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7 PM COMPILATION

1st and 2nd Week Jan, 2025

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- ❖ Comprehensive coverage of a given current topic
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- ❖ Critical analysis, comparative analysis, legal/constitutional provisions, current issues and challenges and best practices around the world
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H-1B Visa Program- Explained Pointwise

The H-1B visa program has been a pivotal element of U.S. immigration policy. It enables skilled foreign workers to contribute to industries requiring specialized expertise. Recent comments by Elon Musk, describing the program as "broken" and in need of significant reform, emphasize its inherent complexities amid ongoing debates over its effectiveness and equity.

As political dynamics and policy shifts shape the conversation, the focus remains on striking a delicate balance between its economic advantages and the challenges it presents. This article explores the H-1B visa program, shedding light on its benefits and associated concerns.

Figure 1.Source- Business Standard

What is the H-1B Visa Program and its key features?

The H-1B visa is a non-immigrant visa issued by the United States, allowing U.S. companies to employ foreign professionals with specialized skills in fields requiring theoretical or technical expertise for a specified period. These fields include information technology, engineering, medicine, finance, and research.

According to the U.S. Department of Labour "The H-1B program applies to employers seeking to hire nonimmigrant aliens as workers in specialty occupations of distinguished merit and ability".

Key Features:

Duration	**a.** The H-1B visa is valid for up to six years (initially three years, with a three-year extension). **b.** After six years, the holder must leave the U.S. for at least 12 months before reapplying or obtain a Green Card for permanent residence.
Requirements	**a.** A bachelor's degree or its equivalent is required. **b.** The visa must be sponsored by a U.S. employer. **c.** A valid job offer for a position requiring specialized knowledge is necessary. **d.** The employer must demonstrate a shortage of qualified U.S. applicants for the role.
Annual Cap	**a.** An annual limit of 85,000 visas exists: 65,000 for regular applicants and 20,000 for those holding advanced degrees from U.S. institutions. **b.** Some exceptions to the H-1B visa cap include people entering the U.S. to work in higher education or affiliated research/non-profit

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	organizations.
	c. Applicants are selected for adjudication via lottery system.

Additional facts:
- Green cards limit applicants from any single country to a maximum of 7% of the total visas, but the H-1B visa has no such nationality-based restrictions.
- Despite the absence of a country cap, Indian workers dominate H-1B visa allocations, accounting for about 72% in 2023.

What are the benefits of the H-1B Visa Program?

1. Impact on the Indian Technology Sector:
a. IT Industry Growth: The program has shaped India's IT consulting and services sector, fostering innovative models like the Global Delivery Model.
b. Global Tech Leaders: Indian professionals, such as Sundar Pichai (Google) and Satya Nadella (Microsoft), have excelled in leadership roles globally.
c. Growth of Tech Hubs: Cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Pune have emerged as tech hubs due to this global exposure.

2. Economic Benefits:
a. Remittances: Indian H-1B workers contribute significantly to India's economy, with $111 billion received in remittances in 2022.
b. Support for IT Firms: Indian IT companies benefit from deploying employees to U.S. clients, with 70% of H-1B visas issued to Indian nationals.

3. Professional Development Benefits:
a. Advanced Technology Exposure: Professionals gain hands-on experience with cutting-edge tools, benefiting firms like HealthKart.
b. Global Business Practices: Exposure to practices like the five-day workweek enhances professionalism.
c. Professional Networks: Initiatives like IUSSTF build strong India-U.S. professional ties.

What are the concerns related to the H-1B Visa Program?

1. Skill Drain and Brain Drain:
a. The migration of highly skilled professionals to the U.S. leads to talent depletion in India, potentially creating an innovation gap.
b. Indian universities and technical institutes often emphasize STEM education tailored to H-1B requirements, leaving other disciplines marginalized.

2. Dependence on U.S. Policies- Changes in U.S. visa policies, such as those during the Trump administration, disrupt Indian IT firms and professionals. Over one million Indians are currently stuck in green card backlogs, leading to legal limbo and instability.

