

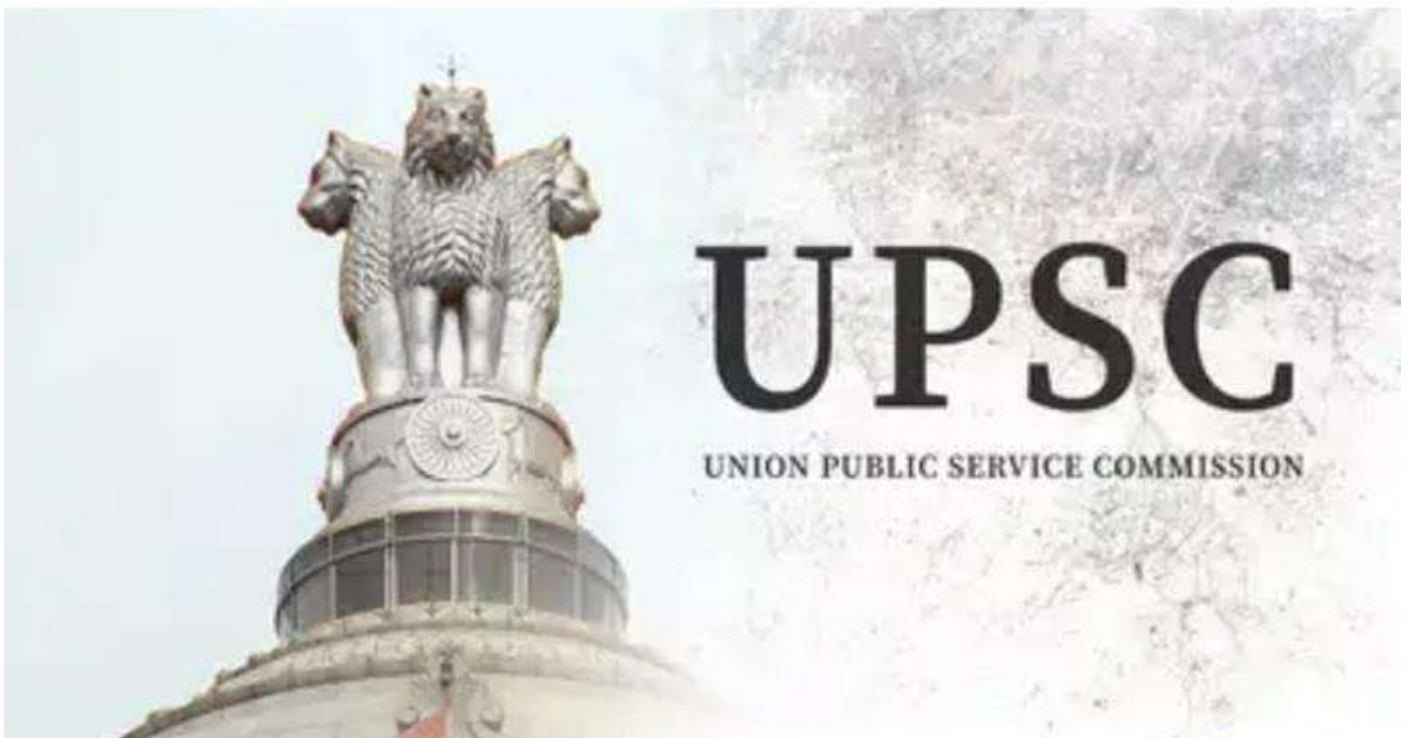


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News Analysis



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December 2025

1. IMPORTANT TOPICS OF THE MONTH

1.1 Existence of Untouchability in India

As per the report, provided by NCRB, 24 cases of untouchability against Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes under the Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act, 1955 are reported for the year 2023.

What is untouchability?

- **Historical background** – Untouchability is a deeply entrenched social practice, primarily in South Asia's caste system that segregates, humiliates, and exploits certain groups (Dalits).
- It is denying the certain groups with basic human dignity, equal opportunities in education, work, and public spaces, and enforcing exclusion through ritual pollution beliefs.
- **Definition** – *The Constitution of India does not define "untouchability."* nor is it clear what constitutes its "practice in any form" or "a disability arising out of 'untouchability'".
- The English term "untouchability" is of relatively recent coinage; its first appearance in print was in 1909 and, while it gained wide currency, it did not gain clarity.

What are the key aspects of untouchability?

- **Caste-Based Discrimination** – It's rooted in the Hindu caste hierarchy, placing Dalits at the bottom, historically assigned "polluting" tasks like sanitation, leatherwork, and waste disposal.
- **Social Exclusion** – Involves denying access to temples, shared wells, schools, and even physical touch, forcing separate living areas.
- **Economic Exploitation** – Keeps Dalit communities in poverty, limiting access to land, resources, and fair wages.
- **Humiliation & Violence** – Manifests as pervasive discrimination, verbal abuse, and physical atrocities, with severe consequences.

What are the protections available against untouchability?

- **Constitutional resolve** – *Article 17 of the Constitution* of India abolished 'untouchability', forbade its practice and made enforcement of any disability arising out of 'untouchability', a punishable offence in accordance with law.
- **Legal protections** – An Act of Parliament namely the "*Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act, 1955* prescribes punishment for enforcement of any disability arising from the practice of 'untouchability'.
- *The Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) {PoA} Act, 1989*, was enacted to prevent atrocities against members of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs).
- *The SC/ST (PoA) Act, 1989 was amended in the year of 2016* and 2018 respectively and the Rules made thereunder were also revised.
- **Institutional arrangements** – At the Central level, a Committee under the Chairpersonship of the Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment, reviews the implementation status of the Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) (PoA) Act, 1989, in States and Union Territories.
- **Central-state coordination** – The Department also holds regular meetings with the State Governments and Union Territory Administrations to monitor the implementation of the PCR Act, 1955 and the SC/ST (PoA) Act, 1989.
- State Governments/UT administrations are advised to ensure prevention of discrimination on the basis of caste of any person and implement these Acts in letter and spirit.
- **Advisories to states** – The Government of India, from time to time, has been issuing Advisories to State Governments/UT Administrations for effective implementation of Protection of Civil Rights (PCR) Act, 1955 and the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989.
- Misuse has been reported by States who act as per relevant legal provisions.

What are the impediments in eradicating untouchability?

- **Deep-rooted Social and Cultural Prejudices** – Untouchability is intrinsically linked to the rigid and centuries-old caste system, which fosters a sense of superiority among so-called "higher" castes and an internalized sense of inferiority among Dalits.
- Changing these entrenched attitudes, norms, and social codes of conduct is a slow process that existing laws alone have not been able to fully achieve.
- **Economic Dependence and Exploitation** – A significant number of Dalits continue to be economically vulnerable and reliant on higher castes, particularly in rural areas.
- They are often forced into stigmatized, "impure" occupations like manual scavenging, which perpetuates their low social status.
- Efforts to secure land rights or fair wages are often met with retaliatory violence and economic boycotts, making it difficult to achieve economic independence.
- **Ineffective Implementation of Laws and Institutional Bias** – Despite strong legal frameworks like Article 17 of the Indian Constitution, the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, and the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, their enforcement is often weak.
- There is a significant gap between the legal provisions and the ground reality due to a lack of political will, corruption, and systemic biases within the law enforcement and judicial machinery.
- This is evidenced by low conviction rates and the large number of pending cases.
- **Residential Segregation** – Dalits often live in segregated areas or slums outside the main village precincts (known as Maharwadass), which reinforces social distance and exclusion from public amenities like common wells, temples, and roads.
- **Lack of Education and Awareness** – Many Dalits, particularly in rural areas, lack access to quality education, which is a key tool for social mobility and empowerment.
- Furthermore, a general lack of awareness about their rights among the marginalized, and a lack of sensitivity among the general population, contribute to the persistence of discrimination.
- **Caste-Based Politics** – Political parties sometimes exploit caste identities for electoral gains, which further perpetuates caste divisions and hinders a unified approach to social reform.
- **Persistence of Specific Practices** – Specific forms of discrimination continue, such as separate utensils for Dalits in tea stalls, denial of entry to temples and homes, and social boycotts for defying customary "duties".

What are the social solutions to eradicate untouchability?

- **Inclusive Education** – Providing common and liberal education for all children in shared schools and hostels helps break down caste barriers from a young age.
- The curriculum should promote critical thinking about social injustices and include the history of anti-caste movements and reformers.
- **Inter-caste Interaction** – Encouraging frequent interaction, shared dining, and social events between different caste groups, including on religious and national occasions, helps reduce prejudice and fosters a sense of unity and brotherhood.
- **Community Vigilance** – Establishing local vigilance committees with representation from all communities to monitor and report instances of discrimination in public spaces.
- **Media and Awareness Campaigns** – Relentless propaganda through mass media (radio, TV, social media) and local communication can challenge stereotypes, celebrate success stories of inter-caste harmony, and emphasize equality as a constitutional duty and human right.
- **Rehabilitation of Occupations** – Efforts to emancipate marginalized communities from "dirty" or stigmatized occupations (such as manual scavenging) through skill development and dignified alternative employment opportunities are crucial for social standing and economic independence.

What are the cultural way forward?

- **Challenging Religious Orthodoxy** – Engaging with religious and spiritual leaders to interpret faith in an egalitarian light and publicly denounce untouchability can help counter the traditional justifications for caste-based discrimination.
- **Cultural Assertion and Self-Respect Movements** – Supporting movements that build self-esteem and identity among marginalized groups is vital.

- **Promoting Inter-caste Marriages** – Actively encouraging and providing support (legal, security, and financial) for inter-caste marriages is a powerful tool for uniting families across caste lines and dismantling the very foundation of the caste system.
- This includes promoting their unique cultural heritage, literature, and history (e.g., Dalit literature, the Self-Respect Movement) to counter the sense of inferiority imposed by the caste system.
- **Equal Access to Public/Religious Spaces** – Ensuring that all public spaces, including temples, wells, and cremation grounds, are accessible to everyone is a symbolic and practical step toward dismantling physical manifestations of untouchability.
- **Civic Education** – Integrating the values of the constitution, human rights principles, and the lives of social reformers (like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi) into education and community dialogues can inspire commitment to an inclusive society.

1.2 Priority Sector Lending (PSL)

Recently, the **State Level Bankers' Committee (SLBC)** of Jharkhand, highlighted that although banks have surpassed the overall PSL benchmark, their agricultural credit disbursement remains below the RBI's target.

What is Priority Sector Lending (PSL)?

- **PSL** – It is an **RBI's initiative** that mandates banks to allocate a specific portion of their lending to specific sectors of the economy.
 - **Inclusive Growth** – These sectors drive inclusive growth but often lack adequate credit.
 - **Access to Affordable Credit** – PSL ensures vulnerable and underserved sections of the society can get loans at lower interest rates.
 - **Reducing Inequality** – RBI identifies these sectors to bridge gaps and promote balanced economic growth.
- **SLBC** – It is an **inter-institutional forum** at the state level that coordinates between banks and the state government to ensure effective implementation of banking development programs, **under the Lead Bank Scheme**
 - **Origin** – Established **by the RBI** in 1969, following recommendations of the Gadgil & Nariman Committees.

What is the historical background & evolution of PSL?

- **Early Recognition** – PSL began in 1966, when Finance Minister Morarji Desai stressed expanding credit to small businesses and agriculture.
- **Bank Nationalisation** – In 1969, the nationalisation of major banks provided the institutional framework necessary to implement direct lending policies to underserved sectors.
- **Gadgil Committee, 1969** – Proposed the Area Approach, which laid the foundation for the **Lead Bank Scheme (LBS)** to strengthen regional credit planning.
- **Nariman Committee, 1969** – Endorsed the Gadgil Committee's recommendations and suggested that each public sector bank should adopt specific districts as Lead Banks to accelerate PSL.
- **Formalization Framework** – In 1972, PSL was formally established based on RBI's **Informal Study Group report** (1971) presented to the National Credit Council.
- **Initial Targets** – In 1974, Commercial banks were advised to gradually increase PSL to 33.3% of credit by 1979.
- **Krishnaswamy Committee, 1980** – Recommended revising the target to 40% of ANBC by 1985, with sub-targets for agriculture and weaker sections.
- **Usha Thorat Committee, 2009** – Supported the continuation of the Lead Bank Scheme, recognizing its importance in expanding PSL coverage.
- **Nair Committee, 2012** – Conducted the most comprehensive review of PSL, reinforcing its importance and suggesting refinements to improve effectiveness.
- **Updated Guidelines** – In March 2025, the RBI issued new PSL guidelines effective from April 1, 2025, expanding sectoral coverage and revising loan limits to ensure better targeting of credit.

What are the key sectors covered under PSL?

- Agriculture

- Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME)
- Export Credit
- Education
- Housing
- Social Infrastructure
- Renewable Energy
- Others

What are the RBI's PSL targets & sub-targets based on 2025 guidelines?

Type of Bank	Overall PSL Targets	Agriculture Credit	Small & Marginal Farmers (SMFs)	Micro Enterprises	Weaker Sections
Domestic Commercial Banks & Large Foreign Banks (20 plus branches)	40% of ANBC	18% of ANBC	10% of ANBC	7.5% of ANBC	12% of ANBC
Regional Rural Banks (RRBs)	75% of ANBC	18% of ANBC	10% of ANBC	7.5% of ANBC	15% of ANBC
Small Finance Banks (SFBs)	75% of ANBC	18% of ANBC	10% of ANBC	7.5% of ANBC	12% of ANBC
Urban Co-operative Banks (UCBs)	60% of ANBC (as of 2025 revision)	18% of ANBC	10% of ANBC	7.5% of ANBC	12% of ANBC

- **Adjusted Net Bank Credit (ANBC)** – The total loan amount given by a bank after making certain adjustments.
 - It is a regulatory metric used by RBI to fix banks' mandatory lending to sectors like agriculture, small businesses, and housing.
- **Priority Sector Lending Certificates (PSLCs)** – It is a ***Tradeable financial instruments***, introduced by RBI, in 2016, to enhance the flexibility and effectiveness of the PSL framework.
 - **Mechanism** – Banks that achieve surplus lending in priority sectors can issue and sell certificates, while banks facing shortfalls can purchase them to meet their mandated PSL obligations.
 - **4 types of PSLCs** are available for trading – Agriculture, Small & Marginal Farmers, Micro Enterprises, General.

What are the major highlights of the key trends & measures in PSL?

- **Growth in PSL (2019–2024)** – Overall PSL credit disbursement to priority sectors like agriculture, MSMEs, and social infrastructure has ***increased by 85%*** over six years.
- **Role of FinTech** – Banks are partnering with FinTechs to improve customer services. Key areas -
 - **Digital account opening** using e-KYC and V-KYC with AI for face and name recognition.
 - **Faster loan processing** through digital journeys, account analysis, and alternate data for real-time decisions.
 - **Innovative products** developed using bank APIs to enhance customer experience.
- **Legal & Structural Reforms**
 - **Insolvency & Bankruptcy Code (IBC)** – Strengthened credit discipline.
 - **Central Repository of Information on Large Credits** – Monitoring high-value accounts for defaults/fraud.

- **SARFAESI Act & Recovery of Debt Act** – Amended for more effective enforcement.
- **Early Warning Systems** – Automated tools to detect stress and prevent NPAs.

How does Priority Sector Lending impact the economy and society ?

- **Financial Inclusion** – The policy ensures that marginalized groups have access to credit at affordable interest rates.
- **Balanced Development** – It helps reduce inequality and regional gaps by bringing unbanked rural populations into the formal financial system, especially the regions dominated by agriculture and small enterprises.
- **Job Creation** – PSL supports job creation by funding **MSMEs and agriculture**—India's biggest employers.
 - MSMEs alone **employ over 25 crore people** and contribute **45.73% of exports** (2023–24).
- **Entrepreneurship Support** – It facilitates entrepreneurship by providing accessible credit to aspiring business owners, enabling them to start and grow enterprises that drive innovation and local development.
- **Encouragement for Innovation** – PSL's recognition of startups ensures that innovation and entrepreneurship receive institutional support, fueling India's growth story.
- **Liquidity Management** – PSLCs provide banks with a tool to balance compliance and liquidity, ensuring smoother financial operations.
- **Agricultural Modernization** – PSL goes beyond basic crop loans by supporting infrastructure development, technology adoption, and allied industries such as dairy and fisheries.
 - This comprehensive approach strengthens food security while driving growth in rural economies.

What are the challenges associated with PSL?

- **Non-Performing Assets (NPAs)** – Repaying loans in priority sectors is often problematic, contributing to higher NPAs.
 - **For example**, Agriculture loans are risky due to crop failures and weather, while small borrowers without collateral cause higher NPAs.
- **Compliance Pressure on Banks** – Banks are required to balance profits with RBI's mandated PSL targets, which can strain resources and limit commercial lending.
- **Misallocation of Resources** – Ensuring that credit reaches the intended beneficiaries continues to be a challenge, and asset quality issues often emerge when loans are disbursed without adequate monitoring.
- **Higher Operational Costs** – Managing PSL accounts requires extensive paperwork, monitoring, and outreach, and studies indicate that operational costs are higher than in regular lending.
- **Credit Assessment Challenges** – Traditional credit scoring doesn't work well for micro enterprises and small farmers, so banks use alternative methods that increase costs and slow processing.
- **Market Concentration** – Banks prefer safer PSL categories like housing loans, which leads to uneven distribution of credit, with agriculture and weaker sections often neglected.

What lies ahead?

- Priority Sector Lending (PSL) remains a cornerstone of India's financial inclusion strategy, channeling institutional credit to industries and segments vital for inclusive economic growth.
- Despite challenges in implementation and asset quality, the evolving PSL guidelines show the RBI's commitment to meeting new needs while ensuring equitable growth.

1.3 India Hosts UNESCO's 20th ICH Session

Recently, The Government of India will host the 20th session of the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage from 8 to 13 December 2025 in New Delhi.

What is the historical background?

- **2003 convention** – For the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage, UNESCO adopted the 2003 Convention on 17th October 2003 during its 32nd General Conference in Paris.
- **Significance** – The Convention responded to global concerns that living cultural traditions, oral practices, performing arts, social customs, rituals, knowledge systems, and craftsmanship were increasingly threatened by globalisation, social change, and limited resources.

- The Convention placed communities, especially indigenous communities, groups, and individual practitioners, at the heart of safeguarding efforts, acknowledging their vital role in creating, maintaining and transmitting cultural heritage.
- It underscored the interdependence between tangible and intangible heritage, the need for global cooperation, and the importance of raising awareness among younger generations.
- **Conservation mechanisms** – With a shared global commitment to protecting humanity's living heritage, the Convention formally established mechanisms for international cooperation, support, and recognition, laying the foundation for UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage lists and the subsequent work of the Intergovernmental Committee.
- **The purposes of this Convention**
 - To safeguard the intangible cultural heritage;
 - To ensure respect for the intangible cultural heritage of the communities, groups and individuals concerned;
 - To raise awareness at the local, national and international levels of the importance of the intangible cultural heritage, and ensuring mutual appreciation thereof;
 - To provide for global cooperation and assistance.
- **Functions of the Intergovernmental Committee**
 - Promotes and monitors the objectives and implementation of the 2003 Convention.
 - Provides guidance on best practices and recommends measures for safeguarding intangible cultural heritage.
 - Prepares and submits to the General Assembly the draft plan for the use of the Intangible Cultural Heritage Fund.
 - Mobilises additional resources for the Fund in accordance with the Convention's provisions.
 - Drafts and proposes operational directives for the implementation of the Convention.
 - Examines periodic reports submitted by States Parties and compiles summaries for the General Assembly.
 - Evaluates requests from States Parties and makes decisions regarding:
 - Inscription of elements on UNESCO's ICH Lists (as per Articles 16, 17 and 18).
 - Granting of international assistance.

What about the 20th Session of Intergovernmental Committee?

- **Nodal agencies** – The Ministry of Culture (MoC), Government of India and its autonomous body, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) are the nodal agencies to host the 20th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee at the Red Fort (Lal Qila) in New Delhi.
- This magnificent 17th-century fort in Delhi, known for its stunning red sandstone walls and grand architecture, palaces, gardens, and museums is itself on the UNESCO World Heritage list.
- **Key Agendas** – By hosting the 20th session of the ICH Committee, India aims to:
 - Present and share its national ICH safeguarding model – combining institutional support, community participation, documentation and national inventory efforts – as a global good practice.
 - Encourage increased international cooperation via collaborative nominations, joint safeguarding initiatives, capacity building, sharing of resources, technical exchange.
 - Bring greater global visibility to India's intangible heritage – including lesser-known traditions, local crafts, regional festivals – thereby attracting global support, interest, research, tourism and resource mobilisation.
 - Use the session's global spotlight to motivate further domestic efforts such as documentation, inventorying, nomination dossiers, community engagement, especially among youth and future generations.
 - Provide a platform for cultural diplomacy, project India's soft-power, cultural richness, diversity and heritage leadership on a global stage.
 - Strengthen the link between heritage conservation and sustainable development, intangible heritage as a resource for livelihoods, community identity, social cohesion, and cultural tourism.

What are the importance of India's intangible cultural heritage?

- **Social & Cultural Identity** – ICH preserves linguistic, ethnic, regional, tribal, religious and community identities – fostering social cohesion and pluralism in a diverse nation like India.
- **Livelihoods & Crafts Economy** – Traditional crafts, performing arts, craftsmanship, and cultural tourism provide livelihoods to artisans, performers, craftspeople, often in rural or marginalised communities.
- Institutional support under the ICH Scheme can help sustain these livelihoods, prevent skill loss, and promote inclusive development.
- **Education & Transmission of Knowledge** – Many intangible heritage forms embed traditional knowledge, ecological practices, oral histories, craftsmanship techniques, folklore, rituals, and indigenous wisdom.
- When documented and transmitted, these strengthen education, deepen cultural literacy and ensure intergenerational continuity.
- **Cultural Diplomacy & Soft Power** – Dances, festivals, crafts, oral traditions – reflects India's diversity, unity, values, and cultural depth.
- Promoting them globally enhances India's soft power, cultural diplomacy and international image.
- Hosting the session further amplifies this impact.
- **Global Heritage Governance & Leadership Role** – With its vast heritage landscape, India's active participation and role as host strengthen global heritage governance under UNESCO.
- It positions the nation as a key voice among developing countries, advocating for balanced, inclusive, and community-sensitive approaches to heritage preservation globally.

What are the India's Contributions to ICH?

- **Need for support** – India's vast and diverse intangible cultural heritage—encompassing living traditions, oral expressions, performing arts, rituals, crafts, and community practices—requires systematic institutional support for its preservation and transmission.
- **Scheme** – The Ministry of Culture launched the “Scheme for Safeguarding the Intangible Heritage and Diverse Cultural Traditions of India” as a centralised mechanism to strengthen ongoing but scattered preservation efforts.
- **Institutional support** – Meanwhile, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) organizes capacity-building workshops to train individuals and increase awareness about the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH).
- **Aims of the scheme** – The Scheme aims to revitalise institutions, practitioners, communities, scholars, and organizations engaged in safeguarding ICH.
- Enhancing national and international recognition of India's cultural traditions, including through UNESCO nominations.
- **Support provided** – It supports a wide range of stakeholders—universities, state governments, NGOs, cultural bodies, researchers, and individual practitioners.
- **Key activities** – The schemes includes the following activities:
 - Documentation and creation of ICH inventories;
 - Preservation and promotion of cultural expressions;
 - Preparation of UNESCO nomination dossiers;
 - Training and capacity building for artists; workshops and performances;
 - Dissemination initiatives;
 - Education–culture integration
 - Support for skill development through Sector Skill Councils under the National Vocational Educational Qualifications Framework (NVEQF).

What are India's intangible cultural heritage inscribed by UNESCO?

- **Elements inscribed** – To date, 15 Indian elements have been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, reflecting the country's extraordinary civilisational depth and cultural continuity.

- **Importance of the inscription** – These inscriptions also reflect India's commitment to safeguarding diverse cultural expression through community participation, documentation, training, and transmission, principles central to the 2003 convention.
- **Inscription included** – These inscriptions range from ancient performing arts like *Kutiyattam and Chhau*, to sacred traditions such as *Vedic chanting*, *Buddhist chanting in Ladakh*, and community-based practices like *Ramlila, Ramman, and Sankirtana*.
- Everyday cultural knowledge systems are equally represented through the *metalcraft of the Thatheras of Jandiala Guru*, the *Kalbelia community's dynamic music and dance*, and large-scale social-spiritual gatherings like the *Kumbh Mela*.
- Elements such as *Yoga, Durga Puja, and Garba* showcase India's vibrant contemporary cultural identity, while *Novruz*, celebrated across several countries including India, highlights regional cultural interconnectedness.

What lies ahead?

- India's hosting of the 20th UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee session marks a milestone, blending symbolic significance with a real chance to lead.
- With a strong heritage infrastructure and history of cultural diversity, India is ready to showcase and share its safeguarding model.
- This event offers India an opportunity to highlight its living heritage, foster global cooperation, and shape a renewed approach to preserving intangible cultural heritage for current and future generations.
- The success of the 20th session of the Intergovernmental Committee in New Delhi will reflect positively on UNESCO, the Government of India, and the vitality of India's cultural traditions.
- India's heritage lives through its people, expressed in its languages, arts, rituals, festivals, and belief systems.
- Hosting this year's session shows India's enduring commitment to safeguarding its cultural legacy for future generations.

G.S PAPER I

2. GEOGRAPHY

2.1 Cold Wave in Telangana

Recently, The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has issued a cold wave alert for four districts of Telangana.

What is a cold wave?

- **Definition** – According to *world meteorological organization*, cold wave is a period of marked and unusual cold weather characterised by a sharp and significant drop in air temperatures near the surface (maximum, minimum and daily average) over a large area and persisting below certain thresholds for at least two consecutive days during the cold season.
- **Criteria of IMD (Indian Meteorological department)**
 - **Cold Wave** – Min temp $\leq 10^{\circ}\text{C}$ (plains) AND $\geq 4.5^{\circ}\text{C}$ below normal.
 - **Severe Cold Wave** – Min temp $\leq 4^{\circ}\text{C}$ (plains) OR $\geq 6.4^{\circ}\text{C}$ below normal.
- **Season of Occurrence** – In India it primarily occurs between November to March, with December and January being the coldest months.
- **Vulnerable regions** – It hits the states of North & Central India such as: Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Rajasthan, UP, MP, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal.
 - **Himalayan Regions** – Naturally colder, criteria focus on deviation from normal.
- **Causes**
 - **Western Disturbances** – Transient weather systems bringing moisture and cold air.
 - **Cold Air Masses** – Cold, Dry Air Masses – Movement of air from Siberia/Canada into India.
 - **Snowfall** – Heavy snow in the Himalayas triggers cold winds.

- **Clear Skies** – Lack of cloud cover allows heat to escape rapidly.
- **Impacts**
 - **Health** – Hypothermia, frostbite, respiratory issues, increased mortality (infants, elderly).
 - **Agriculture** – Damage to Rabi crops (wheat, coffee, tea).
 - **Energy** – Spike in demand for heating fuels/electricity.
 - **Transport** – Reduced visibility, accidents.
- **Management**
 - **Warnings and guidelines** – Issued by IMD & NDMA (National disaster management authority)
 - **Preparedness** – Emergency shelters, public awareness, heat retention tips (dry clothes, hot fluids).
 - **Agriculture** – Shielding crops, animal care.

Why there is a persistent cold wave over Telangana recently?

- **Combination of factors** – Over Telangana right now, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) has pointed to a combination familiar in winter:
 - Dry air,
 - Clear skies,
 - Continental winds.
- **Unusual dry air mass** - The air mass over Telangana State has been unusually dry of late.
 - When humidity is low, the atmosphere holds less water vapour, which is one of the main greenhouse gases near the surface.
 - With less water vapour to trap heat, the ground loses energy more efficiently after sunset.
 - Clear skies strengthen this effect because clouds that might otherwise absorb and re-radiate some of the outgoing heat are absent.
 - Meteorologists have already said the ongoing cold wave is partly linked to dry winds blowing north and northeast and clear skies at night.
- **Influence of surface winds** – The northerly and northeasterly surface winds bring cooler, drier air from inland parts of India rather than air from the Bay of Bengal, which is more moist.
 - This steady cooling keeps the daily minimum temperature down even when the daytime temperature is 'ordinary' since each night begins with a cooler starting point.
 - Telangana had a cold wave warning in mid-November but it has seemed to go on because these low-level winds haven't shifted, thus the local air mass has remained cool and dry.
- **Impact of weak disturbance** – A weak western disturbance is expected to influence the western Himalaya the IMD has said there could be a 2-4°C rise in the minimum temperature as the larger pattern evolves with the lower-level easterlies.

What lies ahead?

- In a press release issued by the IMD it has been said that cold-wave conditions had occurred at isolated places over Telangana and warned that such conditions were “very likely” over the State, as well as in north interior Karnataka.
- The bulletin also said there would be “no significant change” in minimum temperatures over “remaining parts of the country” during the next week.
- That is, the cold patterns won't break in a sudden way.

2.2 Trends in the North Indian Ocean's Storm Cycle

The cyclonic disturbances over the North Indian Ocean, which include the Arabian Sea, the Bay of Bengal, and the land area in between, have changed drastically over the last century.

What is cyclonic disturbances?

- **Cyclonic disturbances** – These are low-pressure weather systems characterized by inward-spiraling winds.

- The word Cyclone is derived from the Greek word 'Cyclos' meaning the coils of a snake.
- **Coined by** – Henry Peddington because the tropical storms in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea appear like coiled serpents of the sea.
- **2 types** – Tropical cyclones & extra-tropical cyclones (temperate cyclones).

Tropical cyclones	Extra-tropical cyclones
These form over warm tropical oceans (above 26.5°C) and are powered by the release of latent heat from condensing water vapor.	They form over land or sea in mid-latitudes (30°-60°), along polar fronts where cold/warm air meet.
Energy are derived from latent heat from condensation in rising moist air.	Get its energy from horizontal temperature gradients (cold vs warm air masses).
They typically moves from east to west.	They moves from west to east.
They are known by different regional names , such as hurricanes in the Atlantic and typhoons in the Pacific.	Driven by the subtropical westerly jet stream, they travel east across Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to reach the Indian subcontinent.
It covers smaller area but much stronger winds and more destructive.	It covers larger areas, bring varied weather (rain, snow, blizzards).

What is the ongoing trend in storm activity across the North Indian Ocean?

- **Frequency of cyclonic disturbances has shifted** – Cyclone activity rose until the 1970s, fell sharply by the 2000s, and is now climbing again but not back to earlier highs.
- **Inverted U-shaped trend in the past century** –
 - Between 1900 and 1920 (averaged under 10); by the 1930s (risen above 15), marking a long period of stability until the 1970s.
 - However, the 1980s and 1990s saw a sharp decline, and hit a low about 8 in the 2000s.
 - Between 2010s and 2020s, the activity rebounded and is rising again, but still below the mid-century peak levels.
- **Regional Origin Shift** – The overall decline in disturbances in recent years is driven almost entirely by a sharp drop in activity within the Bay of Bengal.
 - **Bay of Bengal** – Once the primary hub of cyclonic disturbances, has seen a sharp decline in recent decades, driving the overall fall in activity.
 - **Arabian Sea** – The Arabian Sea has seen growing cyclonic activity, but its frequency remains below that of the Bay in recent years.
 - **Implication** – The cyclone risk is increasingly moving westward toward the Arabian Sea.
- **Intensification & Severity** – Fewer storms overall, but stronger ones, with the Arabian Sea becoming a growing hotspot due to faster warming.
 - A disturbance starts small (low-pressure <31 kmph), then can grow into depression (31–49), and further into a deep depression (50–61).
 - **Severity** – Cyclonic Storm (62–88), Severe Cyclonic Storm (89–117), Very Severe (118–166), Extremely Severe (167–221), Super Cyclonic storm (≥222).
- Since the 1970s, more Bay of Bengal storms have reached severe levels.
- Arabian Sea storms are both increasing and intensifying, creating higher risk and forecasting challenges.
- **Seasonality Shift** – More cyclones now form later in the year.
 - In Bay of Bengal – The disturbances increasingly occur in October–December instead of July–September.

Generally, warmer oceans provide more energy to tropical storms, making cyclones stronger and their paths harder to predict.

- Prior to the 1980s, activity was concentrated in July-September, since then, the focus has shifted to October–November.

How do these shifts in the North Indian Ocean positively impact India?

- **Reduced exposure to cyclones** – With fewer total disturbances, India faces lower overall exposure to cyclones, means less disruption to agriculture, fisheries, and coastal livelihoods compared to the mid-20th century peaks.
- **Decline in Bay of Bengal activity** – The Bay of Bengal, once the most cyclone-prone region, has seen a sharp decline in disturbances.
- This reduces risk for Odisha, West Bengal, and Andhra Pradesh, & allows better resource allocation for disaster management along the eastern coast.
- **Stronger preparedness & monitoring** – Although fewer disturbances occur, those that do form are more predictable targets for monitoring.
- It pushes India to strengthen early-warning systems, disaster preparedness, and resilient infrastructure.
- **Seasonal shift benefits** – Storms now occur later in the year (October–December), giving monsoon crops more time to mature before cyclone strikes.
- Disaster preparedness calendars can be adjusted to focus on the post-monsoon months, improving readiness.

How do these shifts in the North Indian Ocean negatively impact India?

- **Uneven decline** – The overall decline in disturbances is uneven - Arabian Sea activity is rising, exposing the western coast (Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kerala) to new risks.
- **Growing vulnerability of the western coast** – With rise in Arabian Sea activity, the western coast (Mumbai, Kochi, Lakshadweep) is becoming more vulnerable.
- Infrastructure and preparedness on this coast have historically been weaker, raising the potential for greater damage.
- **Disproportionate Impact** – Severe cyclones cause disproportionate losses—damaging lives, property, and agriculture far more than weaker storms.
- **Challenges in Arabian Sea** – The Arabian Sea is heating faster than average, producing stronger, less predictable cyclones, this makes forecasting and disaster planning more difficult.
- **Compound Flooding Risks** – The post-monsoon cyclones coincide with the retreating monsoon, increasing the chance of compound flooding.
- **Danger for Fishing Communities** – Fishing communities face an extended period of risk into winter, threatening livelihoods and safety.

What lies ahead?

- Looking ahead, fewer storms are forming, yet those that do are stronger, later in season, and more hazardous.
- The shifts in frequency, intensity, geography, and timing are reshaping cyclone dynamics in the North Indian Ocean, requiring improved forecasting, coastal planning, and disaster management.

2.3 Arctic Thaw – Climate Crisis, Geopolitical Competition, and India's Strategic Interests

The Arctic region is undergoing unprecedented environmental transformation due to rapid climate change.

What is the issue?

- **Highest surface air temperature** – According to the Arctic Report Card 2025 published by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the Arctic recorded the highest surface air temperatures in the last 125 years.
- The past ten years have been the warmest decade ever recorded in the Arctic region.
- **Arctic amplification** – Arctic warming is occurring at more than twice the global average rate, a phenomenon known as Arctic amplification.
- **Arctic Climate Crisis** – Shrinking glaciers, rising ocean temperatures, and declining sea ice are key indicators of Arctic warming.
- The oldest and thickest Arctic sea ice has declined by more than 95% since the 1980s.

- March 2025 recorded the lowest maximum sea ice extent in the 47-year satellite observation record.
- June snow cover in the Arctic is now nearly 50% of what it was in the 1960s.
- Reduced snow and ice cover lowers the region's albedo, leading to greater absorption of solar radiation.
- This process creates a positive feedback loop that accelerates further warming.
- Permafrost thaw releases iron, mercury, and toxic metals into rivers, a phenomenon described as "rusting rivers."
- These changes degrade freshwater quality and disrupt Arctic ecosystems and indigenous livelihoods.

What are the impacts and consequences of Arctic Thaw?

- **Ecological Consequences of Arctic Warming** – Arctic warming is reshaping terrestrial and marine ecosystems at an unprecedented pace.
- Thawing permafrost destabilizes land surfaces and releases large quantities of greenhouse gases like methane.
- The process of Atlantification is introducing warmer Atlantic waters into the Arctic Ocean.
- Atlantification leads to increased ocean mixing, reduced sea ice formation, and altered circulation patterns.
- Rising ocean temperatures have increased phytoplankton productivity and chlorophyll concentration.
- While this may boost fisheries temporarily, it also disrupts established food chains.
- Wildlife species such as polar bears, seals, and Arctic birds face habitat loss and food scarcity.
- Indigenous communities experience threats to food security, traditional livelihoods, and cultural survival.
- **Impact on Indian Monsoon** – Arctic changes are not regionally confined and have far-reaching global climatic consequences.
- A 2024 study by India's National Centre for Polar and Ocean Research (NCPOR) highlights Arctic influence on atmospheric circulation.
- Arctic warming affects Rossby waves and jet stream patterns in the Northern Hemisphere.
- These altered atmospheric patterns increase the unpredictability of the Indian Summer Monsoon Rainfall (ISMR).
- Variability in monsoon rainfall directly affects Indian agriculture, food security, and rural livelihoods.
- Therefore, Arctic climate stability is closely linked to India's domestic climate resilience.

