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Headlines:

- SC Opposes Use of SIR Data for Non-Electoral Purposes (GS – II: Polity)
- Centre Agrees to Modify Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025 (GS – II: Polity and Governance)
- Manasbal Lake Shows Signs of Ecological Revival (GS – III: Environment)
- India-UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) Comes into Force (GS – II: IR)
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1. SC Opposes Use of SIR Data for Non-Electoral Purposes (GS – II: Polity)

Why in News?

- The Supreme Court issued notices to the **Election Commission of India (ECI)**, the West Bengal Government and the Chief Electoral Officer on a petition challenging the use of **Special Intensive Revision (SIR)** data for non-electoral purposes.
- The Court reiterated that SIR is meant only for electoral roll revision and cannot be used to determine citizenship or deny welfare benefits.

Key Highlights

- The Supreme Court observed that the Election Commission's mandate is limited to electoral matters and does not extend to determining citizenship.
- It held that deletion from the electoral roll cannot automatically lead to denial of welfare benefits or cancellation of caste certificates.
- The Court clarified that questions relating to citizenship must be decided under the Citizenship Act, 1955, by the competent authority.
- The petition alleged that persons excluded during SIR were removed from welfare schemes such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) and women's cash transfer schemes, and subjected to re-verification of caste certificates.
- It also highlighted delays in disposal of appeals, lack of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), and inadequate legal assistance for affected individuals.

Constitutional & Legal Framework

- **Article 324:** Empowers the Election Commission to supervise, direct and control elections and prepare electoral rolls.
- **Articles 5–11:** Provide the constitutional framework relating to citizenship and empower Parliament to regulate citizenship.
- **Citizenship Act, 1955:** Governs the acquisition, determination and termination of Indian citizenship.

- **Article 14:** Guarantees equality before law and protection against arbitrary state action.
- **Article 21:** Ensures that deprivation of rights affecting life and dignity follows a fair, just and reasonable procedure.

Constitutional Significance

- Reinforces the distinction between electoral status and legal citizenship, clarifying that exclusion from electoral rolls does not determine citizenship.
- Upholds the principle that constitutional authorities must function within their assigned jurisdiction, preventing institutional overreach.
- Strengthens the principles of due process, natural justice, and protection against arbitrary deprivation of statutory entitlements.
- Reaffirms that access to welfare schemes cannot be curtailed without following the procedure established by law.

Challenges

- **Jurisdictional Overreach:** Use of electoral roll data for welfare and citizenship-related decisions exceeds the constitutional mandate of the Election Commission.
- **Violation of Due Process:** Denial of welfare benefits without independent legal determination may result in arbitrary deprivation of rights.
- **Lack of Transparency:** Absence of uniform SOPs, clear appellate procedures and reasoned orders.
- **Administrative Delays:** Pendency of appeals may prolong exclusion from electoral rolls and affect access to public services.
- **Impact on Vulnerable Sections:** Poor, illiterate and marginalized groups face greater difficulty in pursuing appeals and legal remedies.
- **Data Misuse Concerns:** Sharing electoral data across departments without adequate legal safeguards may adversely affect civil rights.

Way Forward

- **Maintain Functional Separation:** Electoral roll data should be used strictly for election-related purposes unless specifically authorised by law.
- **Strengthen Appeal Mechanism:** Ensure time-bound disposal of appeals through transparent procedures and reasoned decisions.
- **Issue Comprehensive SOPs:** The ECI should prescribe uniform guidelines for SIR, document verification and grievance redressal.
- **Safeguard Welfare Entitlements:** Welfare benefits should not be withdrawn solely on the basis of exclusion from electoral rolls without independent statutory verification.
- **Expand Legal Aid:** Provide multilingual awareness campaigns, legal assistance and facilitation centres for vulnerable sections.
- **Promote Institutional Coordination:** Clearly define protocols for data sharing between constitutional and executive authorities while respecting constitutional boundaries and citizens' rights.

2. Centre Agrees to Modify Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025 (GS – II: Polity and Governance)

Why in News?

- The Union Government has agreed to modify key provisions of the **Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA) Bill, 2025**, following concerns raised by Andhra Pradesh and other States over excessive centralisation of powers.
- The **Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC)** has recommended amendments to strengthen State participation and limit the Centre's overriding powers in higher education regulation.

Key Provisions of the VBSA Bill, 2025

- **Single Regulatory Framework:** Establishes the **Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA)** as the apex body for regulating higher education (excluding medical and legal education).

- **Three Functional Councils:** Provides for **separate Regulatory Council, Accreditation Council, and Standards Council** to oversee different aspects of higher education governance.
- **Degree-Granting Powers:** Empowers the Regulatory Council to authorise eligible **Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs)** to award degrees.
- **Institutional Autonomy:** Seeks to gradually transform the traditional affiliating university model by granting greater autonomy to eligible institutions.
- **Uniform Academic Standards:** Introduces a common framework for regulation, accreditation, governance, and quality assurance across higher educational institutions.
- **Supersession Powers: Clause 47** empowers the Central Government to suspend or supersede the apex commission and its councils under specified circumstances.

Key Highlights (Recent Amendments)

- The Regulatory Council must obtain a **No Objection Certificate (NOC)** from the concerned State Government before authorising substantially State-funded institutions to award degrees.
- State universities will be permitted to establish constituent colleges, off-campus centres, and multiple campuses in accordance with their respective State laws.
- The JPC recommended a **comprehensive review of Clause 47**, suggesting that supersession powers should be exercised only in exceptional circumstances, for a limited duration, and as a measure of last resort.
- The Committee recommended restricting the regulatory framework to the coordination and determination of academic standards, instead of creating an overarching system of regulation.
- The proposed amendments aim to strengthen cooperative federalism, institutional autonomy, and transparency in higher education governance.

Constitutional & Legal Dimensions

- **Entry 25, Concurrent List (Seventh Schedule):** Education falls under the Concurrent List, enabling both Parliament and State Legislatures to legislate.
- **Entry 66, Union List:** Parliament's role is limited to the coordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education and research.
- **Article 246:** Defines the legislative competence of Parliament and State Legislatures based on the Seventh Schedule.
- **Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC):** Examines Bills in detail and recommends amendments before parliamentary consideration.
- The proposed changes seek to align the Bill with the constitutional principles of cooperative federalism and institutional autonomy.

Governance Significance

- Balances national academic standards with the constitutional autonomy of States.
- Reinforces the role of State Governments in decisions affecting State-funded universities.
- Promotes consultative federalism by incorporating stakeholders' concerns into the legislative process.
- Seeks to reduce regulatory overlap and improve the efficiency, transparency, and accountability of higher education governance.
- Supports the objectives of the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 by creating a streamlined and quality-oriented regulatory ecosystem.

Challenges

- Balancing uniform national standards with the autonomy of States and universities.
- Preventing excessive centralisation of regulatory powers.
- Avoiding duplication of functions between Central and State regulatory authorities.
- Ensuring institutional autonomy without compromising accountability and quality assurance.

- Achieving smooth implementation across diverse higher education systems and State laws.

Way Forward

- Clearly delineate the roles of the Centre, States, and regulatory bodies to minimise jurisdictional conflicts.
- Restrict Central intervention to matters relating to national academic standards, consistent **with Entry 66 of the Union List**.
- Institutionalise mandatory consultation with State Governments before major regulatory decisions affecting State universities.
- Ensure that supersession powers are exercised transparently, for a limited period, and subject to adequate parliamentary oversight.
- Strengthen capacity-building, digital governance, and quality assurance mechanisms in line with the **National Education Policy (NEP), 2020** while preserving institutional autonomy and cooperative federalism.

3. Manasbal Lake Shows Signs of Ecological Revival (GS – III: Environment)

Why in News?

- **Manasbal Lake in Jammu & Kashmir** has witnessed the return of migratory birds following sustained ecological restoration measures.
- The **Wullar-Manasbal Development Authority (WMDA)** has undertaken scientific interventions such as dredging, weed removal, water budgeting, and pollution control to restore the lake's ecosystem.

About Manasbal Lake

- Located in **Ganderbal district, Jammu & Kashmir**.
- It is **one of India's deepest freshwater lakes**, with an average depth of about 13 metres (43 feet).
- The **lake is connected to the Jhelum River** system through a channel and is managed by the Wullar-Manasbal Development Authority (WMDA).

Key Highlights

- More than **46 species** of migratory and resident birds belonging to **23 families** have been recorded, indicating ecological improvement.
- The WMDA has carried out weed removal, dredging, desiltation, and channel restoration to improve water circulation and restore the lake's depth.
- The J&K Water Resources Regulatory Authority will undertake water budgeting—a scientific assessment of the lake's inflows, outflows, withdrawals, storage, and carrying capacity—to maintain ecological balance.
- A **Sewage Treatment Plant (STP)** and an Integrated **Solid Waste Management Plant** are being established to prevent untreated waste from entering the lake.

Ecological Significance

- Migratory birds are important bio-indicators of wetland health, reflecting improved water quality, habitat conditions, and food availability.
- Freshwater lakes support biodiversity conservation, groundwater recharge, flood moderation, fisheries, carbon sequestration, and local livelihoods.
- Manasbal Lake demonstrates how ecosystem-based restoration can revive degraded freshwater ecosystems.

Challenges

- Pollution from untreated sewage and solid waste.
- Excessive aquatic weed growth, siltation, and catchment degradation.
- Encroachment, unregulated tourism, and climate-induced changes in water availability.

Way Forward

- Adopt Integrated Lake Basin Management through catchment area treatment, regular desiltation, and community participation.
- Complete sewage and solid waste treatment infrastructure to eliminate pollutant inflows.

- Institutionalise water budgeting, biodiversity monitoring, and habitat restoration for long-term ecological sustainability.
- Promote sustainable eco-tourism while strengthening wetland conservation under national environmental programmes.

4. India–UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) Comes into Force (GS – II: IR)

Why in News?

- The **India–UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA)** came into force on 15 July 2026, marking a significant milestone in bilateral economic relations.
- The agreement aims to expand trade, improve market access, boost investments, and strengthen economic cooperation between the two countries.

Key Provisions of the CETA

- **Duty-Free Market Access:** Nearly 99% of India's exports (by value) will receive duty-free access to the UK market.
- **Tariff Liberalisation:** India will gradually reduce tariffs on selected UK products, including automobiles and Scotch whisky, under a phased and quota-based framework.
- **Services & Mobility:** Facilitates greater mobility of professionals and enhances cooperation in services.
- **Double Contribution Convention (DCC):** Exempts eligible Indian professionals temporarily working in the UK from paying social security contributions in both countries for up to five years, preventing double payments.
- **Trade Facilitation:** Simplifies customs procedures and promotes transparent trade practices.

Significance for India

- Enhances the competitiveness of labour-intensive sectors such as textiles, garments, leather, footwear, marine products, engineering goods, and auto components.

- Expands export opportunities for India's generic pharmaceutical industry in one of its major overseas markets.
- Encourages greater competition, innovation, and quality improvements in domestic industries through calibrated tariff liberalisation.
- Supports employment generation, export diversification, and integration into global value chains.

Challenges

- Domestic industries may face increased competition from imported goods.
- Limited awareness and low utilisation of FTAs among MSMEs.
- Compliance with Rules of Origin, quality standards, and technical regulations.
- Need to improve trade logistics and ease of doing business to fully realise the agreement's benefits.

Way Forward

- Enhance awareness and capacity-building among exporters, particularly MSMEs, to improve FTA utilisation.
- Strengthen manufacturing competitiveness through innovation, skill development, and infrastructure improvements.
- Ensure effective implementation of Rules of Origin and quality standards to maximise export gains.
- Deepen India–UK economic cooperation in trade, investment, technology, and services to achieve the target of significantly expanding bilateral trade.

