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1. What is an unconditional discharge, which Donald Trump was awarded in sentencing?

Introduction



US President-elect Donald Trump was formally sentenced by Justice Juan Merchan of the New York State Supreme Court recently to an unconditional discharge. This sentence marks an unprecedented lenient step in New York state courts, but still identifies Trump as a felon, days before his elevation as President.

Last May, a jury in Manhattan had convicted Trump of falsifying records to cover up a sex scandal.

What does an unconditional discharge mean?

Convicts may be allowed release from jail without serving the entirety of their jail term, subject to certain conditions, like completing court-ordered counselling, community service, or serving the period under house arrest, among other things. The New York Times reported that a third of defendants convicted since 2014 of falsifying business records in the first degree in Manhattan served less than a year of jail time.

However, Merchan awarded Trump an unconditional discharge, meaning he would not need to meet any of these assurances. Merchan recognised the leniency of the sentence.

What was the Stormy Daniels Hush Money case?

The former president is the first to be named a convicted felon (person accused of serious crime). In May, the Manhattan Criminal Court found him guilty of 34 counts of falsifying business records to cover a hush money (money paid to someone to prevent them from disclosing embarrassing or discreditable information) payment to adult film actress Stormy Daniels. This was meant to avoid the mention of a possible sex scandal from dominating the final weeks of the 2016 presidential campaign.

According to the court, Trump paid Daniels \$130,000 days before the 2016 election to keep quiet on her claim that the two had a sexual encounter. Each of the charges has a maximum sentence of four years in prison.

Trump also awaits indictments in two federal cases, and an election-related case in Georgia.

What comes next for Trump?

Trump presented a defiant face on Friday's hearing, maintaining his innocence. In a six-minute speech, he described the trial as a "very terrible experience," and the case "an injustice of justice." He subsequently posted on Truth Social, calling Merchan "a highly political and corrupt Judge" who "put a gag order" on speaking about "very important aspects of the case. The unconditional discharge allows Trump to proceed with the staff confirmation hearings for key roles in his upcoming administration. However, the legal case against him remains, and he is likely to appeal Friday's sentencing, in a process that may continue well into his second term. He has also begun a civil action suit against Merchan, whom he has repeatedly attacked over the course of the trial. He has sought to have him removed as judge thrice over the last two years, and alleged biased treatment because Merchan's daughter is a Democratic political consultant.

Relevance: GS Prelims; International Issues

Source: Indian Express

2. Why the Genome India project matters

Genome India project

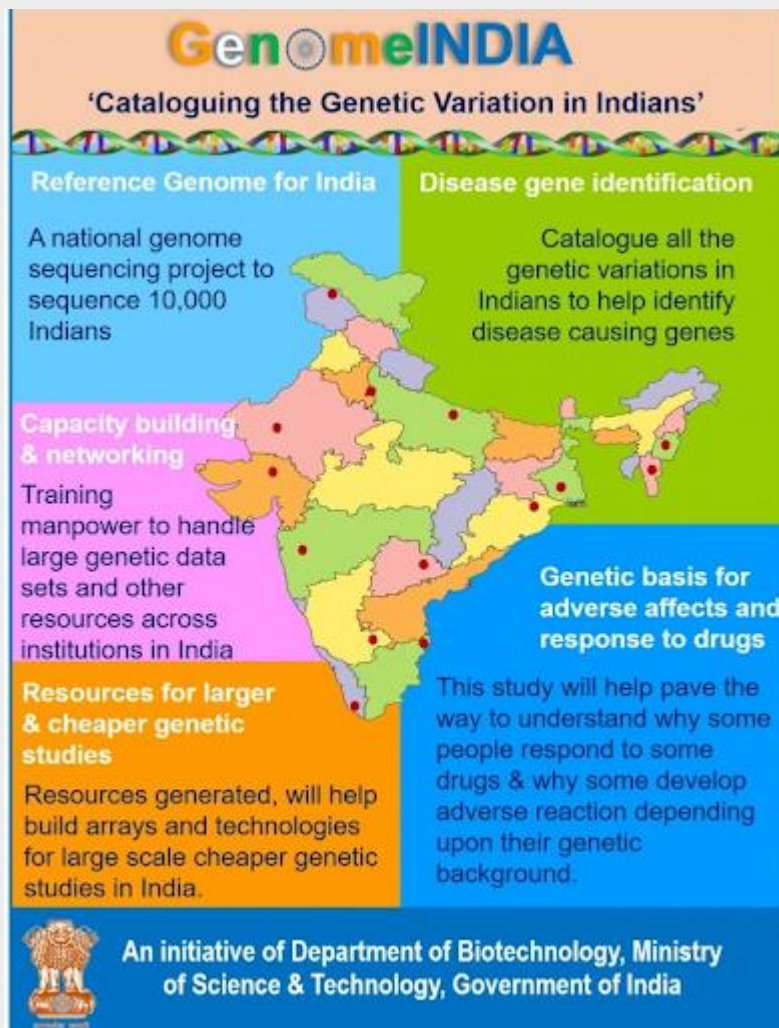
The Department of Biotechnology recently announced its new platform and framework for sharing its 10,000 human genome dataset. The sequences of healthy individuals — from 99 ethnic populations of the country — has helped create a baseline map of India's genetic diversity. The researchers in the second phase plan to sequence genomes of those with specific diseases.