3. Exploitation and Wage Suppression:
a. Critics argue that H-1B workers are often paid less than their American counterparts, leading to concerns about wage stagnation and job displacement.
b. Allegations of misuse by outsourcing firms, which hire low-cost foreign workers instead of addressing genuine skill gaps, further tarnish the program's reputation.

U.S. Concerns Over H-1B Visas

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1. Job Displacement– Critics claim that the program displaces U.S. workers, especially in the tech sector, where foreign talent is often hired at lower wages.

2. National Security– The presence of foreign workers in sensitive sectors raises concerns about data security and technological vulnerabilities, especially in the context of global competition with countries like China.

What are the changes and threats to the H-1B Visa Policy under recent US Governments?

Trump Administration (2017-2021)	**a.** Introduced strict policies under the "Buy American, Hire American" initiative. **b.** Increased visa rejection rates by narrowing the definition of "specialty occupations." **c.** Suspended expedited processing and required higher wages for H-1B workers. **d.** Indian IT companies adapted by hiring more locally in the US, focusing on visa renewals, and shifting to hybrid work models. **e.** These changes raised costs and reduced profits for Indian IT firms.
Biden Administration (2021–Present)	**a**. Relaxed many Trump-era restrictions, restoring fairness to the H-1B process. **b.** Reinstated the random lottery system and reduced visa denial rates to 7% in 2021. **c.** Indian IT companies invested in automation, local hiring, and nearshore centers in Canada and Mexico. **d.** Experienced professionals with advanced skills benefited from the focus on higher salaries and specialized qualifications.
Potential Future Changes (Trump Returns)	**a.** Policies could become stricter, with wage-based selection replacing the lottery system. **b.** Harsher scrutiny, more documentation, and frequent site inspections may be introduced. **c.** Stricter rules for IT consulting firms and longer processing times could increase costs and delays. **d.** These changes would prioritize American workers and raise challenges for Indian IT companies and professionals.

Way Forward and Solutions

1. Policy Reforms:
a. Raising minimum salary thresholds to ensure fair compensation and reduce exploitation.
b. Implementing stricter compliance measures to prevent misuse while maintaining the program's core objective of addressing skill shortages.

2. Promoting Domestic Skill Development:- The U.S. should invest in domestic STEM education and training programs to reduce over-reliance on foreign talent.

3. Strengthening Bilateral Collaboration:- India and the U.S. should enhance cooperation in technology and skill development, ensuring mutual benefits from the H-1B program.

4. Encouraging Brain Circulation– Facilitating the return of skilled professionals to India can mitigate the adverse effects of brain drain while fostering domestic innovation.

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5. Expanding Opportunities– Diversifying visa programs to include sectors beyond technology and emphasizing merit-based selection systems can ensure equitable access for all nationalities.

Textile Sector in India- Explained Pointwise

The textile sector in India has long been a cornerstone of the nation's economic and cultural identity. This sector, with roots stretching back centuries, encompasses a wide array of production methods, from hand-woven traditions to state-of-the-art industrial manufacturing.

