

CURRENT AFFAIRS SUPPLEMENT 11

Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005

Scuttling people's right to information

TH Premium

There is a severe backlash against the RTI Act, which has just entered its 20th year, and against those who use it

WHY IN NEWS?

- The RTI Act, a key tool for ensuring transparency and accountability in governance, enters its 20th year amid serious concerns of institutional erosion and systematic weakening.
- A 2023-24 report by Satark Nagrik Sangathan highlighted widespread vacancies in Information Commissions, mounting backlogs, and regressive legal amendments. Recent Supreme Court observations noted that delays and vacancies risk making RTI a “dead letter.”

Right to Information (RTI) Act, 2005

- Came into force in **October 2005**, the Act empowers Indian citizens to **seek information** from public authorities.
- It aims to **promote transparency and accountability** in government functioning.
- RTI is seen as an **instrument for participatory democracy**.
- **Coordinating Agency:** Department of Personnel and Training (DoPT) under the Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances and Pensions (MoPPG&P) is the nodal agency for RTI implementation.
- **Meaning of RTI**
 - RTI = **Right to Information**, a **fundamental democratic right**.
 - Allows citizens to **request information from public authorities**, including government departments and publicly funded institutions.
- **Purpose of the RTI Act**
 - Promote transparency in public institutions.
 - Empower citizens to question government functioning.
 - Combat corruption by enhancing accountability.
 - Strengthen democratic processes through informed citizenry.

Background of RTI



Recognized as human right

Under Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), and International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).



Precursor Legislation

The Freedom of Information Act, 2002, was replaced by the RTI Act, 2005.



Landmark Case

Raj Narayan v. State of Uttar Pradesh established RTI as a fundamental right.

(Section 2(f) of RTI Act) includes any material in any form:

Records and Documents

Includes records, documents, memos, emails, and advice.

Public Communication

Encompasses press releases, circulars, orders, logbooks, and contracts.

Reports and Data

Covers reports, samples, and data, including electronic formats.

Private Body Information

Information held by private bodies accessible to public authorities.

- **Access to File Notings**
 - **Satyapal v. CPIO TCIL:** Citizens have the **right to access file notings** if they are part of the file in **material form**.
- **Exemptions under RTI Act**
 - **Sections 8(1) and 9** provide exemptions from disclosure:
 1. **Sovereignty and security** of the nation
 2. **Strategic and foreign relations**
 3. **Parliamentary or legislative privilege**
 4. **Commercial confidence, trade secrets, intellectual property**
 5. **Fiduciary relationships**
 6. **Cabinet papers**, including deliberations of Council of Ministers
 - **Section 8(2):** Allows disclosure if **public interest outweighs harm**.
 - **Section 8(3):** Most exemptions lapse **after 20 years**, except national security-related ones.
- **Exempted Organizations (Section 24 & Schedule 2):** Security and intelligence agencies are exempt, except in cases of **corruption and human rights violations**.
 - **Examples:** Intelligence Bureau (IB), Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), Directorate of Enforcement, National Security Guard (NSG), Border Security Force (BSF), Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) and National Technical Research Organisation (NTRO)

