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1. Why are activists opposing EC's election rule amendment? How has the Election Commission defended its decision to limit access to election documents?**Introduction**

The Centre recently amended the Conduct of Election Rules to restrict access for the public to a section of poll documents. This was done by the Union Law Ministry following a recommendation from the Election Commission (EC). While the EC said the amendment aims to restrict access to electronic data, the Opposition and transparency activists have been up in arms,

branding it as an attack on the right to information and electoral freedom.

What is the Conduct of Election Rules?

The Conduct of Election Rules, 1961, is a set of rules which provide for provisions on how to conduct the elections as per the Representation of People Act.

What is the amendment?

This amendment was brought into effect through a notification issued by the Ministry of Law and Justice. Rule 93(2)(a) of the 1961 Conduct of Election Rules had earlier stated that "all other papers relating to the election shall be open to public inspection" but after the amendment, it reads, "all other papers as specified in these rules relating to the election shall be open to public inspection."

Why has the amendment been brought in now?

The move comes after a recent direction to the EC by the Punjab and Haryana High Court to share all documents related to the Haryana Assembly election, including treating CCTV footage also as permissible under Rule 93(2) of the Conduct of Election Rules, to petitioner Mahmoud Pracha.

According to a senior official of the EC, "The rule mentioned election papers. The election papers and documents does not specifically refer to electronic records. In order to remove this ambiguity and considering the serious issue of violation of secrecy of vote and potential misuse of CCTV footage of inside the polling station using artificial intelligence by a single person, the rule has been amended. The EC argues that sharing of CCTV footage may have

serious repercussions, especially in sensitive areas where secrecy is important. All election papers and documents are otherwise available for public inspection.”

Why are the transparency activists protesting?

According to transparency activist Anjali Bharadwaj, Rule 93 is akin to the Right to Information Act as far as elections are concerned and, any change hurts the citizen’s right to know about the process.

Venkatesh Nayak, Director Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative explained further that “upon initial examination, the amendment appears to be aimed at restricting citizen-voters’ right to access a large number of documents created during Parliamentary and State Assembly elections many of which are not specifically mentioned in the Conduct of Election Rules, instead, they are mentioned in the handbooks and manuals published by the Election Commission from time to time”.

He said that given the controversy about voter turnout in recent Lok Sabha and Assembly polls, access to the Presiding Officers’ diaries which contain detailed data about voter turnout and the number of tokens they distribute to voters who are in the queue at the hour scheduled for closing of polling are not mentioned specifically in the Conduct of Election Rules. “The amendment seeks to prevent access to such documents and many other reports and returns that are filed by various election officials”.

What does the Opposition say?

The Congress claimed that a change in rules regarding the conduct of elections vindicated their assertions regarding the rapidly eroding integrity of the electoral process managed by the EC.

The Congress moved the Supreme Court against the amendments.

Congress President Mallikarjun Kharge has said it was part of a “systematic conspiracy to destroy the institutional integrity of the EC”, while the Samajwadi Party and the Left parties accused the EC of “undermining multi-party democracy” by taking “unilateral” decisions without consulting all political parties.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

2. Russian mRNA Vaccine for Cancer: A Potential Breakthrough?

Introduction

Russian scientists have claimed to develop a personalised mRNA vaccine capable of suppressing tumour growth and metastasis in pre-clinical trials. Reports suggest that the vaccine uses artificial intelligence (AI) to identify genetic mutations in less than an hour, making it highly adaptable to individual patients. It is expected to be offered to Russians for free starting early next year.

The vaccine reportedly works by analysing a patient’s tumour to detect unique mutations called neoantigens. These mutations, found only in cancer cells, are used to train the immune



system to recognise and destroy cancer cells. While this approach shows promise, limited information has been shared publicly about the research and its findings.

However, the lack of detailed data has led to skepticism among experts. Russian research institutions, including Gamaleya National Research Center, have faced criticism in the past for inconsistent data reporting, as seen with the Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine. Without comprehensive trial data, experts are uncertain about the vaccine's effectiveness or the range of cancers it may target.

Cancer Vaccines: How Do They Work?

Cancer vaccines differ from traditional vaccines in that they are administered to patients already diagnosed with specific types of cancer. They are designed to enhance the immune system's ability to target cancer cells, either in combination with other treatments or to prevent relapse. These vaccines are typically tailored to target specific mutations within cancer cells, such as neoantigens.

Neoantigens are unique proteins present only on cancer cells, helping the immune system identify and attack these cells. Research has shown that once the immune system recognises neoantigens, it can retain this memory for years, potentially preventing future relapses. This approach is similar to traditional vaccines, which train the immune system to fight infections.

A similar strategy is being employed by researchers at Memorial Sloan Kettering (MSK) for pancreatic cancer. Their vaccine leverages neoantigens to stimulate the immune system, inspired by a small group of patients whose immune systems naturally attacked cancer cells, leading to long-term survival.

