices and timely digital weather advisories.
- **Modernise storage and supply chains:** Invest in cold storage, scientific warehousing, food processing, transport infrastructure and market information systems to reduce post-harvest losses.
- **Improve rural finance and market access:** Strengthen credit, insurance, processing and value-addition opportunities for Farmer Producer Organisations, including women-led groups and smallholders.
- **Reduce food waste:** Improve inventory management, consumer awareness, redistribution of safe surplus food and circular use of agricultural residues.
- **Promote international cooperation:** Share suitable digital public infrastructure, agricultural knowledge and affordable agritech solutions with developing countries while adapting them to local conditions.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims Facts and Mains Linkages:

- **World Food Day:** 16 October; established to commemorate the founding of the FAO in 1945.
- **2026 theme:** "Innovate today. Nourish tomorrow."
- **SDG 2:** Aims to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
- **National Food Security Act, 2013:** Establishes statutory foodgrain entitlements through the Targeted Public Distribution System.
- **Constitutional linkage:** Article 21's protection of life has been interpreted by the Supreme Court in food-related public-interest litigation in connection with human dignity and access to basic necessities.
- **GS Paper II:** Welfare schemes, vulnerable sections, food security and implementation of social protection.
- **GS Paper III:** Agriculture, cropping patterns, irrigation, agricultural marketing, food processing, climate change and science and technology.
- **Core analytical insight:** Food security requires more than adequate grain production; it depends on reliable access, nutritional quality, sustainable resource use and resilience to economic and climatic shocks.

Conclusion:

- India's progress from food aid dependence to large-scale, digitally supported foodgrain distribution has strengthened access to essential staples.
- The next stage must integrate dietary diversity, sustainable agriculture, efficient supply chains and inclusive rural financing to achieve durable food and nutrition security.

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QUESTIONS

1. Consider the following statements:

Statement 1: A child born through Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART) is legally recognized as the biological child of the commissioning couple or woman, conferring all natural parental rights and inheritance privileges.

Statement 2: Gamete donors retain limited contingent parental rights over the resulting child in cases where the commissioning couple fails to fulfill financial obligations to the ART clinic.

Which one of the following is correct in respect of the above statements?

(A) Both Statement 1 and Statement 2 are correct and Statement 2 is the correct explanation for Statement 1.

(B) Both Statement 1 and Statement 2 are correct but Statement 2 is NOT the correct explanation for Statement 1.

(C) Statement 1 is correct but Statement 2 is incorrect.

(D) Statement 1 is incorrect but Statement 2 is correct.

2. Consider the following statements regarding the shift from "women's development" to "women-led development" in India:

(1) Women's development primarily positions women as passive beneficiaries of welfare and relief programmes.

(2) Women-led development actively recognizes women as economic contributors, institutional leaders, and key decision-makers.

(3) This paradigm shift diminishes the legal importance of women's independent property and land ownership rights.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(A) 1 and 2 only

(B) 2 only

(C) 1 and 3 only

(D) 1, 2 and 3

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3. Consider the following locations and their respective wetland features in India:

(1) Sukhna Wetland — Chandigarh (Shivalik Hills foothills)

(2) Sauj Jheel — Uttar Pradesh (Ganga River floodplain)

(3) Loktak Lake — Manipur (Associated with unique floating phumdis)

(4) Sundarban Wetland — West Bengal (India's largest Ramsar Site)

How many of the pairs given above are correctly matched?

(A) Only one pair

(B) Only two pairs

(C) Only three pairs

(D) All four pairs

4. Consider the following constitutional provisions and their association with institutional protections or privileges in India:

(1) Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws across all state actions.

(2) Article 324 provides an express constitutional guarantee of lifelong civil and criminal immunity for all Election Commissioners.

(3) Article 361 grants specified constitutional protections during their terms to the President and Governors.

(4) Articles 105 and 194 outline parliamentary and legislative privileges, including protection for speech and votes.

How many of the above statements are correct?

(A) Only one

(B) Only two

(C) Only three

(D) All four

5. Consider the following statements regarding the historical evolution of food security in India:

(1) The Green Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s successfully reduced India's structural dependence on imported food assistance, such as supplies under United States Public Law 480.

(2) The Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) introduced in 1997 shifted foodgrain distribution toward a universal entitlement model available equally to all citizens regardless of income.

(3) The National Food Security Act, 2013 transformed welfare-based food distribution into a statutory, rights-based legal entitlement.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(A) 2 only

(B) 1 and 3 only

(C) 1 and 2 only

(D) 1, 2 and 3

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ANSWER KEY

1 – Answer (C), 2 – Answer (A), 3 – Answer (D), 4 – Answer (C), 5 – Answer (B)

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In today's fast-changing world, staying updated with current affairs is essential for both academic success and professional growth. Awareness of national and international events not only broadens general knowledge but also sharpens critical and analytical thinking skills. It enables individuals to form well-informed opinions, which are crucial for competitive examinations, group discussions, interviews, and impactful essay writing.

Being well-informed reflects adaptability, awareness, and intellectual curiosity—qualities that are highly valued in a competitive environment. A strong grasp of contemporary issues enhances confidence, widens perspective, and prepares individuals to tackle real-world challenges effectively, ultimately opening the door to better opportunities and long-term personal and career advancement.

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