CENTRALLY SPONSORED SCHEMES

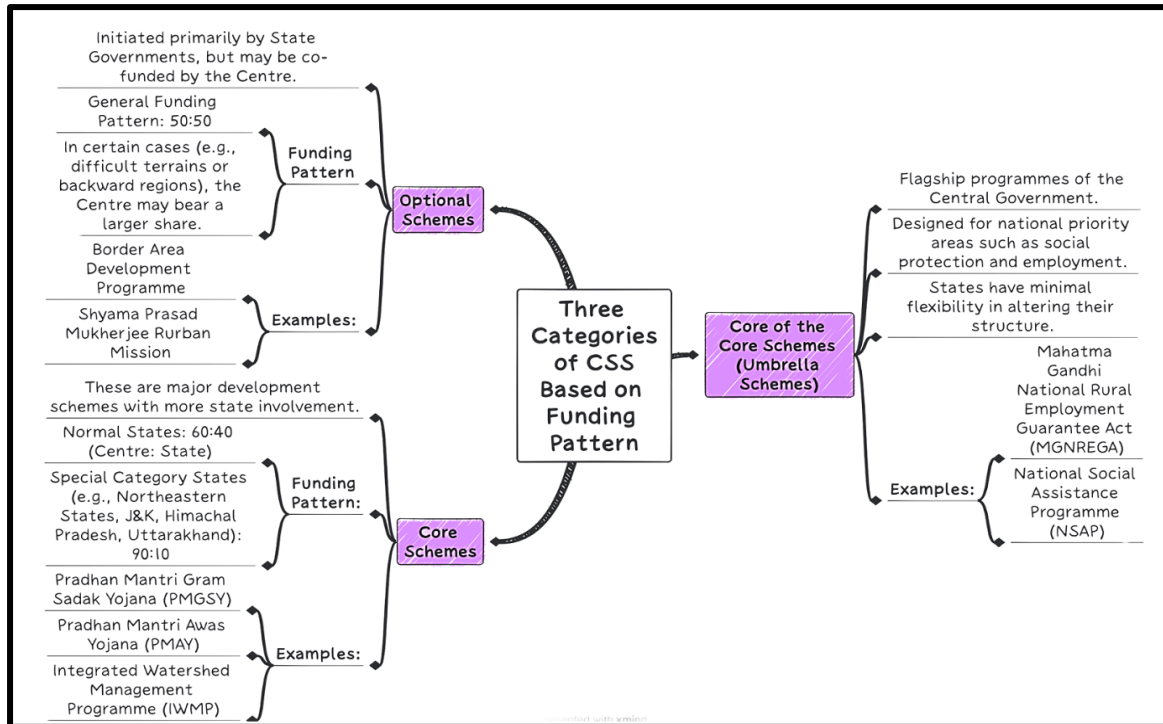
Centrally sponsored schemes may be cut to 50
from 75 on Finance Commission
recommendations

WHY IN NEWS?

- The Government of India is planning to reduce the number of CSS from 75 to 50, through mergers and phasing out of outdated schemes, based on recommendations of the 15th Finance Commission. An internal review process by ministries is underway and expected to conclude by October 2025.

Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS)

- These are schemes that are **jointly funded by the Central and State Governments**, with implementation responsibility lying primarily with **States and Union Territories**.
- These are distinct from **Central Sector Schemes**, which are 100% funded and implemented by the Central Government.
- They serve as a **financial channel through which the Centre supports states** in running specific developmental or welfare programmes.
- The **extent of state contribution** varies depending on the region and nature of the scheme
- **CSS funding comes under the Revenue Expenditure** section of the Union Budget.



HANDLING PUBLIC GRIEVANCES

WHY IN NEWS?

- The Union Government has issued new Comprehensive Guidelines for Effective Redressal of Public Grievances. This is in line with the Prime Minister's directions to make grievance redressal time-bound, accessible, transparent, and citizen-centric.
- The new guidelines mark a significant update from the 2022 guidelines, especially with reduced timelines and technology-led reforms.

Grievance Redressal Mechanism (GRM)

- A **Grievance Redressal Mechanism** is a vital feedback and accountability tool that helps evaluate the efficiency and responsiveness of an organisation or government body.
- It enables citizens to report service delivery issues, delays, or misconduct, and ensures corrective action through institutional response.

Nodal Agencies Handling Grievances

- Two central agencies are primarily responsible for managing public grievances:
 - Department of Administrative Reforms and Public Grievances (DARPG)** under the

Key Features of the Guidelines

	Description
Unified Platform	CPGRAMS as Single-window for registration & tracking
Institutional Setup	Nodal officers & grievance cells established
Nodal Officer's Role	Grievance Categorization, monitoring, analysis, data collation
Time Limit	Reduced resolution timeline to 21 days
Escalation System	Appellate officers for unresolved grievances
Feedback Mechanism	SMS/email feedback & AI tools for analysis
Performance Ranking	Grievance Redressal Assessment Index introduced
Capacity Building	Officer training via SEVOTTAM framework
Whole-of-Government Approach	Inter-departmental coordination & stakeholder awareness

Ministry of Personnel, Public Grievances & Pensions.

- **Directorate of Public Grievances**, functioning under the **Cabinet Secretariat**.

CPGRAMS – Centralized Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System

- A 24x7 **online platform** (www.pgportal.gov.in) allowing citizens to file complaints related to public service delivery.
- Acts as a **centralized interface** linked with all Central Ministries/Departments and State governments.
- Officers are assigned role-based access, ensuring transparent and real-time monitoring.

Grievance Redressal at the State Level

- **District Magistrates** generally serve as the **District Public Grievance Officers**.
- In some states, **Zila Panchayats** have established independent grievance redress systems to address local concerns more effectively.

The post of Deputy Speaker

The post of Deputy Speaker is not symbolic or optional 

That the post remains vacant is a constitutional anomaly and an active sidelining of consensus politics

WHY IN NEWS?

- The 18th Lok Sabha, constituted after the 2024 General Elections, has still not elected a Deputy Speaker, continuing the precedent set by the 17th Lok Sabha (2019–2024). This prolonged vacancy is being widely criticised as a violation of Article 93 of the Constitution, which mandates timely election of both Speaker and Deputy Speaker.

Constitutional Mandate

- **Article 93:** Mandates early election of Speaker and Deputy Speaker of Lok Sabha.
- **Article 94:** Ensures continuity in the Deputy Speaker's office until resignation, removal, or disqualification.

Historical Significance

- **Origin:** Originated during colonial times as Deputy President of Central Legislative Assembly.
- **Beginning:** This post began when Sachidanand Sinha was appointed in 1921.
- **Post-independence:** The office was retained by the Constituent Assembly.
- **1956:** M.A. Ayyangar took over as Acting Speaker, reflecting the office's importance.

Relevance

- **Supports the Speaker:** Helps Speaker in managing vast legislative responsibilities.
- **Presidency:** Presides over debates, committees, and ensures neutrality in discussions.
- **Role:** Expected to act impartially, like the Speaker.

- **Traditionally offered to the Opposition:** Aim to promote bipartisanship and trust, though not mandatory.

Current Constitutional Vacuum

- **No deputy speaker:** 17th Lok Sabha (2019–2024) and 18th Lok Sabha have had no Deputy Speaker.
- **Concentrates authority with ruling party:** Threatens institutional balance.
- **Impact of absence during crises:** May disrupt House proceedings.
- **Denial of Opposition role:** Weakens democratic consensus and conventions.

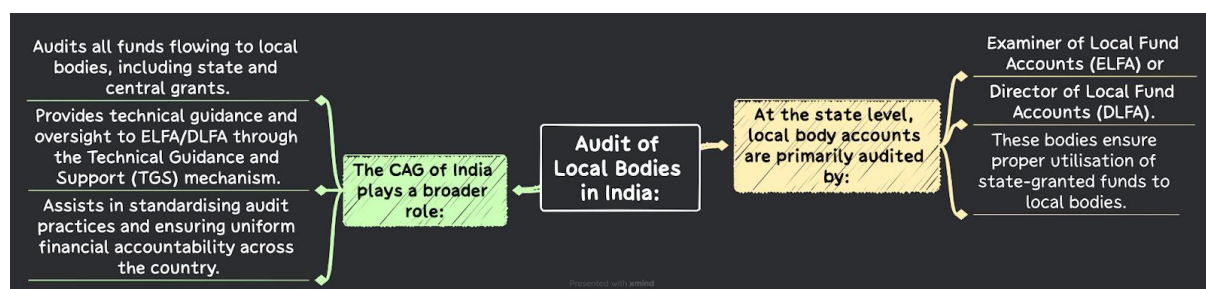
International Centre for Audit of Local Governance (iCAL)

WHY IN NEWS?

The **Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) of India** recently inaugurated the **International Centre for Audit of Local Governance (iCAL)** in **Rajkot, Gujarat**.

About iCAL:

- **iCAL** serves as a **dedicated hub** for collaboration among **auditors, administrators, and policymakers** working with local governments.
- Its **core aim** is to bolster the **autonomy and capacity** of local government auditors, ensuring better assessment of financial management, **service delivery**, and **data transparency**.
- Envisioned as a **Centre of Excellence**, iCAL will promote:
 - **Capacity building** of auditors of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs).
 - **Training and leadership programs** for elected representatives and local executives.
 - **Development of audit standards** and better **data collection/reporting mechanisms**.
- The initiative highlights the role of **local self-governments** in advancing **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)** by encouraging **grassroots participation, ownership, and accountability**.



Cantonment Areas and Their Denotification

WHY IN NEWS?

The **Central Government** has recently issued a notification to **denotify civil areas of 10 cantonments** (out of a total of 58 across India). These areas are now proposed to be **merged with respective state municipal bodies** to bring them under the **civilian urban governance framework**.

Cantonments

- **Cantonments** are specially designated zones intended primarily for **accommodating military personnel** and associated infrastructure.
- The word originates from the French "**canton**" meaning **district or corner**.
- The **first cantonment** was established in **1765 at Barrackpore**, post the **Battle of Plassey (1757)**.
- Initially developed as **temporary military encampments**, they have evolved into more **permanent townships**, providing Residential quarters, Administrative offices and Educational and healthcare facilities for armed forces and their families.
- The **Cantonments Act of 1924**, and its successor, the **Cantonments Act, 2006**, provide the **legal framework** for governance and administration of these areas.

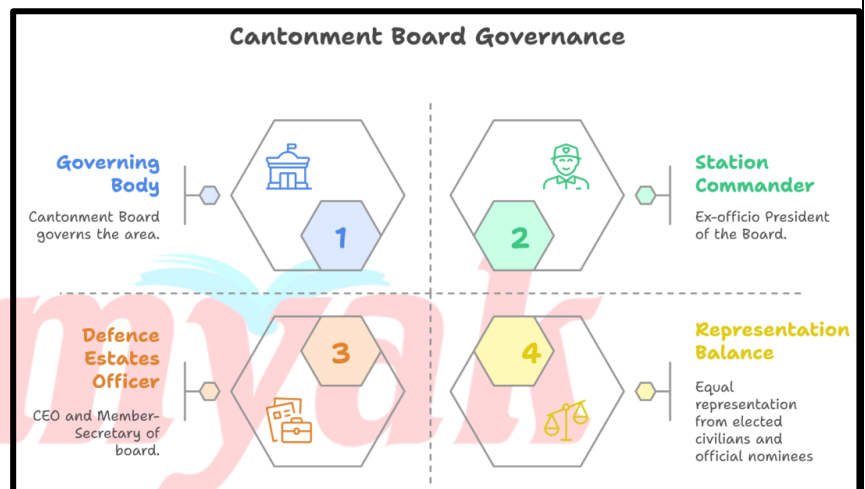
Administrative Structure of Cantonments:

- **Classification:** Cantonments are categorized based on **area and population** into four classes:

- **Class I to Class IV**
- **Representation on the Cantonment Board:**

- **Class I:** 8 elected civilians + 8 nominated/military members
- **Class IV:** 2 elected civilians + 2 nominated/military members

- **Administrative Control:** Cantonments fall under the **Ministry of Defence**.
 - As per **Entry 3 of the Union List (Schedule VII of the Constitution)**, urban self-governance in cantonments is a **Union subject**.



Urban Governance in India: Cantonments vs. Municipalities

Cantonment Governance	Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administered by the Ministry of Defence • Regulated by the Cantonments Act, 2006 • Total of 62 notified cantonments in India 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governed primarily by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs • In Union Territories, oversight lies with the Ministry of Home Affairs • Regulated under the 74th Constitutional Amendment Act, 1992 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Provided for three-tier urban governance through Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, and Nagar Panchayats ○ Empowered state governments to devolve functions, financial powers, and conduct regular elections

Diplomatic Passports

The flight of Prajwal Revanna: How diplomatic passports, visa regimes work

Embroided in a sex abuse case, JD(S) leader Prajwal Revanna fled to Germany on a diplomatic passport. Here is how, and why he chose the European nation.

WHY IN NEWS?

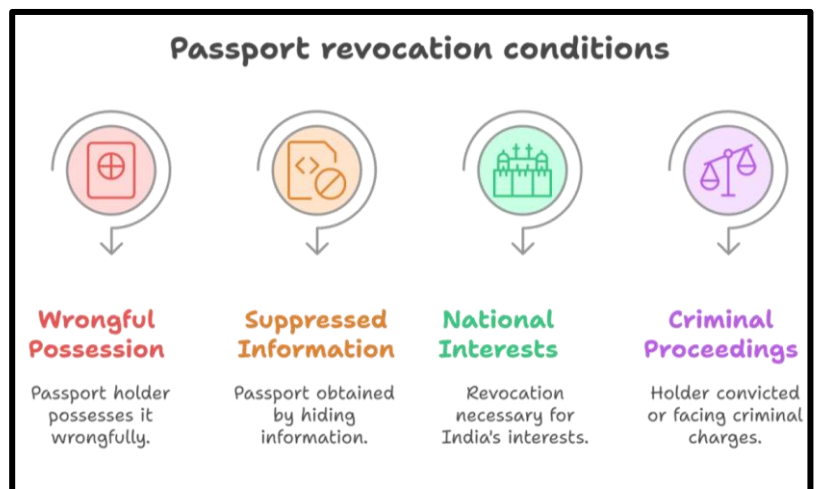
The issue of **diplomatic passports** has gained attention, particularly regarding the **authority to issue** and **revoke** them.

Diplomatic Passport

- A **diplomatic passport** is an official travel document issued to individuals representing their country on **diplomatic missions** or for **government-related travel**.
- It is distinct from a regular passport and is issued to:
 - Diplomats
 - Government officials
 - Immediate family members of the above, in some cases.
- Diplomatic passports confer certain **legal privileges** and **immunities** under international law, including:
 - Immunity from **arrest or detention**
 - Exemption from some **legal proceedings** in the host country, ensuring diplomats can carry out their functions without undue interference..
- **Passports and Visas** are subjects under the **Union List (Entry 19)** of the **Seventh Schedule** of the **Constitution of India**.
- This implies that only the **Central Government** has the legislative power over matters related to **passports, visas, and immigration**.

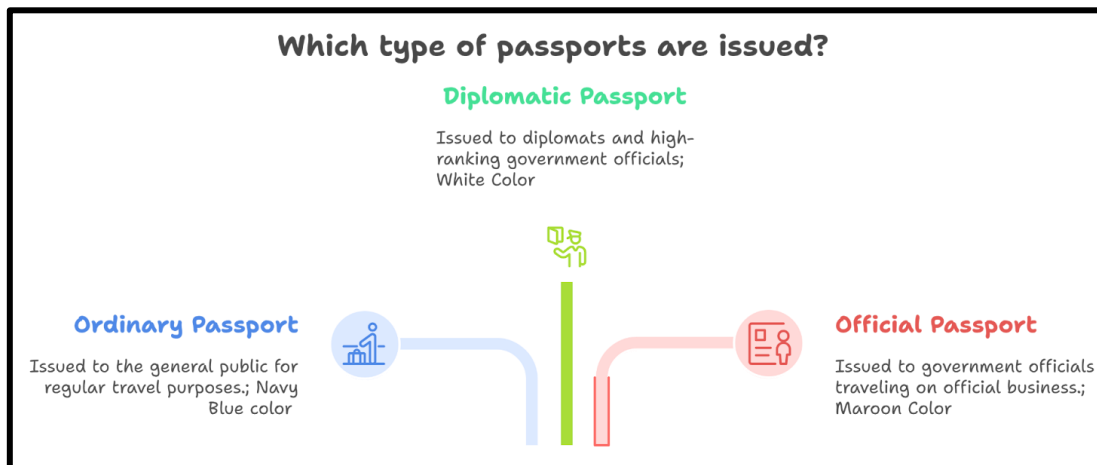
Eligibility for Diplomatic Passports in India:

- Issued by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) under its **Consular, Passport & Visa Division**.
- Categories eligible for diplomatic passports (Type D):
 - **Indian Foreign Service (IFS)** officers (branches A & B), who are traveling abroad for official duties.
 - **Union ministers** and **Members of Parliament (MPs)** traveling for official purposes.
 - Select other **government officials** on official government business.



Revoking Power of Diplomatic Passports:

- The **power to revoke** a diplomatic passport lies with the **passport authority**.
- However, revocation can only take place after a **court order** that justifies the action.



Common Services Centres (CSC) – Special Purpose Vehicle

WHY IN NEWS?

Recently, the **Common Services Centres Special Purpose Vehicle (CSC SPV)** celebrated **15 years** of its establishment, highlighting its role in advancing the **Digital India** mission and rural service delivery.

About CSC Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV):	Key Features of Common Services Centres (CSCs):														
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporation: Incorporated under the Companies Act, 1956 by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), Government of India. • Purpose: The CSC SPV is responsible for monitoring and implementing the Common Services Centres Scheme, one of the Mission Mode Projects (MMPs) under the Digital India Programme. • Functionality: It provides a centralized and collaborative framework for the delivery of services via CSCs while ensuring the systemic viability and long-term sustainability of the scheme. 	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Feature</th><th>Details</th></tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Nodal Ministry</td><td>Ministry of Electronics & IT (MeitY)</td></tr> <tr> <td>Objective</td><td>Act as front-end delivery points for public, private, and social sector services, especially targeting rural India</td></tr> <tr> <td>Target Area</td><td>Primarily rural and remote regions across India</td></tr> <tr> <td>Services Offered</td><td> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public utility services - Social welfare schemes - Healthcare and education services - Financial and agriculture services </td></tr> <tr> <td>Inclusivity Role</td><td>Helps in building a digitally, socially, and financially inclusive society</td></tr> <tr> <td>Network Reach</td><td>Pan-India network addressing regional, linguistic, and cultural diversity</td></tr> </tbody> </table>	Feature	Details	Nodal Ministry	Ministry of Electronics & IT (MeitY)	Objective	Act as front-end delivery points for public, private, and social sector services, especially targeting rural India	Target Area	Primarily rural and remote regions across India	Services Offered	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Public utility services - Social welfare schemes - Healthcare and education services - Financial and agriculture services 	Inclusivity Role	Helps in building a digitally, socially, and financially inclusive society	Network Reach	Pan-India network addressing regional, linguistic, and cultural diversity
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Co-District Initiative by Assam Government

WHY IN NEWS?

The **Assam government** has recently launched a **first-of-its-kind “co-district” initiative**, replacing the existing system of **civil sub-divisions** to improve local governance and administrative efficiency.

Structure of the Co-District System

- **Co-districts are sub-district units created within a district.**
- Each co-district is headed by an **Assistant District Commissioner (ADC)**.
- The ADC is given **powers equivalent to that of a District Commissioner (DC)** in the co-district area.

Objectives of the Initiative

- To **bring governance closer to the people** by decentralizing administrative powers.
- Aims to **overcome logistical and bureaucratic delays** in district-level governance.
- Designed to **enhance accessibility and efficiency** in public service delivery.

Expected Benefits

- **Improved Administrative Efficiency** due to reduction in workload on district headquarters.
- **Faster Response Time** for local needs and grievances.
- **Greater Accountability** as officials are based closer to the population they serve.
- **Enhanced Public Trust** in administration due to ease of access and timely services.

Functions and Powers of Co-Districts officers



Land Revenue Management

Includes mutation, land sale permissions, and record maintenance.



Welfare Activities

Implementation of schemes, beneficiary monitoring.



Disaster Management

Oversight and response preparedness at the local level.



Administrative Control

Oversees all departments within the district.



Magisterial Powers

Issues permissions and maintains law and order.



Public Service

Issuance of ration cards, caste and residence certificates, etc.