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5. India Flags Off Its First Hydrogen-Powered Train (GS-III: S&T)

Why in News?

- The Prime Minister flagged off India's first hydrogen-powered train between Jind and Sonipat (Haryana), marking a significant step towards clean and sustainable rail transportation.
- The initiative aligns with India's goals of decarbonising the transport sector, enhancing energy security, and achieving the Net Zero emissions target by 2070.

Hydrogen-Powered Train: Key Features

- The train operates using Hydrogen Fuel Cell (HFC) technology, where hydrogen reacts with oxygen to generate electricity, with water vapour and heat as the only by-products.
- It is particularly suitable for non-electrified railway routes, reducing dependence on diesel locomotives.
- The initiative complements India's ongoing railway modernisation and green mobility efforts.

Key Terminologies:

Green Hydrogen

- **Definition:** Hydrogen produced through the electrolysis of water using electricity generated from renewable energy sources such as solar or wind power, resulting in near-zero carbon emissions.
- **Applications:** Transportation, steel, refineries, fertilisers, shipping, and power generation.

National Green Hydrogen Mission

- **Launched:** 2023
- **Nodal Ministry:** Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE)
- **Objective:** To make India a global hub for the production, utilisation, and export of Green Hydrogen and Green Ammonia, while reducing fossil fuel imports and supporting India's Net Zero by 2070 target.

Hydrogen Fuel Cell Technology

- A Fuel Cell converts the chemical energy of hydrogen and oxygen directly into electricity through an electrochemical reaction.
- **By-products:** Only water vapour and heat, making it a clean energy technology.
- Particularly suitable for long-distance transport, heavy vehicles, and non-electrified railway routes due to higher energy density and faster refuelling.

Types of Hydrogen

Type	Production Method	Carbon Emissions
Grey Hydrogen	Produced from natural gas (Steam Methane Reforming)	High CO ₂ emissions
Blue Hydrogen	Produced from natural gas with Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS)	Lower emissions
Green Hydrogen	Produced through electrolysis using renewable energy	Near-zero emissions

Fuel Cell Electric Vehicle (FCEV) vs Battery Electric Vehicle (BEV)

Feature	Fuel Cell Electric Vehicle (FCEV)	Battery Electric Vehicle (BEV)
Energy Source	Hydrogen Fuel Cell	Rechargeable Battery
Refuelling/Charging	Refuels in a few minutes	Requires battery charging
Range	Generally longer	Moderate, depending on battery capacity
Emissions	Water vapour only	Zero tailpipe emissions
Best Suited For	Heavy-duty transport, railways, buses and long-distance travel	Passenger cars and short-to-medium distance travel

Significance

- **Decarbonisation of Railways:** Supports the transition towards a low-carbon transport system by reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

- **Energy Security:** Reduces dependence on imported diesel, strengthens energy diversification, and enhances resilience against global supply disruptions.
- **Railway Electrification:** Complements India's rapid railway electrification programme, reducing fossil fuel consumption and operational costs.
- **Green Hydrogen Ecosystem:** Promotes domestic production and utilisation of green hydrogen, creating new opportunities in clean energy and advanced manufacturing.
- **Climate Commitments:** Contributes towards India's Panchamrit commitments and the target of achieving Net Zero emissions by 2070.

Challenges

- High production and storage costs of green hydrogen.
- Limited hydrogen refuelling and transportation infrastructure.
- Safety concerns associated with hydrogen storage and handling.
- Need for indigenous fuel-cell technology and large-scale manufacturing.

Way Forward

- Expand green hydrogen production using renewable energy sources.
- Develop dedicated hydrogen storage, transport, and refuelling infrastructure.
- Promote research, innovation, and indigenous manufacturing of fuel-cell technologies under the National Green Hydrogen Mission.
- Integrate hydrogen-powered trains with railway electrification and renewable energy initiatives to accelerate the decarbonisation of India's transport sector and strengthen long-term energy security.

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