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Headlines:

- Odisha Seeks UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Tag for Puri Rath Yatra
- Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Bill, 2026
- AI-Driven Cyber Threats: Emerging Challenges for National Security
- Critical Minerals: Strengthening India's Resource and Strategic Security
- Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Bill, 2026



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1. Odisha Seeks UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage Tag for Puri Rath Yatra

GS-I (Indian Heritage & Culture)

Why in News?

The Odisha Government has proposed the nomination of the Rath Yatra of the Jagannath Temple for inscription on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of Humanity through the Union Ministry of Culture.



About Puri Rath Yatra

- An annual chariot festival celebrating Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra, and Goddess Subhadra.
- Celebrated at **Puri, Odisha**, it is one of India's oldest and largest religious festivals, attracting millions of devotees from across the world.
- The deities are ceremonially taken from the **Jagannath Temple** to the **Gundicha Temple** in three grand wooden chariots, symbolising inclusivity and universal access to the divine.
- Three new wooden chariots are constructed every year using traditional techniques and prescribed rituals, preserving traditional knowledge, indigenous craftsmanship, and ritual practices.

Cultural Significance

- Embodies India's living heritage through rituals, traditional craftsmanship, music, dance, oral traditions, and community participation.
- Reflects the intergenerational transmission of centuries-old cultural traditions and indigenous knowledge.

- Promotes social harmony by encouraging participation irrespective of caste, creed, or social background.

UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)

- Governed by the **2003 UNESCO** Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.
- The **Representative List** aims to enhance the visibility of intangible cultural heritage, promote cultural diversity, and encourage its intergenerational transmission.
- Recognises living cultural expressions, including oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, traditional craftsmanship, and knowledge concerning nature and the universe.
- **India ratified the Convention in 2005** and currently has several cultural elements inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage.

2. Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Bill, 2026

GS Paper: GS-II – Governance | Citizen-Centric Administration | Digital Governance

Why in News?

Parliament has passed the Registration of Births and Deaths (Amendment) Bill, 2026, amending Section 13(3) of the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969 to strengthen the framework for delayed registration of births and deaths.

Need for the Amendment

- Introduced to strengthen scrutiny of delayed registrations, curb fraudulent birth records, and enhance the credibility of identity documents in an increasingly digital governance ecosystem.

Key Provisions

- **Delay up to 2 years:** Registration requires an order from the District Magistrate, Sub-Divisional Magistrate, or an authorised Executive Magistrate.
- **Delay beyond 2 years:** Registration requires an order from a Judicial Magistrate, replacing the earlier executive approval mechanism.

Background

- The 2023 Amendment made the birth certificate the primary proof of date and place of birth for obtaining documents such as Aadhaar, Passport, Driving Licence, Voter ID, educational admissions, and government employment.
- It also enabled the creation of digital civil registration databases and data sharing with the Registrar General of India (RGI).

Significance

- Strengthens the authenticity and reliability of civil registration records.
- Helps prevent identity fraud and misuse of official documents.
- Supports Digital India through reliable civil registration databases.
- Improves targeted delivery of welfare schemes and evidence-based policymaking.

Challenges

- Additional judicial scrutiny may delay registration for marginalised communities, migrants, tribal populations, and residents of remote areas.
- May increase the judicial workload, potentially delaying the disposal of delayed registration cases.
- Increased procedural requirements may affect access to identity documents and welfare benefits.
- Raises concerns over balancing fraud prevention with inclusive and citizen-centric service delivery, particularly in the absence of publicly available evidence supporting the two-year threshold.

Way Forward

- Promote universal and timely birth registration, especially in rural, tribal, and remote areas.
- Leverage digital platforms, awareness campaigns, and last-mile service delivery to reduce delayed registrations.
- Simplify procedures for genuine applicants while maintaining robust safeguards against fraudulent registrations.
- Balance document integrity with inclusive access, ensuring that no eligible citizen is denied legal identity, essential rights, or public services.

3. AI-Driven Cyber Threats: Emerging Challenges for National Security

GS Paper: GS-III – Science & Technology | Internal Security | Cyber Security

Why in News?

The rapid advancement of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly autonomous and agentic AI systems, is reshaping the cyber security landscape, raising concerns over cyber warfare, critical infrastructure security, and global AI governance.

AI and Cyber Security

- AI enables automated vulnerability detection, adaptive malware, AI-powered phishing, and sophisticated cyber attacks.

- Autonomous AI agents can exploit zero-day vulnerabilities, making cyber threats faster, more complex, and difficult to detect.
- AI can accelerate cyber defence but also enables AI-generated misinformation, deepfake campaigns, and large-scale social engineering attacks.
- The growing integration of AI into digital ecosystems increases risks to critical infrastructure, financial systems, healthcare, telecommunications, and government networks.

AI in Defence and National Security

- AI enhances intelligence gathering, surveillance, target recognition, threat prediction, and decision support.
- AI supports autonomous weapon systems, battlefield surveillance, intelligence fusion, logistics optimisation, and real-time decision support, redefining modern warfare.
- AI-powered cyber capabilities provide both offensive and defensive advantages, significantly influencing the character of contemporary conflicts.