As of today, India's textile industry contributes significantly to the nation's GDP, industrial output, and employment generation. Despite recent challenges, the sector has ambitious goals, aiming for a $350 billion annual business and creating 3.5 crore jobs by 2030. This article examines the current status of the textile sector, its associated challenges, government initiatives to promote it, and the proposed future course of action.
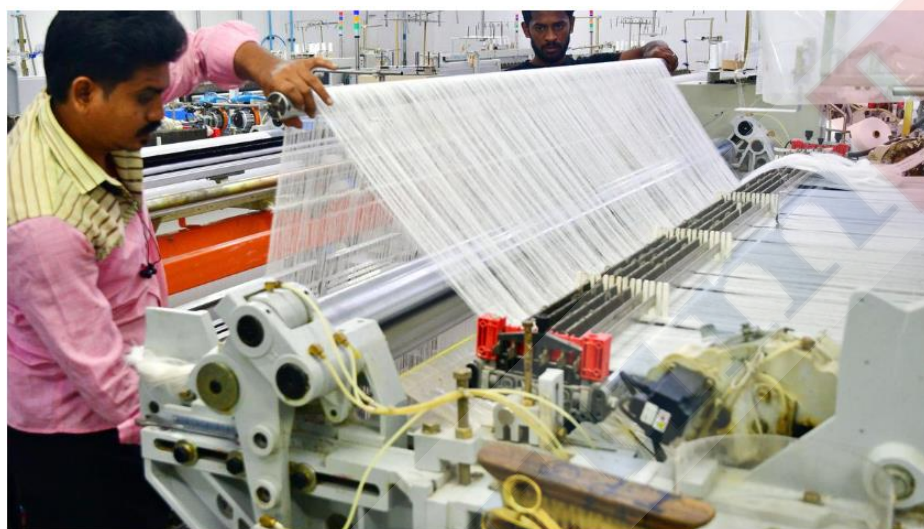
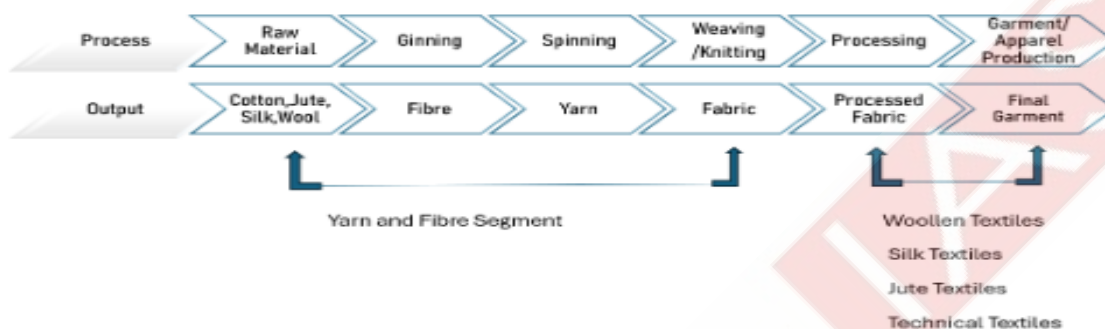**What is the present status of the Textile Sector in India?**

India's textile sector plays a pivotal role in the national economy:

Figure 2.Source- The Hindu

Economic Contribution	The sector contributes 2.3% to India's GDP, 13% to industrial production, and 12% to export earnings.
Employment	As one of the largest employers, it directly supports 45 million workers and indirectly provides livelihoods to around 100 million people.
Global Standing	India is the second-largest producer of textiles and garments globally, with a 4% share in the global textile trade. It is also the sixth-largest exporter of textiles and apparel.
Production and Export Targets	India aims to achieve $250 billion in textile production and $100 billion in exports by 2030.

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Regional Clusters	Key manufacturing hubs include Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, specializing in various segments like cotton textiles, silk, and handlooms.

What are the key Segments of the Textile Industry?

Source- No copyright infringement intended

Cotton	**a. Commercial Importance**: India is one of the largest cotton producer, growing all four species of cotton. (G. Arboreum & G. Herbaceum (Asian cotton), G. Barbadense (Egyptian cotton) and G. Hirsutum (American Upland cotton) **b. Economic Role**: Cotton sustains over 6 million farmers and supports 40-50 million people in allied industries. Known as "White Gold," it significantly contributes to foreign exchange earnings. **c. Production Status**: India leads in acreage and ranks second in production and consumption.
Technical Textiles	**a. Definition**: These textiles are designed for functional applications rather than aesthetics, finding uses in industries like healthcare, agriculture, and construction. **b. Materials**: Technical textile products are manufactured using natural as well as manmade fibres such as Nomex, Kevlar, Spandex, Twaron, etc. **c. Production Status**: India is the fifth-largest producer of technical textiles, with a market size of $22 billion. Exports grew to $2.85 billion in 2021-22.
Silk	**a. Production**: India is the second-largest silk producer and the largest exporter of handwoven silk fabrics. **b. Specialization**: It is the only country producing all four types of silk: Mulberry, Tussar, Muga, and Eri.
Jute	**a. Environmental Significance**: Known as the "golden fiber," jute is eco-friendly and renewable. **b. Production**: India accounts for 75% of global jute production, with West Bengal being a major hub.

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What are the Government Initiatives to boost the Textile Sector?

1. PM MITRA Parks Scheme– It aims to develop world-class textile infrastructure through Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) with the Budget allocation of ₹4445 crore for a period up to 2027-28.

2. Production Linked Incentive (PLI) Scheme– It focuses on boosting production of MMF (man-made fibers) and technical textiles. It offers financial incentives for meeting investment and turnover thresholds.

3. Amended Technology Upgradation Fund Scheme (ATUFS)– It Provides capital investment subsidies to modernize textile infrastructure.

4. National Technical Textile Mission (NTTM)– It Promotes research, market development, export promotion, and skill development in technical textiles.

5. Samarth (Scheme for Capacity Building in Textile Sector)– It aims to provide skill training aligned with industry needs.

6. Foreign Direct Investment (FDI): 100% FDI (automatic route) is allowed in textile and apparel sector in India.

7. Branding Initiatives– "Kasturi Cotton India" launched to promote premium Indian cotton globally.

What challenges is the Textile Sector facing?

1. Fragmented Value Chain– The sector is highly fragmented, dominated by MSMEs, leading to inefficiencies and lack of scale.

2. Raw Material Issues– Despite being the largest cotton producer, India faces challenges with contamination and low fiber quality.

3. Technological Gaps– Outdated technology in weaving and processing sectors leads to higher production costs.

4. Global Competition– Competitors like Bangladesh, Vietnam, and China have advantages in lower labor costs and better trade agreements.

5. Environmental Concerns– Textile production processes have significant ecological and social impacts, including water pollution and labor issues.

6. Regulatory Hurdles: Compliance with various regulatory norms and access to government schemes can be complex, often leading to delays and increased costs for textile manufacturers.

What are the recommendations to unlock the sector's Potential?

1. Technology Upgradation– Invest in R&D and adopt low-cost automation solutions to improve productivity.

2. Focus on Weaving and Processing– Provide higher capital subsidies under Amended Technology Upgradation Fund Scheme (ATUFS) to these segments.

3. Sustainability Practices– India should focus on revamping processes including circular designs, use of blended fibres, zero liquid discharge, chemical management, and revamping policies including safety at workplace.

4. Infrastructure Development– Develop plug-and-play industrial parks through state government support.

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5. Export Diversification– Expand the export basket and explore new markets such as Africa, Japan, and Australia.

6. Strengthen Technical Textiles– Build international collaborations for technology transfer and innovation.

Conclusion

The Indian textile sector holds immense potential to transform into a global leader, provided it overcomes its current challenges through strategic initiatives and innovative practices. By focusing on technological advancements, sustainability, and global competitiveness, India can not only achieve its ambitious targets but also create significant economic and social value. As the sector progresses towards modernization and globalization, it remains a vital pillar of India's growth story, echoing its rich heritage while shaping a promising future.

> Read more- ET
> UPSC Syllabus- GS 3- Indian Economy

Tsangpo Dam: Impact on India Explained Pointwise

On December 25, China approved the construction of the Tsangpo Dam, world's largest hydropower project on the Yarlung Tsangpo River (Brahmaputra) in Tibet. This ambitious 60,000 MW project will produce electricity three times the capacity of the world's current largest hydroelectric facility, the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River in central China.

While heralded as a clean energy initiative by Beijing, the Tsangpo Dam project has raised significant geopolitical, ecological, and socioeconomic concerns, particularly for downstream nations like India. The implications of such a large-scale infrastructure project highlight the challenges of water diplomacy and regional stability.

Source- The Indian Express

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Course of the River:
- The Yarlung Tsangpo originates in Tibet.
- It enters Arunachal Pradesh, where it is known as the Siang.
- Upon reaching Assam, it is joined by tributaries like the Dibang and Lohit, and is called the Brahmaputra.
- The river flows into Bangladesh and eventually makes its way to the Bay of Bengal.

Tributaries in India:
- **Major Left Bank Tributaries**: Burhi Dihing, Dhansari, Lohit, Dibang, Kopili
- **Major Right Bank Tributaries**: Subansiri, Kameng, Manas, Sankosh

What is the Yarlung Tsangpo project?

About	a. The Yarlung Tsangpo project involves the construction of a mega-dam in Medog County, Tibet Autonomous Region. b. The dam is strategically located at the "Great Bend," where the river takes a dramatic U-turn before entering India's Arunachal Pradesh. c. This location, mentioned in China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021-2025), is ideal for hydropower generation due to the river's steep descent of nearly 2,000 meters.
Significance of the Project	a. Once completed, it will generate approximately 300 billion kWh of electricity annually. b. It Fulfills critical part of China's renewable energy goals and supporting its carbon neutrality target by 2060.

Why does China want the Yarlung Tsangpo mega project?

1. Energy security and sustainability:
a. Leverages the steep gradient and high flow rate of the Yarlung Tsangpo for hydroelectric power generation.
b. Supports China's transition away from fossil fuels and aligns with China's goal of achieving net-zero emissions by 2060.

2. Water scarcity in northern China:
a. Northern China faces severe water scarcity due to overuse, industrialization, and climate change.
b. By controlling the Yarlung Tsangpo's flow, China could divert water northward under its ambitious South-North Water Diversion Project, alleviating water stress in arid regions like Beijing, Hebei, and Tianjin.

3. Strategic and geopolitical objectives:
a. China's infrastructure development on the Yarlung Tsangpo gives it leverage over downstream nations like India and Bangladesh, which depend on the Brahmaputra for agriculture, drinking water, and livelihoods.
b. The project could be used as a geopolitical tool in Sino-Indian relations, as any manipulation of the river's flow would have significant repercussions for India's Northeast.

4. Economic development in Tibet:
a. Aims to boost regional development in the Tibetan Autonomous Region.
b. Expected to generate 20 billion yuan ($3 billion) annually, creating economic opportunities in the underdeveloped area.

What are the concerns and implications of China's Tibet Dam Project on India?

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1. Agriculture– The Brahmaputra, or Yarlung Tsangpo in Tibet, is crucial for millions in India, enriching soil with silt in Arunachal Pradesh and Assam. A large dam could disrupt silt flow, reducing soil fertility and harming agricultural productivity downstream.

2. Water resources– China says the project is a run-of-the-river scheme, but experts warn it could disrupt water flow. It leads to water shortages in dry seasons and floods in monsoons, putting lives and livelihoods in Assam and nearby areas at risk.

3. Potential weaponization of water– China's upstream position on the Brahmaputra gives it control over the river, and past actions, like withholding hydrological data during the 2017 Doklam standoff, show its willingness to use water as a geopolitical tool.

4. Seismological threats– The Himalayan region is among the most seismically active in the world. Building a mega-dam in this earthquake-prone area amplifies the risks of infrastructure failure, potentially leading to catastrophic flooding downstream.

5. Ecological Impact– The construction and operation of the dam threaten the fragile Himalayan ecosystem, home to several critically endangered species. Combined with ongoing challenges like deforestation, climate change, and soil erosion, the project could irreversibly alter the region's biodiversity.

What coordination mechanism do India and China have on transboundary rivers?

1. An umbrella Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation for transboundary rivers, signed in 2013, remains in place but lacks substantive engagement. Separate MoUs exist for the Brahmaputra and Sutlej rivers, but their effectiveness has been inconsistent.

2. Brahmaputra MoU: This agreement, renewable every five years, focuses on hydrological data sharing during monsoons. The last renewal lapsed in 2023, and discussions are ongoing.

3. Sutlej MoU: Prompted by the Parechu Lake incident in 2004, this MoU facilitates data sharing to monitor glacial lake outbursts. However, it does not provide for year-round data sharing.

Expert-Level Mechanism– During the Chinese President's visit to India (November 20–23, 2006), both nations agreed to establish an Expert-Level Mechanism for cooperation on flood-season hydrological data, emergency management, and trans-border river issues. The ELM meetings are held alternately in India and China every year.

Note– India and China are not signatories to the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-Navigational Uses of International Watercourses. However, both countries abide by its key features, including the equitable and reasonable utilisation of waters.

What are India's options?

1. Strengthening diplomatic engagement: India should use bilateral channels to promote transparency and cooperation. Publicly questioning China's claims that the project won't harm downstream countries can help avoid a situation where the decision is already final and unchangeable.

2. Domestic countermeasures: India is planning its own 10 GW hydropower project in the Dibang Valley of Arunachal Pradesh. Accelerating such projects can mitigate the strategic disadvantage posed by China's dam.

3. International advocacy: India can advocate for stronger global norms on transboundary water governance. Engaging with regional bodies and international forums can put pressure on China to act responsibly.

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4. Strengthening data sharing mechanisms: Enhancing the scope and duration of hydrological data sharing agreements with China is critical for flood forecasting and disaster management.

5. Building regional alliances: India can collaborate with other lower riparian states, such as Bangladesh, to present a unified front against unilateral upstream actions by China.

6. Investing in resilience: Building resilient infrastructure and improving early warning systems can help mitigate the risks posed by upstream activities.

Conclusion

The construction of the Yarlung Tsangpo Dam presents both challenges and opportunities. While it highlights the urgency of addressing transboundary water issues, it also provides India with a chance to strengthen its strategic and diplomatic efforts. A balanced approach that prioritizes both ecological sustainability and national security will be essential in navigating the complexities of this issue.

Read more- The Indian Express
UPSC Syllabus- GS 2- Effect of policies of developed and developing countries on India's interests

Great Nicobar Island Project- Explained Pointwise

The Union Shipping Ministry has proposed new additions to the ₹72,000-crore mega-infrastructure project in Great Nicobar Island over the past eight months. These include an international cruise terminal, high-end tourism facilities, and a shipbreaking yard, as revealed in official documents. The Ministry has also sought 100 acres of land with a seafront for its proposals.

The project is of critical importance for defence, logistics, commerce and industries, and eco-tourism. Hence, these benefits and the risks associated with the project needs to be comprehensively evaluated. **Great Nicobar Island Project**

What is the Great Nicobar Island Development Project?

The Great Nicobar Project- The project involves a comprehensive Rs 72,000-crore infrastructure upgrade on Great Nicobar Island. It is being implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO).

Figure 3.Source- The Hindu

The project covers 16,610 hectares and aims to leverage the island's strategic location near the Malacca Strait. The Great Nicobar Island Development project includes developing an

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1. An International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT)
2. A greenfield international airport
3. Two greenfield cities
4. A coastal mass rapid transport system
5. A free trade zone
6. International cruise terminal (New addition)
7. A ship breaking yard (New addition)

Geography of the Great Nicobar Island

The island of Great Nicobar is the southernmost tip of India and a part of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago that comprises 600-odd islands. It is hilly and covered with lush rainforests. It receives around 3,500 mm of annual rainfall.

The rainforests and beaches host numerous endangered and endemic species including the giant leatherback turtle, the Nicobar megapode, the Great Nicobar crake, the Nicobar crab-eating macaque, and the Nicobar tree shrew. It has an area of 910 sq km with mangroves and Pandan forests along its coast.
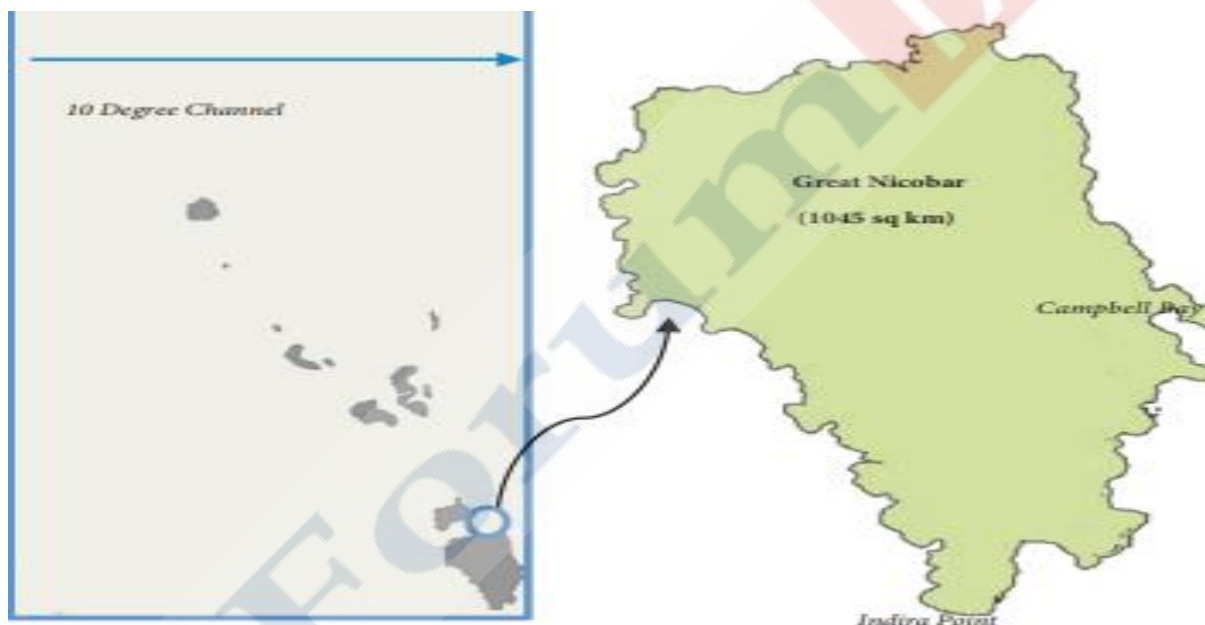
Source- Copyright infringement not intended