What are the importance of Arctic region?

- **The Arctic as a Geopolitical Hotspot** – The Arctic covers nearly 4 % of the Earth's surface and connects North America, Europe, and Asia.
- The region is governed primarily through the Arctic Council, which includes eight Arctic states.
- These states are the United States, Canada, Russia, Norway, Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Sweden, and Finland.
- The Arctic is estimated to hold significant reserves of oil, natural gas, and critical minerals.
- Melting ice is making these resources increasingly accessible for exploration and exploitation.
- New maritime routes are emerging due to reduced ice cover.
- These developments have transformed the Arctic into a centre of strategic competition.
- **Economic and Strategic Significance** – The Northern Sea Route (NSR), also known as the Northeast Passage, connects the Pacific Ocean with the Atlantic Ocean.
- Climate-induced ice retreat has made the NSR increasingly navigable for longer durations.
- The NSR can reduce travel distance between Eastern Asia and Europe by nearly 40% compared to the Suez Canal route.
- Reduced travel time lowers fuel costs, shipping duration, and carbon emissions.
- Russia views the NSR as a strategic asset for economic development and geopolitical leverage.
- Western sanctions on Russia have increased its reliance on Asian partners for NSR development.

- Infrastructure development along the NSR requires massive investment in ports, ice-breakers, and satellite navigation systems.
- **China and Non-Arctic Actors in the Arctic** – China declared itself a “near-Arctic state” in 2018.
- It launched the Polar Silk Road as part of its Belt and Road Initiative.
- China seeks access to Arctic shipping lanes, energy resources, and scientific influence.
- Other non-Arctic states, including India, Japan, and South Korea, are increasing their Arctic engagement.
- These countries advocate for the Arctic as a global commons accessible to all.
- However, increasing militarisation and geopolitical fragmentation threaten Arctic cooperation.
- Finland and Sweden joining NATO has further polarized Arctic geopolitics.

What is the India's Arctic engagement?

- **Historical and Institutional Foundations** – India is a signatory to the Svalbard Treaty of 1920.
- India launched its first Arctic scientific expedition in 2007.
- The Himadri research station was established in Svalbard in 2008.
- India obtained Observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013.
- Scientific research has remained the cornerstone of India's Arctic presence.
- India released its Arctic Policy in 2022 to institutionalize its engagement.
- **India's Arctic Policy 2022 – Six Pillars**
 - Strengthening scientific research and international cooperation.
 - Climate and environmental protection.
 - Economic and human development.
 - Transportation and connectivity.
 - Governance and multilateral engagement.
 - National capacity building in polar sciences.
- The policy reflects India's balanced approach combining sustainability and strategic interests.
- **India's Strategic Interests in the Arctic** – India seeks energy diversification and access to critical minerals through Arctic cooperation.
- Since 2021, India has supported infrastructure development along Russia's Northern Sea Route.
- The Chennai-Vladivostok maritime corridor became operational in 2024.
- This corridor reduces shipping time between India and Europe by nearly two weeks.
- India can leverage its experience in the Himalayas and Antarctica for Arctic research.
- Strengthening climate modelling and monsoon research is essential.
- Diplomatic engagement with all Arctic states is necessary to safeguard India's interests.
- Cooperation between the “Third Pole” and the “North Pole” will shape the Arctic's future.

What lies ahead?

- The Arctic thaw represents both a global climate emergency and a geopolitical inflection point.
- Environmental degradation in the Arctic has direct implications for global climate systems.
- Economic opportunities are expanding alongside strategic rivalries.
- India's Arctic policy provides a comprehensive framework but requires sustained implementation.
- Scientific leadership, climate diplomacy, and strategic partnerships will define India's Arctic role.
- A cooperative and rules-based Arctic order is essential for global climate stability.

3. SOCIAL ISSUES

3.1 The Child Marriage Menace

Recently, The Union government marked the first anniversary of its Bal Vivah Mukh Bharat Abhiyan earlier this month with a 100-day awareness campaign for a country free of child marriage, as part of its commitment to the UN to end child marriage by 2030.

What is the global situation?

- **SDG 5** – The fifth UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
- Within this SDG, Target 5.3 is to eliminate all harmful practices, including child marriage, as well as early and forced marriages, and female genital mutilation.
- **Indicators** – Progress on child marriage is monitored using the indicator of the proportion of women between the ages of 20 and 24 years who were married before they turned 18.
- **UNICEF data** – In 2023, estimated that 64 crore girls got married in childhood, with a whopping third of them in India alone. It added that progress needs to happen 20 times faster than it has been to reach the 2030 target.
- **Prevalence** – Globally, 19% of young women aged 20-24 were married as children, a decrease from 23% a decade ago.
- **Regional Burden** – Nearly half (45%) of all child brides live in South Asia, primarily driven by the numbers in India, which alone accounts for one-third of the global total.
- **Highest Rates** – Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest prevalence rate, with one in three girls marrying before 18, and at the current pace, the region is over 200 years away from ending the practice.
- **Stagnation and Reversal** – Progress has largely stagnated in Latin America and the Caribbean and the Middle East and North Africa, with crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts, and climate change threatening to reverse gains made in other areas.

What is the situation in India?

- **NFHS data** – India has made tremendous strides in reducing child marriage, dropping from 47.4% in 2005-06 to 26.8% in 2015-16, a sharp decline of 21 percentage points over a decade, according to data from the National Family Health Survey (NFHS).
- Progress slowed thereafter, with child marriage rates dropping just 3.5 percentage points over the next five years to reach 23.3% in 2019-21.
- **Higher rates** – The highest child marriage rates among women aged 18 to 29 years was seen in:
 - West Bengal (42%),
 - Bihar (40%), and
 - Tripura (39%),
 - Jharkhand (35%),
 - Andhra Pradesh (33%),
 - Assam (32%),
 - Dadra & Nagar Haveli and Daman & Diu (28%),
 - Telangana (27%),
 - Madhya Pradesh (25%), and
 - Rajasthan (25%).
- **Lowest rates** – The percentage of women marrying before the legal minimum age of 18 years is lowest in:
 - Lakshadweep (4%),
 - Jammu & Kashmir (6%),
 - Ladakh (6%),
 - Himachal Pradesh, Goa, and Nagaland (7% each).
- **Disparities on the basis of higher education and income** – The UN Population Fund's analysis of NFHS data shows that 48% of girls with no education were married below 18 years of age in comparison to only 4% among those with higher education.

- Also, 40% of girls from the lowest quintile of the household wealth index married before they became adults, in comparison to just 8% of those from the highest quintile.

What action is being taken?

- **Legal measures** – *The Prevention of Child Marriage Act* was passed in 2006, and national child marriage rates have halved since then.
- The *Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012* has also helped prevent child marriage.
- However, experts note that legislation has a limited impact without a shift in social norms, especially with respect to the education of girls, which has the highest impact on raising the age of marriage.
- **Minimum age for marriage** – The Union government proposed to raise the minimum age of marriage for women to 21 years to bring them at par with men, and to pave the way for women to complete their higher education, and have greater skills, maturity and independence when they get married.
- **Bal Vivah Mukht Abhiyan** – The *Bal Vivah Mukht Abhiyan* portal records that, as of December 20, 54,917 child marriage prevention officers have been appointed across the country to conduct awareness activities and act on child marriage complaints.
 - **Child marriage prevented** – In the year since the campaign began, it has prevented 1,520 reported instances of child marriage either through persuasion or administrative action, with Madhya Pradesh and Haryana recording the highest figures.
- However, it also records that 198 child marriages were not prevented, resulting in police complaints, reports to the Child Welfare Committee or the provision of annulment.
 - **Collaboration** – The campaign has partnered with faith leaders, youth groups and community networks that hold real influence at the grassroots-level to change the narrative on child marriage and encourage timely reporting and prevention.
- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao scheme** – The Centre's flagship aims to address the declining child sex ratio through empowerment measures, especially promotion of education, though effective implementation has been patchy on the ground.
- **Laadli schemes** – It offer financial support to families with girl children from birth, and steps are being taken to increase the enrolment of girls in school, with measures such as cycles for safe transport to better sanitation in schools.
- **Efforts of states** – A number of States offer financial aid for girls' education.
 - **For instance**, West Bengal's Kanyashree scheme, which offers low-income families ₹1,000 per year to educate their girls between the ages of 13 and 18, along with a one-time grant of ₹25,000 for 18 and 19-year-olds, provided that girls pursue higher education and delay marriage.
- Some women's activists, however, say that the State with the highest rates of child marriage is sending mixed signals with its Rupashree scheme, offering ₹25,000 to low-income families at the time of a daughter's marriage, though the stipulation is that she has crossed 18 years.

What lies ahead?

- The Union government could increase the participation of women in the labour force and improve maternal and child health.
- However, Opposition MPs sought greater scrutiny of the Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill.
- Critics warn that without social reform, a mere legal change could simply criminalise many communities, given that a staggering 61% of women aged 20 to 24 years married before they turned 21 years.
- *Girls Not Brides*, a global partnership, warns that the child marriage target will also impact other SDGs.
- Unless we make significant progress on ending child marriage, we will fall short on at least nine of the SDGs, including those related to poverty, food security, health, education, gender equality, economic growth, climate action, and peace and justice.

G. S. PAPER II

4. INDIAN POLITY

4.1 HECI Bill 2025

In the winter session of Parliament, beginning December 1, 2025, the Union Government plans to introduce the Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) Bill, 2025.

What is HEIC bill, 2025?

- **HEIC bill** – Higher Education Commission of India bill, is a flagship reform to create a single overarching higher education regulator, replacing the University Grants Commission (UGC) and the sectoral councils, excluding medical and legal education.
- **Objective** – The HECI is expected to be a robust framework, designed to ensure quality, accountability, and institutional autonomy in higher education and translate the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020's vision into clear norms on curriculum reforms, better academic delivery, and promote research culture.

How the 2018 draft bill received mixed public reaction?

- **The 2018 draft HECI Bill** – Efforts to create a unified regulator in higher education began with the 2018 draft Higher Education Commission of India (Repeal of University Grants Commission Act) bill, which was placed in the public domain for stakeholder feedback.
- **Suggestions** – It is reported to have garnered over 7,500 suggestions from parliamentarians, State governments, academics, students, teacher unions, and industry associations.
- While the draft bill was applauded for recognising the need to separate regulation from funding, several viewpoints emerged from various stakeholders.
- **Concerns raised** – Several stakeholders, particularly from the States, raised concerns over a potentially “Central government-heavy composition” of HECI.
 - They argued that the limited representation from the States could undermine the concurrent status of education and fail to account for regional diversity.
 - They said the bill also adversely affect the public institutions in rural areas, which often operate with limited infrastructure and faculty.
- **Teacher unions and student groups** – They pointed out the absence of guaranteed representation for faculty and students on the HECI and its advisory bodies.
- It was also felt that the draft bill continued a ‘command-and-control’ regulatory philosophy, replacing the UGC could disproportionately affect smaller and rural institutions.
- The draft bill also did not adequately articulate how the existing specialist regulators, such as AICTE and NCTE, would be integrated into a coherent architecture.
- The academic associations and civil society organisations were reported to have argued that the draft did not sufficiently safeguard institutional autonomy and collegial governance.
- In response to this feedback from the public consultations, the 2018 draft was not tabled in the Parliament, and the government signalled that the proposed bill would be re-worked in light of NEP 2020.

How the NEP 2020 envisaged HECI architecture?

- **NEP 2020** – It emphasises transparency, public self-disclosure by institutions, minimisation of human interface through technology, and the avoidance of conflicts of interest between these four functions.
- It also underscores institutional autonomy, graded on accreditation outcomes, and encourages multi-disciplinary universities with strong internal quality assurance systems.
- **4 verticals** – The HECI, proposed by NEP 2020, envisages four independent verticals:
 - National Higher Education Regulatory Council (NHERC),
 - National Accreditation Council (NAC),
 - General Education Council (GEC)
 - Higher Education Grants Council (HEGC) to address the functions of compliance, quality assurance, setting up academic standards and funding, respectively.
- The proposed HECI bill, therefore, has to move beyond the narrow academic-standards focus of the 2018 draft and codify the four-pillar architecture.
- It has adequate checks and balances, including a robust role for the States and the academic peers, in the governance processes.

- **Global developments since 2018** – The COVID-19 pandemic triggered the largest disruption in the history of education, forcing institutions to shift to online and blended modes of delivery rapidly.
- The online learning delivery model created opportunities for working professionals to learn without leaving their current jobs.
- Due to the unprecedented acceleration in the deployment of technologies like Artificial Intelligence (AI) in industry, skills emerged as a higher priority over knowledge for employment, leading to a dramatic rise in micro-credential skill development courses and stackable learning pathways, to supplement classroom learning.
- **Dr. Radhakrishnan Committee report** – It proposed transformative reforms to strengthen assessment, accreditation and ranking of higher education institutions, to expand coverage of accreditation, and to align existing bodies such as NAAC, NBA and NIRF, with the proposed NAC, under HECI.
- It also recommended a One Nation One Data (ONOD) IT architecture to capture data needed from the institutions for governance, ratings and ranking and maintain the integrity of the same to enable transparent, technology-empowered evaluation and ranking.

What are the expectations of different stakeholders?

- **State government** – The State governments expect commensurate representation within HECI's governance structures, clear articulation of the division of regulatory responsibilities, and protection of their constitutional roles in higher education.
- **Higher educational institution** – The Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) hope for predictable, time-bound approvals; simplified, fully online compliance processes; rationalised inspection and reporting burdens; and a credible pathway to graded autonomy, based on transparent accreditation criteria.
- **Smaller institutions** – The smaller institutions especially in the rural areas, are likely to press for capacity-building support rather than punitive enforcement.
- **Industries** – The industry expects a push for regulatory flexibility to recognise new-age programmes, micro-credentials for skilling, and international joint degrees in emerging areas, while expecting HECI to protect minimum standards. If the proposed bill is to enjoy broad legitimacy, it must be seen to credibly address the expectations of each of these constituencies.

What are the challenges in implementing the HECI bill?

- **Coordination issues** – With over 70% of the universities falling under the States' acts and 94% of the students enrolled in State or private universities, leaving about 6% students in Centrally funded universities, there is a need for better coordination between the Central government and the States and their integration into the governance design, for achieving tangible results.
- **Structural and systemic challenges** – Most of the institutions, particularly the State-funded ones in urban and rural areas, lack digital infrastructure, qualified faculty, and quality assurance systems and need massive capacity-building to move to self-disclosure-based, technology-enabled regulation.
- **Low accreditation coverage** – NEP mandates universal accreditation by 2035, but current accreditation coverage remains below 40% and the delayed binary accreditation needs to be sped up by a drastic expansion of assessment capacity.
- The HECI bill may incorporate reforms to shorten faculty recruitment timelines and institute a reward system based on performance, particularly for research contributions, to attract and retain high-calibre academics.
- The HEGC funding vertical must balance performance-based funding with baseline equity funding. India needs significant investments to meet the GER target of 50% by 2035. The proposed HECI Bill may contain statutory provisions to ensure that the funding mechanism is transparent, merit-based, and performance-linked, ensuring that the regulatory system functions independently and credibly.

What lies ahead?

- The forthcoming HECI bill of 2025 presents a historic opportunity to transform India's fragmented higher education regulatory system into a unified, modern, and outcome-based architecture, to facilitate the achievement of NEP targets for 2035.
- However, success will depend not only on legislative design but on the effectiveness of implementation, Centre-States collaboration, robust data systems, sustained funding, and buy-in from the diverse stakeholders.
- A thoughtfully architected HECI will enable India to build a globally competitive higher education ecosystem, which can accrue significant demographic dividends to the country.

4.2 Electoral Trusts – A Mechanism for Political Funding

During 2024–25, nine electoral trusts collectively contributed Rs.3,811 crore to political parties, nearly three times higher than in 2023–24, following the abolition of electoral bond scheme by the SC.

What are Electoral Trusts?

- **Electoral Trusts** – These are non-profit companies Introduced in 2013 and set up under Section 8 of the Companies Act, 2013.
- **Purpose** – They provide a transparent channel for political funding, ensuring that donations are routed legally and disclosed to the Election Commission of India (ECI).
- **Governed by** – Electoral Trusts Scheme, 2013, The Companies Act, 1956, and the Income Tax Act, 1961.
- **Monitored by** – Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) and the Election Commission of India (ECI).
- **Qualification** – Any company registered under Section 8 of the Companies Act, 2013 can form an electoral trust.
- **Eligibility to donate** – Under Section 17CA of the Income-tax Act, 1961
 - Any citizen of India,
 - A company registered in India, or
 - A firm or Hindu Undivided Family or
 - Association of persons living in India, can donate to an electoral trust.
- **Ineligible donors** – It shall not accept contributions from -
 - An individual who is not a citizen of India
 - A foreign entity whether incorporated or not
 - Other Electoral Trusts (approved under the Electoral Trusts Scheme)
 - Contributors without PAN
 - NRIs without a passport number.

Trends in Electoral Trust Contributions

- The number of registered electoral trusts grew from 3 in 2013 to 17 in 2021–22. Despite this, only a few trusts contribute regularly.
- In 2023–24, just 5 trusts made donations, while in 2024–25 the number increased to 9.
- Among these, **Prudent, Progressive, and New Democratic Electoral Trusts** together accounted for **98%** of the total contributions in 2024–25.

What are the other sources of funding for political parties in India?

- **Cash Donations** – Limited to Rs.2,000 (down from Rs.20,000), requiring digital/cheque payments above this.
- **Known Sources** – Membership fees, sale of publications, bank interest, asset sales.
- **Unknown Sources** – A significant portion (around 66% in 2021-22 for national parties) remains untraceable, raising transparency issues.
- **Electoral Bonds (Scrapped)** – A controversial instrument for anonymous donations, largely from corporates, often linked to government contractors.

Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) vs. Union of India, 2024 - the SC has unanimously struck down the Electoral Bond Scheme, declaring it unconstitutional, it violates right to information under Article 19(1)(a).

To know about Electoral Bond, click [here](#)

What are the functioning mechanism of the electoral trusts?

- **Renewal** – Electoral trusts must apply for renewal every 3 financial years.
- **Mandatory Donation Requirement** – They must donate 95% of contributions received in a financial year to political parties registered under the Representation of the People Act, 1951.

- **Contributor Identification** – The contributors' PAN (in case of a resident) or passport number (in case of an NRI) is required at the time of making contributions.
- **Transparency in Funding** – The electoral trusts route ensures disclosure of both contributors and beneficiaries, making the process more transparent.
- **Modes of Payment** – Trusts can receive contributions, that are made via cheques, bank drafts, or electronic transfers. Donors are required to disclose their Permanent Account Number (PAN).
- **Utilization of Funds** – At least 95% of collected funds must be disbursed to registered political parties, with the remaining 5% administrative expenses.
- **Restrictions on Use** – Trusts cannot use donations for the benefit of their members.
- **Accountability & Reporting** – Trusts must maintain audited accounts, disclosing donors, recipients, and disbursements to the Central Board of Direct Taxes (CBDT) and the Election Commission of India (ECI).

What is the difference between electoral bonds and electoral trusts?

Feature	Electoral Bonds	Electoral Trusts
Introduction	Introduced in 2017	Introduced in 2013
Legal Basis	Finance Act, 2017	Companies Act, 2013 (Section 8)
Nature	Financial instruments issued by SBI	Non-profit companies act as intermediaries
Donor Identity	Anonymous donors, secrecy	Donor details disclosed to ECI
Beneficiaries	Registered political parties	Registered political parties
Payment Mode	Purchased via SBI in denominations (Rs.1,000 to Rs.1 crore)	Cheques, drafts, electronic transfers
Current Status	Struck down by SC (Feb 2024)	Primary channel for donations.

What are the benefits of electoral trusts?

- **Transparency** – Trusts must file annual reports with the ECI and CBDT, showing donors and recipient parties.
- **Tax Benefits** – Donations to registered trusts get 100% tax deduction for individuals and companies.
- **Accountability** – Trusts must keep audited accounts and submit regular reports on funds.
- **No Foreign Funding** – Contributions from foreign entities, government departments, or non-citizens are prohibited.
- **Corporate Framework** – Trusts give companies a legal, structured way to donate in line with governance norms.

What are the concerns associated with electoral trusts?

- **Transparency Issues** – Although trusts are supposed to disclose donor and recipient details, the reports are filed with the CBDT and ECI, but not easily available to citizens.
- **Corporate Dominance** – A few big corporate trusts dominate funding, mostly favoring ruling parties.
- **Concentration of Funding** – Only a handful of trusts are active, with three accounting for almost all donations.
- **Nexus between Corporates & Parties** – Trusts act as intermediaries for corporates and parties, making parties dependent on corporate money and weakening fair competition.
- **Lack of Public Accountability** – Citizen's face difficulty in verifying the sources of party funding, creating a significant democratic deficit.

What steps should be taken next?

- **Transparency** – Trusts should disclose their rules and allocation criteria to ensure transparency.

- **Cap on Corporate Donations** – Corporate donations must be capped to prevent concentration of political power, following models like Germany.
- **Expand Public Funding** – Public funding should be expanded to reduce dependence on corporate money and ensure fair competition.
- **Regulatory Oversight** – Oversight must be active and strict, challenging practices that entrench corporate dominance.

4.3 Erosion Of Pakistan's Judiciary

Recently, Pakistan's National Assembly and the Senate passed the 27th amendment which introduces new provisions in the military command structure, it has far-reaching implications for Pakistan's judiciary.

What is the 27th amendment of Pakistan?

- **New Court** – The amendment has created a new Federal Constitutional Court (FCC).
- **Supreme Court's role curtailed** – The amendment has curtailed the role of supreme court as the custodian of the Constitution, thereby reducing the judiciary's independence.
- **Reaction from the judges** – 3 judges from the Supreme and High Courts have already resigned in protest against the 27th amendment, while four judges from the Islamabad High Court have appealed against it.

How the 27th amendment reduces the independence of Pakistan's judiciary?

- **Curtailing the original jurisdiction of SC** – The creation of a new FCC to address issues relating to the Constitution and federal-provincial relations would mean that the Supreme Court would no longer have its original jurisdiction.
- Thus, the Supreme Court would not hear cases relating to the interpretation of the Constitution, fundamental rights, or questions of federal-provincial relations.
 - **For instance**, In recent years, the Supreme Court had used its original jurisdiction to deliberate on a few high-profile political developments including the Panama Case.
- **Powers to executive** – It provides the executive with the power to transfer judges without their consent.
- Critics of the amendment argue that this provision would enable the executive to transfer judges who do not toe its line.
- Though the executive has to follow certain procedures, in effect, it could transfer judges to secure its choice or to penalise those who disagree with it.
- This would significantly undermine the judiciary's independence at the higher level.
- **The hidden agenda** – Though the executive is trying to justify it in terms of necessity, the real reason is to pick those judges who will be amenable, especially with respect to constitutional matters.
 - The critics argue, is part of a plan to subvert the Supreme Court's "over reach" on constitutional matters.
- **Divided and weakened judiciary** – The FCC already has a Chief Justice and a few other judges; it has also started entertaining cases in the first week of its existence.
- **Unbalanced power** – Overall, the 27th amendment gives the executive and the legislature an edge over the judiciary, thereby undermining the essence of the balance of power in a constitutional democracy.
- **Undermines the successes of the 18th amendment** – The 18th amendment aimed to depoliticise the judiciary and make it independent.
- The 18th amendment, passed in 2010 by the PPP government, provided for a Judicial Commission of Pakistan (JCP) to recommend the names of new judges, thereby giving more space to the judiciary, the 27th amendment makes it redundant.

What is the amendment's history?

- **18th amendment (2010)** – It had mandated that the JCP be comprised of judges from the Supreme Court & High Courts.
- **26th amendment** – It altered the composition of JCP by bringing in more members from the executive, thereby undermining the selection of judges for the higher courts.
 - The JCP now has more members from the political side.

- It also granted the JCP the power to appoint constitutional benches, thereby removing the Chief Justice of Pakistan's power to appoint benches.
- The 26th and 27th amendments are not the first time the executive in Pakistan has tried to weaken the judiciary.

What lies ahead?

- Given the political and societal issues facing Pakistan, and the questions of accountability, especially in higher institutions, as the recent International Monetary Fund report highlighted, an independent judiciary is essential for Pakistan.
- Separation of powers and an independent judiciary are essential for any constitutional democracy, especially Pakistan.
- Political parties of Pakistan should know this, given the challenge from the Establishment (Pakistan's military complex) to democracy and its institutions.
- An independent judiciary will remain the only institution that could protect, if at all, overreach from the Establishment.
- The real motivations of the Pakistan Muslim League (N) (PML-N) government are to clip the wings of the Supreme Court and reduce it to a Court of Appeals by removing its original jurisdiction.

4.4 Draft ISI Bill – 2025

Recently, protests erupted over the draft Indian Statistical Institute Bill, 2025 released by Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI).

What is the Indian Statistical Institute (ISI)?

- **Establishment** – The ISI was founded in December 1931 by P.C. Mahalanobis in Kolkata and has since grown into one of India's most prestigious academic and research institutions.
- **Registration** – The institute was originally registered in April 1932, under the Societies Registration Act of 1860, and later re-registered under the West Bengal Societies Registration Act of 1961.
- Being a society provided the institute its own memorandum of association, bye-laws, and regulations.
- **Recognition** – Parliament enacted the Indian Statistical Institute Act, 1959, declaring ISI as an Institution of National Importance (INI).
- **Legacy** – Many scholars link the origin of the institute to the Bengal renaissance and credit the institute with shaping India's planning and policy apparatus.
- **Importance** – The National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) was developed at ISI, establishing the foundation of India's official statistical system.
- Other than P.C. Mahalanobis, the institute has produced legendary scholars such as Professor C.R. Rao and S.R.S. Varadhan.
- With about 1,200 students and six centres across India, ISI offers undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Statistics, Mathematics, Quantitative Economics, Computer Science, Library and Information Science, Cryptology and Security, Quality Management Science and Operations Research.

What are the concerns of the academicians over the draft bill?

- **Change in nature of the institute** – The primary concern of those opposing the draft Bill is how the ISI's institutional status will change, from an "a registered society to a statutory body corporate".
- **Lack of legitimate reason** – Academicians noted that there is no transparent reason that MoSPI should repeal the (1959) Act, abolish the society and introduce a Bill which violates the basic spirit of the agreement between the general body of the society and the government.
- **Undermines cooperative federalism** – The move to bypass the society registered under the WB Societies Registration Act to a "statutory body corporate" infringes upon the jurisdiction of the Societies Registration Act and is against the spirit of cooperative federalism.
- Those opposing the draft Bill point out that the governance structure, as in the existing 1959 Act, vested authority in a council with academic representation, and procedural safeguards against government overreach.
- **Gives enormous power to government** – The proposed 2025 Bill, however, gives power to the Board of Governors (BoG), defined under Section 15 of the Act, which is heavily dominated by government nominees sidelining the authority of faculty and academic stakeholders.

- **Concerns over funding** – Since there is a push for a corporate model of funding in the draft Bill, getting funds for basic research projects could be a problem in the future.
- Section 29 of the proposed 2025 Act deals with 'power to generate revenue' which includes student fees, consultancy services and sponsored research projects among others.
- **Control over appointments** – Another critical area raised by those opposing the Bill is that all appointments will be controlled by the Union government, through the BoG.
- After the proposed Bill, there are apprehensions of political interference in the appointments by the Union Government.
- **Government's response** – The government claims that the idea behind the legislation is the vision to make ISI not only one of the best in India but one of the foremost institutes in the world as the institute approaches its centenary in 2031.
- A press release stated that, over the years, four review committees had examined the functioning of ISI.
- The most recent, chaired by Dr. R.A. Mashelkar in 2020, recommended major reforms to strengthen governance, expand academic programmes, and make ISI globally competitive.

What lies ahead?

- The students and academicians are banking on the support of Opposition parties to oppose the proposed legislation.
- Government could consider the issues raised by the academicians and students to ensure the transparent and vibrant function of the ISI.

4.5 Free Speech – Protection and Regulation

Recently the proceedings of The Supreme Court in Ranveer Allahbadia vs Union of India and other cases have said that self-styled bodies are insufficient for regulation of online content and suggested the creation of neutral, autonomous bodies it further suggested that the Government publish the draft regulatory guidelines and invite comments.

What are the existing laws and regulation on free speech?

- **Legal provisions** – Section 67 of the Information Technology Act and Sections 294, 295 and 296 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) penalise obscenity.
- **Online regulation** – Sections 66 of the Information Technology Act prohibits computer-related offences such as hacking and 66E of the Act prohibits publishing personal images of others.
- **Cyber terrorism** – Section 66F of the same Act penalises cyber terrorism.
- **The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules** – It were also promulgated in 2021 though they are criticised for their overreaching interference and penal provisions.
- **Oversight mechanism** – Under these rules, there is already an oversight mechanism by the Centre.
- These rules also impose prior restraint.
- To illustrate, as per clause II (c) under the appendix of the Rules, a publisher should take “due caution and discretion” while dealing

What is the outline in the Constitution and the Courts ruling?

- **Article 19(2)** – The grounds based on which the right to free speech can be restricted are laid down by the Constitution.
- This consists of interests of sovereignty, security of the state, public order, defamation and others expressly enumerated.
- **Common Cause vs Union of India (2008)** – In this case the Court cautioned itself: “Apart from the doctrine of separation of powers, courts must realize that there are many problems before the country which courts cannot solve, however much they may like to.”
- When the Court takes on this task, it is limited by inherent institutional barriers, including that of technical expertise in the field of online media regulation.
- The Court's obstinacy for regulations in the field also would be vitiated by the same limitations.

- **Sahara India Real Estate Corp. Ltd. & Ors. vs Securities & Exch. Board of India & Anr., (2012)** – The court had considered in detail the question whether regulation of media content is desirable.
- Being conscious of the dangers of blanket prohibition, the Court held that pre-censorship of the media must be avoided at all costs.
- In the context of court reporting, it was held that the postponement orders directed at the media must be done only as a last resort and must satisfy a high threshold of reasonableness.
- **Kaushal Kishor case (2023)** – The Court itself, speaking through a five judge Bench held that additional restrictions beyond what is expressly laid down in Article 19(2) could not be imposed.
- It was categorically held: “The grounds lined up in Article 19(2) for restricting the right to free speech are exhaustive.
- Under the guise of invoking other fundamental rights or under the guise of two fundamental rights staking a competing claim against each other, additional restrictions not found in Article 19(2) cannot be imposed on the exercise of the right conferred by Article 19(1)(a) upon any individual.”
- It is interesting to note that on previous occasions, the Court has effectively restrained itself from venturing into blanket prohibitory measures.
- **Adarsh Co-operative Housing Society Ltd. vs Union of India and Others (2018)** – When a suggestion was made by a counsel urging the court to direct the film-makers to add a disclaimer before the movie, the Court repelled it.
- It said that it is for the Censor Board and not for the Court to decide it, and even the Censor Board could decide it only after hearing the producer or the director of the movie.
- Validity of the laws are to be determined by the Court as the constitutional umpire.
- **Constituent Assembly debates** – Pandit Thakur Dass Bhargava said that “the Supreme Court should ultimately be the arbiter and should have the final say” in situations of challenging the restrictions on freedom, by saying whether “the restrictions put are reasonable” (Constituent Assembly Debates. December 1, 1948).
- This is the scheme of Article 19 of the Constitution as well.
- Therefore, constitutional propriety demands that the Court abstains not only from the process of law making but also from the deliberation on the requirement for a law touching the citizen’s freedom.

What is the scenario in other countries?

- **European union** – The Digital Services Act, 2022 promulgated by the European Union prescribes content removal protocols.
- **Germany** – The Network Enforcement Act, 2017 in Germany ensures prompt action on harmful content, without adversely impacting free speech.
- **United Kingdom** – The Online Safety Act, 2023 of the United Kingdom focuses on removal of harmful content and imposing a fine in case of breach.
- **Australia** – The Online Safety Act, 2021 in Australia imposes a fine on non-compliance with regulation.
- **The case of China and Russia** – Countries such as China and Russia are invoking draconian laws to restrict online content.
- Surveillance and pre-censorship also dominate the online content regulation in these jurisdictions.
- Sadly, even some of the democracies which transform into autocracies also follow suit.

What lies ahead?

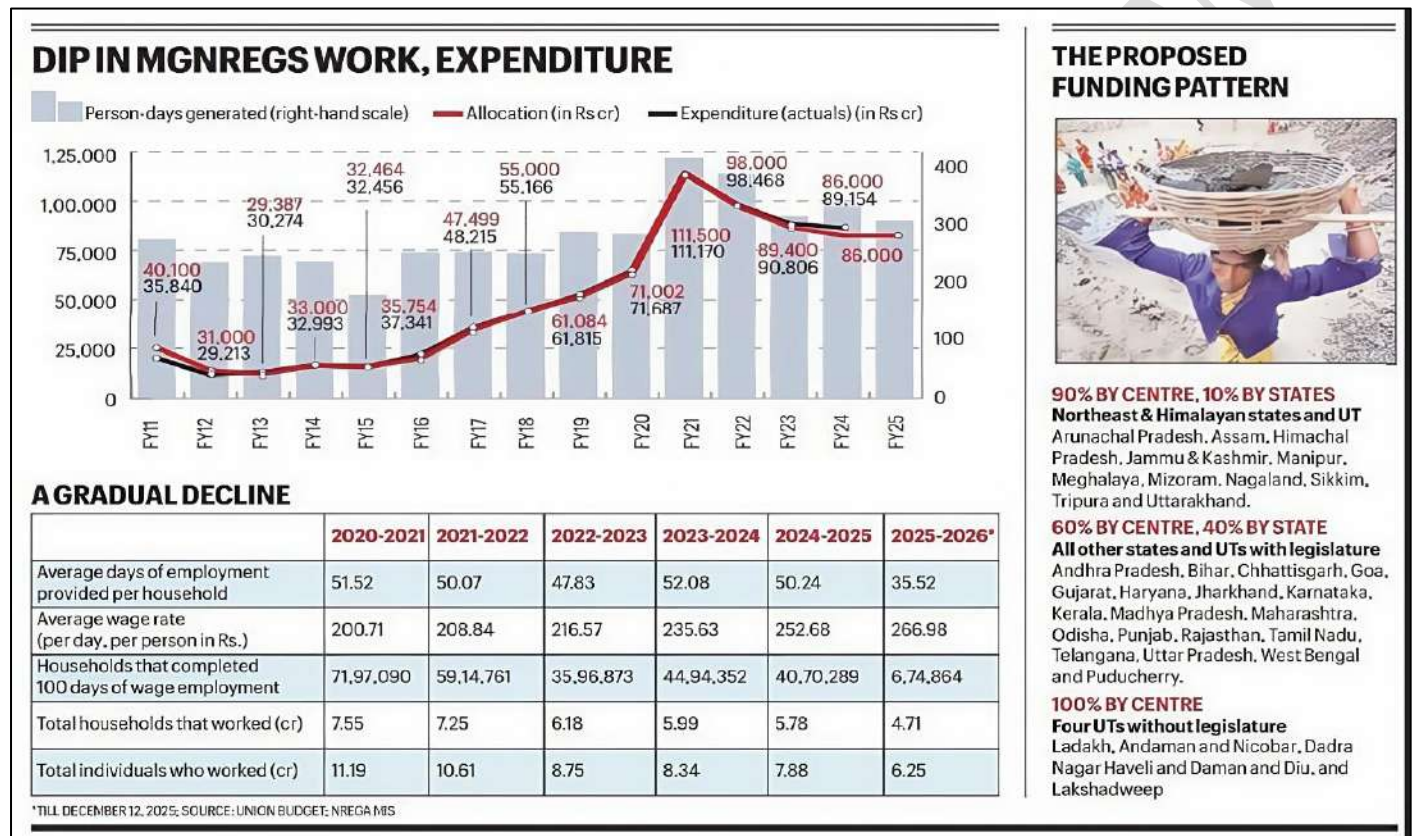
- When the Court repeatedly asks for stringent laws to regulate Internet content and when the Centre readily agrees, it is a serious concern in terms of a citizen’s freedom.
- Despite the existence of many provisions, any attempt at further regulating the right to freedom of speech and expression must be subject to critical analysis, especially when it comes from the Court.
- Author Salman Rushdie, when censored, has put it succinctly – “Free Speech is the whole thing, the whole ball game and Free speech is life itself.”

4.6 VG-G RAM G Bill - The MGNREGA Revamp

Recently, the government proposed the VB-G RAM G Bill to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) of 2005.

What are the key changes the VB-G RAM G Bill proposes to the current rural job guarantee framework?

- **Guaranteed wage employment days** – Section 5(1) of the VB-G Ram G Bill proposes 125 days of guaranteed employment to every rural household whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work.
- MGNREGS guarantees employment for 100 days, the number of families exhausting that work quota has been very limited owing to the large base of active workers.
- **States to share funding burden** – One of the major changes the VB-G RAM G Bill proposes is in the fund-sharing pattern.
- Unlike MGNREGA, where the Centre pays the entire wage bill, states will have to share the wage payment burden under VB-G RAM G.



- For Union territories without a legislature, the Union government shall bear the entire cost.
- **Payment structure under the MGNREGA** - The Union government pays
 - The complete wage bill for unskilled manual work
 - Up to three-fourths of the material cost of the scheme (including payment of wages to skilled and semi-skilled workers subject to the provisions of Schedule II)
 - Such percentage of the total cost of the scheme as may be determined by the Union government towards the administrative expenses, which may include the salary and allowances of the programme officers and supporting staff, the administrative expenses of the central council, facilities to be provided under Schedule II and other items.
- The state governments pay for:
 - The cost of unemployment allowance
 - One-fourth of the material cost of the scheme (including payment of wages to skilled and semi-skilled workers subject to the provisions of Schedule II);
 - Administrative expenses of the state council.
- **Normative allocation** – The new “normative allocation” formula transforms the method of allocation of resources into a purely top-down process.

- The Bill defines this as “the allocation of the fund made by the Central Government to the State”.
- Normative allocation would be a departure from the MGNREGA provision of the labour budget.
- **Pause during agriculture season** – The VB-G Ram G Bill introduces provisions for pausing the employment guarantee scheme for 60 days during sowing and harvesting to ensure “adequate agricultural labour availability”.
- States are to notify this 60-day period in advance.
- They may issue distinct notifications for different areas based on agro-climatic zones, local patterns of agricultural activities or other factors.
- **Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans** – As per the provisions of the Bill, all works under the new scheme shall be originated from the Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans consolidated at the Block, District and State levels and further aggregated into the Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack, which shall comprise a comprehensive listing of works aligned with National development priorities.
- **Thematic domains** – The Viksit Bharat National Rural Infrastructure Stack shall encompass four thematic focus domains:
 - Water security through water-related work
 - Core rural infrastructure
 - Livelihood-related infrastructure
 - Works for the mitigation of extreme weather events
 - These plans will be integrated with the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan.
- **Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Card** – The VB-G RAM G Bill provides for issuance of Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Cards to an adult member of every rural household willing to undertake unskilled manual work.
- Such persons may submit the names, ages and address of the household to the Gram Panchayat within whose jurisdiction they reside, for the purpose of registration under the new job guarantee scheme.
- **Special cards** – It also has provisions for the issuance of Special Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Cards to
 - Single women,
 - Persons with disability
 - Persons above sixty years
 - Released bonded labourers
 - Persons belonging to Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups
 - Transgender persons.
- The special card will have a distinct colour.
- Unlike existing job cards which are valid for five years, the Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Card will be valid for three years, after which it may be renewed upon verification.
- **Higher penalty** – Section 27 of the new Bill provides for a higher penalty for violation of its provisions. The penalty was earlier Rs 1,000; now it is proposed to be Rs 10,000.
- **Annual budget** – For the current financial year, the government has allocated Rs 86,000 crore for MGNREGS.
- For the new scheme, the Rural Development Ministry estimates the annual requirement of funds on wage, material and administrative components at Rs 1,51,282 crore, including the state share. “
- Of this, the estimated central share is Rs 95,692.31 crore,” it said.

4.7 The Law on ‘Suspension of Sentence’

On December 29, a three-judge vacation bench of the Supreme Court, consisting of Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant, Justice J.K. Maheshwari, and Justice A.G. Masih, stayed the Delhi High Court’s decision to suspend the life sentence of Kuldeep Singh Sengar, a former four-time MLA, who was convicted in the infamous 2017 Unnao rape case.

What is the background of the unnao rape case?

- **2017** – Kuldeep Singh Sengar, then a sitting MLA, allegedly raped a minor girl at his residence.

- **2018** – The incident was marred by police inaction and alleged intimidation of the victim, prompting the case to be transferred to the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI).
- The trial was then shifted to Delhi under the Supreme Court's directions.
- **2019** – On December 16, 2019, Sengar was convicted, and on December 20, 2019, he was sentenced to life imprisonment until the end of his natural life.
- **2025** – Despite his conviction, Sengar filed an appeal against his sentence, leading to the Delhi High Court's decision to suspend his sentence on December 23, 2025, pending the appeal.

What is the legal framework on suspension of sentence?

- **Conclusion of a trial** – Once a trial concludes, an accused is either acquitted or convicted.
- **Conviction** – A conviction displaces the "presumption of innocence" and renders the sentence operative, requiring the convict to undergo the awarded punishment.
- **Suspension of sentence** – However, under Section 389 of the CrPC, 1973 (now Section 430 of the BNSS, 2023), a convict may seek suspension of the sentence during the pendency of an appeal.
- The suspension of the sentence, however, does not affect the finding of guilt but only suspends the execution of the punishment.
- **Differences in legal approach** – While suspension of sentence is routine in cases involving short-term or fixed-term sentences, the legal approach is different in cases involving serious crimes like rape, particularly those punishable by life imprisonment.
- In such cases, courts are generally cautious about suspending the sentence, as it may send the wrong message about the severity of the crime.

When do courts suspend a sentence?

- **Exception vs Rule** – In cases involving serious offences, the suspension of a sentence is an exception rather than the rule.
- **Short-term sentences** – The Supreme Court, in cases like *Bhagwan Rama Shinde Gosai vs. State of Gujarat* (1999), clarified that suspension of a sentence in appeal should be done liberally in cases involving short-term sentences.
- **Life imprisonment sentences** – However, in cases involving life imprisonment, such as Sengar's, suspension is rare and must be done after considering several factors.
- This factors includes:
 - **The nature and gravity of the offence** – The seriousness of the crime must be assessed.
 - **The manner of commission of the crime** – The brutality and intent behind the crime must be taken into account.
 - **The desirability of granting bail** – Whether releasing the convict on bail would be appropriate, especially considering the victim's safety and potential societal impact.
- The decision to suspend Sengar's sentence by the Delhi High Court was influenced primarily by his conviction under the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, which criminalizes "aggravated" sexual assault by a public servant.
- This decision sparked controversy due to the interpretation of the term "public servant."

What is the 'public servant' debate?

- **POCSO act** – One of the key issues in this case was whether Sengar's actions qualified as "aggravated sexual assault by a public servant" under Section 5(c) of the POCSO Act.
- **Narrow view of High Court** – The High Court took a narrow view and held that Sengar, an elected MLA, did not fall under the category of a "public servant" as defined under the Indian Penal Code (IPC), Section 21.
- The court noted that the IPC definition of a "public servant" does not include elected legislators like MLAs.
- **Controversial interpretation** – In practice, elected officials wield significant power and influence, often exercising authority over vulnerable populations.
 - The POCSO Act, designed to protect children from sexual exploitation, was meant to address the abuse of power by public servants, including police officers, teachers, and government officials.
 - The High Court's narrow interpretation excluded elected legislators, creating an anomaly.

- **Broader view of trial Court** – This decision diverged from the trial court's judgment, which had interpreted the term "public servant" more broadly, applying the definition under the Prevention of Corruption Act (PCA), 1988, which includes anyone holding a public office.
- The High Court's ruling raises important questions about how the law should be applied when it comes to sexual crimes committed by powerful individuals.

Can a life sentence be suspended based on 'prolonged incarceration'?

- **The situation of prolonged incarceration** – The High Court also relied on the fact that Sengar had already spent over seven years in prison.
- It cited the case *Kashmira Singh vs. State of Punjab* (1977), which held that prolonged incarceration without a final conviction could result in injustice.
- **Supreme Court's observation** – However, in cases of life imprisonment, the Supreme Court has consistently stated that mere prolonged incarceration cannot justify the suspension of a sentence.
- In the *Chhotelal Yadav vs. State of Jharkhand* (2025) case, the Supreme Court clarified that suspension of a sentence in life imprisonment cases should only occur if there is a palpable error in the trial court's judgment that could lead to acquittal on appeal.
- The High Court's reliance on Sengar's time served in prison could therefore be seen as insufficient grounds for suspension, given that his appeal was still pending and no clear error in the trial court's judgment had been established.
- **Concerns of Intimidation** – In addition to legal arguments, the survivor in this case raised serious concerns about her safety.
- She had previously been subjected to systemic intimidation, including the custodial death of her father and a truck-car accident in 2019 that critically injured her and her lawyer and killed her two aunts.
- Despite the Supreme Court granting her CRPF protection, the High Court ruled that the risk of further threats could not be the sole reason to deny Sengar's suspension of sentence.
- This stance has drawn criticism, as it highlights the extent to which survivors of sexual violence are often subjected to intimidation and violence while seeking justice.
- The survivor's fears were grounded in her traumatic experiences, yet the High Court's decision seemingly downplayed the gravity of these threats.
- **Important Questions raised** – The case raises several key questions about fairness, equality, and the interpretation of laws that aim to protect vulnerable populations.
 - Should MLAs be classified as public servants under POCSO?
 - What weight should be given to the period of incarceration when deciding to suspend a life sentence?
 - How can the justice system ensure the safety of survivors who have faced systemic intimidation and violence?

What lies ahead?

- While the Delhi High Court's legal interpretation may be technically sound, its narrow reading of the POCSO Act and the suspension of a life sentence in this case raises concerns about justice for survivors of sexual violence.
- This case underscores the need for a more expansive, victim-centric approach in interpreting laws designed to protect children and vulnerable individuals.
- The Supreme Court's stay on the High Court's decision is a timely reminder that legal technicalities must not override the larger principles of justice, especially in cases involving serious crimes like sexual assault.
- As the appeal progresses, it will be crucial to see how the law evolves to address the growing concerns surrounding the abuse of power, gendered violence, and the protection of survivors in India's criminal justice system.

5. GOVERNMENT POLICIES AND INTERVENTIONS

5.1 Digitalizing the SIR Process

Recently, the Election Commission is facing criticism for its Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls as reliance on outdated data threatens voter inclusion and the integrity of upcoming elections.

What is the problem with SIR?

- **Entirely paper process** – This is precisely the problem with the ongoing Special Intensive Revision (SIR), which relies on the legacy rolls of 2002 to 2004 which were created entirely on paper through manual, error-prone processes when India was entering its digital era.
- **Depending on outdated record** – It is astonishing that the Election Commission of India (EC) still relies on these outdated records today.
- This regression has erased decades of digital progress, forcing SIR 2.0 to operate on outdated methods and unreliable, unverifiable data.
- An exercise meant to produce clean and updated voter rolls has instead pushed the country into a prolonged crisis lasting months.
- **Legacy of SIR** – The past SIRs functioned mainly as routine summary revisions, focusing on deletions such as removing voters who had shifted, died, or become ineligible, and adding those who had moved or reached voting age.
- It was executed casually, with little effort to update or correct records.
- Therefore, the resulting rolls contain incomplete, ambiguous, and missing information, with standards varying across States and constituencies.
- **Common errors** – These include entries showing only first and middle names without last names, missing EPIC or house numbers, and widespread spelling errors.
 - **For example**, Agarwal/Agraval, Rakesh/Rakeash, Sangal/Sahgal, and Veer/Vir.
- **Anomalies** – Random inspections of the rolls reveal alarming anomalies, such as entries implying polygamy.
 - **For instance**, some people after days of manually scanning hundreds of thousands of entries in Hindi, English, and Bengali, could not find their own record — despite having voted in every general election.
- **Difficulties in verification** – Moreover, as the rolls exist only in paper form, a database of more than 600 million entries cannot undergo verification or consistency checks.
- The EC's search interface is essentially non-functional, typically returning “no details found” or “error” when queries are made.
- The search page also includes a disclaimer that the rolls are published exactly as received from State Chief Electoral Officers (CEOs).
- These incomplete, non-searchable legacy records form the foundation of today's SIR —leaving countless genuine voters unable to find their names anywhere.
- **Underutilisation of resources** – ECINet allows voters to search the current one-billion-record database using mobile numbers, EPIC numbers, names, dates of birth, addresses, and family relations.
- **Detection of errors** – It detects duplicate or missing entries and supports services such as registration, deletion, corrections, Aadhaar linking, locating constituencies and polling booths, contacting BLOs, downloading EPIC cards, filing complaints, and tracking their status.
- These functions are comprehensive and typically work flawlessly, enabling even online submission of Enumeration Forms (EFs) through Aadhaar-based verification.
- **Issues with the BLOs** – Most function mainly as distributors and collectors of paper EFs.
- Lacking past polling records, many demand birth certificates and extra address proofs despite EC rules requiring none.
- Many also lack data-entry skills, resulting in piles of undigitised EFs.
 - **For instance**, over half of Uttar Pradesh's EFs remain undigitised as per an EC press release on November 27.
- Paper EFs double the workload: forms are filled by hand and then digitised, and photo-pasting forces poor voters to pay for photographs while BLOs re-digitise them.
- This digital-to-paper-to-digital loop is inefficient and error-prone.

How ECINet could help?

- **ECINet** – It enables fast, error-free online EF submission with no digitisation, paper-photos, signatures, or documents.
- Forms 6, 7, and 8 facilitate online insertion, deletion, correction, and Aadhaar linking — separate from BLOs.
- Aadhaar verification makes the process smooth and reliable.
- **Accessibility and inclusion** – For non-tech-savvy citizens, the EC could have deployed mobile digital kiosks with handheld devices and trained staff to help them file EFs online, thereby easing pressure on BLOs and eliminating the need for paper forms.

How to make the SIR fully digital?

- **Searchability through digitisation** – Convert all State/UT rolls into a fully searchable digital format, using English as the standard for searchable data and metadata, with regional languages retained as non-searchable fields.
- **Data integration** – Fuse old records with reliable datasets — Aadhaar, PAN/Income Tax, driving licence, and local body records — using robust APIs and consistency checks. Aadhaar must be strengthened as the anchor for identity verification.
- **Differentiate voter categories** – Classify voters into three groups:
 - Stable-address voters,
 - Frequent movers,
 - Those with immigration/nationality issues.
- **Submission of EFs online** – Ensure EFs are submitted entirely online, supported by mobile digital kiosks operated by trained personnel.
- India has an ample supply of tech-savvy workers who can assist efficiently, while electoral officials handle ground verification.
- **Digitise all steps** – Complete document verification, uploads, and post-validation checks entirely online, with transparent workflows.
- With these reforms, SIR 2026 can transition from its dependence on outdated paper records to a modern, trusted, technology-driven national exercise.

What lies ahead?

- A fully digital system, as outlined above, would eliminate the long-standing flaws of legacy SIR and enable seamless integration of all processes through ECINet.
- These reforms are straightforward, feasible, and implementable within the extended timelines of the ongoing SIR.
- Most steps require minimal effort; only data integration may be deferred beyond SIR 2.0.
- Once adopted, every component of the SIR will become simpler, faster, and more reliable, with grievances addressed in real time preventing panic, confusion, and unnecessary stress.
- A digital SIR is not optional; it is indispensable — there is no alternative.
- SIR 2026 must become a trust revolution powered by technology, transparency, verification, and integrity.

5.2 Swasth Nari Campaign – A Shift in Approach to Women's Health

Recently, India has received three Guinness World Records titles under the nationwide Swasth Nari, Sashakt Parivar Abhiyaan (SNSPA), marked by unprecedented coordination, mass mobilisation, and efficient digital use.

What is Swasth Nari campaign?

- **Swasth Nari campaign** – The "Swasth Nari, Sashakt Parivar" (Healthy Woman, Empowered Family) campaign was a nationwide health initiative in India launched by Prime Ministry of Health and Family Welfare on September 17, 2025, to run until October 2, 2025.
- **Significance** – It was celebrated as a large-scale "Jan Andolan" (mass movement) involving various government ministries, medical colleges, and community organizations.

What are the Key objectives and activities?

- **Health and nutrition improvement** – The core goal was to improve the health of women and children through comprehensive services.
- **Health screenings** – It included extensive screening for non-communicable diseases such as breast and cervical cancer, anemia, diabetes, hypertension, and TB.
- **Health camps** – The campaign organized numerous health camps at various government facilities, providing preventive, promotive, and curative services.
- **Awareness and counselling** – Health camps also offered counseling on nutrition, menstrual hygiene, mental health, and lifestyle choices.
- **Community participation** – The initiative encouraged broad community involvement, with over 20 ministries, medical colleges, and private organizations participating.
- The campaign's massive community mobilisation that involved more than 5 lakh Panchayat representatives, 1.14 crore students, 94 lakh Self-Help Group members, and 5 lakh other community members
- **Digital integration** – Beneficiaries were enrolled in digital health services like the ABHA and encouraged to use online platforms for health pledges and information.

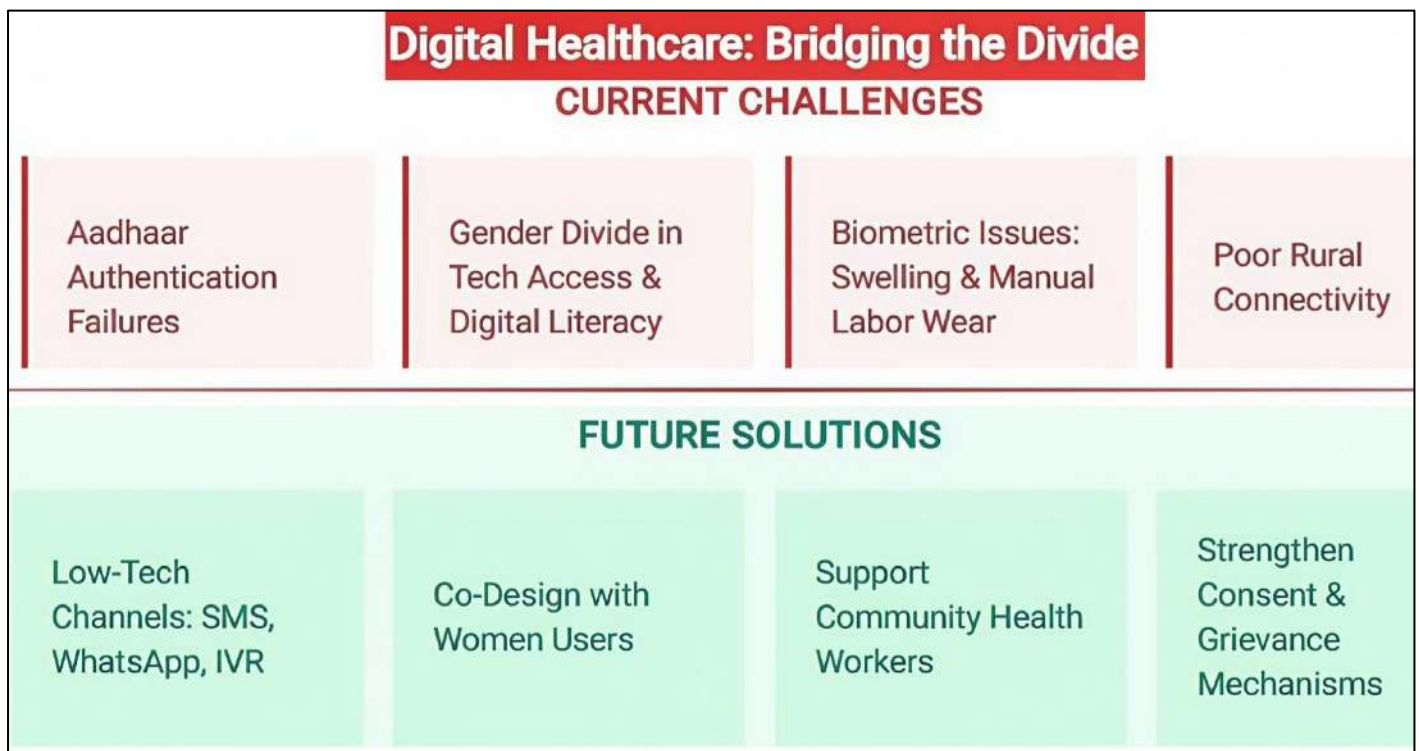
What are the Digital turns in women's healthcare?

- **Foundation** – India's journey towards digitising women's healthcare began in earnest in the mid-2000s, marking a shift from manual, paper-based record system to data-driven health governance utilising digital tracking systems.
- **Varied technologies** – India has deployed diverse technologies, including Interactive Voice Response Systems (IVRS), SMS, telemedicine, and mobile health applications, to strengthen maternal healthcare.
- Notably, these choices have been shaped by the targeted population's socioeconomic status and literacy levels.
- **The Mother and Child Tracking System (MCTS)** – It was launched in 2009, represented the first systematic attempt to create digital registries for pregnant women and children, aiming to track immunisation schedules and antenatal care visits.
- This evolved into the Reproductive and Child Health (RCH) portal, which consolidated multiple vertical programmes into an integrated digital platform.
- **The Kilkari mobile health programme** – This was rolled out in 2016 as a part of the Digital India Initiative, delivers 72 weekly automated voice messages in Hindi to those women registered in the RCH portal.
- The programme now reaches over 29 million women across 18 states and union territories.
- **eSanjeevani telemedicine platform** – It was integrated into the public system, has delivered over 100 million consultations since 2020.
- Government data suggests that women constitute the majority of beneficiaries, with more than half of consultations pertaining to female patients.
- **National Digital Health Mission in 2020** – It was later rebranded as the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission (ABDM) – marked an acceleration toward a comprehensive health data infrastructure.
- The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a catalyst, normalising telemedicine, digital health records, and mobile health applications.
- **Co-WIN platform** – It demonstrated the state's capacity for mass digital health coordination.
- These infrastructures have since been efficiently utilised for women's health initiatives, as evidenced by the recent SNSPA campaign.

How Digitisation has yielded measurable improvements in certain dimensions of healthcare delivery?

- **Improve immunisation coverage** – Studies on the mMitra voice message service for maternal health indicate that digital tracking systems have improved immunisation coverage.
 - mMitra has enabled automated reminders and reducing dropout rates between vaccine doses, apart from aiding doctor consultations for bleeding and promoting institutional child delivery.
- **Increased home visits** – Research proves that mobile health applications used by frontline health workers have increased antenatal home visits by 15.7% and postnatal visits by 12%, while facilitating health education and systematic screening.

- The ability to generate real-time data on service delivery gaps has enhanced administrative visibility, potentially enabling more responsive resource allocation.



What lies ahead?

- State-level initiatives like Haryana's proposal to assign unique "pregnancy IDs" linked to the RCH portal may help illustrate the importance of integrating technology in medical care.
- Although the initiative aims at improving monitoring of sex-selective abortion and ensuring maternal healthcare benefits, it also illustrates how digital infrastructures can be deployed both to protect and to discipline women's reproductive lives.
- Nonetheless, a more progressive trajectory could be possible if digitisation is reframed through an inclusive approach that takes into account the intersectional vulnerabilities of women in India.
- This requires prioritising low-tech, multilingual channels (SMS, WhatsApp Chatbots & IVR) co-designed with women users; strengthening enforceable consent, grievance and redress mechanisms.
- The digital tools need to be used to support rather than replace community health workers, enabling ASHAs to leverage data for advocacy and claim-making, not just reporting.
- Digitisation can advance women's health only when it redistributes power, protects autonomy, and actively mitigates the inequalities it risks entrenching.
- An imperative now made tangible by initiatives like the Swasth Nari, Sashakt Parivar Abhiyaan, signalling India's readiness to translate scale into sustained structural transformation.

6. EDUCATION

6.1 India's Goal of 100% Literacy by 2030 – The Bihar Challenge

The national ambition of full literacy faces a major obstacle in the form of Bihar's non-participation in the Centre's flagship adult literacy programme, ULLAS.

What is the ULLAS scheme?

- **ULLAS** – The ULLAS (Understanding Lifelong Learning for All in Society) scheme was launched by the Union Government in 2022 to address adult illiteracy in a structured and measurable manner.
- **Key Features of ULLAS**
 - Targets non-literate persons aged 15 years and above

- Door-to-door identification through surveys
- Training in basic literacy and numeracy (up to Class 3 level)
- Focus on functional literacy, including Reading, writing, numeracy and Digital and financial literacy.
- Assessment through a standardized test
- Successful learners receive a literacy certificate
- **Definition of literate state** – The scheme defines a State/UT with 95% literacy as being “fully literate”, acknowledging practical limitations in achieving absolute universality.
- **ULLAS Alignment with NEP 2020** – NEP 2020 explicitly calls for:
 - Adult education “as soon as possible”
 - Lifelong learning frameworks
 - Functional literacy beyond rote learning
- ULLAS operationalises these goals by combining literacy with life skills, making it central to India’s education reform agenda.
- Literacy is a foundational pillar of human development and democratic participation.
- It directly impacts employment, health outcomes, gender equality, and economic growth.
- Recognising this, India has committed to achieving 100% literacy by 2030, in line with the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG-4).

What is the current status of literacy in India?

- **PLFS** – According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24:
- **National literacy rate (age 7+) – 80.9%**
 - Male literacy – 87.2%
 - Female literacy – 74.6%
- **Fully literate states** – Five States/UTs have already declared themselves fully literate under ULLAS:
 - Himachal Pradesh
 - Mizoram
 - Goa
 - Tripura
 - Ladakh
 - Several other States and one Union Territory are close to achieving this status.
- **Bihar’s Literacy Indicators**
 - Literacy rate (2023–24 PLFS) - 74.3%
 - Second lowest in India.
 - Female literacy - 66.1%
- Nearly 2 crore non-literate persons aged 15–59
 - 67 lakh males.
 - 1.32 crore females.
- Historically, Bihar has lagged behind:
 - 2011 Census literacy rate - 61.8% (lowest in India)
 - Persistent gender and rural-urban gaps.
- Given these figures, Bihar carries one of the highest illiteracy loads in the country, making its absence from ULLAS a major concern.

What has been the union government’s response?

- **Financial and Administrative Measures**

- Rs.35.09 crore approved for Bihar in 2023–24.
 - Rs.15.79 crore (75% of central share) released.
- **Shortcoming from Bihar** – The state did not:
 - Submit annual plans.
 - Transfer funds to the Single Nodal Agency (SNA).
 - Implement programme activities and the Funds remain unutilised.
- **Ministerial Intervention** – In October 2024, Union Education Minister wrote to the Bihar Chief Minister, highlighting:
 - The urgency of Bihar's participation
 - The scale of adult illiteracy
 - The risk to India's 2030 literacy goal
- The Centre also warned of interest penalties due to delayed fund transfers, as per Department of Expenditure norms.

Why has Bihar not joined the ULLAS scheme?

- **Bihar's own scheme** – Bihar has cited the existence of its own literacy programme, Akshar Anchal, as the primary reason for non-participation.
- **Akshar Anchal Scheme** – It is operational for nearly 15 years
- **Targets** – The scheme targets the following
 - Dalits, Mahadalits
 - Minority communities
 - Extremely Backward Classes
 - Women
- **Focus areas**
 - Schooling for children (6–14 years)
 - Basic literacy for women (15–45 years)
- **Challenges of the scheme** – While Akshar Anchal addresses important social groups, it lacks:
 - National standardisation
 - Certification parity
 - Integration with NEP-aligned monitoring mechanisms

What are the broader issues involved?

- **Centre–State Coordination** – Education is a Concurrent List subject, requiring cooperation rather than parallelism.
- Bihar's refusal highlights coordination challenges in federal governance.
- **Standardisation of Literacy Outcomes** – ULLAS provides:
 - Uniform definitions
 - Common assessment frameworks
 - National comparability
- **Gender Inequality** – With female literacy at just 66.1%, Bihar's non-participation disproportionately affects women's empowerment and workforce participation.
- **National Credibility** – India's commitment to SDGs and NEP 2020 depends on inclusive participation by high-burden states.

What should be done?

- **Cooperative Federalism** – Centre and Bihar should explore convergence between ULLAS and Akshar Anchal
- Allow flexibility while ensuring national standards

- **Outcome-Based Monitoring** – Independent assessments
 - Transparent reporting
 - Integration with Census and PLFS data
- **Focus on Women and Marginalised Groups** – Community-based learning centres
- Incentives for female learners
- Use of local languages and digital tools
- **Political and Administrative Will** – Literacy must be treated as a developmental priority, not an administrative formality.

What lies ahead?

- India's aspiration of achieving 100% literacy by 2030 is both laudable and necessary for inclusive development.
- However, the goal remains unattainable without the active participation of high-burden states like Bihar.
- While state-specific initiatives have value, alignment with national frameworks such as ULLAS is essential to ensure uniform standards, accountability, and measurable outcomes.
- Resolving the Bihar impasse through cooperative federalism will be decisive in determining whether India's literacy mission becomes a reality or remains an unfulfilled promise.

7. HEALTH

7.1 HIV – The Disease and the Global Response

Recently, In a landmark paper in Science on May 20, 1983, researchers in France, reported they had isolated a “retrovirus” from a patient at risk of developing AIDS.

What is HIV?

- **HIV** – Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system.
- Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) occurs at the most advanced stage of infection.
- **Concerns** – HIV targets the body's white blood cells, weakening the immune system.
- This makes it easier to get sick with diseases like tuberculosis, infections and some cancers.
- **Transmission** – HIV is spread from the body fluids of an infected person, including blood, breast milk, semen and vaginal fluids. It is not spread by kisses, hugs or sharing food. It can also spread from a mother to her baby.
- **Prevention** – IV can be prevented and treated with antiretroviral therapy (ART). Untreated HIV can progress to AIDS, often after many years.
- **World data and Indian scenario** – The United Nation estimates that 40.8 million persons are living with HIV globally, and among them 25.44,000 are in India.
- In 2024 alone, there were 1.3 million new infections reported worldwide, with India reporting 68,450 new cases.

Why HIV is not curable even today?

- **No vaccine yet** – There is still no vaccine developed exclusively to cure HIV.
- The estimated 91.4 million people who have ever been infected with HIV, only a handful of individuals have been declared “cured.”
- **Issue with bone marrow transplant** – Bone marrow transplants are risky procedures that are neither safe nor practical for the vast majority of persons living with HIV.
- **Unusuality of retrovirus** – HIV belongs to a family of viruses called retroviruses.
- These viruses are unusual because, as part of their life cycle, they convert their genetic material from RNA to DNA, then integrate this DNA into the host's own DNA.
- Once this happens, the viral DNA becomes, for all practical purposes, indistinguishable from your own and the virus becomes a part of you.

- **Viral latency** – After integrating its DNA into the host genome, HIV can enter a dormant state known as viral latency.
- In this state, an infected cell carries HIV's genetic material but produces no new virus particles.
- **Invisibility of virus** – At any given time, some infected cells churn out new viruses while others slip into latency, creating a shifting, hidden reservoir that has so far made a true cure impossible.
- There are viruses that can integrate into the host genome, and other retroviruses like HTLV-1 do this, even the hepatitis B virus sometimes leaves behind a stable DNA form in liver cells.
- There are also viruses that establish long-term latency: the herpes simplex and varicella-zoster viruses hide in nerve cells while the Epstein–Barr virus can persist silently in B-cells.
- **Rapid mutations** – HIV's extraordinary sequence diversity, for example, is a hallmark of many RNA viruses.
- The hepatitis C, influenza, and some other viruses also mutate rapidly.
- **Constantly changing appearance** – The HIV virus constantly changes its appearance while simultaneously hiding inside long-lived cells, creating a moving target that the immune system can neither fully recognise nor completely eliminate.
- This combination of rapid mutation layered onto integration and latency makes HIV one of the toughest pathogens humankind has ever encountered.

What are the developments that took place against HIV?

- **Improved global response** – Decades of public-health efforts ranging from information and education campaigns to widespread testing and the expansion of antiretroviral therapy have transformed the global response to HIV.
- **Increased awareness** – People are getting diagnosed earlier, and treatment coverage continues to rise.
- As a result, the incidence of infections is falling year on year in many parts of the world, making room for hope against hope that an end to one of the worst pandemics to afflict humans may well be on the horizon.
- **Advances in medicine** – Today, with the availability of potent antiretroviral therapy (ART), persons with HIV who have access to these medications do not become sick with AIDS, the illness caused by the HIV.
- Research has shown, that the life expectancy of people living with HIV who are receiving ART and are virologically suppressed, is almost similar to persons who don't have HIV.
- This has become possible due to the scientific discoveries of several antiretroviral medications which are given in combination to persons with HIV.
- **Role of lenacapavir** – With the discovery of lenacapavir, a new, long-acting injectable antiviral medicine, HIV can today be prevented if lenacapavir is given twice a year as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).
- **Funding crisis** – The sudden withdrawal of the United States, the single biggest contributor to the global HIV response, disrupted treatment and prevention programmes around the world in early 2025.
- International assistance accounts for 80% of prevention programmes in low- and middle-income countries.
- UNAIDS modelling shows that if the funding permanently disappears, there could be an additional 6 million new HIV infections and an additional 4 million AIDS-related deaths by 2029.
- Ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic, India's next big public health opportunity
- **The Indian scenario** – In India, more than 95% of funding for HIV treatment and prevention is supported by the government.
- India's generic manufacturers supply 92% of the antiretroviral medications prescribed globally.
- While these are laudable measures and efforts, India is yet to implement lenacapavir PrEP through its national programme, and this is a gap that needs correction.
- Efforts should be made, and political impetus given, to implement PrEP in India to achieve the target of zero new infections.
- Regulatory, patent barriers may hinder global access to new HIV prevention drug: activists

What lies ahead?

- It is time for low- and middle-income countries to take ownership of supporting HIV prevention and treatment efforts in their healthcare programmes rather than depending on international assistance.

- Already, 25 of 60 low- and middle-income countries have found ways to increase HIV spending from domestic resources into 2026 as shown in the UNAIDS report.
- This is the future of the HIV response — nationally-owned and led, sustainable, inclusive and multisectoral solutions.
- This transformation cannot happen overnight however: global solidarity and renewed commitment from funding partners will be needed as countries plan and lead sustainable transitions towards self-financing.
- UNAIDS estimates that if the world, including India, embraces new technologies and newer interventions, the annual cost of the HIV response could fall by around US\$ 7 billion globally.
- was ultimately rendered powerless by humanity's collective will.
- India needs to introduce lenacapavir PrEP to help achieve zero new infections, and must also lead global efforts for sustainable, inclusive and multisectoral solutions.
- The consensus behind the old model of financing the HIV response may be coming to an end, but the international community is forging a new, more sustainable path.

***Lenacapavir** tablets and lenacapavir injection can be used for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to reduce the risk of getting HIV in people who are HIV negative.*

7.2 The New Action Plan On AMR

Recently, India's new National Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance (NAP-AMR 2.0), (2025-29) has been released.

What is AMR?

- **Antimicrobials** – This includes antibiotics, antivirals, antifungals, and antiparasitics, used to prevent and treat infectious diseases in humans, animals and plants.
- **Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR)** – It occurs when bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites no longer respond to antimicrobial medicines.
- As a result of drug resistance, antibiotics and other antimicrobial medicines become ineffective and infections become difficult or impossible to treat.
- It increases the risk of disease spread, severe illness, disability and death
- **Concerns** – Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) is affecting human health, veterinary practices, aquaculture, agriculture, waste systems and the entire food chain.
- Antibiotic residues, resistant organisms and environmental discharge connect these sectors in powerful ways.
- AMR does not remain confined to hospitals and it moves through soil, water, livestock, markets and food systems, making it a true One Health challenge.

What is the evolution and status of India's plan on AMR?

- **The first National Action Plan on AMR** – It was launched in 2017, was a significant step forward.
- It brought AMR into national consciousness, encouraged multi-sectoral participation, improved laboratory networks, expanded national surveillance and supported stewardship.
- It also placed AMR firmly within a One Health framework, recognising the links between human health, animal health and the environment.
- Despite this progress, implementation during the first plan period remained limited at the State level.
- **Efforts of states** – Only a small group of States, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Sikkim and Punjab have, developed formal State Action Plans, and only a few moved meaningfully into execution.
- The majority of the states continued to rely on fragmented activities within individual sectors.
- State-wide, multisectoral One Health structures did not take shape in most parts of the country.
- **AMR in State's jurisdiction** – The slow uptake was not due to a shortage of national effort, but because the major determinants of AMR fall under State jurisdiction.
- Health administration, hospital functioning, pharmacy regulation, veterinary oversight, agricultural antibiotic practices, food-chain monitoring and waste governance are controlled by State departments.
- National guidance alone cannot create uniform implementation when the operational levers sit elsewhere.

How the NAP-AMR 2.0 represents a more mature framework?

- **Spells out committed goals** – It moves beyond broad intent and outlines clearer timelines, responsibilities and resource planning.
- **Recognises private sector participation** – The important advancement is the recognition that India cannot address AMR without meaningful participation from the private sector, which delivers a major proportion of health care and veterinary services.
- **Strengthens the scientific base** – The plan also strengthens its scientific base by placing greater emphasis on innovation – rapid diagnostics, point-of-care tools, alternatives to antibiotics and improved environmental monitoring.
- **Expands the One Health perspective** – It deepens its One Health perspective, giving more attention to food-system pathways, waste management and environmental contamination.
- **Connected surveillance structure** – Surveillance structures are more integrated across human, veterinary, agricultural and environmental sectors, creating a harmonised national approach.
- **Governance mechanisms** – In terms of governance, the NAP-AMR 2.0 introduces a higher level of national oversight by placing intersectoral supervision under NITI Aayog through a dedicated Coordination and Monitoring Committee.
- **Pushes for AMR cells** – It repeatedly stresses that every State and Union Territory should establish State AMR Cells and prepare State Action Plans aligned with the national framework, supported by a national dashboard for progress reporting.
- These developments signal that AMR is evolving from a technical health issue to a national development priority requiring multi-departmental engagement.

Where the new plan falls short?

- **No mechanisms for ensuring state action** – The plan stresses that States must develop AMR Action Plans and establish AMR Cells, but it does not create any mechanism to ensure that they do so.
- There is no formal Centre-State AMR platform, no joint review mechanism, no statutory requirement for States to notify or implement their plans.
- **Absence of financial pathway** – No financial routes such as NHM-linked incentives are present, that could anchor sustained State commitment.
- **Jurisdictional issue** – Health services, veterinary oversight, agricultural antibiotic use, food-chain safety and waste regulation lie almost entirely within State jurisdiction, this is the pivotal gap.
- **Absence of organized system** – Without a structured method for political engagement, administrative follow-through and shared accountability, even a well-designed national plan risks remaining a technical document rather than a functional national programme.

What needs to be done?

- **Coordinated mechanism** – To make the NAP-AMR 2.0 effective, India needs a clear architecture that brings political leadership, senior administrators and sectoral departments from all States into a unified system.
- **Dedicated council** – A national-State AMR council, chaired by the Union Health Minister and guided by NITI Aayog, could provide the platform for regular review, joint decision-making and coordinated problem-solving across human health, veterinary sectors, agriculture, aquaculture, food systems and environmental regulation.
- **Framing of timelines and reviews** – State engagement would also strengthen if the Union Government formally requested each State to prepare and notify its AMR Action Plan, with timelines and annual reviews.
- **Strengthening communication** – Experience from the National Health Mission (NHM) and tuberculosis (TB) programmes shows that high-level communication, especially through Chief Secretaries, can significantly shift administrative attention.
- **Strengthening financial mechanisms** – Even modest conditional grants under the NHM can drive improvements in surveillance, stewardship, infection control and laboratory strengthening.
- When funding signals priority, States respond with administrative energy and policy focus.
- **Need for state's commitment** – India's broader public health experience shows that real progress happens only when the Centre and States work within a structured, mutually accountable system.
 - **For example, *The National Tuberculosis Elimination Programme*** and its achievements arise from regular joint reviews, shared monitoring missions and clearly defined roles across levels of government.

- The National Health Mission follows similar principles, where coordinated planning, dedicated funding signals and periodic performance assessments enable States to turn national priorities into on-ground action.

What lies ahead?

- The NAP-AMR 2.0 provides the scientific and strategic foundation India needs. But its success will depend entirely on how effectively national and State systems work together.
- AMR is driven by real-world practices along the entire One Health continuum — from hospitals and farms to markets, food chains and wastewater systems. Without strong State participation, national plans cannot have national impact.
- India has an opportunity now to build a coordinated and accountable Centre-State model for AMR control.
- If such a system is established, the country can achieve measurable progress and set an international example.
- Without it, even the most well-crafted national plan may remain a document of intentions rather than a framework for action.
- With stronger coordination, political commitment and sustained support across States and sectors, the NAP-AMR 2.0 can become a turning point in India's AMR journey.

7.3 Creating Suicide-Safe Campuses – Lessons from the IITs and the Road Ahead

Recently the instances of suicide in India's leading IITs have raised the questions on the mental health of students.

What is the issue?

- **Suicide of students** – Entering the portals of India's premier institutions such as the Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) is widely seen as the culmination of years of hard work, discipline, and sacrifice.
- However, this narrative of success is often disrupted by disturbing reports of student suicides on campuses that are otherwise symbols of academic excellence.
- **Data** – Between 2005 and 2024, at least 115 IIT students were reported to have died by suicide.
- These incidents point to a deeper structural and cultural problem within higher education.
- **Deep issues** – While IITs have begun to respond with counselling services, peer support, and wellness initiatives, the challenge lies in making such measures comprehensive, consistent, and embedded into institutional culture.
- The issue is not merely one of individual vulnerability, but of systemic failure that demands coordinated responses from institutions, families, communities, and the State.

What are the major reasons for increasing suicides?

- **Academic stress** – Competitive academic environments, fear of failure, rigid evaluation systems, and uncertain job prospects create sustained psychological pressure.
- Surveys reveal that more than 60% of students identify academic pressure as the primary source of stress.
- **Social alienation** – For many students, especially first-generation learners or those from marginalised backgrounds, the transition to elite institutions also brings cultural alienation and loneliness.
- **Other issues** – untreated mental health conditions, and exposure to peers in distress significantly increase suicide risk.
- Employment insecurity, family expectations, harassment, and social isolation.
- **Issues of stigma** – Importantly, stigma around mental health continues to deter students from seeking help.
- Thus, the crisis on campuses reflects both unmet mental health needs and an ecosystem that prioritises performance over well-being.

What are the institutional responses?

- **Interventions from IIT** – Recognising the gravity of the issue, several IITs have initiated proactive mental health interventions.
- These include:
 - **Strengthening counselling services** with professional psychologists and psychiatrists.
 - **Peer support networks**, where trained student volunteers act as first points of contact.

- **Faculty and staff sensitization** – Enabling teachers, wardens, and administrators to recognise early warning signs.
- **Structured mental health programmes** – Such as wellness weeks, orientation sessions, and stress-management workshops.
- **Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) model** – Some IITs have also adopted internationally recognised methods like this which trains campus stakeholders to identify and respond to suicidal behaviour.
- These steps signal a shift from reactive to preventive approaches.
- **Academic Reforms to Reduce Stress** – Academic pressure remains a central trigger for distress.
- Acknowledging this, certain IITs have experimented with reforms to reduce cognitive overload.
 - **For instance**, IIT Bombay allows first-year students to drop one course per semester, providing flexibility and reducing the fear of irreversible failure.
- **Other interventions** – Other institutions have revised grading systems, introduced bridge courses, and encouraged collaborative learning over hyper-competition.
- Such reforms highlight an important insight that mental health cannot be addressed solely through counselling, it must be integrated into academic design and evaluation frameworks.

What are the gaps and continuing challenges?

- **Low Counselling services** – They are often understaffed, with unfavourable counsellor-to-student ratios.
- **Lack of mandatory interventions** – Many interventions still depend on students voluntarily seeking help, which is unlikely in a culture where stigma remains strong.
- Moreover, peer supporters themselves may face emotional burnout if not adequately supervised.
- **Ineffective digital supports** – Digital tools such as anonymous check-ins and helplines offer promise, but their effectiveness depends on awareness, trust, and follow-up mechanisms.
- **Less frequency of campaigns** – Similarly, workshops and awareness campaigns often occur sporadically rather than as part of a sustained strategy.

What can be done?

- **The Role of Families** – Families play a crucial role in shaping students' emotional resilience.
- High parental expectations, limited understanding of mental health, and pressure to conform to predefined success paths can exacerbate distress.
- **Regular communication between institutions and parents** – The discussion about mental health, academic realities, and available support systems is therefore essential.
- **Policy measures** – At the policy level, government initiatives such as Manodarpan, aimed at providing psychosocial support to students, offer a broader safety net.
- However, their success depends on effective institutional implementation, coordination, and monitoring.
- **Towards a Culture Change on Campuses** – Creating suicide-safe campuses requires more than isolated programmes, it demands a fundamental shift in institutional culture.
- Mental health must be normalised as an integral part of campus life, not treated as an exception or crisis response.
- This includes:
 - Making mental health services easily accessible and confidential.
 - Embedding well-being into curricula and orientation programmes.
 - Training students, faculty, and staff to act as informed gatekeepers.
 - Encouraging open conversations that challenge stigma.
 - Institutions that prioritise empathy alongside excellence are better equipped to identify distress early and prevent crises from escalating.
- **The Importance of Monitoring and Data** – Sustainable reform requires evidence-based policymaking.
- Regular monitoring, data collection, and independent research are essential to evaluate whether interventions are effective.

- Transparency in reporting mental health outcomes, while respecting privacy, can help institutions learn from each other and refine best practices.

What lies ahead?

- Student suicides expose deep cultural and systemic flaws within India's higher-education ecosystem.
- While IITs have demonstrated that change is possible through counselling, peer support, academic reform, and awareness initiatives, the real challenge lies in ensuring consistency, scale, and long-term commitment.
- Suicide prevention is not a one-time intervention but a continuous process that requires collaboration among families, educational institutions, policymakers, and society at large.
- Ultimately, building suicide-safe campuses means redefining success—not merely as academic achievement, but as the holistic development and well-being of students.
- Mental health demands time, resources, and sustained attention, but investing in it is essential for the moral and social credibility of India's educational institutions.

8. GOVERNANCE

8.1 New Labour Codes - Upgraded Safety for Hazardous Sector Workers

The new labour codes introduced by the government has a profound impact on the health and life of the workers, in the hazardous industries.

What are the new labour codes?

- **Need for the regulation** – Many workers in these industries operate in high-risk environments in industries such as mining, petroleum, metallurgy, chemical and heavy manufacturing play a vital role in India's economic growth.
- Recognizing the need for a stronger, future-ready safety architecture for the workforce.
- **New labour codes** – The Government has introduced the new Labour Codes consolidating 29 Central labour laws into 4 Labour Codes.
- Under *The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 (OSH&WC)*, a more integrated, preventive safety system with risk assessment, free annual health check-ups, training, PPE, emergency planning, etc. have been provisioned.
- **Aim & objective** – These reforms strengthen safety protocols, mandate risk-mitigation practices, and enhance accountability while giving employers clearer, simpler, and more predictable regulatory pathways.
- Notably, the new framework aims to ensure safer worksites, stronger protections, and more dignified conditions for India's hazardous-sector workforce.

What are the key benefits to workers in hazardous processes?

- **Safety Standards** – The OSH&WC Code highlights national standards to be followed for use, handling, storage, and transport of hazardous substances.
- In order to further enhance the safety safeguards employers must conduct risk assessment, obtain approval, and maintain emergency response systems.
- **Health & Medical Protection** – Earlier, medical & health records were maintained manually and lacked portability and long-term traceability.
- Now, health records are mandatory and accessible to employees and inspectors, enabling transparency and long-term portability.
- Additionally, under the new Codes, pre-employment, periodic, and post-exposure medical examinations are mandatory, along with a free annual health check-up for all workers, ensuring early detection of occupational diseases that reduces medical costs and supports a healthier, more productive workforce.
- **Protective & Welfare Measures** – Under the new provisions, employers must provide and maintain PPE (personal protective equipment) such as helmets, gloves, respirators, and goggles.
- Additionally, ensuring improved sanitation and hygiene standards is also required- by mandating canteens, rest shelters, washing facilities, first aid, ambulance rooms, and cooling areas in high-temperature workplaces.

- Employers need to adhere by the prescribed maximum working hours of 8 hours per day and 48 hours per week.
- Training & Awareness** – Earlier, trainings were not compulsory and varied by sector. Now, mandatory training sessions on the safe handling, storage, transport, and disposal of hazardous materials have been introduced to assist workers.
- Social Security** – To ensure efficient social security provisions, immediate compensation for occupational diseases or accidents is ensured under the Social Security Code, 2020 (SS) / ESIC.
- Besides, workers are also entitled to ESIC benefits (medical, occupational disease, injury, disability, dependents' benefits).
- Other benefits such as PF, gratuity, maternity, employment injury compensation and old-age protection (pension) are also provided, along with digital health and social security records that enhance transparency and portability.



- Special Rights** – The Right is explicitly guaranteed under OSH&WC Code wherein workers may refuse dangerous work that are likely to cause serious injury or death, with mandatory employer investigation and zero penalty for refusal by workers.
- Besides, pregnant women and adolescents also avail benefits of special rights, as they are strictly barred from engaging in hazardous processes. Safety supervision is also mandatory for women workers in permitted tasks.

What are the Comparative Breakdown of Previous Laws vs. New Labour Codes?

- Legal Framework** – Earlier, fragmented laws with separate provisions under the Factories Act (hazardous process), Mines Act, Dock Workers Act, and Building & Other Construction Workers Act (BOCW Act), carried their own list of hazardous operations.
- There are now uniform definitions under OSH&WC Code, 2020 for all industries involving chemical, biological, physical hazards.
- Specific provisions lay down standards for use, handling, storage, transportation of hazardous substances.
- There is also a uniform national framework for safety, health, welfare, emergency response.
- Identification of Hazardous Processes** – Previously, different lists and rules under multiple Acts led to weak enforcement.
- Now, a consolidated Schedule under OSH&WC Code lists all hazardous processes (asbestos, toxic chemicals, pesticides, radioactive materials, etc.).
- Additionally, employers must conduct risk assessments and provide prior intimation before initiating hazardous processes.
- Emergency & Disaster Preparedness** – No unified emergency management system existed with dependency on factory inspectorates or National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) guidelines.
- Now, with the Labour Codes in place, there needs to be a mandatory on-site emergency plan for every hazardous establishment, emergency response mechanisms and six-monthly mock drills.
- Besides, a formal linkage with the local Disaster Management Authority for external coordination is also required.
- Inspection & Enforcement** – There were multiple inspectorates under different Acts and overlapping jurisdictions existed.
- Whereas now, a unified Inspector-cum-Facilitator system is in place with risk-based digital inspections, joint compliance audits, and stringent penalties for violations.

What lies ahead?

- The new Labour Codes mark an impactful shift towards safer, fairer and more accountable workplaces- especially for those in hazardous sectors.
- With stronger safety standards, universal social security, welfare facilities, and emergency response mechanisms, India is building a labour ecosystem where security is not a privilege, but a guarantee.
- As India moves towards a more productive, inclusive, future-ready economy, it aligns with the spirit of *Shramev Jayate*- honoring the contribution of every worker who keeps the nation moving.

8.2 Consumer Rights – Ensuring Efficient and Speedy Disposal

National Consumer Day is observed in India on 24 December to highlight the significance of consumer rights and the broader framework of consumer protection.

How have consumer laws in India evolved over time?

- **Ancient India** – Dharmasastra and Arthashastra emphasized fair trade, honest weights, and accountability of merchants. Ethical trade was seen as a moral duty.
- **Medieval Period** – Guilds and local regulations ensured quality standards and punished fraudulent practices.
- **British Rule** – The Consumer protection began to take legal shape through laws like:
 - Indian Contract Act (1872) defined rights and obligations in trade.
 - Sale of Goods Act (1930) focused on product quality and buyer rights.
 - Drugs and Cosmetics Act (1940) regulated safety in pharmaceuticals.
- **Post-Independence Foundations** – The Consumer protection initially tied to rationing, subsidies, and price controls.
 - Its focus was on basic needs and preventing exploitation in
 - Essential commodities (Essential Commodities Act (1955),
 - Food adulteration (Prevention of Food Adulteration Act (1954),
 - Controlled monopolistic trade practices, etc.
- **Consumer Protection Act, 1986** – It recognized consumer rights and marked a shift from welfare dependency to rights recognition.
- It defined consumer rights - safety, information, choice, redressal, and education.
- Introduced **3-tier redressal system** –
- District Consumer Disputes Redressal Forum – Involving claims up to Rs. 50 lakhs.
- State Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission – exceeding Rs. 50 lakhs and up to Rs. 2 crore.
- National Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission (NCDRC) – Apex body, involving complaints above Rs. 2 crore.
- **Judicial Contributions** – The Courts expanded consumer rights through progressive judgments and recognized consumer protection as **part of Article 21 (Right to Life)** in some cases.
- **Consumer Protection Act, 2019** – Modernized framework to address digital economy:
 - Covers e-commerce transactions.
 - Introduced Central Consumer Protection Authority (CCPA).
 - Stricter penalties for misleading ads and unfair trade practices.
 - Product liability provisions holding manufacturers accountable.
- **CCPA Functions** – It is mandated to recall unsafe goods, penalize misleading ads, regulate endorsers and issue guidelines against dark patterns (false urgency, drip pricing, disguised ads).
- **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023** – It focused on data privacy, consent, and accountability in digital transactions.

*In July 2025, 10 States, along with the NCDRC recorded a **disposal rate of more than 100%** (more cases were resolved than newly filed during the month).*

***National Consumer Day, 2025** carries the theme “Efficient and Speedy Disposal through Digital Justice”, which underscores India’s transition from traditional welfare-oriented consumer protection to a digital-first framework, driven by platforms such as e-Jagruti and the upgraded National Consumer Helpline 2.0.*

What are the measures taken by the Government to protect the Consumer rights?

- **e-Jagruti (launched Jan 2025)** – It is a digital platform for consumer grievance redressal, integrates earlier systems, including OCMS, e-Daakhil, NCDRC CMS, CONFONET into a single, streamlined interface.
- **Achievements** – 1.35 lakh filings, 1.31 lakh disposals, disposal rates >100% in several states.
- **National Consumer Helpline 2.0** – The Department of Consumer Affairs has upgraded the National Consumer Helpline (NCH) with the introduction of AI-enabled NCH 2.0.
- It now resolves over 12 lakh complaints annually, with many being addressed within 21 days; refunds worth Rs.27.61 crore facilitated Apr–Oct 2025.
- **Jago Grahak Jago App & Dashboard** – It is the advanced digital tools to safeguard consumers from deceptive online practices, which detects dark patterns in e-commerce.
- **Consumer Welfare Fund** – It aims to support initiatives that protect consumer interests and strengthen the consumer movement across the nation.
- **Consumer Welfare Corpus Fund** - States/UTs establish a Consumer Welfare Corpus Fund
- **Contribution Ratios** – 75:25 → Central Government : State Government (general states) & 90:10 → For Special Category States and designated Union Territories.
- During the financial year 2024-25 (as on 31.12.2024), an amount of Rs.38.68 Crore has been released to the States/UTs.
- **Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS)** – It serves as India’s national standard body under the BIS Act, 2016.
- Over 22,300 Indian Standards are in force, with 94% aligned with international norms of International Organization for Standardization (ISO) and International Electrotechnical Commission (IEC).
- **BIS Care App** – It enables consumers to easily verify hallmarked jewellery by simply entering the HUID number to check purity, product type, and details of the jeweller and hallmarking centre.
- **National Test House (NTH)** – It is a trusted laboratory for testing, calibration, evaluation, and quality control of a wide range of engineering materials and finished products.
- The NTH is modernising its operations through the adoption of digital solutions such as Laboratory Data Automation System (LDAS), new mobile application, etc.
- It tested 45,926 samples in 2024–25, revenue up 49.89%.
- **Legal Metrology Amendments (2025)**
 - Packaged Commodities Amendment Rules, 2025 – Medical device packages must comply with Medical Devices Rules, 2017 labeling norms.
 - Government Approved Test Centre Amendment Rules, 2025 – It expanded scope of approved test centres by recognizing regional reference laboratories and national test houses.

What are the key issues associated with consumer rights in India?

- **Low Consumer Awareness** – Many consumers are unaware of their rights to safety, information, choice, and redressal under the law.
- **Delays in Grievance Redressal** – The Consumer courts and grievance portals face case backlogs and procedural hurdles, leading to prolonged delays.
- **Misleading Advertisements & Unfair Trade Practices** – Misleading claims in health, education, and e-commerce trick consumers; enforcement is weak.
- **Digital & Financial Fraud** – With the rise of online shopping and digital banking, consumers face cyber fraud, phishing, and unauthorized transactions.
- **Weak Enforcement & Accountability** – Authorities like CCPA exist but lack strong power; companies often escape liability.

- **Accessibility Issues** – Rural consumers face difficulty accessing consumer forums or online portals due to poor digital access and language barriers.

What lies Ahead?

- National Consumer Day 2025 highlights India's ongoing commitment to safeguarding consumer rights and promoting trust in the marketplace.
- Various activities like digital launches, collaborations, awareness drives, and innovation awards show a united effort to empower consumers.
- Collectively, these measures demonstrate steady progress towards a fair, transparent, and consumer-centric ecosystem, reinforcing the idea that informed and empowered consumers are vital for a healthy economy.

8.3 Shadow Campaigns in India – Regulating Political Influence in the Age of Digital Intermediaries

Recently, there has been concerns over the issues of the shadow campaign in the electoral process of India.

What is the issue?

- **Shadow campaigns** – It refer to political communication efforts carried out by third-party actors such as digital marketing firms, ideological groups, influencers, or surrogate pages that are not officially linked to political parties or candidates.
- **Missing regulation** – While election rules continue to focus on political parties and candidates as the primary actors, contemporary electoral influence is shaped by a broader ecosystem of third-party intermediaries, including campaign firms, digital influencers, interest groups, and surrogate advertisers.
- India's electoral regulatory framework is increasingly misaligned with the realities of modern political campaigning.
- **Supreme Court's directive** – This disconnect was highlighted during the Bihar Assembly elections, when the Election Commission of India (EC) issued a series of directives aimed at regulating political advertisements, exposing critical gaps in both the scope and timing of election regulation.
- **Election commission's directives** – On October 14, the Election Commission mandated pre-certification of political advertisements by the Media Certification and Monitoring Committee (MCMC).
- It reiterated the requirement under Section 77(1) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, which obliges political parties to disclose expenditure on social media campaigns.
- On October 21, the EC expanded its advisory, prohibiting political advertisements in print media on polling day and the preceding day without prior MCMC approval.
- These measures aimed to ensure transparency and fairness in electoral communication.

What are the limited lens of regulation?

- **Overemphasis on Parties and Candidates** – The EC's directives continue to address political parties and candidates as the central regulatory subjects.
- This approach overlooks the reality that electoral outreach is increasingly mediated by third-party actors operating outside formal party structures.
- Campaign consultancies, influencer networks, and issue-based organisations now play a decisive role in shaping voter perceptions.
- **Narrow Media and Time Focus** – The October 21 notification extended regulation to non-party entities but applied only to print media.
- The restriction was limited to a narrow pre-poll window, despite digital campaigns peaking well before polling day. This reveals a regulatory imagination that remains anchored in legacy media, even as electoral persuasion has decisively shifted to digital platforms.
- **Digital Campaigns and the Question of Timing** – Digital political campaigns operate on a long temporal arc, building influence over weeks and months through repeated exposure.
- Regulations that activate only immediately before polling are ineffective in addressing persuasive effects already embedded in voter consciousness.
- The mismatch between the speed of regulation and the scale of digital influence allows early-stage manipulation to go unchecked.

- Bihar Assembly Election as a Case Study – The Bihar Assembly election provides a useful empirical case to examine shadow campaigning.
- Data from Meta's Ads Library was analysed for political advertisers spending more than ₹1 lakh in Bihar during the 30 days preceding November 10, the day before the final polling phase.
- Advertisers were categorised into official party or candidate pages and third-party actors.

Who Pays and Who Persuades?

- **Distribution of digital campaign spending** – During the period analysed, 55 advertisers spent more than ₹1 lakh on digital political advertisements on Meta platforms.
- Only 23 advertisers were official political parties or candidates.
- The remaining 32 advertisers were third-party or surrogate campaigners operating independently.
- This demonstrates that a significant proportion of electoral messaging originates outside formally regulated actors.
- **Unequal Circulation of Political Messages** – Digital political influence depends not only on expenditure but also on reach and algorithmic amplification.
- Despite near-identical average spending, third-party advertisers generated almost twice the average impressions compared to official party or candidate pages.
- This suggests that communicative power in digital elections is increasingly concentrated outside formal political actors.
- **Age-wise consumption patterns** – Approximately 76.4% of digital outreach by parties and candidates, and 74.5% by third-party actors, was consumed by individuals aged 13–34 years.
- Party and candidate advertisements remained sharply concentrated among the 13–24 and 25–34 age groups.
- Third-party advertisements displayed a more dispersed reach, generating higher impressions among 25–44-year-olds and retaining significant presence beyond the age of 44.
- This indicates that third-party actors are more effective in reaching a broader demographic spectrum.
- **Campaign efficiency and cost asymmetry** – Campaign efficiency was measured as impressions generated per ₹10 lakh spent.
- Third-party advertisers generated an average of 2.60 crore impressions, while party or candidate pages generated 1.54 crore impressions.
- This stark difference demonstrates that equal financial inputs result in unequal political visibility.
- **Blurring of financial responsibility** – The analysis revealed cases where official party pages hosted advertisements funded by external entities.
 - **For example**, advertisements on the official Meta page of the Janata Dal (United) were sponsored by an entity named "The Spectrum".
- Such arrangements raise serious concerns regarding the transparency of campaign finance reporting.
- **Understatement of true campaign expenditure** – Expenditure incurred by third-party entities to sponsor ads on official pages may not be reflected in party expenditure statements submitted to the EC.
- This leads to a systematic underreporting of the actual financial footprint of digital campaigning.

What are the legal and constitutional concerns?

- **Supreme Court precedent** – In *Secretary, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting v. M/s Gemini TV (2004)*, the Supreme Court held that no individual or entity may publish advertisements for the benefit of any political party or candidate.
- By implication, advertisements directed against a party or candidate are equally impermissible, as they benefit rival political actors.
- **Inconsistent application by the EC** – Despite this legal position, third-party actors continued campaigning during polling hours in the Bihar elections.
- The EC's guidelines did not adequately extend regulatory obligations to these actors, creating an accountability gap.

- **The accountability gap in campaign finance** – Political parties are required to disclose what they spend on elections.
- They are not required to disclose what others spend on their behalf.
- Digital expenditure disclosures often list payments under platform names such as “Facebook” rather than identifying the actual funders or content creators.
- The reverse flow of funding, where third-party entities finance advertisements on official party pages, remains legally invisible.
- This inversion poses a serious threat to electoral transparency and fairness.
- **Temporal misalignment** – Electoral influence now accumulates over prolonged digital exposure rather than last-minute messaging.
- Regulations triggered only at the end of campaigns fail to address structural manipulation occurring earlier.
- **Democratic costs** – Each election conducted without comprehensive digital regulation erodes public trust in electoral fairness.
- The continued mismatch between law and practice risks weakening India’s democratic legitimacy in the digital age.

What lies ahead?

- India’s election rules are governing a campaign ecosystem that no longer exists in isolation around political parties and candidates. Electoral influence today flows through a complex network of digital intermediaries whose financial and communicative power remains largely unregulated.
- The challenge is no longer one of recognising this transformation, but of demonstrating regulatory resolve.
- Unless election laws expand their scope to include third-party actors, platform dynamics, and long-duration digital persuasion, the gap between formal compliance and real influence will continue to widen, undermining the foundations of democratic accountability.

9. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

9.1 Russian President’s Visit to India – Key Takeaways

Recently, During the visit of Russian president Putin to India, Prime Minister Narendra Modi called the India-Russia relationship steady like a pole star (dhruva tara).

What are the main takeaways?

- **Visit amidst global disorder** – It is Putin’s first visit since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the India-Pakistan conflict this year, and the downturn in India-U.S. ties.
- **Huge prospects** – There was considerable speculation that the two sides were working on a substantial set of agreements on defence cooperation, procurement and technology transfer deals in aircraft, air defence systems, drones and missiles.
- **No defence announcement** – The meeting between Defence Minister Rajnath Singh and his Russian counterpart Andrei Belousov before Mr. Putin landed, ended without any announcements.
- **Prominent attention** – The focus was squarely on economic cooperation, and taking forward the roadmap on the “Development of Strategic Areas of India – Russia Economic Cooperation till 2030” that was launched during Mr. Modi’s visit to Moscow in 2024.
- **Significant agreement** – They announced a “Labour Mobility Agreement” that will facilitate Indian skilled workers to work in Russia, where manpower shortages for three million jobs are expected by the end of the decade.
- **MoU on Fertilizer sectors** – Russian and Indian fertilizer companies also signed an MoU to build a urea plant in Russia.
- **Maritime and customs** – Apart from this, the two sides signed agreements on maritime cooperation, ports and customs.

- **Trade corridors** – The two sides expected to smooth the path for bilateral trade, particularly via the Chennai-Vladivostok Eastern Maritime Corridor and International North South Transport Corridor.
- **Agreement on currencies** – India and Russia agreed to continue working towards enhancing the settlement of bilateral trade in their national currencies.
- **No talks on Oil procurements** – There were no announcements, on oil procurement that made up more than \$60 billion of the \$69 billion trade last year.
- **No spaced and nuclear agreements** – There were no concrete outcomes on space and nuclear cooperation.

What are the important factors to consider?

- **Significance of Putin's Visit** – President Vladimir Putin's visit to India came at a crucial moment, as the Ukraine war approached its fourth year.
- The visit coincided with intense negotiations in Moscow over a U.S.-led peace proposal.
- **India's Position** – PM Narendra Modi thanked Mr. Putin for consistently keeping India informed about the conflict.
- Modi reiterated that India is "not neutral" and stands on the side of peace.
- He expressed hope for a quick end to the war.
- **Russia's Position** – Mr. Putin also expressed hope for peace.
- He indicated openness toward the U.S.-backed peace plan.
- **Impact of Western Sanctions** – Western sanctions on Russia continue to impose significant costs on India.
- Although Mr. Putin assured uninterrupted fuel supplies and India maintains it will decide oil purchases based on "commercial considerations," sanctions by Europe and a U.S. tariff of 25% on Indian goods have weakened India's earlier resolve.
- Russian oil intake by India dropped sharply in 2025, with a 38% year-on-year decline in value (October 2025).
- **Strategic Cooperation Held Back** – Both sides avoided major announcements in defence, space, and nuclear sectors—possibly to avoid triggering a U.S. reconsideration of CAATSA sanctions.
- A critical joint article by the U.K., Germany, and France before the visit may have also contributed to India's cautious approach, despite India rejecting such "public advice" as unacceptable.
- **Diplomatic Atmosphere** – Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who previously criticised Modi's embrace of Putin, stayed silent this time.
- His silence is likely due to New Delhi's diplomatic outreach and the delicate phase of the ongoing U.S.-led peace negotiations.

What lies ahead?

- For New Delhi, an end to the conflict in Ukraine will ease the tightrope walk it is currently being forced into due to the deep polarisation between Russia and Europe, and as Russia's dependency on China grows.
- Mr. Putin's visit came just a month before likely visits from German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and the European Union's top leadership Ursula Von Der Leyen and Antonio Costa for Republic Day.
- The EU-India Summit is being held after a long gap, and the EU-India Free Trade Agreement is expected to be signed.
- In February, New Delhi expects French President Emmanuel Macron and other Western leaders at the Artificial Intelligence Summit, and Canadian PM Mark Carney thereafter.
- Meanwhile, the India-U.S. free trade agreement, that hopes to see a rollback of excessive U.S. tariffs, is also in a decisive phase.
- In that sense, New Delhi hoped the Putin-visit, that was long delayed, would be a "win-win."
- It wanted the visit to be a reaffirmation of its traditional ties with Russia, while ensuring the outcomes did not raise a protest from the West.
- This would allow India to continue to uphold its decades-old policy of "strategic autonomy."

9.2 India's Engagements with Jordan

As part of a three nation visit to Jordan, Ethiopia and Oman from 15-18 December, 2025 PM Narendra Modi was in Amman on December 15-16, where he held extensive discussions with His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan on the 15th of December 2025.

What are the engagements of India-Jordan bilateral relations over the years?

- **Background** – India and Jordan enjoy warm relations based on mutual respect.
- Diplomatic ties were formalized in 1950 after the first agreement for cooperation and friendly relations was signed in 1947.
- This year marks the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties between the two countries.
- PM visited Jordan in February 2018, in transit, during his visit to State of Palestine.
- This was followed by King Abdullah-II's state visit to India from 27 February to 1 March 2018.
- During this visit there were delegation-level talks, a CEO's Roundtable, a joint address at the conference on *'Islamic Heritage: Promoting Understanding & Moderation'*, and the signing of **12 MoUs/Agreements**.
- **Trade and Economic Cooperation** – Over the years, economic relations between India and Jordan have strengthened significantly, with bilateral trade showing robust growth.
- India is the fourth largest trading partner of Jordan.
- In the financial year 2023–24, total India-Jordan trade reached US\$ 2.875 billion, with India's exports to Jordan amounting to US\$ 1.465 billion.
- Institutional frameworks underpinning this trade include the Trade and Economic Joint Committee (TEJC), set up under the 1976 Trade Agreement, and other dialogue mechanisms such as maritime and sector-specific working groups.
- **Defence Relations** – India and Jordan signed an MoU on Defence Cooperation in 2018.
- In 2024, a three-member Indian Army, Navy, and Air Force delegation attended the Special Operations Forces Exhibition and Conference (SOFEX) in Aqaba.
- A Jordanian Royal Navy delegation also visited India. They toured the Southern Naval Command Kochi and the Indian Naval Academy, Ezhimala.
- This visit took place from April 29 to May 4, 2024.
- **Science and Tech** – The Indian-Jordan Center of Excellence in Information Technology (IJCOEIT), a next-generation IT facility at Al-Hussein Technical University (HTU), was inaugurated on 02 October 2021.
- The Center is equipped with state-of-the-art IT infrastructure, including the Super Computer PARAM Shavak and advanced training facilities.
- The Government of India conducts master trainer courses for Jordanian experts in emerging fields such as Cyber Security, Web Development, Machine Learning, Big Data Analytics, etc., who in turn train Jordanian youth at IJCOEIT.
- It is envisioned that 3000 Jordanian experts/professionals would be nurtured at the Center.
- On the sidelines of the 4th round of Foreign Office Consultation with Jordan held in Amman, Secretary (CPV & OIA) and JS(WANA) visited the India-Jordan Center of Excellence in IT (IJCoEIT) at the Al-Hussein Technical University (HTU).
- **Education** – India and Jordan are strengthening ties in education and capacity building.
- India is a popular study destination for Jordanian students.
- There are 50 slots for Jordan under the Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme of Ministry of External Affairs.



- **People-to-People Ties** – More than 2,500 Jordanians have graduated from Indian universities.
- In 2024-25, Jordan used 37 civilian ITEC slots, 4 special executive programmes, and 5 ICCR scholarships.
- India and Jordan signed a Manpower Agreement and a visa-free travel for diplomatic and official passport holders during King Abdullah II's visit to India in March 2018.
- Around 17,500 Indian nationals currently live in Jordan, mostly working in textiles, construction, manufacturing, healthcare, nursing, universities, IT, financial companies and UN agencies.
- Jordan provides Visa on Arrival to Indian tourists since 2009 and e-Visas since 2023.
- There is a direct flight from Amman to Mumbai. Both countries cooperated during the evacuation of Indian nationals from Israel under Operation Sindhu.
- **Cultural Exchanges** – There is strong interest in Jordan for Indian culture, especially Bollywood films.
- Regular cultural exchanges involving dance and music, as also events on Yoga Day take place between the two countries on a regular basis.
- Most recently, in July 2024, an ICCR sponsored "Natraj Sanskritik Silpi Samaj" cultural troupe performed Assamese Folk Dance at the 38th Jerash festival of Culture and Arts, the signature cultural festival of Jordan.

What are the Outcomes of PM's Visit?

- **Strengthening ties Engagements** – Both the leaders discussed ways to further deepen bilateral engagement in the fields of:
 - Trade and investment
 - Defense and security
 - Renewable energy
 - Fertilizer and agriculture
 - Innovation
 - IT and digital technologies
 - Critical minerals & Infrastructure
 - Health and pharma
 - Education and capacity
 - Tourism and heritage
 - Culture and people-to-people ties.
- **Bilateral trade** – Prime Minister proposed that the two countries should aim to enhance bilateral trade to US\$ 5 billion over the next 5 years.
- **Digital payments** – He also called for collaboration between Jordan's digital payment system and India's United Payments Interface (UPI).
- **Investing in Fertilizers** – Jordan is an important supplier of fertilizer to India, and companies on both sides are in discussions for further substantive investment in Jordan to meet growing demand for phosphatic fertilizer in India.
- **Peace & Security** – The two leaders conveyed strong appreciation and support for each other's fight against terrorism and condemned terrorism in all its forms and manifestations.
- They shared perspectives on the developments in the region and on other global issues and reiterated the importance of restoring peace and stability in the region.
- **MoU's signed between India and Jordan**
 - MoU on Technical Cooperation in the Field of New and Renewable Energy
 - MoU on Cooperation in the field of Water resources Management & Development
 - Twinning Agreement between Petra and Ellora
 - Renewal of the Cultural Exchange Programme for the years 2025-2029
 - Letter of Intent on Cooperation in the field of sharing successful digital solutions implemented at population scale for digital transformation

What lies ahead?

- The India-Jordan, ties demonstrate how sustained political engagement reinforces economic and other outcomes for strong bilateral relations.
- Regular consultations, leadership-level meetings, and shared perspectives on regional stability and counter-terrorism have added strategic depth to the partnership.
- The engagements and outcomes of the recent high-level visit will further consolidate these gains.
- As India deepens its West Asia engagement, Jordan's role as a reliable economic and political partner remains significant, reflecting a balanced relationship built on trust, trade, and strategic alignment.

9.3 India–Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)

Recently India and Oman signed the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) on 18 December 2025, marking a major milestone in India's economic diplomacy with the Gulf region.

What is the background of India–Oman relations?

- **Legacy** – India and Oman share civilisational, maritime and people-to-people ties going back over two centuries.
- **Diaspora** – Nearly 7 lakh Indians reside in Oman.
- Indian merchant families have been present in Oman for 200–300 years.
- **Indian investment** – Over 6,000 Indian companies operate in Oman.
- **Remittances** – Annual remittances of around USD 2 billion flow from Oman to India.
- **Trade** – Bilateral trade currently stands at over USD 10 billion.
- **Strategic importance of Oman** – Oman also holds strategic importance for India as:
 - A gateway to the Middle East and Africa
 - A partner in maritime security in the Indian Ocean
 - One of the most politically stable Gulf countries

What are the key features of the India–Oman CEPA?

- **Unprecedented Market Access for Indian Goods** – One of the most significant outcomes of the CEPA is the near-complete tariff elimination by Oman.
 - Zero-duty access on 98.08% of Oman's tariff lines
 - Covers 99.38% of India's exports by value
 - Immediate tariff elimination on nearly 98% of tariff lines
- This provides Indian exporters with clear price competitiveness in the Omani market.
- **Boost to Labour-Intensive Manufacturing Sectors** – The agreement directly benefits India's employment-generating sectors, including:
 - Textiles and garments
 - Leather and footwear
 - Gems and jewellery
 - Engineering goods
 - Plastics and furniture
 - Agricultural and food products
 - Pharmaceuticals and medical devices
 - Automobiles
- These sectors are critical for:
 - MSMEs
 - Women-led enterprises

- Artisans
- Export-oriented clusters
- Thus, the CEPA supports inclusive growth, employment creation, and export diversification.
- **Balanced Tariff Liberalisation by India** – India has offered tariff concessions on:
 - 77.79% of its tariff lines
 - Covering 94.81% of imports from Oman by value
 - However, India has carefully protected sensitive sectors by:
 - Keeping key agricultural products (dairy, tea, coffee, rubber, tobacco) in the exclusion list
 - Excluding gold and silver bullion, jewellery
 - Protecting labour-intensive domestic sectors like footwear and sports goods
 - For some sensitive Omani exports, India has used Tariff Rate Quotas (TRQs) instead of full liberalisation, ensuring policy space and domestic protection.

What are the major breakthroughs of services sector?

- **First-of-Its-Kind Services Commitments by Oman** – Oman has offered ambitious services commitments in 127 sub-sectors, which is unprecedented.
- Key sectors include:
 - Computer and IT services
 - Business and professional services
 - Research and Development
 - Audio-visual services
 - Education & Health services
- This is crucial because:
 - Oman imports USD 12.52 billion worth of services globally
 - India's current share is only 5.31%, showing huge untapped potential
- **Enhanced Mobility for Indian Professionals (Mode 4)** – A major highlight of the CEPA is the liberal mobility framework, especially under Mode 4 of services trade.
- For the first time, Oman has provided:
 - Commitments for Intra-Corporate Transferees
 - Increase in ICT quota from 20% to 50%
 - Extension of stay for Contractual Service Suppliers from 90 days to 2 years, extendable further
- Liberalised entry and stay are provided for professionals in:
 - Accountancy and taxation
 - Architecture
 - Medical and allied sectors
 - This supports India's strength as a global supplier of skilled manpower.
- **100% FDI for Indian Companies in Services (Mode 3)** – The agreement allows 100% Foreign Direct Investment by Indian companies in major services sectors in Oman through commercial presence.
- This will:
 - Enable Indian firms to set up operations in Oman
 - Strengthen regional value chains
 - Use Oman as a base to access Africa and West Asia

What are the landmark commitments on traditional medicine and pharma?

- **Traditional Medicine (AYUSH)** – Oman has made the first-ever comprehensive commitment on Traditional Medicine across all modes of supply.

- Significance:
 - Opens Gulf markets for AYUSH and wellness sectors
 - Promotes medical value travel
 - Strengthens cooperation in traditional healthcare systems
- **Pharmaceuticals and Medical Devices** – The CEPA provides, Fast-tracking of marketing authorisation for drugs approved by USFDA, EMA, UKMHRA
- Acceptance of GMP inspection documents
 - This reduces time cost, regulatory uncertainty
 - It boosts India's image as the "Pharmacy of the Global South."
- **Addressing Non-Tariff Barriers and Standards** – The agreement also addresses long-standing non-tariff barriers through:
 - Mutual recognition arrangements for Halal certification
 - Acceptance of India's NPOP certification for organic products
 - Enhanced cooperation on standards, conformity assessment and technical regulations
 - This ensures real market access, not just tariff concessions.

What are the strategic and geopolitical significance?

- **Strengthens India's Gulf Strategy** – CEPA deepens economic engagement with a politically stable Gulf partner.
- **Diversification of Trade Partners** – Reduces over-dependence on a few markets and strengthens resilience.
- **Supports India's Global Value Chain Integration** – Particularly in services, pharma, manufacturing and logistics.
- **People-centric Economic Diplomacy** – Benefits Indian workers, professionals, MSMEs and diaspora.
- **Oman's First FTA Since 2006** – Reflects high trust and strategic alignment with India.

What lies ahead?

- The India–Oman CEPA is not just a trade agreement but a strategic economic partnership that aligns with India's goals of export growth, employment generation, services leadership, and skilled mobility.
- By combining market access, services liberalisation, investment opportunities, and people-to-people ties, the agreement sets a new benchmark for India's engagement with the Gulf region.
- If effectively implemented, the CEPA has the potential to transform India–Oman relations from transactional trade to long-term economic integration, contributing meaningfully to India's vision of becoming a global economic power with inclusive growth.

9.4 Cambodia - Thailand Dispute

Recently, the longstanding border dispute between Thailand and Cambodia has erupted into one of the most serious episodes of violence in years, raising alarm in Southeast Asia and globally.

What is the historical context of the dispute?

- **Legacy of Western rule** – It largely stems from the legacy of colonial-era boundaries drawn in the early 20th century when both countries were under French and Western influence.
- **ICJ verdict** – The most symbolic flashpoint historically has been the area around the *Preah Vihear* temple – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – which was the subject of a 1962 International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling awarding the site to Cambodia but leaving surrounding terrain contentious.
- Tensions have periodically flared since the early 2000s, with deadly clashes reported in 2008 and 2011, often involving artillery exchanges and mutual accusations of violations.
- **Unsolved border issue** – While the ICJ ruling has helped clarify title to the ancient temple itself, broader border demarcation remains unresolved, leaving room for recurrent friction.
- **Recent clashes** – Hostilities reignited on 7 December 2025 when clashes broke out along the shared border, particularly in the *Preah Vihear region*.

- Both sides accuse the other of initiating attacks, with reports of rocket fire and artillery exchanges.
- **Claims of Thailand** – Cambodia used rocket launchers that hit civilian areas, leading to the first confirmed Thai civilian death in this round of violence.
- **Cambodia response** – Denies such allegations and asserts that its forces were responding to Thai aggression.
- Thai military responses have included airstrikes on what it describes as military targets inside Cambodian territory, while Cambodian forces reportedly used BM-21 rocket systems against Thai positions.
- The use of heavy weapons and air power represents a significant escalation compared to past incidents.



What are the impacts of the conflict?

- **Casualties** – Both military personnel and civilians have been killed or injured. Cambodia reported civilian deaths and injuries, while Thailand confirmed both soldier and civilian casualties.
- **Displacement** – The fighting has displaced hundreds of thousands of people on both sides of the border, forcing entire communities to flee areas of active combat.
- **Public Safety Warnings** – Foreign governments, including the U.S. Embassy, have issued travel alerts recommending that citizens avoid travel within 50 km of the border, highlighting the unpredictable and volatile security situation.
- In addition to immediate displacement and injury, education and economic activities have been disrupted in affected provinces, with schools closed and communities cut off from normal services.
- **Cultural Heritage at Risk** – The *Preah Vihear Temple*, a site of immense historical and cultural significance, is at risk due to its proximity to the conflict zones.
- Damage has been reported to infrastructure associated with the site, prompting concern from outside nations.
 - **For instance**, the Ministry of External Affairs of India has called for protection of the temple and restraint from both parties, emphasizing its status as a shared cultural treasure.

What are the ceasefire efforts and diplomatic struggles?

- **Ceasefire agreement** – Both governments had engaged in ceasefire negotiations, including a peace accord signed in October 2025 in Kuala Lumpur with the involvement of mediators.
- However, this tentative peace collapsed, with both sides providing conflicting narratives about its existence and terms.
- Thailand's leadership publicly denied any formal truce despite external claims that a ceasefire had been agreed.
- **International mediation** – China and the United States have pushed for renewed ceasefire commitments in advance of a special ASEAN meeting, with diplomatic representatives attempting to broker a new cessation of hostilities.
- Cambodia has been less responsive publicly to these overtures, although both nations are participating in regional discussions.
- **United Nation negotiation** – It has condemned the escalation and expressed concern for civilian safety, while ASEAN members including Indonesia and Malaysia — are mobilizing diplomatic engagement to prevent a full-scale war.

What are the root causes beyond the battlefield?

- **Sovereignty and Nationalism** – National pride and sovereignty issues play a central role, with both governments tying territorial control to national legitimacy.
- **Border Demarcation** – Despite decades of dialogue, fully demarcating the nearly 817-km border remains unfinished, making flare-ups more likely when incidents occur on the ground.

- **Diplomatic Tools vs. Military Might** – Cambodia has indicated willingness to pursue legal avenues including ICJ adjudication on broader boundary disputes.
- Thailand has favoured bilateral talks and resisted broader international judicial jurisdiction.

What are the regional and global implications?

- **ASEAN's Unity and Credibility** – Persistent violence tests ASEAN's ability to manage intra-regional disputes without external intervention.
- **Tourism and Economy** – Both countries depend significantly on tourism, with border closures and security fears dampening visitor confidence.
- **Great Power Diplomacy** – The involvement of external powers such as the U.S. and China adds complexity to negotiations, as both seek influence in Southeast Asia.

What lies ahead?

- The December 2025 escalation in the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict highlights the fragility of peace in the face of unresolved historical disputes and rising nationalist sentiment.
- Despite repeated ceasefire talks and diplomatic efforts, mistrust and contradictory narratives have kept hostility alive.
- The humanitarian toll underscores the urgent need for committed negotiation, third-party mediation, and safeguards for civilians and cultural heritage.
- Only sustained diplomacy, backed by regional institutions like ASEAN and the broader international community can hope to prevent a further slide into deeper conflict.

9.5 India – New Zealand Free Trade Agreement

Recently, India and New Zealand have just concluded negotiations for a forward-looking FTA, marking a historic milestone in bilateral economic relations.

What is India – New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (FTA)?

- **FTA** – A Free Trade Agreement (FTA) is a pact between two or more countries to lower or eliminate barriers to trade, like tariffs (taxes) and quotas.
- It makes it easier and cheaper to exchange goods, services, investments, and intellectual property across borders, fostering economic ties and opposing protectionism.
- These agreements create a predictable, transparent environment, benefiting businesses by reducing costs and increasing market access globally, with specifics varying but generally covering customs, regulations, and IP.
- **India-New Zealand FTA** – The Agreement delivers unprecedented duty-free access for Indian exports to New Zealand while:
 - Safeguarding India's sensitive sectors,
 - Strengthening economic resilience, and
 - Promoting inclusive growth aligned with India's national priorities.
- **Background** – India and New Zealand announced negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) In March 2025.
- Following several rounds of negotiations, the India-New Zealand FTA was concluded in December 2025, becoming one of India's fastest-concluded FTAs.
- This FTA enhances market access and tariff preferences for Indian exports to New Zealand, while serving as a gateway to the wider Oceania and Pacific Island markets.

What are the India – New Zealand bilateral trade ties?

- **Merchandise Trade** – Grew from USD 873 million in 2023–24 to USD 1.3 billion in 2024–25, registering a 49% growth.
- **Merchandise Exports to New Zealand** – Rose to USD 711 million in 2024–25, showing a positive trend of 32%.
- In 2024-25, the exports from India to New Zealand was higher than imports from New Zealand, maintaining positive trade balance with the country.

- **Services Trade** – India's services exports to New Zealand grew by 13% in 2024, reaching USD 634 million. Major sectors include travel, IT, and business services.

What are the areas of cooperation and Gains to India from FTA?

- **Enhanced Market Access for Indian Goods** – New Zealand's market access offer covers immediate elimination of duties (zero duty) on 100% of tariff lines of New Zealand (8,284 tariff lines), from Entry into Force.
- New Zealand maintained tariffs around 10% in around 450 lines of key Indian exports in products including textile/apparel products, leather and headgear, ceramics, carpets, automobiles and auto components.
- Additionally, the average applied tariff at 2.2% in 2025 will become zero from EIF.
- The offer extends gains to several products and sectors
 - Labour intensive sectors like textiles and clothing, leather and footwear;
 - Emerging and advanced engineering sectors like transport/auto, pharmaceuticals, plastic & rubber, electrical & electronic machinery, mechanical machinery, chemicals and;
 - Agri Products like fruits and vegetables, coffee, spices, cereals, processed foods
- **Gains from import to support domestic industries** – Wooden logs, coking coal, waste and scrap of ferrous, non-ferrous metals.
- **Gains for Agriculture, Technology Cooperation, and Farmer Income Growth** – New Zealand have agreed on focused Action Plans for kiwifruit, apples, and honey to improve productivity, quality, and sectoral capabilities of these fruits growers in India
 - The cooperation includes:
 - The establishment of Centres of Excellence,
 - Improved planting material & Capacity building for growers,
 - Technical support for orchard management,
 - Post-harvest practices, Supply chains and food safety.
- Projects for premium apple cultivators and sustainable beekeeping practices will enhance production and quality standards.
- This is paired with Market access for the selected agricultural products (Apples, Kiwifruit, and Manuka Honey) from New Zealand in India.
- This access will be managed through a Tariff Rate Quota (TRQ) system with Minimum Import Price and seasonal imports, ensuring consumer choice while protecting domestic farmers.
- All TRQs are linked to Agri-technology Action Plans and monitored by a Joint Agriculture Productivity Council, balancing market access with protection of sensitive domestic agricultural sectors.

What are the Enhanced Opportunities beyond Goods?

- **Services** – Commitment across 118 services sectors, with Most-Favoured Nation (MFN) treatment in 139 sectors.
- **Health & Traditional Medicine Annex** – For the first time, New Zealand has signed an annex to facilitate trade in Ayurveda, yoga, and other traditional medicine services with India.
- This landmark provision promotes the global recognition of India's AYUSH systems, supports medical value travel, encourages collaboration in wellness services, and reinforces India's position as a global hub for health, wellness, and traditional medicine services.
- It gives centre stage to India's AYUSH disciplines (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Sowa-Rigpa, Siddha, and Homeopathy) alongside Maori Health practices
- **Student Mobility** – New Zealand signed Annex on Student Mobility and Post Study Work Visa for the first time with any country.
- Indian students can work up to 20 hours per week while studying, even if there are policy changes in future, with extended post-study work visas.
- **Professional Pathways** – A quota of 5,000 visas for skilled Indians for stay upto 3 years in the sectors of interest to India.
- This include Indian iconic occupations (AYUSH practitioners, Yoga Instructors, Indian Chefs, and Music Teachers) and Other sectors of interest - IT, Engineering, Healthcare, Education, and Construction

- **Working Holiday Visa** – 1,000 young Indians annually can avail multiple entry in New Zealand for a period of 12 months.
- These provisions create unprecedented opportunities for Indian youth and professionals to gain global exposure.

Investment and Economic Co-operation

- **FDI Commitment** – New Zealand will invest **USD 20 billion in India over 15 years**, strengthening long-term economic ties.
 - **Organic Primary Products** – Mutual recognition of **organic certification** to be agreed between the two sides.
 - **MSME Cooperation** – Institutional linkages to help small businesses access trade-related information and global markets.
 - **Technical Assistance** – Cooperation has been agreed in AYUSH, audio visual industries, tourism, sports and traditional knowledge systems.
 - **Health collaboration** – The FTA promotes India's AYUSH systems internationally, encourages medical value travel, and positions India as a global wellness hub.
- **Cultural & Traditional Knowledge** – Dedicated cooperation in Ayush and Indian traditional knowledge has been agreed.
 - Engagement with New Zealand's indigenous Maori communities to promote cultural exchange and mutual respect.
 - This strengthens India's soft power and global recognition of its heritage.
 - **Pharmaceuticals & Medical Devices** – Annexes for expedited regulatory pathways and recognition of inspections from trusted regulators (US, EU, UK, Canada).
 - **Intellectual Property Rights** – Binding commitment by New Zealand to amend its laws within 18 months to provide EU-level protection for India's Geographical Indications (GIs).
 - **Customs & Trade Facilitation** – Advance rulings, electronic documentation, and faster clearance times (within 48 hours, 24 hours for perishables).
 - **Rules of Origin (ROO)** – Robust framework to prevent circumvention and ensure integrity of preferential access.
 - **Sectoral Highlights** – The India–New Zealand FTA secures duty free or preferential access across a wide range of sectors.
 - These gains are expected to boost India's exports, create jobs, and strengthen the competitiveness of Indian industries in the Oceania region.

What are India's global trade networks?

- **India's FTA with other countries** – It enhances competitiveness by reducing or eliminating tariffs and by improving market access for goods and services.
 - India -Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), 2025
 - India -UK Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA), 2025
 - India-EFTA Trade & Economic Partnership Agreement (TEPA) with Switzerland, Norway, Iceland, and Liechtenstein, 2024
 - India- United Arab Emirates Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), 2022
 - India- Australia Economic Cooperation and Trade Agreement (ECTA), 2022
 - India – Mauritius Comprehensive Economic Cooperation and Partnership (CECPA), 2021

What lies ahead?

- The India–New Zealand Free Trade Agreement reflects a defining moment in India's trade diplomacy, opening new avenues for comprehensive economic cooperation.
- By securing improved market access for Indian goods, expanding opportunities in services and mobility, and deepening collaboration in agriculture, investment and emerging sectors, the Agreement delivers tangible and wide-ranging benefits across the economy.

- From farmers and MSMEs to students and skilled professionals, the gains from this Agreement are expected to be broad-based, reinforcing India's position as a trusted, forward-looking global partner and advancing the vision of a globally integrated Viksit Bharat 2047.

9.6 U.S. Naval Moves against Venezuela

Recently, The United States has announced a "total and complete blockade of all sanctioned oil tankers going into and, out of Venezuela marking a significant escalation in its pressure campaign against the Nicolás Maduro government.

What are the three merchant ships targeted by the U.S.?

- **Skipper** – It was seized by U.S. authorities off the coast of Venezuela.
 - The vessel was carrying nearly two million barrels of crude oil.
 - According to the U.S. government, the oil had been shipped at subsidised rates to Cuba, which has been providing economic and political support to the Maduro regime.
- **Centuries** – The Panamanian-flagged tanker was stopped and boarded by the U.S. Coast Guard.
 - The Venezuelan Navy escorted the ship up to the boundary of Venezuela's Exclusive Economic Zone, after which U.S. forces intervened.
 - The vessel was transporting Venezuelan oil and had previously lost certification from major international classification societies.
- **Bella 1** – The U.S. Coast Guard attempted to intercept this tanker that was en route to Venezuela to load crude oil.
 - The vessel had earlier been sanctioned by the U.S. for trading Iranian oil and was again suspected of violating U.S. sanctions related to Venezuela.
- These three ships illustrate the methods used by sanctioned states to continue oil exports despite international pressure.

What are the nature and scope of U.S. Sanctions?

- **United Nations sanctions** – These imposed by the United Nations are legally binding on all member states and can include military, diplomatic, or economic measures.
- **U.S. sanctions** – They are largely unilateral measures designed to achieve American foreign policy objectives at relatively low direct cost.
- Rather than relying on physical enforcement, which is expensive and often ineffective, the U.S. increasingly uses financial and economic leverage.
- **Past experience of US sanctions** – The maritime blockade of Iraq under the Oil-for-Food Programme after the First Gulf War, showed that physical blockades cost billions of dollars and failed to prevent illegal oil trading.
- **Revised Strategy of US** – Since the Second Gulf War, the U.S. has focused on exploiting its dominant position in the global financial system, especially through control over the U.S. dollar and international banking infrastructure

What is the role of the dollar and global finance?

- **Petro dollar system** – The U.S. exercises significant influence through the petrodollar system, as most global oil transactions are conducted in U.S. dollars.
- The American government has direct authority over U.S. companies and prohibits them from trading with sanctioned countries.
- **Submission of other banks and agencies** – Non-U.S. banks and companies also comply with U.S. sanctions to retain access to the American market and the global financial system, which is heavily centred in the United States.
- Even transactions that do not directly involve the U.S. often pass through American financial intermediaries, allowing Washington to block or monitor them.
 - **For example**, major international banks such as HSBC were reluctant to re-enter Iran even after the 2015 nuclear deal, due to continuing restrictions on U.S. firms.
 - In 2014, BNP Paribas paid nearly \$9 billion in fines for violating U.S. sanctions.

- Similarly, U.S. pressure on Banco Delta Asia in Macau effectively disrupted North Korea's access to international finance.

What are the shipping-related sanctions and their mechanisms?

- **Control over various factors** – Shipping sanctions rely heavily on control over insurance, certification, and registration, rather than ownership of vessels.
- **Dominance of west** – While shipbuilding and ownership are globally dispersed, marine insurance is dominated by Western companies, particularly those based in the United Kingdom.
- Ships require insurance coverage, especially Protection and Indemnity (P&I) insurance, to enter ports and conduct trade.
- **Mandatory certification** – Certification by recognised classification societies, most of which belong to the International Association of Classification Societies (IACS), is also mandatory for obtaining insurance.
- When the U.S. imposes sanctions, classification societies often withdraw certification and major insurers terminate coverage.
 - **For instance**, Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, several Russian ships were stranded in the Bosphorus Strait after losing P&I insurance, making them unacceptable risks for transit through Turkish waters.
- In addition, some countries may revoke flag registration of sanctioned vessels to avoid U.S. retaliation.
- Ships that lose their flag or falsely claim nationality can be boarded by naval forces under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

What are the effectiveness of U.S. sanctions in the shipping sector?

- **Finding alternate route** – Energy-rich states such as Iran and Russia have managed to develop alternative networks despite losing access to mainstream insurers and classification societies.
- Russia, in particular, has partially bypassed price-cap mechanisms imposed on its oil exports.
- **Role of OFAC** – The U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) plays a central role in enforcing sanctions by identifying and blacklisting individuals, companies, and vessels.
- In June 2024, OFAC sanctioned Bella 1 for allegedly transporting cargo linked to a Hezbollah-owned company.
- **Operating with irregularities** – Many vessels now operate under unclear or frequently changing ownership, flags of convenience, and lesser-known classification societies.
- This complicates enforcement and reflects deliberate attempts to evade sanctions.
- **The Shadow Fleet and Emerging Counter-Networks** – The cases of Skipper, Centuries, and Bella 1 exemplify what Western governments describe as the "shadow fleet" aging vessels operating without proper insurance, certification, or transparent ownership.
- Centuries, once certified by the American Bureau of Shipping, later received certification from a smaller classification society not affiliated with the IACS.
- Skipper similarly lost certification from recognised bodies and was accused by U.S. authorities of falsely flying the flag of Guyana.
- **Cooperation among countries** – These developments indicate increasing cooperation among sanctioned states such as Venezuela, Iran, Russia, and potentially China, aimed at weakening U.S. dominance over global finance and maritime trade.

What lies ahead?

- The decision by the United States to resort to a physical maritime blockade against Venezuelan oil exports signals the limits of financial sanctions alone.
- While U.S. control over the dollar, banking, insurance, and certification remains formidable, the persistence of shadow fleets and alternative trading networks shows that sanctioned states have achieved partial success in resisting economic isolation.
- For global governance, this raises important questions about the future effectiveness of unilateral sanctions, the fragmentation of the international economic order, and the increasing militarisation of maritime enforcement in global trade routes.

9.7 India's Diplomatic Headwinds in 2026

The defining spirit of Indian foreign policy in 2025 was one of shock and surprise and as India steps into 2026, policymakers face a complex international landscape marked by economic uncertainty, geopolitical realignments, regional instability, and shifting alliances.

What are the biggest global developments affecting India in 2025?

- **The United States and the Trump Factor** – The re-election of Donald Trump emerged as the single most consequential global event for India in 2025.
- Indian policymakers initially expected a pro-India Trump presidency based on past engagement.
- This assumption proved incorrect due to punitive trade measures and hostile immigration policies.
- Crackdowns on H-1B visas, student visas, and deportations of undocumented Indians triggered domestic criticism of the Ministry of External Affairs.
- President Trump's repeated claims of mediating the ceasefire of Operation Sindoor undermined India's narrative on cross-border terrorism.
- The hosting of Pakistani leadership at the White House and approval of F-16 supplies weakened India's diplomatic position.
- India also faced strained relations with Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Malaysia for their perceived support to Pakistan.
- President Trump's announcement of "Liberation Day" tariffs severely destabilised the multilateral economic system.
- His protectionist trade policies disrupted global supply chains and undermined institutions such as the World Trade Organization.
- India was directly affected by the imposition of a 25% tariff and an additional 25% surcharge on Indian exports, primarily due to India's continued purchase of Russian oil.
- **U.S. Policy Shifts on Russia and China** – President Trump's altered stance towards Russia and China overturned earlier U.S. strategic frameworks.
- Russia and China, earlier labelled as America's principal threats, were selectively engaged, unsettling traditional U.S. allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.
- This unpredictability weakened alliance cohesion and complicated India's balancing strategy between great powers.
- **Decline in Diplomatic Norms and Global Leadership** – President Trump's confrontational and high-handed treatment of world leaders marked a sharp decline in diplomatic decorum.
- His overt quest for international recognition, including claims of resolving "eight wars" to justify a Nobel Peace Prize bid, eroded the credibility of U.S. leadership.
- India found it increasingly difficult to rely on established diplomatic norms in dealing with Washington.
- **Rise of the Global Ultra-Right** – Elections across Europe, Japan, and Chile witnessed the rise of ultra-right and xenophobic political forces.
- These trends threatened liberal democratic values and complicated India's diaspora diplomacy.
- Increasing nationalism reduced support for multilateralism and migration-friendly policies, affecting Indian professionals abroad.
- **Global Economic Slowdown and Energy Concerns** – Global growth was projected to decline steadily from 3.3% in 2024 to 3.1% in 2026.
- A glut in oil production by OPEC countries led to falling oil prices.
- While beneficial for India's import bill, lower oil prices weakened incentives for renewable energy transitions and climate action.
- **Russia-Ukraine War and Its Economic Fallout** – The Russia-Ukraine war entered its fourth year without resolution.
- For the first time, India faced direct economic consequences for its energy imports from Russia.
- The European Union and the United Kingdom imposed sanctions on Nayara Energy, an Indian-Russian joint venture.
- The United States sanctioned major Russian oil companies, indirectly affecting India's energy security.

- **Israel–Gaza Conflict** – Israeli military operations in Gaza continued through 2025, resulting in over 70,000 deaths, including 20,000 children.
- India maintained a cautious diplomatic position, avoiding direct criticism of Israel.
- An American-backed ceasefire towards the end of the year offered limited optimism.
- **Iran, SCO, and BRICS Complications** – India's refusal to criticise Israeli strikes on Iran in June led to diplomatic discomfort within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and BRICS, where Iran is a member.
- India's balancing act between Israel, Iran, and Arab states became increasingly complex.
- **India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC)** – The ambitious India-Middle East Economic Corridor remained stalled due to regional instability.
- This delayed India's connectivity and trade ambitions linking Asia with Europe.
- **Neighbourhood Turmoil** – India faced renewed tensions with Pakistan following a military conflict.
- Nepal witnessed Gen-Z-led protests that toppled the government, raising concerns over political stability.
- In Bangladesh, mob violence turned anti-India after the killing of a right-wing leader.
- These events cast doubts on the effectiveness of India's "Neighbourhood First" policy.

What are the diplomatic successes of India in 2025?

- **Reset in India-Canada Relations** – Relations with Canada improved after years of tension over Khalistani extremism.
 - Prime Minister Modi attended the G-7 outreach in Canada.
 - Both leaders agreed to de-escalate disputes and rebuild trust.
- **Engagement with the Taliban** – India initiated direct engagement with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.
 - A meeting between the Indian Foreign Secretary and Taliban Foreign Minister led to improved ties
 - External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar accorded full honours to Amir Khan Muttaqi during his visit to Delhi.
 - While controversial, this engagement countered Pakistan's influence and created a strategic opening.
- **Managing Relations with China** – India continued rapprochement with China after the 2024 Modi-Xi meeting.
 - Measures included reopening Kailash-Mansarovar Yatra, restoring visas and flights, and resuming water data sharing.
 - Despite China's support to Pakistan during Operation Sindoor, India maintained engagement through SCO mechanisms.
- **Strengthening Select Neighbourhood Ties** – India strengthened relations with Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives.
 - India's humanitarian assistance to Sri Lanka after Cyclone Ditwah, including \$450 million in aid, was widely appreciated.

What lies ahead in 2026?

- **Trade and Economic Diplomacy** – Bilateral trade agreements with the U.K., Oman, and New Zealand were concluded.
- Major trade agreements with the U.S., EU, ASEAN, GCC, and others remain pending.
- The India-EU Free Trade Agreement is expected to be finalised during the Republic Day visit of EU leaders.
- **Key Diplomatic Events** – India will closely monitor elections in Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Nepal due to their regional implications.
- India will host the Artificial Intelligence Summit in February 2026 with participation from global leaders.
- Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney is expected to visit India to discuss trade, critical minerals, and nuclear cooperation.
- **Multilateral Engagements** – Uncertainty remains over President Trump's participation in the Quad Summit hosted by India.

- Leaders of BRICS, including Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, are expected to attend the BRICS Summit in India.
- Prime Minister Modi will attend the G-20 Summit in Miami, hosted on a Trump property, following U.S. mid-term elections.

9.8 India-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement

Recently, India has concluded a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with New Zealand.

What are the key agreements?

- **Duty free market for India** – India will receive zero-duty market access for all its exports to New Zealand.
- **Reduced tariff for New Zealand** – India will relax tariffs on 95% of imports from New Zealand, with 57% of these products becoming duty-free from day one.
- **FDI** – New Zealand has committed to investing \$20 billion in India over the next 15 years, with firm clawback mechanisms in case the investment doesn't meet the stipulated timeline.
- The FDI is aimed at promoting skill mobility and services, creating employment and growth opportunities across 118 sectors.
- **New areas of trade** – For the first time, New Zealand has agreed to facilitate trade in Ayurveda, yoga, and traditional medicine services with India.
- **Mobilization of Indians** – The deal also makes provisions for the support and mobility of Indian skilled workers.
- Youth, students, and professionals will find it easier to live and work in New Zealand.
- **Skill development** – The FTA creates opportunities for India to become a key supplier of skilled workforce in services such as IT professionals, Engineers, Yoga instructors, Indian chefs, Music teachers, as well as in sectors including healthcare, education, and construction.
- **Enhanced permits** – Student mobility, work permits of up to 20 hours per week while studying, and extended post-study work visas are some of the opportunities for Indian youth to get global exposure.
- **Other opportunities** – The agreement also builds on MSMEs and employment opportunities through labour-intensive sectors, including textiles and apparel, leather and footwear, gems and jewellery, engineering goods, and processed food items.
- **Sectors kept out** – India has refused to give market access to major items crucial to New Zealand.
- This includes items such as dairy and agricultural products, including
 - Milk, Cheese, Cream, Butter & Yogurt,
 - Onions, Sugar & Edible oils, Spices, and Rubber.
- In order to protect Indian farmers and small and medium industries.
- **Action plans on development** – New Zealand will develop focused action plans to develop and improve productivity, quality, and sectoral capabilities for fruit growers in India, particularly for exotic fruits like kiwifruit, apples, and honey.
- This cooperation will ensure the establishment of centres of excellence, improved planting material, capacity building for growers, technical support for orchard management, post-harvest practices, supply chains, and food safety.

Why is the FTA important?

- **Framework for future** – More than a breakthrough, the India-New Zealand FTA is a framework for deeper cooperation in the future.
- It is India's conscious move to increase its global economic footprint.
- Trade diversification demands a deep and deliberate transformation of the country's productive sector and integration into global value chains.
- **Fast concluded deal** – The India-New Zealand FTA is hailed for being the fastest concluded, completed in a record time of nine months after being announced in March 2025.
- **Access to important markets** – It enhances market access and tariff preferences for Indian exports to New Zealand, while proving to be a gateway to Oceania and Pacific Island markets.

- **Potential and importance of New Zealand** – Standing at \$49,380, New Zealand is among the higher-income economies in Oceania.
- The Indian diaspora in New Zealand constitutes 5% of its population, which amounts to 3,00,000 persons.
- This creates a promising exchange and opens opportunities for soft power politics between the two nations.
- Currently, India's bilateral merchandise trade with New Zealand stands at \$1.3 billion.
- The deal aims to double this figure over the next five years.
- India has instated strict safeguards to protect its sensitive sectors, like agriculture and dairy, from one of the world's largest dairy exporters.
- This is also one of the first FTAs negotiated and concluded entirely by a women-led and women-driven team, from the chief negotiating officer to the ambassador to New Zealand.

Why is India accelerating new FTAs?

- **Positioning India's relation** – By engaging with the Pacific, West Asia, and Africa as trade partners, India is leveraging its position and promoting realignments through bilateral engagements and FTAs.
- **Platform for commitments** – FTAs provide a platform to pursue unique and region-specific commitments, creating room for WTO-plus commitments, especially in areas like services, digital trade, and investment.
- **Reduced dependency on major powers** – Diversification of trade partners means that India doesn't have to be dependent on traditional markets such as the EU, the U.S., and China.
- **Reassuring developmental goals** – FTAs are aligned with India's development goals and policies, such as Make in India.
- Securing India's sensitive sectors through technology transfers and production-induced incentive schemes that can help in aligning Indian manufacturing with the global value chains.
- India is currently determined to materialise FTAs with several countries, including Russia, Oman, the U.K., and New Zealand, in spite of its not-so-successful past FTA engagements.
- This points to India's attempt at securing strategic and geopolitical alliances via economic and trade liberalisation.
- **3rd FTA of 2025** – This is India's third FTA this year, after agreements with the U.K. and Oman.
- **Countering multiple issues with US** – It is a part of a broad strategy that India is determined to take forward after the U.S. imposed steep tariffs.
- A large chunk of India's trade is U.S.-dependent.
- The bilateral trade between India and the U.S. stands at \$132 billion, and changes in the tariffs by the U.S. really hurt India's trade.
- India's exports to the U.S. declined sharply in September and October, dropping to 12% and 8.5%, respectively.
- The Indo-U.S. free trade deal is in slow progress, and 50% of the tariffs still remain unchanged.
- This has resulted in a departure from the U.S. and into an urgent need for diversification of India's trade policies and strategic alliances in order to attract greener trade pastures.
- One of the main reasons for the stalling of the Indo-U.S. bilateral talks is India's steadfast policy of not opening up its farming and dairy sector to concessions in the FTA.
- India is thus making a substantial move from short-term economic partnerships to long-term trade alliances.

What criticisms does the agreement face?

- **Criticism from New Zealand** – This is New Zealand's first FTA that excludes dairy and agriculture from its purview, due to which it is heavily criticised in New Zealand by coalition partners of the current government.
- The Foreign Minister of New Zealand said that the deal is 'neither free nor fair' as it bypasses the dairy and agriculture sector, the country's largest industry, and added that they will vote against the bill when it comes to the floor in the New Zealand Parliament in 2026.
- **Criticism from India** – In India, FTAs are criticised for widening trade deficits and generating asymmetric gains, as it has led to imports from partner countries growing faster than our exports.
- Although the safeguards established by the current India-New Zealand FTA claim to cover these risks and protect and promote India's sensitive sectors through manufacturing collaboration.

- The success of which will have to be determined as the implementation unfolds over the years.

What lies ahead?

- Even though the India-New Zealand FTA is considered historic, it is important to learn from the trade agreements in the past, as many resulted in low yields.
- India needs to invest in domestic competitiveness, meet global market standards and quality requirements, ensure strong rules of origin, define anti-dumping provisions, strengthen its sensitive sector and MSMEs and formulate them in line with global markets.
- India also needs to invest in research and development for increasing quality and competitiveness of its products if it has to thrive in the global market.

10. ECONOMY

10.1 The Health Security se National Security Cess Bill, 2025

Recently, The Health Security se National Security Cess Bill, 2025 has been introduced to create a clear legal framework for a special excise cess on manufacturing of pan masala and other tobacco products.

What is the need for the bill?

- **About the bill** – The Health Security se National Security Cess –proposes to tax all those people who have machines installed for production of pan masala.
- The machines include fill and seal machines and any packing machine used to fill pan masala in in pouches, tins or other containers.
- **India's tobacco use** – According to the Global Adult Tobacco Survey (GATS-2), nearly 42% of men and 14% of women in India use tobacco.
- Moreover, India amounts to 70% of the world's smokeless tobacco (SLT) users i.e. gutkha, pan masala and among smoked tobacco, bidis are preferred over cigarettes, especially in rural and lower income families.
- As both SLT and smoked tobacco use increase cancer risk in lung, head, neck, stomach, and pancreas, India ranks first globally in male cancer deaths.
- **Increased economic cost of tobacco use** – Experts found that the economic cost of both SLT and smoked tobacco amounted to ₹1.77 lakh crore in 2016-17.
- **Ineffective ban** – Centre's ban on use of gutkha has more or less remained ineffective as the tobacco industry has ensured wide accessibility of its products via policy interference, pricing tactics, targeted marketing and dense tobacco shop networks.
- **Who recommendation** – Though WHO has recommended taxing tobacco products at 75% of its MRP, very few have followed through.
- **Affordability of tobacco products** – Also, study has shown that affordability of cigarettes and bidis remain the main hamper.
- 87% of Indian cigarette vendors sell single sticks, frequently operating near tea stalls, found research.
- This practice is banned in 88 countries but not in India.

What are the theme-based provisions?

- **Goods Covered** – Pan Masala & any other goods as notified.
- **Taxable person**– Any person who owns/operates/controls machines or processes manufacturing specified goods as given, regardless of tax status, as prescribed.
- **Nature of Levy** – achines installed or processes undertaken, in addition to other certain duties/taxes, as prescribed.
- **Basis of Calculation** – Computed by maximum rated speed (pouches/tins per minute) & weight per pack, or manual process flat rate, as prescribed.
- **Monthly Cess Amounts** – or Machine based process: ₹101 lakh/month, as prescribed.
- (cess for item - up to 500 Number of pouches or tins or containers per minute, up to 2.5g)

- For Manual process: ₹11 lakh/month flat, as prescribed.
- **Abatement** – 15+ days continuous stoppage eligible for abatement
- **Use of Proceeds** – Credited to Consolidated Fund of India, for public health & National Security.
- **Registration & Returns** – Registration, Self-declaration of machines, monthly returns & payment by 7th of month.
- **Monitoring & Verification** – Scrutiny, Audit, Inspection/search/seizure.
- **Offences** – Offences & penalties, Confiscation, Arrest, Graded Imprisonment Levels, as prescribed
- **Appeals Structure** – Appeal to Appellate Authority → Tribunal → High Court → Supreme Court.
- **Government Powers** – May increase cess up to 2× in public interest; may exempt taxable persons; may add goods to Schedule I, as applicable & prescribed.

What are the procedural format for effective implementation?

- **Registration** – Any person owning/operating/controlling machines or processes manufacturing specified goods must register with the proper officer.
- **Self-Declaration of Machinery / Process Parameters** – Taxable person must submit self-declaration of machines/processes, including parameters like maximum rated speed, weight per pack, and type of packing.
- **Verification / Calibration** – Details declared may be verified or calibrated by the proper officer (with opportunity of being heard).
- **Cess Computation** – Cess is computed based on machine capacity (pouches/tins per minute) and weight per pack, or a flat monthly rate for manual process.
- **Monthly Payment & Return Filing** – Cess must be paid at the beginning of each month but no later than the 7th, with a monthly return filed by the taxpayer.
- **Abatement for Non-Operation** – If a machine or unit remains inoperative for 15+ days, cess amount may be abated proportionately, subject to conditions.
- **Review, Audit & Assessment** – Provisions for scrutiny of returns, audit, and assessment where cess is unpaid or short-paid.
- **Enforcement** – Includes inspection, search, seizure, confiscation, arrest and penalties for contraventions.
- **Compliance, Enforcement & Appeal Framework** – The Bill establishes a structured compliance framework under which every taxable person must register, self-declare machine and process details, and file monthly returns along with the applicable cess payment.
- The strong compliance framework further strengthens oversight through scrutiny of returns, audits, and the deployment of technological and monitoring mechanisms to ensure accuracy and transparency in reporting.
- Non-submission of returns, failure to maintain required declarations, or non-payment of cess will also attract specified compliance consequences.
- **Other Inclusions** – An Enforcement Framework that includes search, inspection, seizure, confiscation of goods and machinery, recovery of dues, penalties, and arrest in severe contraventions, has been provided to safeguard revenue.
- For effective implementation, the Bill specifies a Graded Penalty Structure based on the nature and scale of the violation.

What lies ahead?

- The Health Security se National Security Cess Bill, 2025 represents a significant step towards establishing a stable and transparent revenue channel dedicated to strengthening India's Public Health Systems and National Security capabilities.
- By adopting a capacity-based levy structure supported by a robust compliance and enforcement framework, the Bill ensures predictability in revenue mobilisation while maintaining accountability through oversight.
- It also offers a balanced approach that is administratively practical, legally coherent, and aligned with National Priorities.

10.2 Fugitive Economic Offenders Act, 2018

Recently, the Finance Ministry informed the Lok Sabha that Fifteen people have been declared wanted by various courts under the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act (FEOA) as of October 31, 2025, nine of whom are linked to large-scale financial frauds against public sector banks.

What is Fugitive Economic Offenders Act?

- **Fugitive Economic Offender (FEO)** – It defines an individual against whom an arrest warrant has been issued for a scheduled economic offence and who either leaves India to avoid prosecution or refuses to return when summoned.
- **Fugitive Economic Offenders Act, 2018** – It enables swift action against high-value financial offenders, ensuring asset seizure, faster recovery, and stronger deterrence against major scams.
- It aims to stop economic offenders from escaping India after committing major financial crimes and ensure that their assets can be quickly seized to recover public money.
- **Applicability** – The Act applies only when the amount involved in the offence is ₹100 crore or more.
- **Objectives** – It aims to prevent major economic offenders from escaping India and ensure quick recovery of assets involved in high-value financial crimes.
 - To stop high-value economic offenders from fleeing India to evade investigation.
 - To enable swift attachment and confiscation of their properties.
 - To strengthen asset recovery mechanisms in major financial fraud cases.
 - To act as a deterrent against money laundering, bank fraud, and financial scams.
 - To support faster justice by reducing delays caused by absconding offenders.

What are the important provisions of the act?

- **Role of ED** – Enforcement Directorate (ED) can file an application before the Special Court to declare a person an FEO.
- It is the primary agency responsible for implementing the Fugitive Economic Offenders Act, 2018 by identifying absconders, tracing their assets, and initiating legal processes to declare them FEOs.
- ED may provisionally attach properties of the accused for 180 days to prevent disposal.
- **Special Court** – The special courts under PMLA (prevention of money laundering act) conducts the FEO declaration hearing and issues final orders.
- **Confiscation of properties** – Once declared an FEO, the court can confiscate all properties, including benami and overseas assets (equivalent value).
- Offenders are barred from filing or defending civil claims in India unless they return to face investigation.
- **Assets covered** – The Act covers both movable and immovable assets, including proceeds of crime and corporate properties.
- Confiscated properties vest in the Central Government free of all encumbrances.

What are the recent developments regarding the FEOs?

- **Identified FEOs** – The Ministry of Finance informed Parliament that 15 individuals had been declared FEOs as of October 31.
- Nine of them are involved in large-scale financial fraud, and the amounts they owe have been made public.
- **Amount owed to banks** – Just nine Fugitive Economic Offenders (FEOs) owed Indian banks over ₹58,000 crore in principal and interest.
 - State Bank of India (SBI) is owed over ₹22,000 crore, followed by Punjab National Bank and Bank of India.
 - In terms of total dues owed initially (principal plus interest), businessman Mallya tops the list with nearly ₹27,000 crore.
 - He is followed by the Sandesara family (Sterling Group) and Nirav Modi.
- **Recovery rate** – Notably, the SBI has achieved the highest recovery rate among these lenders, retrieving close to 52%.

- This is largely attributed to effective recovery measures, including liquidation, in Vijay Mallya's account.
- In contrast, the recovery rate for other banks remains below 40%.
- Over 56% of amount owed by Mallya has been recovered till date, date show, while for others, the rate is much lower at 17% for the Sandesara family and 7% in the case of Modi.
- Despite having arrest warrants issued against them, these FEOs have left India and refuse to return to avoid criminal prosecution.

10.3 India's 8.2% Growth Rate – The Question of Sustainability

Recently, India's GDP surged 8.2% to Rs.48.63 lakh crore, indicating strong economic momentum and the IMF's 'Grade C' rating warns of structural weaknesses that could threaten long-term growth amidst global volatility and internal challenges.

What is the general state of Indian economy?

- **Genuine push of economy** – An 8.2% increase of GDP indicates that this rise is part of a genuine momentum rather than just being a post-pandemic bounce.
- **Rise in Industrial demand** – The 9.1% growth in manufacturing indicates that industrial demand has increased and factories are operating closer to capacity.
- **Growth of service sector** – Services, now 60% of India's GDP, is growing at 9.2%, with financial services at 10.2%, which reflects strong credit activity, higher transactions, and sustained urban demand.
- **Increase in GVA** – The increase in real Gross Value Added (GVA) numbers from Rs.82.88 lakh crore to Rs.89.41 lakh crore further indicates that agriculture, industry and services are experiencing genuine rise in added value and not just rise in prices.
- **Increase in nominal GDP** – The real numbers held up because the nominal GDP increased by 8.8%, demonstrating that inflation remained under check.
- **Growing private consumption** – Private Final Consumption Expenditure (PFCE) rising by 7.9% show that households are spending more.
- **Improvements in rural income** – The growth of agriculture by 3.5%, supported by fuller reservoirs and better horticulture output, points to a small but real improvement in rural incomes.
- **Inflation under check** – Inflation, which had been high for much of the previous years, finally eased and even slipped below target toward the end of 2024-25.
- **Growth of credits** – Banks experienced significant credit growth and were in a position to lend with a clean balance sheet, maintaining capital buffers which are far in excess of regulatory requirements.
- **High quality spending** – On the budget front, the Centre stuck to the path of consolidation with the help of strong GST and direct tax collections and successfully managed to keep the spending mix relatively high-quality.
- **Stable external sector** – The external sector remained stable with a small current account deficit, healthy services exports and diversified foreign exchange reserves to weather global volatility.
- **Growth amidst global issues** – If one were to just look at these figures, it would appear that the Indian economy is moving forward even as much of the world slows down and is eclipsed in greater economic uncertainty.

What is the rating of IMF and RBI report?

- **Grade C** – The International Monetary Fund (IMF) announced that India had been assigned 'Grade C' in its recent assessment on its national income accounting.
 - There are four grades in total: A, B, C, and D.
- **Highlighted shortcomings** – Some of the multiple shortcomings highlighted by the IMF team which require careful consideration and review include:
 - The use of an outdated base year (2011/12).
 - The use of wholesale price indices as data sources for deflators due to the lack of producer price indices.
 - The excessive use of single deflation, which may introduce cyclical biases.
 - Sizeable discrepancies between production and expenditure approaches that may indicate the need to enhance the coverage of the expenditure approach data and the informal sector.

- Lack of seasonally adjusted data and room for improvement in other statistical techniques used in the quarterly national accounts compilation.
- A lack of consolidated data on States and local bodies after 2019.
- **Critical question raised** – How can a nation possibly be underrated when it's racing at 8% while the world limps at 3%?
 - But the truth lives in the footnotes of our own documents.
- **The RBI's Annual Report (2024-25)** – It recognises that the economy has performed well, but it also quietly lays out the structural issues that still drag down India's credibility.
- **Economic Chronicles of Countries** – The countries with discretionary exercises in projecting the good alone in numbers have two narratives: the one they tell the world and the one they whisper under their own breath.
 - India's 8.2% is the story its government wants tell the world and The IMF's C is the whisper.
 - An economy appearing to grow fast is not the same thing as an economy growing well.
 - What the IMF is really saying is that India's institutional bones are not yet as strong as its muscle.
- **Mining and Electricity** – It was hit by an unusually long monsoon, while electricity generation slowed because of a milder-than-usual winter that reduced heating and peak-load demand.
- Although these might seem like fleeting weather phenomena, they significantly undermined the industrial base of the year.
- **Growing unevenness** – The unevenness is evident even in this strong quarter.
- Electricity and utilities grew only 4.4%, and mining barely moved at 0.04%.
- These are backbone sectors and subsequently their sluggishness signals that recovery is not evenly spread across the real economy.
- **Employment-Output mismatch** – According to nominal GVA, the primary sector accounted for 14%, the secondary sector for 26%, and the tertiary sector for 60% in Q2.
- These proportions look normal for a service-led economy, but India's case is different because its employment structure does not match its output structure.
- Too many Indians still work in agriculture and low-wage services, sectors that contribute little to productivity gains.

What are the identified structural vulnerabilities?

- **Exports affected** – The RBI cautions that India's export trajectory will continue to be impacted by growing trade protectionism, tariff uncertainty, and geopolitical tensions in key markets.
- Services exports and remittances help cushion the current account, but they cannot substitute for a diversified and scaled-up goods export engine which India still lacks.
- **Financial market contradictions** – The rupee looked stable from a distance, but underneath, it was constantly being pushed down by a strong U.S. dollar and the usual swings in foreign capital.
- **Shortcoming of GDP** – The GDP captures the pace of economic activity but it does not capture the quality of governance that sustains it.
- The true conflict is that, despite India's robust short-term economic momentum, its long-term framework is still being developed.
- **Slow growth of important sectors** – Even with the strong Q2 performance, broad-sector analysis shows agriculture growing only 3.5%, utilities at 4.4%, and mining barely above zero, sectors that collectively employ millions but contribute less and less to value creation.
- This does not diminish the achievement of 8.2% growth.

What lies ahead?

- When one realises that the IMF is grading the architecture that supports India's growth rather than the country's growth rate, its Grade C starts to make sense.
- A country can grow at 8% and still have structural vulnerabilities.
- It can post healthy GVA numbers and still have weak institutional capacity at the State level, low labour productivity, and an export profile mismatched with global demand.

- The IMF's grade serves as a subtle reminder to see past the quarterly glow and recognise the unresolved issues in economic structure, finance, and governance.
- India is leading the way and what it needs now is the depth.

10.4 High Growth, Low Confidence – The Challenge of India's Economic Statistics

The data on India's real GDP and the grading of Indian economy by IMF underscores a significant issue in the challenges of Economic statistics.

What are the recent issues?

- **Data of India's real GDP** – The Union Statistics and Programme Implementation Ministry reported that *India's real GDP grew 8.2%* and the *nominal GDP 8.7%* in the second quarter of the financial year 2025-26 – the strongest print in six quarters.
- **The IMF report**, in its data adequacy assessment, had given India's national accounts a "C" grade.
- Noting "shortcomings that somewhat hamper surveillance", even as the overall macro data set earned a "B".
- **Weakening of the statistics** – The uninterrupted decennial Census series (since 1881), which underpins most sampling frames, has been broken.
- **Lack of Continuity** – The official consumption expenditure survey, the backbone of poverty and inequality statistics and consumer price index (CPI) reweighting, was last released in 2011-12.
- The 2017-18 round was scrapped after leaked results suggested a fall in real consumption, with the government citing "data quality" problems.
- In that sense, the IMF's "C" grade distils several long-running concerns.

What are the challenges of the economic statistics of India ?

- **The base year issue** – The current GDP series *still uses 2011-12 as its base year* – a benchmark that will be 14 years out of date by the time a new series with 2022-23 as base is rolled out in February 2026.
- Real growth, obtained by deflating nominal aggregates, uses price indices derived from consumption and production patterns that no longer accurately reflect the economy's structure.
- **Gap in revision of CPI & WPI** – Both the consumer and wholesale price baskets, which should be refreshed roughly every five years, are long overdue for revision.

The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) tracks inflation for goods at the bulk/producer level, focusing on goods only (raw materials, fuel, manufactured items).

The Consumer Price Index (CPI) measures inflation for households at the retail level, including both goods and services (food, housing, healthcare, education).

- Moreover, the narrow gap between nominal and real GDP in the latest quarter, barely half a percentage point, is also significant.
- When deflators are based on outdated expenditure weights, they are prone to understating effective inflation and overstating real growth.
- Point estimates of 8%-plus growth should, therefore, be treated as only indicative.
- **The current price in-appropriation** – The current price architecture is particularly ill-suited to a services-led economy.
- *Services now account for about 55%* of the gross value added (GVA).
- Yet India still relies heavily on the wholesale price index (WPI), which omits most services, for deflating output.
- The IMF has been explicit that the absence of a comprehensive producer price index (PPI) and *"excessive use of single deflation"* are central reasons for the "C" grade.
- **Ignoring informal economy** – The treatment of the informal economy in national statistics is a serious weakness.
- The informal sector *contributes roughly 45% of the GDP*, but is not measured annually from the ground up.
- Instead, statisticians fix the formal-informal relationship in the base year and then extrapolate informal activity from formal-sector indicators such as corporate filings or GST data.

- That shortcut might work in a stable environment, but it breaks down when shocks, such as demonetisation, GST, and the pandemic, hit small, cash-dependent firms much harder than listed companies.
- Proxying kirana stores, small workshops, and petty services with large firms makes aggregate GDP look healthier precisely when vulnerability is greatest.
- **Difficulties in inferring GDP** – The quarterly GDP numbers are difficult to interpret in their current form.
- In an economy with pronounced monsoon and festival cycles, raw quarter-on-quarter changes say little about the underlying trajectory.
- Most advanced statistical systems publish seasonally adjusted series to strip out predictable intra-year patterns and identify genuine turning points.
- India does not produce such reports, leaving investors and policymakers to read the cycle off unadjusted GDP, where a festival quarter and a genuine upswing are virtually indistinguishable.

What should be the reform agenda?

- **Prioritizing the statistics** – Statistics must be treated as economic infrastructure, not an administrative by-product.
- The National Statistical Commission (NSC) should be given a firm statutory basis, its own budget, security of tenure for members, and a clear mandate to publish data without political clearance, with protections for its Chair analogous to those of the RBI Governor.
- India was an early supporter of the UN's Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.
- It now needs to write those principles into domestic law rather than merely endorsing them in international forums.
- **Ensuring the periodicity** – The Census, consumption, labour-force and enterprise surveys should have legislated periodicity and statutory deadlines for release, with deviations explained to Parliament.
- Anonymised microdata should be routinely available to researchers with reasonable lags to enable independent "shadow" estimates that provide external validation, as investors and multilaterals often demand.
- **Building a transparent digital data** – As digital sources multiply, the risk grows that selective high-frequency indicators (GST collections, toll data, UPI volumes) will substitute for, rather than complement, a coherent system.
- The integration of digital data into national accounts must be transparent and replicable, otherwise, dashboards will multiply, but doubts will persist.
- For global investors, weak and unreliable data mean mispriced risk; for policymakers, they mean misjudged slack, misplaced priorities and a macro stance looser than what fundamentals warrant.
- If trend growth is overstated and poverty undercounted, job creation looks less urgent than it is, and the case for safety nets and basic public goods appears weaker than it should.

What lies ahead?

- India's economic rise is real, but its statistical institutions have not kept pace.
- If the coming overhaul succeeds in building an independent, modern and transparent system, what will finally matter is not IMF's grade card, but whether an 8.2% print commands confidence, not scepticism.
- To be fair, India is moving on the reform agenda.
- A new GDP series with 2022-23 as the base, an updated CPI with 2024 weights, and a revised IIP are all slated for release in early 2026, with greater use of GST returns, corporate filings, digital payments, and recent consumption and enterprise survey data.
- If these revisions are implemented rigorously and then institutionalised as a regular cycle, India's statistical methods will come much closer to international best practice.

10.5 India's Banking Sector – The journey of Strength and Trust

As the world's fourth-largest economy, India's financial sector has evolved into a resilient and dynamic force, ready to power the country's growth ambitions and investment needs.

What is the present status of India's Banking system?

- **Bank deposits and credit** (domestic) – They have nearly tripled between 2015 and 2025, with deposits rising from Rs.88.35 lakh crore to Rs.231.90 lakh crore and credit expanding from Rs.66.91 lakh crore to Rs.181.34 lakh crore.
- **Capital buffers** – They have strengthened, the *capital to risk weighted assets (CRAR)*, which measures capital adequacy, rose from 12.94% in March 2015 to 17.36% in March 2025 with CET-1, which represents the highest quality capital a bank can hold, increasing from 9.98% to 14.81% during the same period.
- **Asset quality** – Gross Non-Performing Assets (GNPA) and Net Non-Performing Assets (NNPA) have reduced to 2.2% and 0.5% in March 2025 after rising to highs of 11.18% and 5.94% respectively in March 2018.
- **NPA Decline** – As a result of the Government's strategy of recognition, resolution, recapitalisation and reforms, gross NPA ratio have since declined to Rs.2,73,413 crore (gross NPA ratio of 2.79%) as on 31st March 2025.
- Further, as per RBI data on domestic operations, stressed assets, including restructured standard assets, as percentage of gross advances in SCBs has declined from 9.8% as on 31st March 2014 to 3.55% as on 31st March 2025.
- **Bank Profitability on the Rise** – As per the RBI, India's banking sector is sufficiently capitalized and well-regulated.
- Notably, profitability of banks improved for the sixth consecutive year in 2023-24.
 - **Public Sector Banks** – From FY 22-23 to FY 24-25, the total Business of Public Sector Banks (PSBs) rose from Rs.203 lakh crore to Rs.252 lakh crore
 - From FY 22-23 to FY 24-25, net profit increased from Rs.1.05 lakh crore to Rs.1.78 lakh crore.
 - Dividend payouts grew from Rs.20,964 crore to Rs.34,990 crore, reflecting the continued strengthening of financial performance.
 - **Scheduled Commercial Banks (SCBs)** – During FY 24-25, SCBs recorded their highest ever aggregate net profit of Rs.4.01 lakh crore, compared to the net profit of Rs.3.5 lakh crore in FY 23-24.
 - The growth trajectory continues, as SCB's recorded an aggregate net profit of Rs.1.02 lakh crore in first 3-months of FY26.
 - Continuing on this success, the profitability of SCBs improved during FY 25, with Profit After Tax surging by 14.7% (YoY).
 - Gains in profitability continued with Return on Assets (RoA) at 1.37% and Returns on Equity (RoE) at 14.1%.

What are the measures that is propelling performance of India's banks?

- **The Asset Quality Review (AQR)** – It was launched in 2015 which compelled banks to recognize the true state of their loan books, bringing hidden NPAs to light and strengthening the supervisory framework.
- **4R's strategy** – The Government also implemented a comprehensive 4R's strategy, consisting of:
 - Recognition of NPAs transparently,
 - Resolution and recovery of value from stressed accounts,
 - Recapitalizing of PSBs, and
 - Reforms in PSBs and the wider financial ecosystem for a responsible and clean system.
- **The Prompt Corrective Action (PCA) framework** – It helped restore the health of weak banks, followed by the consolidation of 27 PSBs into 12 by 2020.
- A detailed review of business in terms of sustainability, profitability, viability and projections along with credit risk related actions have been beneficial.
- **The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code (IBC)** – It was introduced in 2016, along with complementary out-of-court resolution mechanisms.
- It transformed India's credit culture and improved recovery processes.
- It changed the creditor-borrower relationship, taking away control of the defaulting company from promoters/owners and debarred willful defaulters from the resolution process.
- **Sharper recovery laws** – Key legislations such as the SARFAESI Act, 2002 (The Securitisation and Reconstruction of Financial Assets and Enforcement of Security Interest Act, 2002) and the Recovery of Debt and Bankruptcy Act have been amended to enhance their effectiveness in asset recovery.

- **Focused debt resolution** – The pecuniary jurisdiction of *Debt Recovery Tribunals (DRTs)* was raised from Rs.10 lakh to Rs.20 lakh, enabling them to prioritize higher-value cases and improve recovery efficiency.
- **Specialized recovery mechanisms** – PSBs have established dedicated stressed asset management units for close monitoring and faster resolution of NPAs.
- The deployment of business correspondents and incorporation of a business strategy that uses physical sales and marketing force to interact directly with customers (Feet-on-street model), has further boosted recovery efforts.
- In October 2025, the RBI issued a landmark reform through its Draft Directions 2025, proposing a shift to the Expected Credit Loss (ECL) framework.
- The framework applies to scheduled commercial banks, including foreign banks, and introduces a risk-sensitive approach to provisioning.
- These are expected to further support credit risk management practices, promote greater comparability across financial institutions, and align regulatory norms with globally accepted regulatory and accounting standards.
- **Proactive stress management** – The RBI's Prudential Framework for Resolution of Stressed Assets promotes early identification, reporting, and time-bound resolution of stressed loans, with incentives for lenders to act swiftly.

What are the evolving priorities in India's banking landscape?

- **Priorities** - The following priorities outline the path ahead for strengthening the banking ecosystem and supporting India's broader development goals:
 - **Strengthen deposit mobilization** through targeted drives, effective use of branch networks, and deeper outreach in semi-urban and rural areas to sustain strong credit growth.
 - **Identify emerging commercial growth** areas over the next decade to enhance profitability and maintain momentum in economic expansion.
 - **Deepen corporate lending** in productive sectors while upholding robust underwriting and risk management practices.
 - **Advancing India's Green Growth Agenda** by scaling up lending to renewable and sustainable energy sectors.
 - Develop tailored credit models to support new initiatives such as **Small Modular Nuclear Reactors (SMR)** announced in Budget 2025–26.
 - **Broaden financial inclusion** through key government schemes- **PM MUDRA Yojana**, **PM Vishwakarma**, **PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana**, **PM Vidyalaxmi**, and **Kisan Credit Card (KCC)**.
 - **Focus on Agri credit** under the PM Dhan Dhanya Yojana in 100 low-productivity districts with customised credit products to improve farm output and local economic growth.
 - **Expand international presence** by strengthening operations in GIFT City, supporting India's global financial aspirations, and enhancing participation in the **India International Bullion Exchange (IIBX)**.
 - **Enhance customer experience** through faster grievance redressal, user-friendly multilingual digital platforms, and clean, accessible physical branches in metro and urban centres.

What lies ahead?

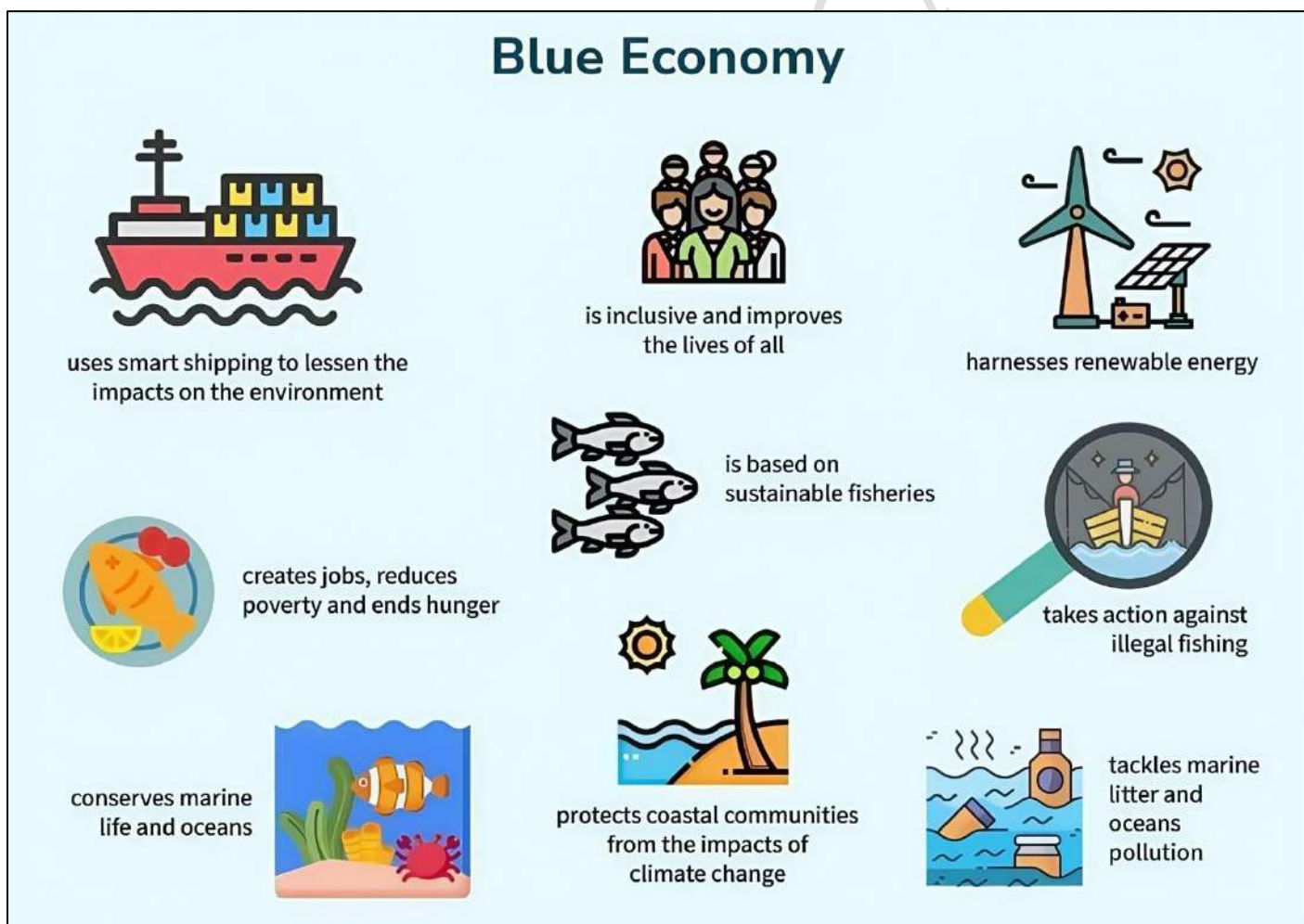
- India's banking sector has transformed from a period of stress to one of strength and stability.
- With cleaner balance sheets, robust capital buffers, and record profitability, banks today are more resilient, efficient, and future-ready.
- Driven by reforms, digital innovation, and financial inclusion, the sector is powering India's growth ambitions- financing infrastructure, supporting entrepreneurs, and advancing green and inclusive development.
- As India moves toward becoming the world's third-largest economy, its banks stand at the forefront- anchoring financial stability and fuelling the nation's next decade of growth.

10.6 The Indian Ocean – Cradle of a New Blue Economy

Today, as climate change, rising sea levels, and overfishing place unprecedented stress on marine ecosystems—especially in the highly vulnerable Indian Ocean—India again faces a historic responsibility.

What is blue economy?

- **Blue economy** – It sustainably uses ocean resources for economic growth, jobs, and livelihoods while protecting marine ecosystems, balancing exploitation with conservation.
- It involves innovation, smart governance (like marine spatial planning), and inclusive practices, recognizing oceans as engines for clean energy, coastal jobs, and climate defense, contrasting with traditional marine economies that often degrade the environment.
- **Key aspects & sectors**
 - **Fisheries & Aquaculture** – Sustainable fishing, green aquaculture, better supply chains.
 - **Marine Renewable Energy** – Offshore wind, tidal, thermal energy.
 - **Shipping & Ports** – Efficient, green maritime transport, digital ports.
 - **Tourism** – Sustainable coastal and marine tourism.
 - **Biotechnology** – Utilizing marine biodiversity for pharmaceuticals.
 - **Blue Carbon** – Protecting and restoring mangroves and seagrass for carbon sequestration.
 - **Deep Sea Mining** – Exploring minerals responsibly.



What is the background of India's blue economy?

- **India's Stance** – When the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) was negotiated in the 1970s and early 1980s, India stood with the world's smallest and most vulnerable states.
- **Advocacy of India** – Alongside Pacific Island countries, India championed the principle that the seabed beyond national jurisdiction should be the "common heritage of mankind".

- It was a remarkable moment, because a large developing country aligning itself with island nations, not for advantage, but for fairness.
- **Nehru's Vision** – As early as the 1950s, Jawaharlal Nehru recognised the ocean's centrality to India's future, declaring: *"Whichever way we turn, we are drawn to the seas."*
- *"Our future security and prosperity are closely linked with the freedom and the resources of the oceans."*
- That foresight set the stage for India's enduring role as both a maritime nation and a maritime leader.
- **Present status** – Half a century later, the ocean faces pressures unimaginable at the time of UNCLOS. Climate change is heating and acidifying the seas, sea levels are rising, and illegal and unregulated fishing is stripping marine life from the water column.
- The Indian Ocean, home to one-third of humanity, is already one of the most climate-vulnerable basins on earth.
- India now has both the opportunity and the responsibility to play a historic leadership role once again.
- This time, the task is not to draft law, but to shape practice – ensuring that the Indian Ocean becomes not a theatre of rivalry, but a laboratory of sustainability, innovation, and resilience.

What should be done for a sustainable Blue Ocean?

- **3 pillars** – India's Blue Ocean Strategy should rest on three pillars: stewardship of the commons, resilience, and inclusive growth.
 - **Stewardship** – India must continue to assert that the Indian Ocean is a shared space, not a contested one.
 - By prioritising ecosystem restoration, biodiversity protection, and sustainable fisheries, India can set the tone for cooperative management, rather than competitive exploitation.
 - **Resilience** – As the climate crisis intensifies, ocean nations must focus on adaptation and preparedness.
 - India can lead by establishing a Regional Resilience and Ocean Innovation hub – one that strengthens ocean observation networks, improves early warning systems, and transfer technology to small island developing states and African coastal nations.
 - **Inclusive growth** – The Indian Ocean must become a driver of prosperity for all littoral states.
 - Green shipping, offshore renewable energy, sustainable aquaculture, and marine biotechnology offer pathways to development that are compatible with climate goals.
- **Sustained investment and coordinated regional action** – It is encouraging that the financial tide is beginning to turn.
 - **Blue Economy and Finance Forum (BEFF)** – It was held in Monaco, in June 2025, with governments, development banks and private investors.
 - They highlighted a €25 billion pipeline of existing ocean investments and announced €8.7 billion in new commitments, with near-parity between public and private sources.
 - **The Finance in Common Ocean Coalition** – By bringing together 20 public development banks, it announced annual pledges of \$7.5 billion.
 - **The Development Bank of Latin America** – It doubled its blue economy target to \$2.5 billion by 2030.
 - **Brazilian Presidency at COP30 in Belém** – The launched the One Ocean Partnership as part of the Belém Action Agenda, committing to mobilise \$20 billion for ocean action by 2030.

What is the present strategy and concerns on Indian Ocean?

- **Present strategy** – Much of today's discourse on the Indian Ocean is framed in terms of "Indo-Pacific strategy", naval balance, freedom of navigation, and secure sea lanes.
- **Ecosystem collapse and climate disruption** – Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, coral reef degradation and intensifying storm surges erode livelihoods and undermine social stability.
- Addressing these threats requires a shift from traditional notions of maritime security toward security through sustainability.
- **SAGAR doctrine** – India's doctrine of Security and Growth for All in the Region (SAGAR) articulated by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in Mauritius in 2015, offers an important anchor.

- The prime minister said *“We seek a future for the Indian Ocean that lives up to its name as a zone of peace, stability and prosperity.”* he said.

What is India’s historic responsibility?

- **Stockholm Conference in 1972** – Prime Minister Indira Gandhi warned, we do not want to impoverish the environment any more than we want to impoverish our people.
- That insight remains strikingly relevant.
- **COP30 in Belem (2025) & the G-20 Summit in Johannesburg** - It recognised the importance of terrestrial and marine ecosystems for climate stability, sustainable development, and community resilience.
- Anchoring scaling up of finance and support for developing countries, aligning with the equity dimensions of ocean action.
- With the outcomes of the 3rd United Nations Ocean Conference (UNOC3) in Nice, COP30 in Belém, and the entry into force of the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Agreement, 2026 is shaping up to be a pivotal year for ocean governance.
- **Prospects for India** – India’s readiness to ratify the BBNJ Agreement presents an opportunity to demonstrate how the Indian Ocean region can pioneer globally relevant solutions.
- From green shipping corridors and blue bonds to inclusive marine technology transfer and carefully governed ocean-based carbon dioxide removal.
- This agenda could also serve as a defining theme for India’s chairmanship of the Indian Ocean Rim Association.

What India should do?

- **Financial routing** – India must seize this moment to channel global financing into regional priorities.
- An Indian Ocean Blue Fund, seeded by India and open to contributions from development banks, philanthropy, and the private sector, could provide the institutional architecture needed to turn pledges into projects.
- **Building leadership** – If India leads with ambition, humility, and inclusivity, the Indian Ocean can once again demonstrate what was evident during UNCLOS negotiations: that even in the most complex of arenas, cooperation can prevail over conflict, and solidarity over rivalry.
- **Coordination** – The Indian Navy and the Indian Coast Guard, working alongside civilian agencies, can deepen regional cooperation in maritime domain awareness, disaster response and ecosystem monitoring - aligning security objectives with environmental stewardship.
- **Choosing the right approach** – Not of rivalry, but of responsibility. Not of dominance, but of stewardship.
- As External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has noted, India’s approach to the Indian Ocean is “cooperative, consultative, and outcome-oriented,” aimed at shared prosperity and stability.
- The guiding principle should be simple and resonant: “From the Indian Ocean, for the World.”

What lies ahead?

- The Indian Ocean, the cradle of some of the world’s oldest civilisations, can now become the cradle of a new blue economy, one that marries prosperity with sustainability, and resilience with justice.
- The challenge is clear: to move beyond rhetoric, to align vision with finance, and to build partnerships that endure.
- For the world, the message is urgent: the ocean is not a void to be filled or a frontier to be conquered. It is the foundation of life itself.

10.7 Unclaimed Financial Assets – Your Money, Your Right

The Government has launched the nationwide initiative “Your Money, Your Right” to help citizens reclaim unclaimed financial assets, has already facilitated the return of nearly Rs.2,000 crore to rightful owners.

What are Unclaimed Financial Assets?

- **Definition** – Money with banks, insurers, mutual funds, or other financial institutions that **remains unclaimed by the account holder or their legal heirs for a prolonged period.**
- **Assets included:**

- **Bank deposits** such as savings accounts, current accounts, fixed deposits and recurring deposits that have not been operated for 10 years or more
- **Insurance policy** proceeds that remain unpaid beyond the due date
- **Mutual fund** redemption proceeds or dividends that could not be credited due to reasons such as change in bank account, bank account closure, incomplete bank account in records etc.
- **Dividends and shares** that remain unclaimed and are transferred to statutory authorities
- **Pension and retirement benefits** that are not claimed within the normal course
- **Reasons for Unclaimed Financial Assets** – The routine life events such as migration for work, changes in contact details, closure of old bank accounts, or lack of information among family members and legal heirs.
- **Volume of unclaimed financial assets** –
 - **Indian banks** together hold around Rs.78,000 crore in unclaimed deposits.
 - **Unclaimed insurance policy** proceeds are estimated at nearly Rs.14,000 crore.
 - Unclaimed amounts in **mutual funds** are about Rs.3,000 crore.
 - **Unclaimed dividends account** for around Rs.9,000 crore.
- Together, these amounts underline the scale of unclaimed savings belonging to citizens that continue to remain unused, despite being securely held within the financial system.

What is “Your Money, Your Right” Initiative?

- **Launch** – It is a nationwide **awareness & facilitation campaign**, carried out as a 3-month drive from October to December 2025, reaching every State and Union Territory.
- **Coordinated by** – Department of Financial Services, Ministry of Finance, in collaboration with key financial sector fund regulators, including:
 - Reserve Bank of India (RBI)
 - Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI)
 - Securities and Exchange Board of India (SEBI)
 - Investor Education and Protection Fund Authority (IEPFA)
 - Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA)
- **Objective** – To help citizens identify, access and reclaim financial assets that legally belong to them, using simple processes and transparent systems.
- The campaign is anchored in the **3A Framework** – Awareness, Accessibility and Action.
- **Citizen Outreach** – The combined digital platforms with on-ground engagement for wide coverage.
 - **Facilitation camps** – Held in 668 districts till 19 Dec 2025, were conducted through State-Level Bankers’ and Insurance Committees, in coordination with lead district banks and local administrations.
- Citizens assisted via helpdesks & digital kiosks to trace and claim assets and encouraged enrolment in financial inclusion schemes and completion of KYC/re-KYC.
- **Progress Achieved** – Nearly Rs.2,000 crore was returned to rightful owners, reconnecting families with financial assets that had remained unclaimed for extended periods.

Why Unclaimed Assets Matter?

- **Beyond Numbers** – Unclaimed money is not just a statistic, it represents real resources that families and individuals are unable to use.
- **Household Impact** – For households, it may result in restricted or deferred access to funds needed for education, healthcare, livelihood support or emergencies.
- **Senior Citizens’ Security** – For senior citizens, it could involve pensions or insurance benefits that provide essential financial security.
- **Systemic Consequences** – At a broader level, unclaimed assets weaken the connection between citizens and the formal financial system.
- **Trust and Participation** – When people are unable to access their rightful money, it affects trust, participation and confidence in financial institutions.

- **Government Response** – The “Your Money, Your Right” initiative seeks to resolve this issue by strengthening household finances while enhancing the credibility, inclusiveness of the financial system.

What are the Digital Platforms for tracing Unclaimed Assets?

- **UDGAM Portal** – Developed by the RBI to help citizens search for unclaimed bank deposits across participating banks in a centralized manner (multiple banks in one place).
- **Bima Bharosa Portal** – It enables individuals to trace unclaimed insurance policy proceeds.
- It allows policyholders, nominees and legal heirs to check whether any insurance amounts are due to them by providing links to the enquiry pages of insurers.
- **MITRA Portal** – The Mutual Fund Investment Tracing and Retrieval Assistant (MITRA), hosted on MF Central.
- It enables investors to trace unclaimed and inactive mutual fund investments.
- **Investor Education and Protection Fund Authority (IEPFA) portal** – It provides a search facility that allows individuals to trace unclaimed dividends, shares or deposits by entering details such as PAN, Name or Company Name & Demat ID/Folio Number.

What lies ahead?

- Your Money, Your Right is a focused & citizen-centric initiative to reconnect individuals and families with their unclaimed financial assets.
- By combining awareness, simplified access and coordinated facilitation, the initiative addresses a long-standing gap in the financial system by ensuring rightful owners get their money back.
- At a broader level, the initiative strengthens trust in financial institutions, reinforces financial inclusion and promotes responsible financial practices.
- By ensuring that personal savings remain accessible, protected and transferable, Your Money, Your Right contributes to a more transparent, responsive and citizen-first financial ecosystem.

10.8 Lagging Of Manufacturing in India – The Puzzle of India’s Industrialisation

Recently, there has been questions surrounding the declining share of manufacturing in the Indian economy and it is important to know the background and theoretical perspective.

What is the issue?

- **Underperformance of manufacturing** – One of the enduring puzzles of India’s development trajectory is the persistent underperformance of its manufacturing sector.
- India’s manufacturing sector has remained stagnant at around 15–17% of GDP, and in recent decades has even ceded space to services.
- **Performance of other economies** – This is significant especially when compared to non-Western economies such as China and South Korea, which started from broadly similar economic positions in the early 20th century.
- These economies successfully transitioned from agrarian structures to manufacturing-led growth.
- **Comparative Perspective** – China and South Korea followed export-oriented industrialisation strategies, combining state support, disciplined labour markets, and technological upgrading.
- Manufacturing in these economies expanded rapidly, creating millions of productive jobs and driving sustained productivity growth.
- **India’s contradiction** – India witnessed a phenomenon often described as “premature deindustrialisation”, where the economy shifted directly from agriculture to services without a strong manufacturing base.
- **Service sector dominance** – Services today contribute over 55% of India’s GDP, but this growth has been capital- and skill-intensive, limiting its ability to generate broad-based employment.

What are the Explanations of Economists?

- **Arvind Subramanian’s Argument** – Economist Arvind Subramanian, in his book *A Sixth of Humanity*, offers a provocative explanation by applying the concept of the Dutch disease to India’s development experience.
- **Concept origin** – Originally coined to explain the decline of Dutch manufacturing after the discovery of the Groningen gas fields in 1959.

- The *Dutch disease* refers to a situation where a booming sector crowds out other tradable sectors through wage and price effects.
- **Effect of government sector** – Subramanian argues that in India's case, the expansion of the government sector with relatively high salaries functioned like an economic windfall.
- **Result of high wages** – High public-sector wages drew labour away from manufacturing, raised economy-wide wage expectations, and increased domestic prices.
- As a result, Indian manufacturing found it difficult to remain competitive both domestically and internationally.
- **Working of dutch disease** – The Dutch disease operates through two main channels:
 - **Resource Movement Effect** – Labour shifts from manufacturing to the booming sector (in this case, government services), raising wages across the economy.
 - **Spending Effect** – Higher incomes increase demand for domestic goods, pushing up prices.
- In a regime of free trade, rising domestic prices make imports cheaper relative to domestic manufactured goods, reducing demand for local manufacturing.
- Even without a change in the nominal exchange rate, the real exchange rate appreciates, eroding export competitiveness.
- **Limits of the Dutch Disease Framework** – While analytically appealing, this explanation has important limitations.
- The Dutch disease was originally developed to analyse exogenous windfalls, such as natural resource discoveries.
- High government salaries, by contrast, are the result of deliberate policy choices in a democratic polity.
- This distinction matters because policy-driven wage increases can, in principle, be accompanied by complementary investments in productivity and technology.
- Treating government salaries as an unavoidable windfall risks underplaying the role of private sector responses and long-term technological change.
- **Alternative perspective** – This theory suggests that high wages and labour scarcity can stimulate technological progress, encouraging firms to adopt labour-saving and productivity-enhancing technologies.
- **Historical evidence** – Economic historians such as Robert C. Allen argue that Britain's high wages in the 18th and 19th centuries created incentives for mechanisation, triggering the Industrial Revolution.
- Daron Acemoglu shows that ageing labour forces in countries like Germany, Japan, and South Korea encouraged automation, leading to higher productivity and wages.
- From this perspective, high public-sector wages in India should have pushed manufacturing firms to innovate rather than stagnate.

What are the problems identified?

- **Technological Stagnation in Manufacturing** – The failure of Indian manufacturing to respond with technological upgrading suggests deeper structural issues.
- **Lack of linkages** – Unlike East Asian economies, India did not build strong linkages between the State, industry, and technology adoption.
- **Policy & Other issues** – Industrial policy remained fragmented, and firms often relied on cheap and abundant labour instead of investing in capital and skills.
- This pattern is evident even in India's celebrated private sector growth. Despite rapid expansion, wage growth has remained subdued, and productivity gains have been uneven.
- **The Services Sector Paradox** – India's services-led growth further complicates the picture.
- High-growth sectors such as IT and software services have generated wealth but limited employment elasticity. Entry-level wages in major IT firms have shown little real growth since the early 2000s, despite rising corporate profits.
- Moreover, many new-age "unicorns" such as Swiggy, Zomato, Blinkit, and Ola rely heavily on India's vast pool of informal labour rather than frontier technological innovation.
- This reinforces a growth model that creates value without raising average productivity or wages.
- **Inequality and the Nature of Growth** – The consequences of this development path are visible in rising income and wealth inequality.

- While both the public and private sectors have expanded, the benefits have been unevenly distributed.
- Manufacturing, which could have provided stable, middle-income jobs at scale, failed to play its transformative role.
- If public-sector wages once kept incomes higher, it is legitimate to ask why private manufacturing did not match this through innovation and productivity growth.

What lies ahead?

- India's manufacturing stagnation cannot be explained by a single framework.
- While the Dutch disease provides useful insights into wage and price dynamics, it is insufficient on its own.
- A comprehensive analysis must incorporate technological choices, labour market structures, industrial policy, and inequality dynamics.
- The central challenge for India today is not merely expanding manufacturing, but ensuring that growth is productivity-driven, technologically progressive, and employment-intensive.
- Without addressing the underlying incentives that shape innovation and wage growth, India risks remaining trapped in a model of high GDP growth with limited structural transformation.
- A renewed focus on technology-driven manufacturing, skill development, and coherent industrial policy is essential if India is to achieve inclusive and sustainable growth in the decades ahead.

10.9 Economic Reforms of 2025 – Building a Future-Ready India

The recent reforms introduced by the government in 2025 represent a significant shift in governance, focusing on delivering measurable outcomes rather than simply expanding regulatory frameworks.

What are the key reforms that is shaping growth and opportunity?

- **Income Tax Reforms** – In 2025, India introduced substantial changes in direct taxation, particularly in the Income Tax Act.
- The Union Budget 2025-26 provided major relief to taxpayers by exempting annual incomes up to ₹12 lakh from income tax.
- Salaried individuals could benefit from an effective exemption of ₹12.75 lakh due to the standard deduction, which directly boosts disposable income for millions of middle-class households.
- Moreover, the introduction of the New Income Tax Act, 2025 simplifies the tax structure and enhances clarity.
- This overhaul, which was guided by principles such as textual and structural simplification and minimal changes in tax policy, eliminates obsolete provisions.
- The new act consolidates compliance requirements and strengthens digital enforcement, paving the way for a more transparent and efficient taxation system.
- **Labour Reforms** – The labour market in India underwent a major transformation in 2025 with the consolidation of 29 labour laws into four new Labour Codes.
- These include the Code on Wages, 2019, Industrial Relations Code, 2020, Code on Social Security, 2020, and Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code, 2020.
- The reform aimed to enhance both business ease and worker welfare.
- These changes focused on streamlining compliance for businesses while offering greater security for workers, including gig and platform workers.
- Some significant measures include:
 - **Wages** – Uniform definitions of wages and minimum wage standards across all sectors.
 - **Industrial Relations** – Simplified processes for trade unions and dispute resolution.
 - **Social Security** – Extending social security benefits to gig and platform workers, improving health, maternity, and provident fund provisions.
 - **Workplace Safety** – Ensuring safer and more secure working conditions, especially for women and migrant workers.
- These reforms aim to create a unified labour framework that serves over 500 million workers and provides a foundation for a future-ready workforce.

- **Rural Employment Reforms** – The Viksit Bharat - Guarantee for Rozgar and Aajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025, replaced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).
- This Act introduced several provisions aimed at enhancing rural livelihoods and providing sustainable employment in agriculture and other rural sectors.
- Some notable changes include:
 - **Extended Employment Guarantee** – Providing 125 days of wage employment per rural household.
 - **Integrated Rural Employment** – Ensuring adequate labour during peak agricultural seasons.
 - **Asset Creation** – A focus on creating public assets such as rural infrastructure and water security projects.
 - **Decentralized Planning** – Allowing local communities to plan their development projects while ensuring integration with national schemes.
- By focusing on both employment generation and asset creation, the reforms aim to create long-term economic sustainability for rural India.
- **Ease of Doing Business Reforms** – To boost business growth and attract investment, the Indian Government has undertaken significant reforms aimed at improving the ease of doing business.
- The Quality Control Orders (QCOs) were phased in with a focus on MSMEs.
- These orders ensure that products meet international standards while providing SMEs with adequate time and support to meet compliance requirements.
- Additionally, the government has focused on improving access to finance for MSMEs, including:
 - **Loans linked to external benchmarks** with shorter reset periods.
 - **Credit guarantees for MSMEs**, covering up to ₹100 crore for equipment and machinery.
 - **Collaterals-free loans** for micro and small enterprises.
- These measures aim to ensure that businesses, especially MSMEs, can grow without facing unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles.
- **GST 2.0 Reforms** – The Next-Generation GST reforms represent a major overhaul of India's indirect tax system.
- These reforms introduce a two-slab GST regime (5% and 18%), simplifying tax classification and compliance.
- This system will particularly benefit MSMEs and small traders by reducing tax complexity.
- The GST 2.0 reforms also focus on:
 - **Reducing the cost of living** – By lowering taxes on essential goods and services.
 - **MSME Enablement** – Simplifying GST registration, refunds, and returns for MSMEs and startups.
 - **Revenue Stability** – Expanding the tax base, which has grown to over 1.5 crore taxpayers.
- By making GST more efficient, the government is aiming to create a tax system that benefits both businesses and consumers.
- **Export Promotion Mission** – To boost India's global trade competitiveness, the Union Government launched the Export Promotion Mission (EPM).
- With an allocation of ₹25,060 crore for FY 2025–26 to FY 2030–31, the mission aims to strengthen India's export ecosystem by providing financial and non-financial support to MSMEs and first-time exporters.
- Key measures include:
 - **Trade Finance** – Access to affordable finance for MSMEs.
 - **Market Access** – Enhancing the visibility of Indian products in international markets.
 - **Boosting Labour-Intensive Sectors** – Supporting sectors like textiles and handicrafts.
- The Export Promotion Mission will integrate digital tools and a unified framework to boost exports from underserved districts and sectors.

What are the driving outcomes?

- **Major push for Indian economy** – Collectively, these reforms represent a major push towards a future-ready Indian economy.

- **Creating a competitive economy** – They are designed not only to simplify systems and reduce burdens but also to create a transparent, resilient, and globally competitive economic ecosystem.
- **Towards 2047 vision** – By focusing on inclusivity, digital transformation, and long-term growth, these reforms align with India's vision for 2047, ensuring that the country is equipped to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing global economy.

What lies ahead?

- The economic reforms of 2025 aim to transform India's economic landscape by addressing key challenges such as tax simplification, labour rights, business compliance, and export competitiveness.
- By focusing on outcome-based governance and creating a more inclusive economy, these reforms are laying a strong foundation for sustainable growth and development.
- With these initiatives, India is on the path to becoming a future-ready economy that can thrive in an increasingly complex global market.

INDUSTRIES, INFRASTRUCTURE & INVESTMENTS

10.10 Recent Transport Crises in India – Lessons to Learn

Recently, India has recently faced two major transport disruptions that highlight important economic lessons.

What are the recent issues?

- **Overcrowded Trains of Bihar** – The severe rush for Bihar-bound trains during October and November occurred because migrant workers travelled home for Chhath Puja and the Bihar elections.
- This sudden increase in demand, without a corresponding increase in supply, created a textbook demand shock.
- Since Indian Railways maintains low and fixed ticket prices for public welfare, fares did not rise even though demand shot up.
- As a result, travellers were forced into dangerously overcrowded trains, especially in unreserved compartments.
- According to standard economic theory, prices should rise when demand increases so that only those willing to pay the higher price would travel.
- While this might create market equilibrium, it would also deny essential travel to people who cannot afford expensive fares.
- **The IndiGo Crisis** – In contrast to the railway crisis, the mass cancellation of IndiGo flights in December was a classic supply shock.
- IndiGo cancelled a large number of flights due to regulatory non-compliance.
- This sudden reduction in supply occurred while normal demand for flights continued.
- Because IndiGo controls over 60% of the Indian aviation market, the withdrawal of so many flights created immense disruption.
- Ticket prices on other airlines skyrocketed, passengers were stranded, and consumers suffered significant financial losses.
- Such extreme market-wide effects occur only when a single private company dominates the sector.

What are the reasons argued for transport crisis in India?

- **Debate of low Prices and inefficiency** – Critics often claim that low railway prices create inefficiency because excess demand results in overcrowding.
- However, this criticism ignores the real issue.
- The core problem is not low fares, but the insufficient supply of trains and seats.
- Essential services such as rail travel, healthcare, and education must remain affordable to ensure social welfare.
- Therefore, the correct solution is not to raise prices but to expand supply through greater public investment.
- Significant government investment is needed to increase the number of trains, improve infrastructure, and meet predictable seasonal demands. However, this becomes difficult in a neo-liberal framework that sets strict limits on fiscal deficits and discourages large-scale public spending.

- **Limited government investment** – The Indian state is often unable to expand public services because fiscal deficit rules prevent substantial investment.
- Although higher spending could improve welfare, governments avoid it due to pressure from global financial institutions and credit-rating agencies.
- One way to increase spending without raising the deficit is through greater taxation of the wealthy.
- Economists such as Thomas Piketty have shown that modest taxes on the top 1% could significantly strengthen India's welfare services.
- However, such taxation is politically difficult because it is opposed by both domestic elites and global capital.
- As a result, public services remain underfunded despite being essential.
- **Effects of monopolies** – If India's aviation market were genuinely competitive, the cancellation of one airline's flights would not have caused such severe disruption.
- Other airlines would have replaced the cancelled flights and stabilised prices.
- However, IndiGo's near-monopoly status meant that its withdrawal affected the entire market.
- This situation reflects a broader global trend. In the United States, supply disruptions during Joe Biden's presidency contributed to high inflation.
- Large corporations used their **pricing power** to increase prices far beyond their cost increases.
- These examples show that flexible pricing only works in a truly competitive market, and such competition can exist only when governments enforce strong anti-monopoly rules.
- **Outcomes of the Neo-Liberal Model** – Although the railway and aviation crises appear different, both are outcomes of India's neo-liberal economic model.
- This model restricts the state's ability to invest in essential services but encourages the deregulation of private markets.
- Because the state is constrained by fiscal deficit rules, it cannot invest adequately in transport infrastructure.
- Because private markets are deregulated, monopolies grow unchecked and gain enormous pricing power.
- The result is predictable: Public services become overcrowded and under-funded, and private services become expensive and unreliable.
- **Failure of Public and private sectors** – The overcrowding of trains and the flight cancellations reveal a dual failure:
 - **Public Sector Failure** – It is caused by low investment, not low prices.
 - **Private Sector Failure** – It is caused by monopoly power, not regulation.
- In both cases, ordinary citizens bear the burden. Travellers either endure unsafe and overcrowded conditions or face extremely high prices when private monopolies reduce supply.

What lies ahead?

- India needs a balanced economic approach that strengthens the public sector while regulating private monopolies.
- Welfare cannot be achieved by simply keeping public prices low or by allowing private markets to operate without oversight. Real welfare requires:
 - Adequate public investment in infrastructure.
 - Fair taxation of high-income groups.
 - Strong anti-monopoly regulations.
 - A competitive marketplace that protects consumers.
- Without such reforms, India will continue to face repeated transport crises.
- Unless India strengthens its public infrastructure and prevents the rise of monopolies, such crises will continue to repeat.

10.11 Bridges of India – Architecture against the Odds

Recently the Indian bridges have gained a wide attention for its infrastructural efficiency and engineering marvel.

What is the importance of Indian bridges?

- **Witness of Indian engineering** – Spanning over turbulent rivers, deep gorges, and restless seas, India's bridges stand as silent testimonies to the country's engineering ambition.
- **Tool of connectivity** – They connect not just towns and regions, but people, cultures, and economies, often in places where geography had long dictated isolation.
- Across India, bridges shape everyday life in ways most of us barely notice.
- They shorten distances that once took days to cross, open access to remote communities, and withstand nature at its fiercest.
- **Measuring the vision of infrastructure** – Among the countless bridges that form a vast network throughout the country, several key bridges exemplify the scale and vision of India's infrastructure.
- Each one carries its own tale, of daring design, relentless weather, and the human resolve to overcome terrain.

What are the bridges that define India's connectivity?

- **Atal Bihari Vajpayee Sewri-Nhava Sheva Atal Setu** – Stretching across the Arabian Sea like a bold stroke on the city's canvas, the Atal Setu, also known as the Mumbai Trans Harbour Link (MTHL).
- It marks Mumbai's biggest step towards a horizon unrestrained by traffic and time.
- It has been developed to ease the heavy traffic burden of Mumbai's island city.
- Built using advanced construction and safety systems, the bridge offers a faster and safer route across the bay, reducing accident risks and improving the daily travel experience for commuters.
- The MTHL has helped boost tourism in Mumbai and nearby regions, while also enhancing connectivity for trade and industry, contributing to the growth of the local economy.
- Spanning 16.5 kilometres over the sea and extending another 5.5 kilometres on land, and stands as India's longest sea bridge.
- Even amid the unprecedented challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the project managed to stay on track and meet its planned deadline.
- **Chenab Bridge** – India's engineering prowess has reached a new pinnacle with the completion of the Chenab Bridge, the world's highest railway arch bridge.
- It has been hailed as a testament to the brilliance and commitment of the country's engineers and workers as the project confronted hurdles.
- The Chenab Bridge rises 35 metres higher, positioning itself not only as a vital infrastructural asset but also as an emerging tourist landmark.
- Perched 359 metres above the Chenab River, the bridge forms a crucial segment of the Udhampur–Srinagar–Baramulla Railway Link (USBRL).
- With Vande Bharat trains set to operate on the route, travel time between Katra and Srinagar will reduce to just about three hours.
- The 1,315-metre-long steel arch structure has been designed to withstand wind speeds up to 260 kmph and built with a projected lifespan of 120 years.
- The Chenab Rail Bridge stands as a symbol of India's ambition, technical excellence, and advancing infrastructure capabilities.
- **New Pamban Bridge** – The newly constructed Pamban Bridge, connecting Rameswaram with the mainland, is India's first vertical lift railway sea bridge.
- It has emerged as a standout symbol of modern Indian infrastructure on the world map.
- The 2.07 km structure includes a 72.5-metre vertical lift section that can rise 17 metres, allowing ships to pass safely without halting train movement.
- The new Pamban Bridge's construction encountered major environmental and logistical challenges, including turbulent waters, strong winds, cyclones and seismic risks, and the difficulty of transporting heavy materials to the remote site within tight tidal windows.

- Through innovative engineering and advanced technology, over 1,400 tons of fabrication, lift-span launches, 99 girders, and extensive track and electrification work at sea were completed with zero injuries.
- Crafted with stainless reinforcement, high-performance protective coatings, and fully welded joints, the bridge promises greater longevity and lower upkeep.
- It has also been prepared for future growth, with space for a second railway line.
- A specialised polysiloxane finish shields the structure from corrosion, an essential safeguard given the demanding coastal conditions.
- **Dhola–Sadiya Bridge** – The Dhola–Sadiya Bridge, also known as the Bhupen Hazarika Setu, is a vital link between Assam and Arunachal Pradesh.
- It provides the first permanent road connection between northern Assam and eastern Arunachal Pradesh.
- Built as a beam bridge, it sweeps over the Lohit River, one of the Brahmaputra's major tributaries, connecting Dhola in Tinsukia district to Sadiya in the north.
- Stretching 9.15 kilometres, it is built to withstand the load of 60-tonne military tanks, including the Indian Army's Arjun and T-72 models.
- This capability adds significant strategic value to the structure.
- **Anji Khad Bridge** – The Anji Khad Bridge pierces the Himalayan landscape with an elegance and scale unmatched, emerging as India's first cable-stayed railway bridge and a key link in the Katra–Banihal section of the Udhampur–Srinagar–Baramulla Rail Line.
- Located about 80 kilometres from Jammu and set against snow-capped peaks, the bridge soars 331 metres above the Anji River valley and extends 725 metres across the gorge.
- Its defining feature is an inverted Y-shaped pylon rising 193 metres above its foundation, supported by 96 high-tensile cables.
- More than 8,200 metric tonnes of structural steel reinforce the bridge, enabling it to withstand seismic activity.
- The Anji Khad Bridge was built through extremely rugged Himalayan conditions marked by cherty limestone formations and unstable hill-wash debris with large limestone boulders.
- To protect the mountain ecology, extensive slope-stabilisation measures were implemented throughout construction.
- Beyond its technical sophistication, the Anji Khad Bridge stands as a symbol of persistence and vision, with completion in just 11 months.
- As part of the broader rail link connecting the Kashmir Valley with the rest of India, it is set to improve travel efficiency, enhance regional connectivity, and unlock new economic opportunities.

What lies ahead?

- India's bridges are more than infrastructure; they are statements of intent, connecting a nation defined by scale and contrast.
- They rise from mountainsides, pierce through monsoon clouds, and skim the surface of some of the subcontinent's most volatile waters.
- Through every corner of this vast terrain, various bridges continue to reflect India's drive and determination.
- In their shadows lie stories of innovation, perseverance, and the complex landscapes they dared to conquer.
- They reshape economies, redraw maps, and reimagine how people move, live, and dream.
- Each new span reflects not just engineering progress, but the nation's willingness to push beyond the limitations of region, time, and history.
- As India continues to grow, its bridges will remain among the clearest expressions of a country in motion, always reaching forward, always building its own path.

11. ENVIRONMENT

11.1 Uranium In Breast Milk

Recently, A study published from Bihar has revealed traces of uranium (U238) in the breast milk of lactating mothers across six districts of the State.

What is the study about?

- **Paper title** – Discovery of uranium content in breast milk and assessment of associated health risks for mothers and infants in Bihar, India.
- **Publication** – The study was published in the magazine, *Nature*.
- **Number of samples** – Samples of breast milk were taken from 40 mothers selected randomly.
- **Districts covered** – Begusarai, Katihar, Nalanda, Samastipur, Kagharia and Bhojpur.
- **Investigation** – The samples underwent a detailed uranium analysis at the Mahavir Cancer Sansthan & Research Centre in Patna.

What impact does it have on breast milk?

- **Observations** – The results showed all breast milk samples had uranium concentrations between 0 microgram/L and 5.25 microgram/L.
- The highest U238 concentration was observed in Katihar district.
- The authors linked uranium in breast milk to uranium contamination of ground water, citing earlier groundwater studies to establish the link.
- **Permissible limit** – There is currently no permissible limit or benchmark specified for uranium concentration in breast milk.
 - However, the World Health Organization has set a provisional guideline limit of 30 microgram/L of uranium in drinking water.
- **U238** – Scientists found the uranium isotope 238 (U238), said to be the most common isotope, making up over 99% of natural uranium in breast milk.
 - It is a weakly radioactive, dense, and very heavy metal.
 - It occurs naturally in the environment, and can be found in almost all rock, soil, and water, including the oceans, though in low concentrations.
- **Study of (USEPA) – United States Environmental Protection Agency** observed that external exposure to uranium is not as dangerous as exposure to other radioactive elements because the skin will block the alpha particles [in the uranium].
- However, ingestion of high concentrations of uranium can cause health effects, such as cancer of the bone or liver.
- A person can be exposed to uranium by inhaling dust in air, or ingesting water and food contaminated with uranium.
- The general population is exposed to trace levels of uranium primarily through food and water, according to the USEPA.
- **Uranium in ground water** – In recent years, groundwater uranium [U238] poisoning has posed serious health hazards in the exposed population.
 - In India, an estimated 151 districts and 18 States have reported groundwater uranium contamination, and about 1.7% of groundwater sources are affected in Bihar.

Does it affect mothers and infants?

- **Low impacts** – Uranium was found in all samples but remains under permissible limits, implying low expected health impact.
- The study concludes that the actual impact on infant health is likely low, and that most of the uranium absorbed by mothers is excreted primarily through urine, not concentrated in breast milk.
- **Non carcinogenic risk** – 70% of the infants showed potential non-carcinogenic risk in the assessment but the levels observed are expected to have “minimal actual health impact” on mothers and infants, and breastfeeding should continue unless a clinical reason requires otherwise.

- **Potential threat** – If long-term exposure to uranium continues in infants, it may affect kidney development and cognitive and mental health outcomes (including low IQ and neurodevelopmental delay).

What lies ahead?

- The actual immediate danger, is that people might misunderstand or misinterpret the study, and stop breast-feeding in panic. Insufficient breast-feeding is a major cause of infant mortality, infections, and malnutrition.
- Therefore, while reporting the study, it must be emphasised that breast-feeding is safe.
- Periodic groundwater studies must be conducted to ensure that concentrations of metals and other contaminants do not exceed 'safe' limits in the food chain.
- The paper calls for future studies with larger sample sizes and environmental uranium profiling (in water, soil, and diet).
- Isotope-specific measurements are warranted to better understand maternal-infant uranium kinetics in exposed populations.
- Further studies are being planned to study uranium contamination in breast milk in other States.

11.2 Aravalli's - The New Definition and Conservation

Recently, The Supreme Court (SC), in an order last month, settled on a uniform definition of the Aravalli hills and ranges, and paused the grant of fresh mining leases inside its areas spanning Delhi, Haryana, Rajasthan and Gujarat.

What are the significances of Aravalli's?

- **Ancient & Oldest** – It's one of the world's oldest fold mountain ranges, with origins in the Proterozoic era (over 2 billion years old).
- **Location** – Extends approximately 650 km from Delhi through Haryana, Rajasthan, to Gujarat.
- **Highest Peak** – Guru Shikhar on Mount Abu (1,722 m).
- **Climate Regulator** – Acts as a natural barrier, preventing the Thar Desert from encroaching on fertile plains and guiding monsoon clouds eastward.
- **Biodiversity Hotspot** – Rich in flora and fauna, with sanctuaries like Sariska & Ranthambore, supporting significant NCR biodiversity.
- **Mineral Wealth** – It is richly endowed with sandstone, limestone, marble, granite, and minerals such as lead, zinc, copper, gold, and tungsten.
- While historically mined for these resources, it has in the past four decades been excessively quarried for stone and sand.
- **Watershed** – A vital source for rivers like Chambal, Sabarmati, and Luni, and crucial for groundwater recharge.
- **Ecological Significance:**
 - **Desertification Barrier** – They help arrest the eastward spread of the Thar Desert into Haryana, Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh.
 - **Air Quality** – Reduces dust pollution in the Delhi-NCR region.
 - **Water Security** – Helps recharge groundwater for northern India.



What was the action taken against mining?

- **Rules of ministry** – The Environment Ministry, since the early 1990s, has laid down rules restricting mining to only sanctioned projects but these have been flagrantly violated.
- **Supreme court ruling** – In 2009, the SC stepped in and imposed a blanket ban on mining in the Faridabad, Gurugram, and Mewat districts of Haryana.
 - In May 2024, the SC prohibited granting of fresh mining leases and renewals in the range and directed its Central Empowered Committee (CEC) to undertake a detailed examination, leading to a set of recommendations submitted in March 2024.
- **Proposal of The CEC** – It proposed a comprehensive approach that included:

- a complete scientific mapping of the Aravalli range across all States.
- a macro-level environmental impact assessment of mining activities.
- strict prohibition of mining in ecologically sensitive areas such as protected habitats, water bodies, tiger corridors, key aquifer recharge zones and areas within the National Capital Region.
- It urged stringent regulation of stone-crushing units.
- It also recommended that no new mining leases or renewals be permitted until proper mapping and impact assessments were completed.
- These recommendations were taken up by the Court in its order of November 2025.
- **Green wall project** – In June, 2025, the Centre started an Aravalli 'Green Wall' project.
- The plan is to expand green cover in the five-km buffer area around the Aravallis in 29 districts of Gujarat, Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi.
- The government said this initiative will play a crucial role in restoring 26 million hectares of degraded land by 2030.

Why there is a need for a uniform definition?

- **Erratic criteria** – The Court found that States were using inconsistent criteria to identify Aravalli formations.
- **Contradictory definitions** – There have also been differing definitions, including by expert groups such as the Forest Survey of India (FSI) on what makes up 'Aravalli Hills and Ranges.'
- **FSI definition** – In 2010, the FSI had said hills with:
 - Slope $>3^\circ$, & Foothill buffer = 100m,
 - Inter hill distance or valley width= 500m and
 - The area enclosed by above defined hills from all sides," would make up Aravalli hill and ranges.
- **Supreme court's intervention** – To resolve this, it constituted a committee comprising representatives from the Environment Ministry, the FSI, State Forest Departments, the Geological Survey of India and the CEC.
- This committee was tasked with creating a scientifically grounded, nationwide definition of the Aravallis.
- The committee submitted its findings in October 2025.
- **Recent definition** – The SC committee finally ruled that only hills above 100 metres would make the cut.

What are the other observations of the Supreme Court?

- **Suggestion for management plan** – The Court directed the preparation of a detailed Management Plan for Sustainable Mining (MPSM) covering the entire Aravalli range.
- The plan must:
 - Demarcate areas where mining must be absolutely prohibited,
 - Identify zones where limited and highly regulated mining may be permitted
 - Map sensitive habitats and wildlife corridors
 - Evaluate cumulative ecological impacts
 - Determine ecological carrying capacity
 - Articulate restoration and rehabilitation measures.
- **Approach on mining** – The Court explained that past experiences show total bans often lead to the rise of illegal mining syndicates, violent sand mafias and unregulated extraction.
- The Court therefore opted for a calibrated approach:
 - Existing legal mining continues under tight regulation
 - New mining is paused until a scientifically driven plan is prepared
 - Permanently sensitive areas remain off-limits.

11.3 Bioremediation - Need of the Hour

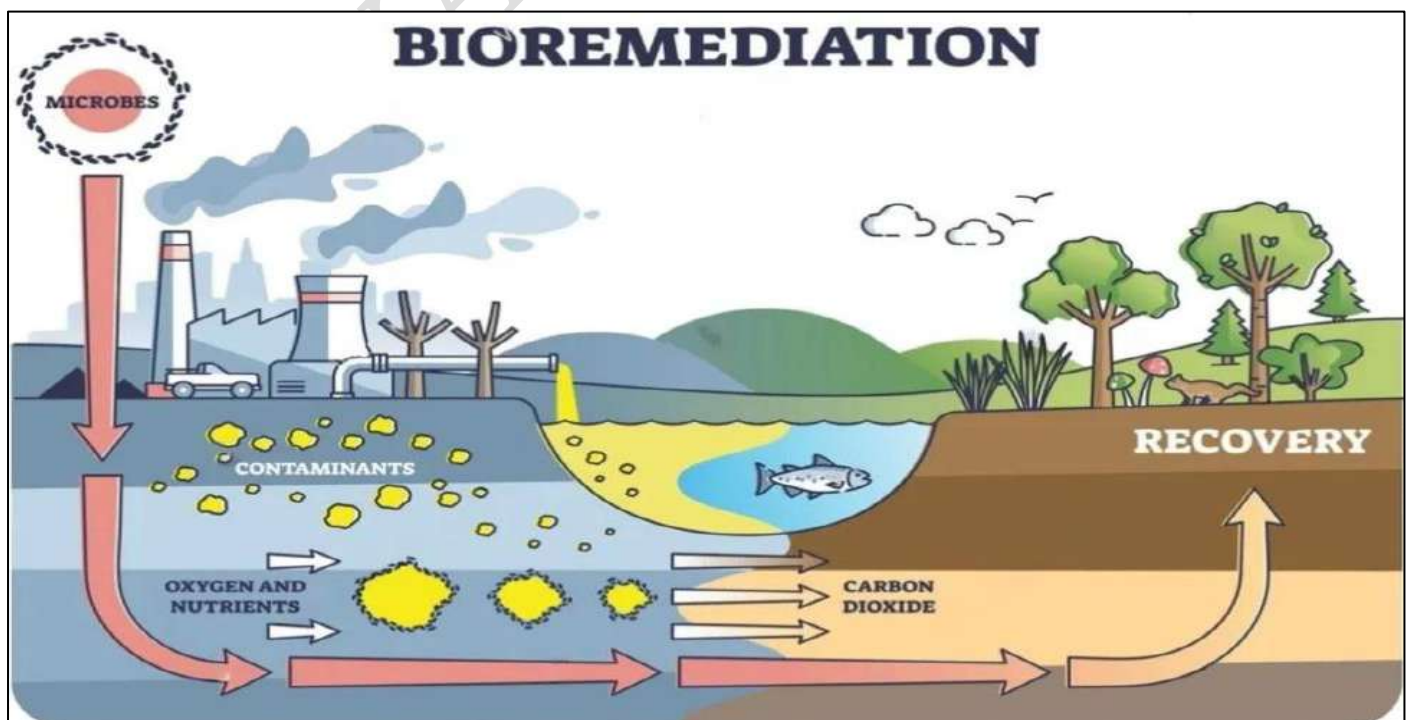
Recently, the Bioremediation process has gained attention and importance due to ever increasing pollutions in many waterbodies in India.

What is bioremediation?

- **Bioremediation** – It literally means “*restoring life through biology.*”
- It harnesses microorganisms such as bacteria, fungi, algae and plants to sequester or transform toxic substances such as oil, pesticides, plastics, or heavy metals.
- These organisms metabolise these pollutants as food, breaking them down into harmless by-products such as water, carbon dioxide, or organic acids.
- In some cases, they can convert toxic metals into less dangerous forms that no longer leach into the soil or groundwater.
- **Types** – There are two broad types:
 - **In situ bioremediation**, where treatment happens directly at the contaminated site — think oil-eating bacteria sprayed on an ocean spill.
 - **Ex situ bioremediation**, where contaminated soil or water is removed, treated in a controlled facility, and returned once cleaned.
- Modern bioremediation combines traditional microbiology with cutting-edge biotechnology.
- First, new biotechnologies are enabling humans to gain unprecedented insight into biology, allowing them to identify biomolecules with useful characteristics.
- Second, these technologies allow humans to replicate these biomolecules under desired conditions of use, such as sewage plants or agricultural lands.
 - **For example**, genetically modified (GM) microbes are designed to degrade tough chemicals like plastics or oil residues that natural species struggle with.
- **Biosensing** – Synthetic biology also allows for “biosensing”, organisms that change colour or fluorescence when they detect toxins, providing early warnings of contamination.

Why does India need bioremediation?

- **Heavy industrialization in India** – India’s rapid industrialisation has come at a heavy environmental cost.
- Although pollution has been reducing, rivers such as the Ganga and Yamuna receive untreated sewage and industrial effluents daily.
- Oil leaks, pesticide residues, and heavy-metal contamination threaten both ecosystems and public health.



- **Issues with traditional methods** – Traditional clean-up technologies are expensive, energy-intensive, and often create secondary pollution.
- **Potential of Bioremediation** – It offers a cheaper, scalable, and sustainable alternative, especially in a country where vast stretches of land and water are affected but resources for remediation are limited.
- **Advantage of India's diverse biodiversity** – Indigenous microbes adapted to local conditions, such as high temperatures, salinity, or acidity, can outperform imported strains in environmental recovery.

Where does India stand today?

- **The Department of Biotechnology (DBT)** – It has supported several projects through its Clean Technology Programme, encouraging partnerships between universities, public research institutions, and industries.
- **CSIR-National Environmental Engineering Research Institute** – It has a mandate to propose and implement programmes related to bioremediation.
- **IITs** – Researchers at the Indian Institute of Technology have experimented with a nanocomposite material synthesised from cotton that can be used to mop up oil spills and others have identified bacteria that can consume toxic pollutants in soils.
- **Startups** – Firms like Biotech Consortium India Limited (BCIL) and Econirmal Biotech offer microbial formulations for soil and wastewater treatment.
- **Challenges** – Widespread adoption faces several challenges
 - Technical ones such as a lack of site-specific knowledge and the complex nature of pollutants, and
 - Regulatory ones such as a lack of unified bioremediation standards.

What are other countries doing?

- **Japan** – It integrates microbial and plant-based cleanup systems into its urban waste strategy.
- **European Union** – It funds cross-country projects that use microbes to tackle oil spills and restore mining sites.
- **China** – It has made bioremediation a priority under its soil pollution control framework, using genetically improved bacteria to restore industrial wastelands.

What are the opportunities and risks?

- **Ecology restoration** – Bioremediation can help restore rivers, reclaim land, and clean industrial sites, while creating jobs in biotechnology, environmental consulting, and waste management.
- **Integration of schemes** – It can also integrate with the government's Swachh Bharat Mission, Namami Gange, and other green technology initiatives.
- **Concerns with GMOs** – The introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into open environments need to be strictly monitored to prevent unintended ecological effects.
- **Lack of monitoring** – Inadequate testing or poor containment or monitoring can create fresh problems while solving old ones.

What needs to be done?

- **National standards** – There is a need to develop national standards for bioremediation protocols and microbial applications.
- India will need new biosafety guidelines, certification systems, and trained personnel to scale this technology responsibly.
- **Building regional bioremediation hubs** – Linking universities, industries, and local governments would enable better understanding of local issues and identifying appropriate technologies for their resolution.
- This can be implemented through support for local startups and community projects through the DBT–BIRAC ecosystem.
- **Public engagement** – It would raise awareness that microbes can be allies, not threats, in environmental restoration.

12. SECURITY

12.1 Biosecurity in India - Measures and Challenges

Recently, External Affairs Minister addressed a conference on '50 Years of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC).

What is biosecurity?

- **Definition** – Biosecurity refers to the set of practices and systems designed to deter the intentional misuse of biological agents, toxins or technologies.
- **Domain** – It covers everything from safeguarding labs handling dangerous pathogens, to detecting and containing an intentional outbreak of a pathogen.
- Biosecurity is not only about protecting human health from pathogens, but extends to agricultural and animal health too.
- **Biosecurity Vs Biosafety** - Biosecurity differs slightly from biosafety, which is a set of practices meant to prevent the accidental leakage of pathogens.
- A robust biosafety protocol feeds into biosecurity.
- **BWC** – After a few instances of bioweapons development, the Biological Weapons Convention came into existence in 1975.
- It became the first international treaty that not only prohibited the use and development of biological weapons of mass destruction, but also asked its signatories to destroy existing stockpiles.
- Over the past many decades, the use of bioweapons has been muted.

Biological Weapons Convention

- The **Biological Weapons Convention (BWC)** is the first multilateral disarmament treaty to ban an entire category of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).
- It prohibits the hostile use, development, production, acquisition, transfer, and stockpiling of biological and toxin weapons.
- **Core Prohibition** – States Parties agree not to develop, produce, stockpile, or acquire biological agents or toxins in quantities without justification for peaceful purposes.
- **Status** – The Convention opened for signature on April 10, 1972, and entered into force on March 26, 1975.
- It has near-universal membership with 189 States Parties as of May 2025.
- **Purpose** – It prevents the use of disease as a weapon, building upon the 1925 Geneva Protocol, which only banned use but not possession or development.
- **Peaceful Cooperation** – The BWC promotes the exchange of equipment, materials, and information for peaceful purposes in biological science and technology.
- **Review Process** – States Parties hold Review Conferences every five years to evaluate the Convention and strengthen its implementation.

Why does India need biosecurity?

- **Geography & Ecology** – India's geography and ecology make it vulnerable to cross-border bio-risks.
- India's dependence on agriculture and large population makes the threat more dangerous.
- **Suspected weapon preparation** – While India has not had any explicitly known biosecurity attack, there have been reports of the alleged preparation of the toxin Ricin (derived from castor oil) for potential use in a terror attack.
- This incident underscores how non-state actors are pursuing biological tools, reinforcing the urgency of robust biosecurity.
- **Rapid growth of Biotech** – Further, the rapid spread of biotechnologies have endowed humans with increased control over biology, increasing the chances of malicious actors experimenting with bioweapons development.

What are the agencies and framework of India engaged in bio-risk reduction?

- **Institutional measures** – The Department of Biotechnology oversees research governance and safety frameworks for labs.

- The National Centre for Disease Control manages outbreak surveillance and response.
- The Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying monitors livestock biosecurity and transboundary diseases.
- The Plant Quarantine Organisation of India regulates agricultural imports and exports.
- **Legal measures** – India's biosafety and biosecurity laws include the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, which governs hazardous microorganisms and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).
- The Weapons of Mass Destruction and their Delivery Systems (Prohibition of Unlawful Activities) Act, 2005, which criminalises biological weapons.
- **Rules & Guidelines** – India has also developed Biosafety Rules (1989) and specific guidelines were released in 2017 for the purposes of Recombinant DNA Research and Biocontainment.
- The National Disaster Management Authority has a detailed guideline on the management of biological disasters.
- **International treaty** – India is also part of international platforms that emphasise biosecurity, such as the Biological Weapons Convention and Australia Group.
- **Challenges** – Lab regulation, public-health surveillance, agriculture protection, a unified national biosecurity framework is still evolving.
 - **Outdated Laws & Policies** – Most of the current policies and laws have to be also updated to keep pace with new forms of biothreats that are emerging.
 - **Less response mechanisms** – India is currently ranked 66 on the Global Health Security Index, and while its score for detecting biothreats has increased, its score for being able to effectively respond to threats has reduced.

What are other countries doing?

- **US** – The U.S. anchors its biosecurity framework under the National Biodefense Strategy (2022-2028) which integrates health, defence, and biotech oversight.
- In 2024, the U.S. further strengthened this system through the Federal Guidance on Synthetic Nucleic Acid Screening, requiring gene synthesis companies to verify DNA orders against pathogen databases to prevent misuse.
- **EU** – The European Union regulates through the EU Health Security Framework (2022) and Horizon Europe's dual-use research guidelines, embedding biosecurity in its One Health model.
- **China** – The Biosecurity Law (2021) of China treats biotechnology and genetic data as matters of national security, mandating centralised control over research and material transfers.
- **Australia** – The Biosecurity Act (2015) of Australia provides a unified legal framework across human, animal, and plant sectors, now extending to synthetic biology.
- **UK** – The United Kingdom's Biological Security Strategy (2023) focuses on biosurveillance and rapid response.

What are the risks ahead?

- The risk of an inadequate biosecurity apparatus is profound.
- It jeopardises the lives of billions of Indians.
- It is therefore necessary that a national biosecurity framework that coordinates actions across various government agencies is developed.
- Such a framework would also be able to identify infrastructure and capability gaps that need to be addressed.
- Use of new-age biodefence technologies such as microbial forensics and new approaches such as social media surveillance could then be appropriately adopted to plug such gaps.

DISASTER MANAGEMENT

12.2 Aviation Safety – The FDTL Crisis and India's Regulatory Malaise

The recent turmoil in India's aviation sector triggered by mass flight cancellations by private airline IndiGo and followed by a controversial government response has raised serious concerns about the state of aviation safety.

What is the issue?

- **Large scale flight cancellation** – Starting on December 2, IndiGo flights were delayed and cancelled due to apparent pilot shortages.
- Flight disruptions were recorded in New Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad and other cities.
- On December 5, at least 1,600 flights were cancelled in one of the worst aviation crises in India.
- **Noncompliance with new regulation** – Early last year, the government announced new flight regulations, called the Flight Duty Time Limitations or FDTL – to improve the working hours of the Indian airlines' pilots.
- However, when the November 1 deadline arrived, IndiGo airline was not prepared.
- As a result, it was first forced to delay and later cancel flights, as there were not enough pilots available
- The decision of the Minister of Civil Aviation to place Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) orders “under abeyance” has renewed debates on regulatory integrity, crew fatigue, and the prioritisation of commercial interests over passenger safety.

What is FDTL Norms?

- **FDTL** – Flight Duty Time Limitation (FDTL) norms were introduced as a Civil Aviation Requirement (CAR) to ensure that pilots receive adequate rest and operate fatigue-free.
- Fatigue management is globally recognised as a non-negotiable element of flight safety.
- Despite this, the DGCA appealed to pilots' bodies to cooperate and simultaneously hinted at diluting FDTL requirements.
- This appears to be aimed at easing operational pressures on IndiGo, which failed to plan for upcoming regulatory changes.
- Such actions cast doubt on the regulator's commitment to safety and create an impression that commercial interests have overshadowed passenger welfare.
- **New Norms** – FDTL was finally implemented in two phases this year, and the rules include:
 - Increasing pilots' mandatory weekly rest period from 36 to 48 hours.
 - A pilot's personal leave request, however, cannot be included under the mandatory rest period.
 - Capping pilots' flying hours that continue into the night to 10 hours.
 - Capping the weekly number of landings a pilot can make between midnight and early morning to 2.
 - Submitting quarterly pilots' fatigue reports to the Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA).

What are the issues in abiding to FDTL norms?

- **Historical Pattern** – This is not the first instance of such regulatory backtracking.
- In **2007**, the DGCA rolled out a robust CAR addressing crew fatigue.
- However, Airline owners protested to the Civil Aviation Ministry
- The Ministry ordered the DGCA to keep the CAR in abeyance
- In **May 2008**, DGCA officially suspended the CAR
- This pattern showcases a long-standing approach where aviation safety standards are subordinated to commercial pressures, even at the cost of risking passenger lives.
- **Judicial Intervention and Its Contradictions** – The 2008 suspension of CARs prompted pilots' associations to approach the Bombay High Court.
- The high Court:
 - Condemned the government for endangering pilots and passengers
 - Described the decision as arbitrary and safety-compromising
 - Suggested reducing flights instead of stretching pilots' duty hours
 - Emphasised that “safety has been overlooked to protect financial interests of airline operators”
- However, in a surprising reversal, the same High Court later upheld the Ministry's action — further weakening regulatory enforcement.

- **Failure of Planning** – Both IndiGo and DGCA were fully aware that the new FDTL regime would come into force from **November 1, 2025**.
- In spite of that:
 - No adequate preparation was undertaken
 - No additional pilots were recruited despite clear requirements
 - Resulted in mass cancellations and nationwide chaos
 - Passengers may get ticket refunds, but the losses due to hotel stays, rescheduled travel, and personal disruptions remain unaddressed.
- **Violation of Minimum Crew Requirements** – DGCA's own CAR (Series C, Part II, 2022) mandates:
 - **At least 3 sets** of crew per aircraft under regular employment, But in reality:
 - A minimum of **6 sets** of pilots are needed even under existing FDTL rules
 - **12 sets** are needed for long-haul wide-body operations
 - Airlines have deliberately underemployed crew to cut costs, with IndiGo as a major violator
 - The absence of enforcement underscores regulatory capture and the failure of oversight.
- **Lack of Accountability and Regulatory Capture** – In 2006, the *International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)* recommended that India establish an **independent aviation safety authority**, free from government interference.
- Nearly two decades later, this recommendation has not been implemented.
- **Recent actions** – Including the December 5, 2025 abeyance order – highlight:
 - DGCA's inability to enforce its own safety standards
 - Ministry's willingness to override regulatory safeguards
 - Airlines' confidence that violations will go unpunished
 - Even developing nations with weaker aviation systems rarely dilute safety norms to this extent.
- **Recurring Tragedies and Unlearned Lessons** – India has witnessed three major aviation accidents since 2010:
 - **Mangaluru (2010)**
 - **Kozhikode (2020)**
 - **Ahmedabad (AI 171 crash)** – report still delayed
- Instead of strengthening regulatory systems post-accidents, the government's recent moves indicate regression and misplaced priorities.

What lies ahead?

- The suspension of FDTL regulations and continued prioritisation of commercial interests reveal a fundamental flaw in India's aviation governance.
- Regulatory dilution, absence of accountability, judiciary inconsistency, and weak oversight collectively threaten passenger safety.
- Unless India establishes an independent regulator and enforces strict compliance, aviation safety will remain a myth – and the skies will be navigated not by robust systems, but merely “on a wing and a prayer.”

12.3 New Seismic Map of India

Recently, India has unveiled an updated seismic zonation map as part of the revised Earthquake Design Code by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS).

What is a seismic map?

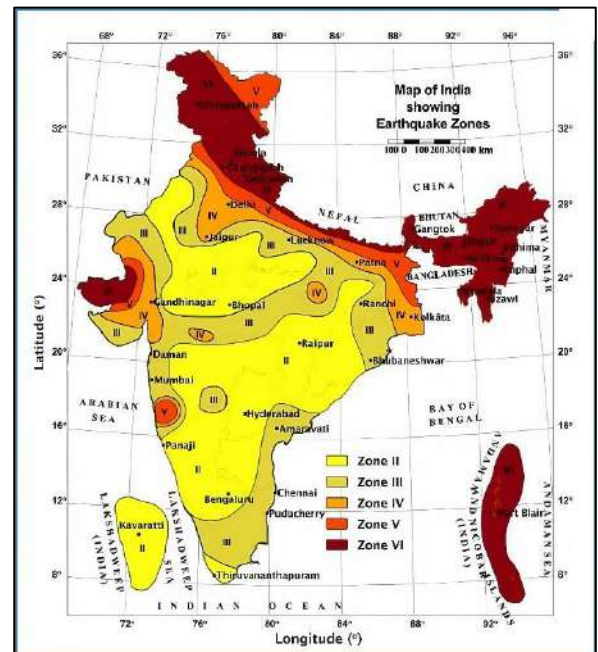
- **Seismic map** – It shows earthquake risk, highlighting areas prone to shaking, liquefaction, or landslides using color-coded zones to guide safe construction, urban planning, and emergency prep, based on data about faults, past quakes, and geology to predict shaking intensity over time.

• Key Components & Meanings

- **Seismic Hazard Zones** – Areas categorized by potential earthquake effects, from low to very high indicating increased risk.
- **Colour Coding** – Different colours represent specific hazards (e.g., green for liquefaction risk, blue for landslides) or levels of ground shaking probability.
- **Isoseismal Lines** – Contour lines on maps showing areas that experienced the same intensity of shaking (Modified Mercalli scale), useful for historical quakes.
- **Geological Data** – Incorporates fault lines, soil types (which amplify shaking), and seismic wave behavior.

• Application

- **Building Codes** – Dictate how strong structures (hospitals, bridges, homes) must be built.
- **Land Use** – Inform decisions on where to build critical infrastructure or develop residential areas.
- **Emergency Planning** – Help authorities plan response and evacuation routes.
- **Risk Communication** – Make complex geological data understandable for the public and developers.



What are the Key changes in the updated map?

- **Previous map** – 59% of India's landmass was considered earthquake-prone and divided into four seismic zones based on the intensity of past events:
 - Zone II (low)
 - Zone III (moderate)
 - Zone IV (high)
 - Zone V (very high)
 - Zone V was the most seismically active region, while zone II was the least.
- **Updated map** – It has added one more zone of the highest seismic-hazard category – Zone VI.
- As a result, 61 % of India's landmass now falls under moderate-to-high seismic hazard risk zones.
- The Himalayan belt, which was earlier split across Zones IV and V, has now been put under a single highest risk Zone VI in view of high seismic risk across the entire region (from Jammu and Kashmir to Arunachal Pradesh).
- In the long-overdue classification, which acknowledges the extensive tectonic vulnerability of the Himalayas, towns and cities that lie on the boundary of any two zones will now automatically be considered in the higher risk zone.

What is the rationale behind the update?

- **Basis** – This revision is based on comprehensive data on faults, ground-shaking behaviour, tectonic movements, and underlying lithology (physical character of a rock or rock formation) of the vulnerable regions across the country.
- **Factors of safety** – During any intense seismic events, the safety of the people depends mainly on two factors:
 - **Structural Elements (SEs)** – The load-bearing components of a building, like beams, columns, walls, etc.
 - **Architectural Elements and Utilities (AEUs)** – Non-structural elements held by SEs like glass windows, ceilings, lifts, air conditioning ducts, and other installations for services and utilities.
- **Conventional design** – Traditionally earthquake-resistant design has largely focused on strengthening SEs.
- However, damage to AEUs can also jeopardise the safety of the people and structures.

- Any losses or damage to critical infrastructure, like government buildings, hospitals, schools, commercial complexes, malls, convention centres, and milk and food supply stores, can lead to major socio-economic consequences.
- Revised design** – The revised Earthquake Design Code, 2025, seeks to address this gap by laying down standards for the design of SEs and protection of AEUs.
- These provisions are expected to reduce the damage to both SEs and AEUs during earthquake effects like ground shaking.
- Achieving SDG** – These revisions will help towards achieving two crucial United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):
 - SDG 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure)** – By building resilient infrastructure, promoting inclusive and sustainable industrialisation, and fostering innovation.
 - SDG 11 (Sustainable cities and communities)** – By enhancing the safety, resilience, and sustainability of cities and human settlements.

What are the seismic vulnerabilities of India?

- Dynamic Indian plate** – The Indian Plate is still moving towards the Eurasian Plate at nearly 5 cm/year.
- This ongoing collision led to the formation of the Himalayas – a geologically young region, meaning the rocks are still adjusting, folding and breaking, making the mountains unstable.
- The Himalayas have not yet attained isostatic equilibrium (or gravitational equilibrium) and continue to rise.
- This makes the region vulnerable to frequent earthquakes of varying intensities.
- Major fault system** – Beneath the Himalayan ranges lie three major fault systems:
 - Main Central Thrust (MCT)** – Between the Greater and the Lesser/Middle Himalayas
 - Main Boundary Thrust (MBT)** – Between the Lesser Himalayas and Outer Himalayas (Shivaliks)
 - Main Frontal Thrust (MFT) or Himalayan Frontal Fault (HFF)** – Between the Outer Himalayas and Northern Indian Plains
- The HFF is the southernmost fault and has densely populated foothills.
- The recent seismic hazard update has been cautious about the potential southward propagation of rupture along this fault, which could extend the hazards into areas such as Dehradun.
- Devastating earthquake experiences** – According to the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA), India has experienced 10 major earthquakes over the last 15 years, resulting in over 20,000 casualties.
- Historically, India, particularly the Himalayan belt, has been vulnerable to high-magnitude seismic events, sometimes exceeding 8.0.
- Major devastating Earthquakes** – Four particularly devastating earthquakes happened within a span of 50-55 years, claiming thousands of lives and causing severe damage to properties:
 - 1897 Shillong earthquake (M 8.7)
 - 1905 Kangra earthquake (M 8.0)
 - 1934 Bihar-Nepal earthquake (M 8.3)
 - 1950 Assam-Tibet earthquake (M 8.6)
- More recently, the 2001 Bhuj earthquake (M 7.9) claimed 12,932 lives and devastated 890 villages.
- India's high seismic vulnerabilities is further evident in the fact that it recorded 159 earthquakes within four months between November 2024 and February 2025.

How the revised map seeks to minimise seismic risk?

- Exposure window concept** – To minimise seismic risk, the revised map introduced the concept of 'exposure window'.
- It considers population density, concentration of infrastructure, urban expansion patterns, and socio-economic vulnerability.
- This has been introduced using the Probabilistic Exposure and Multi-Hazard Assessment (PEMA) method.
- Consideration of multiple factors** – While readjusting the zones, the aim was to consider both physical and geological factors as well as the potential human and economic impacts.

- This is particularly important for densely populated cities, where even moderate intensity earthquakes can also cause significant damage.
- **Conformity with the norms** – The BIS has urged that all new infrastructure projects and structures be constructed in accordance with the revised guidelines.
- **Revision of codes** – The Himalayan states, which are now reclassified into Zone VI, will be required to revise building codes, infrastructure design norms, and long-term urban planning frameworks.
- Mandatory seismic audits and retrofitting of vulnerable infrastructure will be essential for future preparedness.

What lies ahead?

- Challenges posed by earthquakes as a disaster are unique, as their location, time, and magnitude still cannot be predicted with precision.
- This necessitates a stronger emphasis on preparedness and mitigation measures to minimise losses.
- There is a need to preserve traditional construction practices and integrate the safety provisions, wherever required, to enhance their resilience.
- There is also an urgent need to retrofit critical older structures of cultural, social, and historical importance to ensure their resilience.
- The Prime Minister's 10-Point Agenda for Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) also emphasises leveraging technology to enhance the efficiency of disaster risk management efforts.
- Accordingly, efforts towards improving infrastructure, developing early warning systems, and enforcing safety standards and guidelines are crucial to ensuring safety during future earthquakes.

13. ETHICS

13.1 Death Penalty – The practice and The Peril

Recently, The Supreme Court heard the Union government's submission that it is still examining whether a more humane and less painful method of execution could replace hanging.

What is death penalty?

- **Death penalty** – The death penalty, or capital punishment, is the state-sanctioned killing of a person as a punishment for a crime.
- **Sanctioning authority** – A death sentence is handed down by a court of law for a serious crime, and the execution is the carrying out of that sentence.
- The practice is also known as judicial homicide.
- **Death row** – It is the state of an imprisoned person who has been sentenced to death and is awaiting execution.

What is the status of death penalty in India?

- **Recent development** – For the 3rd year in a row, the Supreme Court has not confirmed any death sentences.
- It acquitted 9 death row prisoners, commuting 5 to life imprisonment, and remanding 2 cases to the trial courts for fresh consideration.
- **Latest proposals** – The Supreme Court is listening to a proposal to give convicts on death row an option of choosing lethal injection as an alternative to death by hanging as a mode of execution.
- The top court expressed its displeasure with the government's unwillingness to evolve on the issue, after the Centre indicated that offering such an option might not be feasible.
- **Governments stand on hanging** – The Centre stands by hanging, calling it the "safest and quickest" option, but has hinted it is open to considering other methods.
- **Death row in India** – It is 564 and the highest in nearly two decades.
- Trial courts have sentenced more than 100 people to death annually in recent years, often without proper consideration of mitigating circumstances.
- **Supreme courts position** – The top court has reminded judges not to be swayed by the brutality of crimes or public outrage, reminding them that penology now centres on the preservation of human life.

- Significantly, some recent judgements show a preference for alternatives to execution.
 - **For example**, Life imprisonment without remission—brought in after the Nirbhaya case for aggravated rape—has increasingly become the middle path for serious crimes that could otherwise attract the death penalty.
- **Manoj vs State of Madhya Pradesh (2022)** – The top Court state that such factors must be evaluated to prevent retributive sentencing, compliance remains poor.
- **Supporting arguments** – Death penalty supporters often view it as society's way of answering extreme acts of cruelty by satisfying our collective sense of justice and warning against recurrence.
- **The grounded reality** – But experience shows it does not clearly prevent violent crime, nor does it ensure justice.
- The risk of wrongful execution, the inability to rehabilitate, and the moral contradiction of taking life in the name of law continue to shadow its practice.

How many people are executed every year?

- **World data** – Amnesty International recorded 1,153 executions in 2023, an increase of 31% from the 883 known executions in 2022.
- It was the highest figure recorded by Amnesty International since the exceptionally high number of 1,634 in 2015.
- **Missing records** – The report noted that known totals did not include the thousands of people believed to have been executed in China, which remained the world's leading executioner in 2023.
- There was a 20% increase in the number of death sentences handed out globally in 2023, taking the total to 2,428.

Which countries still use the death penalty?

- **Major countries** – About 55 nations still retain and implement the death penalty.
- The United States, Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt.
- Additionally, capital punishment is also carried out in China, India, and most Islamic states.
- Amnesty International also noted that North Korea was "likely to be using the death penalty at a sustained rate," but could not independently verify the claim.
- **Countries abolished death penalties** – While over 70% of the world has abolished capital punishment in law or practice.
- Amnesty's data show the death penalty is not used at all in 112 countries.
 - The practice was fully abolished by four countries in 2024- Kazakhstan, Papua New Guinea, Sierra Leone and the Central African Republic.
 - Two other nations, Equatorial Guinea and Zambia, have said they would only be used for the most serious crimes.
 - In April 2023, the Malaysian parliament also voted to remove the mandatory death penalty for 11 serious crimes, including murder and terrorism.
 - In July 2023, Ghana's parliament voted to abolish the death penalty altogether.

How do countries carry out the death penalty?

- **Existing methods** – Hanging, shooting, electrocution, lethal injection and beheading remain the most common methods of execution.
- **The lethal injection** – It generally consists of three chemicals:
 - **Sodium pentotal** (an anaesthetic),
 - **Pancuronium bromide** (used to paralyse the prisoner) and
 - **Potassium chloride** (used to stop the heart) – and is widely used by countries including China, Vietnam and the US.
- **Electrocution** – The prisoner is blindfolded and a jolt of between 500 and 2000 volts, which lasts for about 30 seconds, is repeatedly administered until the prisoner is declared dead.

- The US also commonly uses electrocution to carry out death sentences
- **Nitrogen hypoxia** – Some US states also use nitrogen gas as a method of capital punishment.
- It induces death by nitrogen hypoxia, which works by depriving the body of oxygen when an inmate is forced to breathe only nitrogen.
- **Hanging** – Most Asian and African nations, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Botswana, India, Iran, Iraq, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Nigeria, Palestine authorities, South Sudan and Sudan, use hanging as a legal method of capital punishment.
- The 'long drop' is the most commonly used hanging method.
- Some countries, such as Iran, use cranes to publicly hang the culprits.
- **Shooting** – Countries including China, Indonesia, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Taiwan and Yemen use shooting squads to execute prisoners.
- **Beheading** – Beheadings are carried out in public using a sword, usually in a town square or close to a prison.
- The condemned, who is blindfolded, handcuffed and often given a sedative, typically wears white - as does the executioner.
- As of 2022, only Saudi Arabia is known to use beheading as a form of execution.

What lies ahead?

- The larger constitutional issue of ensuring fairness and consistency in awarding death sentences—is before a Constitution Bench in a pending suo motu case.
- The overdue outcome will bring long-needed clarity to a system often marked by arbitrariness and moral unease.
- As over 113 countries move towards abolition, India's continued reliance on capital punishment appears increasingly out of step with moral progress.
- To focus only on the mechanics of execution, rather than on whether the state should kill at all, is to lose sight of justice's higher purpose to balance accountability with humanity.

13.2 Supreme Court's Ruling on Narco Tests

Recently, The Supreme Court (SC) has held that any forced or involuntary narco test shall be unconstitutional and invalid.

What is the recent the legal intervention of SC?

- **Patna HC order** – The order that permitted narco test in *Amlesh Kumar v. State of Bihar* (2025).
- **Observation of SC** – The apex court is of the view that the Patna High Court's order was in contravention of the guidelines given in *Selvi v. State of Karnataka* (2010).

What is a narco test?

- **Definition** – A narco test is a process of investigation during which it is expected that the accused, undergoing such a test, would express the concealed facts.
- **Process** – He is sedated by administering a certain class of substances, such as barbiturates, for instance, Sodium Pentothal, to reduce a subject's inhibitions and reasoning ability.
- It is a non-violent method similar to those called polygraphs or brain mapping.

Why are these tests constitutionally problematic?

- **Article 20** – Clause (3) of Article 20 of the Constitution provides for the protection against self-incrimination, meaning that no person accused of any offence shall be compelled to be a witness against himself.
- **Intervention of Supreme Court** – The apex court, while referring to the Selvi guidelines, has held that without free consent, any such test would be unconstitutional and hence any information obtained therefore shall not be used as evidence.
- It is important to note that all three clauses of Article 20 form the constitutional foundation of India's criminal justice system.
 - **Clause (1)** – It deals with ex-post facto laws that declare an act as an offence which, when committed, was not an offence.

- **Clause (2)** – It states that no person shall be prosecuted and punished for the same offence more than once, that is, protection against double jeopardy.
- **Clause (3)** – It protects an accused from self-incrimination.
- One of the principles of a democratic criminal justice system is the need to balance the rights of the victim with those of the accused.
- Any violation of the right against self-incrimination would be a matter of serious concern in the context of democratic values and principles.
- **Article 21** – Similarly, personal liberty under Article 21 is of paramount importance because it incorporates the Right to Privacy.
- Any such test without the express consent of the person (accused) would violate one of the most basic human rights.
- Article 21, together with Articles 19 and 14, constitute the 'Golden Triangle' of the Constitution, as explained by the Supreme Court in *Maneka Gandhi v. Union of India* (1978).
- It means that violation of the Right to Privacy would thereby violate the Right to Life and Personal Liberty, and, finally, the Golden Triangle.

What have courts said about evidentiary value?

- **Observation of SC** – *Manoj Kumar Saini v. State of MP* (2023) and *Vinobhai v. State of Kerala* (2025), the courts held that the results of a narco test do not confirm guilt.
- Although information obtained from the test might contribute to the investigation, it must be corroborated with other evidence.
- **Consent** – The Supreme Court has held that consent must be informed, recorded before a magistrate, and undertaken with medical, legal, and procedural safeguards.
- Article 21, incorporates the phrase 'procedure established by law' which signifies that the procedure provided by law shall be fair.
- All procedural safeguards shall be taken care of before conducting any such non-invasive tests.
- The court has made it clear that a person may volunteer for a narco-analysis test at the stage of defence evidence under Section 253 of BNSS, however, there is no indefeasible right to such testing.

What lies ahead?

- The principle underlying informed consent is individual autonomy, which is associated with the concept of natural justice.
- Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant said that an act is ethical only when performed with consent.
- In this context, forced or involuntary testing violates ethical principles as well as core human and natural values.