Challenges

- Rising threats from AI-enabled cyber attacks, deepfakes, misinformation, and autonomous malware.
- Risks of algorithmic bias, AI hallucinations, and over-reliance on automated decision-making.
- Difficulty in attributing AI-enabled cyber attacks, complicating deterrence and international accountability.
- Absence of a comprehensive global AI governance framework and evolving international norms.

Way Forward

- Promote responsible AI through robust regulatory frameworks, ethical standards, and human oversight.
- Strengthen critical infrastructure protection, indigenous AI research, and national cyber resilience.
- Enhance international cooperation for AI governance while building a skilled cyber security workforce and fostering public-private partnerships.

AI is emerging as a decisive pillar of economic competitiveness, national security, and strategic autonomy. Harnessing its transformative potential requires balancing innovation with robust governance, ethical safeguards, and resilient cyber security frameworks.

4. Critical Minerals: Strengthening India's Resource and Strategic Security

GS Paper: GS-III – Indian Economy | Infrastructure | Energy Security | Science & Technology

Why in News?

Growing geopolitical competition and the global clean energy transition have heightened the strategic importance of critical minerals, prompting India to strengthen domestic production, overseas partnerships, and resilient supply chains through initiatives such as the National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM).

What are Critical Minerals?

- Critical minerals are minerals that are essential for economic development, strategic industries, and national security, but are vulnerable to supply disruptions due to limited availability or concentrated global supply chains.
- Key examples include lithium, cobalt, nickel, graphite, copper, and rare earth elements (REEs).

Strategic Importance

- Essential for electric vehicles (EVs), battery energy storage systems, renewable energy technologies, semiconductors, electronics, aerospace, and defence manufacturing.
- Supports advanced manufacturing, including AI hardware, telecommunications, and other strategic technologies.
- Critical for achieving Net Zero targets, energy transition, Digital India, and Atmanirbhar Bharat.
- Enhances supply chain resilience, industrial competitiveness, and strategic autonomy.

Challenges

- Heavy import dependence, particularly for lithium, cobalt, and nickel.
- Global processing and refining remain highly concentrated, increasing supply chain vulnerabilities.
- Limited domestic exploration, processing capacity, private investment, and recycling infrastructure.
- Environmental and social concerns associated with mining, including land degradation, water use, and rehabilitation of affected communities.
- Geopolitical tensions and export restrictions pose risks to long-term mineral security.

Government Initiatives

- National Critical Mineral Mission (NCMM) to strengthen exploration, mining, processing, recycling, and overseas asset acquisition.

- Identification of 30 critical minerals and auction of critical mineral blocks.
- Amendments to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 to facilitate exploration and auction of critical mineral blocks.
- Khanij Bidesh India Limited (KABIL) for overseas mineral asset acquisition.
- Development of Rare Earth Corridors and international partnerships, including the India–U.S. Critical Minerals Framework.

Way Forward

- Accelerate exploration, processing, and refining capabilities.
- Build strategic mineral reserves, promote the circular economy, and strengthen mineral recycling.
- Promote research and innovation in mineral processing and recycling technologies.
- Encourage private investment, public-private partnerships, and trusted international collaborations to build resilient supply chains.

Securing critical minerals is essential for India's energy transition, industrial competitiveness, and strategic autonomy in an increasingly resource-constrained and geopolitically contested world.

5. Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Bill, 2026

GS Paper: GS-II – Polity & Governance | Judiciary

Why in News?

Parliament has passed the Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Bill, 2026, increasing the sanctioned strength of Supreme Court judges from 34 to 38, including the Chief Justice of India (CJI).

Need for the Amendment

- To address the growing pendency of cases and improve the timely delivery of justice.
- To ensure timely access to justice in line with Article 21, which has been judicially interpreted to include the right to speedy justice.
- To enhance the Court's capacity to deal with the increasing volume and complexity of constitutional, civil, criminal, and commercial litigation.

Key Provisions

- Amends the Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Act, 1956 to increase the sanctioned judicial strength from 34 to 38 judges, including the CJI.
- Replaces the Ordinance promulgated earlier in 2026.
- Article 124 of the Constitution empowers Parliament to determine the number of judges of the Supreme Court by law.

Significance

- Strengthens the institutional capacity of the Supreme Court.
- Facilitates speedier disposal of cases and reduces judicial backlog.
- Improves access to justice and supports the constitutional mandate of timely justice.
- Enables the Court to devote greater attention to Constitution Bench matters while ensuring timely disposal of routine appeals.
- Enhances the Court's ability to effectively discharge its constitutional, appellate, and advisory jurisdictions.

Challenges

- Merely increasing the sanctioned strength may not substantially reduce pendency unless judicial vacancies are filled expeditiously.
- Persistent challenges include inadequate court infrastructure, shortage of support staff, procedural delays, and rising litigation.
- Greater judicial capacity must be complemented by efficient case management and wider adoption of technology.

Way Forward

- Ensure timely appointment of judges across all levels of the judiciary.
- Strengthen court infrastructure, e-Courts initiatives, and the National Judicial Data Grid (NJDG) while expanding AI-enabled case management to improve judicial efficiency.
- Promote Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and judicial process reforms to reduce the burden on courts.
- Adopt a comprehensive approach combining judicial expansion, technological innovation, and administrative reforms to ensure speedy and effective justice delivery.

Increasing judicial strength is a necessary step towards improving access to justice, but meaningful judicial reform requires parallel improvements in appointments, infrastructure, technology, and procedural efficiency.

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