First, what is genome sequencing?

The human genome is essentially an instruction manual we inherit from our parents that decides how our body develops and functions. This genetic information determines everything from a person's height, to the colour of their hair and eyes, to the diseases they may inherit, or the ones they are pre-disposed to. It is a tome written with just four letters A,C,G, and T — the four bases that come together to create the unique genetic makeup of everyone. There are around 3 billion pairs of bases in the complete human genome.

To sequence the genome, researchers first extract the information from the blood. Handling the entire genome, however, is extremely difficult. So, the researchers cut it up into smaller pieces and tag them. A sequencer is then used to decode these smaller chunks of the genetic material. Once done, it is put together using the tags to create a whole genome — in the same way one would assemble say an Ikea furniture by numbers.

What is the Genome India project?



India is a country that is varied not only in geography, languages that are spoken, food, and culture, it is also diverse in genetic make-up. There are over 4,600 distinct populations. The Genome India project was first approved in 2020 with the aim of capturing this diversity at the genomic level.

Researchers from 20 different scientific institutions have come together to sequence the first 10,000 genomes under the project. With everything in place — a successful collaboration, a data storage facility, data sharing platform, and a framework — the department of biotechnology aims to expand the programme further and sequence up to 1 million genomes.

How does creating the database help?

One, this map can help identify genetic basis or genetic risk factors for various diseases. These can then be used as targets for developing therapies and diagnostic tests. Newer therapies for several diseases work by modifying, deleting, or adding certain genes — something that would not be possible without having a genetic map and an understanding of which genes lead to the disease.

Two, an Indian dataset helps identify new variants. The researchers have identified 135 million genetic variations in the 10,000 genomes so far, 7 million of which are not found in the global databases.

Three, population level sequencing can also tell scientists and clinicians the frequency at which certain genetic variations that are known to cause disease appear and hence how common a disease might be. Take for example, the MYBPC3 mutation known to lead to cardiac arrest at a young age is found in 4.5% of the Indian population but is rare globally. Or, another mutation called LAMB3 that causes a lethal skin condition is found in nearly 4% of the population near Madurai but it is not seen in global databases. This is the reason India requires its own genome dataset.

Four, it may also help identify rare disease and develop gene therapies that can treat them.

Five, it can also help in identifying resistance indicating variants, for example genes that might make certain medicines or anaesthetics ineffective in certain populations. An example from India is a sect of the Vaishya community from South India who have the gene missing for properly processing common anaesthetics. Use of these anaesthetics can result in them remain under for hours or even death.

What is the second phase of the project?

The second phase of the project would involve sequencing the genomes of those with specific disease. This will enable researchers compare the diseased genomes with the healthy ones, helping in identifying genes that are responsible for or pre-dispose a person to certain diseases. They may be able to study the genetic changes when someone gets a disease, take for example cancer.

The team is currently in discussion with experts to identify the diseases for which genomes should be sequenced and the number of genomes for each disease required to produce meaningful results.

The diseases that would most likely be included in the list would be different types of cancers, chronic conditions such as diabetes, and various neurological or neurodegenerative diseases. Rare diseases that are found in Indian populations are also likely to be included in the list of diseases to be studied for the next phase of Genome India project.

How will the data be shared?

For now, the data will be available to Indian researchers through managed access. "This is the first time that we have created a resource such as this and we have to be very careful how we share this highly sensitive data. The data will be made available only through managed access — meaning it would be available only to research institutes that partner with us for the study," said Dr Suchita Ninawe, senior scientist from department of biotechnology.

Scientists wishing to utilise the data would have to respond to a call for proposals and collaborate with the department. The research will be funded by the government.

To maintain the anonymity of the data, it would also be double blinded. "After the samples from different regions are collected and sequenced by one of the partner institutes, it would be encoded before being uploaded to the central database. When the data is shared further with those wishing to study it, it would be encoded once again. This is to ensure that there is no way for the anonymity to be breached," said Dr Ninawe.

Are there other such projects across the world?

The first Human Genome Project — which was an international consortium funded by the US National Institutes of Health among others — published the world's first complete human genome in 2003. Since then, the 1,000 genome project — again through international collaboration — published 1,092 sequences in 2012. A UK government project sequenced 100,000 genomes by 2018. There has also been a European effort to sequence 1+ Million Genomes across 24 countries.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper III; Science & Technology
Source: Indian Express

3. What draft rules on VC appointments say, why states are upset

Introduction

Several states have objected to provisions in The UGC (Minimum Qualifications for Appointment and Promotion of Teachers and Academic Staff in Universities and Colleges and Measures for the Maintenance of Standards in Higher Education) Regulations, 2025, that could give the Chancellor – who is typically the state Governor – a bigger role in appointing Vice Chancellors (VCs) of state universities.

DRAFT RULES ON VC APPOINTMENTS

2010 Gazette Notification

The selection of VC should be through proper identification of a panel of 3-5 names by a sear committee through a public notification or nomination or talent search process or in combination

2025 draft

The selection for the vice-chancellor post shall be through an all India newspaper advertisement and public notification. Applications can also be sought through nomination or a talent search process by a search cum selection committee



Who should be a VC

2010 Gazette Notification | Persons of the highest level of competence, integrity, morals and institutional commitment

2025 draft | A distinguished person possessing high academic qualifications and demonstrated administrative and leadership capabilities, strong alignment to constitutional values, strong social commitment, belief in teamwork, pluralism, ability to work with diverse people, with a flair for innovation and a global outlook in higher education, along with the overall vision of the institution and abilities to manage complex situations

SEARCH CUM SELECTION COMMITTEE

2010 Gazette Notification

A nominee of the visitor/chancellor, who should be the chairperson of the committee

A nominee of the chairman, University Grants Commission

A nominee of the syndicate/senate/executive council / board of management of the university



The visitor/chancellor shall appoint the vice-chancellor out of the panel of names recommended by the search committee

2025 draft

A nominee of the visitor/chancellor, who shall be the chairperson of the search cum selection committee

A nominee of the chairman, University Grants Commission

A nominee of the apex body of the university such as syndicate/senate/executive council / board of management/ equivalent body of the university

The visitor/chancellor of the university shall appoint the vice-chancellor out of the panel of names recommended by the search-cum-selection committee

2025 draft | The search-cum-selection committee shall short-list the candidates and interact with the short-listed candidates to prepare a panel of 3-5 names for submission to the visitor/chancellor

How VCs are appointed

Regulations notified by the University Grants Commission (UGC) in 2018 said that a search-cum-selection committee comprising eminent persons in higher education shall shortlist 3-5 candidates by public notification, nomination, a “talent search process”, or a combination of these processes.

The Chancellor – or Visitor in a central university – appoints the VC from among the recommended names.

In the case of state and private universities, one member of the search-selection committee is nominated by the UGC Chairman. For state universities, the rest of the committee is constituted in accordance with state law.

The Kerala University Act, 1974, for example, says the VC will be appointed by the Chancellor “on the unanimous recommendation of a committee appointed by him consisting of three members”, one elected by the university Senate, and one each nominated by the UGC Chairman and the Chancellor (Governor).

Central universities – there are 56 currently – are established under an Act of Parliament, and are administered by the Centre. The Visitor, their ceremonial head, is the President of India.

The composition of the committee to appoint the VC of a central university is determined by the Act that governs the university. For the University of Delhi and Jawaharlal Nehru University, for example, the committee has two nominees of the university Executive Council, and one of the Visitor.

States vs Centre over VCs

Over the past several years, non-BJP governments in states have clashed with the Governor, who is a nominee of the Centre, over the appointment of VCs.

KERALA: The tussle began in 2021, when then Governor Arif Mohammad Khan claimed he had been forced to act against his conscience by the LDF government in the reappointment of Gopinath Ravindran as VC of Kannur University.

In 2023, the Assembly passed a Bill to replace the Governor with eminent educationists as Chancellors of universities in the state. The Bill is yet to receive the assent of the President.

WEST BENGAL: The Supreme Court is currently seized of the matter arising out of the West Bengal government’s challenge to a June 2023 order of the Calcutta High Court upholding the unilateral appointment of interim VCs in 13 state universities by Governor C V Ananda Bose.

In July 2024, the SC appointed former Chief Justice of India U U Lalit to head separate search-selection committees to shortlist candidates for the positions. There has been some progress in this process since.

Earlier, the West Bengal Assembly passed The University Laws (Amendment) Bill 2023 to replace the Governor with the Chief Minister as Chancellor of all state-aided universities. The Bill is yet to receive the Governor’s assent.

KARNATAKA: In December 2024, the Assembly passed a Bill to replace the Governor with the Chief Minister as Chancellor of Karnataka State Rural Development and Panchayati Raj University. The Bill is yet to receive the Governor’s assent.

In November, the Karnataka Cabinet had decided to do the same for other state universities as well. The state Higher Education Minister had said a draft Bill was in the works to amend the Karnataka State Universities Act to bring in critical administrative reforms for the 42 universities under the state government.

MAHARASHTRA: In 2021, when Uddhav Thackeray's Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government was in power, the legislature passed a Bill that restricted the Governor's power to only approving VC candidates recommended by the state government, and gave greater authority to the state's Higher and Technical Education Minister instead.

The Bill remained pending with then Governor Bhagat Singh Koshyari. After Eknath Shinde became Chief Minister in 2022, the new government withdrew the Bill and the original process, in which the Governor had the final say in the appointment of VCs, was restored.

TAMIL NADU: In 2022, the DMK-led government passed two Bills to allow the state government to pick VCs for state universities, but these Bills were not approved by the Governor.

Last year, Governor R N Ravi asked the government to recall the notifications to set up search committees for VCs of several state universities on the grounds that they did not include the nominee of the UGC chairman. The appointments remain pending.

New UGC regulations

- * The draft regulations say "the Chancellor/ Visitor shall constitute the Search-cum-Selection Committee comprising three experts." The 2018 regulations did not specify who would constitute the committee.

- * Unlike the 2018 regulations, the new regulations specify the composition of the committee: a member each nominated by the Visitor/ Chancellor, the UGC Chairman, and the apex body of the university (Senate/ Syndicate/ Executive Council). This gives nominees of the Centre the majority in the committee.

- * Besides professors, individuals at senior levels in industry, public policy, public administration, or public sector undertakings, can also become VCs, says the draft.

Question of federalism

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan has said that the draft regulations "undermine federalism by stripping states of their rights to appoint" VCs for state-run universities, and "vest unchecked power in the Chancellor".

The Tamil Nadu Assembly has asked the Centre to withdraw the draft regulations. Chief Minister M K Stalin has said giving Governors broader control over VC appointments is a "direct assault on federalism and state rights", and an attempt to "undermine democratically elected state governments".

However, UGC chairman M Jagadesh Kumar has said the draft regulations seek to provide a "robust process" for selecting VCs, "aligning with the overarching goals of quality and transparency in higher education". The 2025 draft removes the ambiguities of the 2018

regulations, he said. The draft is also aligned with the "objectives of the National Education Policy 2020, he said.

Relevance: GS Prelims & Mains Paper II; Governance

Source: Indian Express

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