Approved Cancer Vaccines

Currently, only one cancer vaccine, Sipuleucel-T, has been approved by the US FDA. This vaccine, developed for prostate cancer in 2010, is personalised by exposing a patient's immune cells to a cancer-specific protein and reintroducing them into the body. However, its efficacy was limited, extending patient survival by only four months.

Despite significant research efforts, major breakthroughs in cancer vaccines remain elusive. While several vaccines have shown promise, their impact on cancer treatment has been modest. Cost and accessibility also pose challenges, especially for personalised treatments.

Vaccine-Preventable Cancers

Certain cancers can be prevented through vaccines targeting their underlying causes. For instance, over 95% of cervical cancer cases are linked to persistent infection with high-risk strains of human papillomavirus (HPV). Vaccination against HPV has significantly reduced cervical cancer incidence. Similarly, vaccination against hepatitis B can lower the risk of liver cancer by preventing chronic infection.

Considerations for Cancer Vaccines

The success of cancer vaccines depends on several factors. Cost-effectiveness is crucial, as high prices may limit accessibility. Government support is essential to integrate these vaccines into public health programmes. Moreover, vaccines must demonstrate significant mortality benefits and long-term efficacy to justify widespread adoption. While advancements like the Russian mRNA vaccine are promising, more data and successful trials are needed to determine their true impact on cancer treatment.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology

3. Background and Debates Around the No-Detention Policy

What Was the No-Detention Policy?



The RTE Act, 2009, aimed to ensure free and compulsory education for children aged 6-14. Section 16 of the Act prohibited holding back or expelling students until the completion of elementary education (Class 8). The policy sought to prevent demotivation and school dropouts while emphasizing continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE). However,

students were not required to pass board exams during this phase.

Centre Ends No-Detention Policy for Classes 5 and 8

The Centre has scrapped the no-detention policy for central schools, including Kendriya Vidyalayas and Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas. From this academic session, students in Classes 5 and 8 can be held back if they fail to meet promotion criteria after regular exams. These students will get additional instruction and a chance to clear a re-examination within two months. If they fail again, they will not be promoted.

This move comes after the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, was amended in 2019 to allow states and UTs to hold back students in these grades. Since then, 18 states and UTs have ended the no-detention policy, with Punjab being one of the first.

Why Was the RTE Act Amended?

A 2017 Bill to amend the RTE Act highlighted that automatic promotions were leading to declining learning outcomes and low student attendance. The amendment replaced Section 16, introducing annual exams for Classes 5 and 8, with provisions to hold back students failing re-examinations. By 2019, this amendment became law.

Arguments For and Against the No-Detention Policy

Supporting the Policy:

- Advocates highlighted that detention often demotivates students and increases dropouts.
- The policy kept children in the education system for at least eight years, boosting enrollment and reducing dropouts among marginalized groups.

Criticizing the Policy:

- Critics pointed to declining learning levels and teacher accountability.
- A 2012 Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE) sub-committee report found a drop in reading proficiency among Class 5 students and increased migration to private schools.
- Misinterpretation of the policy as “no assessments” led to low motivation among students and teachers.

The Debate’s Conclusion

By 2016, CABE recommended scrapping the policy, citing its negative impact on academic performance. Some states, like Punjab and Madhya Pradesh, supported introducing board exams for Classes 5 and 8. Others, like Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, argued for retaining the policy to ensure eight years of school education and avoid higher dropout rates.

Implementation Across States and UTs

States Retaining the No-Detention Policy

States and UTs like Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, and Odisha continue the no-detention policy. Tamil Nadu has also decided to retain it, focusing on strengthening the CCE system.

States Scrapping the No-Detention Policy

States including Punjab, Delhi, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan have ended the policy. In Delhi, 20% of Class 8 students and 0.93% of Class 5 students failed their exams in the first academic year following the policy’s removal.

Punjab’s Concerns with the No-Detention Policy

In 2014, the Punjab government, led by Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal, opposed the no-detention policy, citing a decline in learning outcomes. A resolution was passed in the Vidhan Sabha to restart board exams for Classes 5 and 8. Badal also wrote to Prime Minister Modi, highlighting that automatic promotions without exams were deteriorating stage-specific learning. Despite these concerns, the Centre amended the RTE Act only in 2019.

Punjab’s Workaround: Learning Outcome Evaluation System (LOES)

To address declining learning outcomes without violating the RTE Act, Punjab introduced the Learning Outcome Evaluation System (LOES) in 2016. Under LOES, students in Classes 5 and 8 were evaluated by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT). However, students were not held back but identified for remedial coaching.

Reintroduction of Board Exams in Punjab

After the 2019 amendment to the RTE Act, Punjab officially reintroduced board exams for Classes 5 and 8. The amendment allowed states to detain students who failed both the regular exams and re-examinations, conducted within two months of the results. Punjab adopted this provision to improve accountability and learning outcomes.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance