The Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2026

Mains: *GS II – Statutory bodies*

Why in News?

*Recently, the introduction of the **Indian Statistical Institute (ISI) Bill, 2026** in the Lok Sabha has reignited a significant debate on the governance of India's premier academic and research institutions.*

What is the Indian statistical institute?

- **Foundation** – The **Indian Statistical Institute (ISI)** was founded in **1931** by the eminent statistician **Prasanta Chandra Mahalanobis**, one of the pioneers of modern statistics in India.
- **Evolution** – Initially established as a statistical laboratory within Presidency College, Kolkata, the institute gradually evolved into one of the world's leading centres for statistical research, mathematics, computer science, economics, quantitative social sciences, and data science.
- **Statutory recognition** – In **1959**, Parliament enacted the **Indian Statistical Institute Act**, declaring the institute an **Institution of National Importance**.
- This legislation empowered the ISI to award degrees and receive financial assistance from the Central Government while allowing it to continue functioning as a registered society.
- **Present status** – Today, the institute is headquartered in **Kolkata**, with centres located in **Delhi, Bengaluru, Chennai, and Tezpur**, and has made globally recognised contributions to statistical science, operations research, artificial intelligence, cryptology, and interdisciplinary research.
- **Existing Governance Structure –** The governance of the ISI has traditionally been based on a model of **shared institutional autonomy**.
- Its highest decision-making authority is the **33-member Council**, comprising:
  - An elected Chairperson.
  - Representatives of the Central Government.
  - Representatives from institutions such as the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).
  - Eminent scientists and academicians.
  - Faculty and institutional representatives.
- The Council appoints the **Director**, who serves as both the academic and administrative head of the institute.
- The existing structure ensures significant participation of academics and internal stakeholders in decision-making, thereby preserving institutional autonomy.

What are the major provisions of the Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2026?

- **Conversion into a Statutory Body Corporate –** The Bill proposes transforming the ISI from a registered society into a **statutory body corporate**, giving it a governance structure directly established under parliamentary legislation.
- **Appointment of the President of India as Visitor –** The Bill designates the **President of India** as the **Visitor** of the institute, similar to several Central Universities and IITs.
- The visitor is empowered to, conduct inspections, order inquiries, review institutional functioning, and remove the director under specified circumstances.
- **Establishment of a Board of Governance –** The existing Council will be replaced by a **Board of Governance**.
- Composition of the board:
    - A Chairperson nominated by the Visitor on the recommendation of the Central Government.
    - Representatives of the Union Government.
    - Eminent persons nominated by the Government.
    - The Director.
    - Institutional representatives.
- The board will exercise powers relating to, administration, academic appointments, awarding degrees, framing rules and regulations, financial management.
- **Academic Council –** The Bill establishes an **Academic Council** comprising:
- Heads of academic divisions, heads of centres, the director as chairperson.
- The academic council will primarily advise the board on academic matters.
- **Appointment of the Director –** The Director will be appointed through a **Search-cum-Selection Committee** constituted by the Central Government.
- The Board Chairperson will appoint the Director from the panel recommended by this committee.
- The Bill also provides for, periodic performance reviews, removal of the director under specified conditions, oversight by the visitor.

What are the concerns raised?

- **Erosion of Institutional Autonomy –** The primary concern is the perceived reduction in institutional independence.
- Critics argue that, most members of the proposed Board are either nominated by or represent the Central Government.
- Internal stakeholders will have a significantly reduced role, Decision-making may become overly centralised.
- **Increased Government Control –** The bill grants the union government greater influence over, appointment of the director, selection committee composition, performance reviews, removal procedures.
- Opponents argue that these provisions may transform the Director into an executive accountable primarily to the Government rather than the academic community.
- **Weakening of Democratic Governance –** The present Council includes elected representatives and eminent scientists from outside the institute.
- The proposed governance model reduces the number of elected members while

increasing nominated positions.
- Critics argue that this weakens participatory decision-making.
- **Threat to Academic Freedom** – Academic institutions thrive when scholars enjoy independence in, research, recruitment, curriculum design, institutional priorities.
- Greater governmental intervention, critics argue, may influence research agendas and administrative decisions, thereby affecting academic freedom.
- **Lack of Adequate Consultation** – Faculty members and students have alleged that the reforms were drafted without sufficient consultation with stakeholders.
- Several petitions and campus protests have demanded wider discussions before introducing such far-reaching institutional changes.

What lies ahead?

- The Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2026 represents one of the most significant governance reforms proposed for a premier Indian research institution in recent years.
- While the Government views the legislation as a step towards modernisation, administrative efficiency, and better governance, critics fear that it could dilute institutional autonomy and increase executive influence over academic administration.
- The debate reflects a larger policy challenge confronting Indian higher education: how to ensure accountability in publicly funded institutions without compromising the independence that underpins academic excellence and innovation.
- Achieving this balance will be crucial not only for the future of the Indian Statistical Institute but also for the credibility and global standing of India's higher education and research institutions.

Reference

The Hindu| the Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2026

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