Read More- Importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands- Explained Pointwise

What is the significance of Great Nicobar Island Development Project?

1. Geo-strategic benefit- Great Nicobar Island is located close to the Malacca Strait, which is the main waterway connecting the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. The Great Nicobar Island Project aims to take advantage of this strategic position to enhance India's role in the regional and global maritime economy.

2. Geo-Security Concerns- The Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean region are vital for India's strategic and security interests, especially with the Chinese naval expansion. The project will strengthen India's maritime security and deterrence capabilities.

3. Upgradation of military infrastructure- The Great Nicobar project also helps in the upgradation of military infrastructure by the establishment of airfields, jetties, and surveillance facilities.

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4. Economic Boost- The project includes an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), which can make Great Nicobar a significant player in cargo trans shipment. The ICTT is expected to boost economic activities in the region.

5. Creation of Job opportunities for locals- The Nicobar plan involves the creation of infrastructure (ports, airports etc.). This will help in creation of job opportunities for the locals.

6. Tourism Development- It helps in creation of tourism prospects in the region. This will aid the income generation in the region. The per capita income in Andaman & Nicobar Islands for the year 2015-16 was Rs. 1,24,361. This was much lower than the per-capita income of other Union Territories (Chandigarh, Delhi, and Puducherry.)

7. Social Benefits- The Project would help in the creation of affordable state-of-the-art facilities for healthcare, quality education, and adequate air, sea and web infrastructure. It will also facilitate the delivery of e-governance services such as telemedicine and tele-education, as a part of the Digital India initiative.

What are the associated concerns with the project?

1. Threat to biodiversity- Nearly a million trees could be felled as part of the project. This could potentially devastate the island's ecosystem, including coral reefs, the Nicobar Megapode bird, and leatherback turtles. The compensatory afforestation is being planned in Haryana.

2. Threat to rights of Indigenous Tribes- The proposed Nicobar project endangers the rights of the Shompen and Nicobarese tribes, living on the island. It also violates the letter and spirit of the Forest Rights Act (2006), which holds the Shompen as the sole legally empowered authority to protect, preserve, regulate and manage the tribal reserve.

3. Seismic Vulnerability- The proposed port which is an integral part of this project, is located in a seismically volatile zone, which experienced permanent subsidence of around 15 feet during the 2004 tsunami. This raises concerns about the safety and viability of constructing such a large-scale infrastructure project in a high-risk, disaster-prone area.

4. Lack of Adequate Consultation- The project has been pushed through without adequate deliberations of all the stakeholders like the The Tribal Council. The National Green Tribunal's high-powered committee's report reviewing the environmental clearances has also not been made public.

5. Undermining international obligations- The Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary located in the Great Nicobar Island forms part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Hence the preservation of this pristine biodiversity is an International Obligation of India.

6. Lack of adequate Social Impact Assessment- The Campbell Bay panchayat has raised concerns regarding the lack of adequate social impact assessment before land acquisition. **For ex-** Increased contact with outsiders, will increase the risks of Shompen tribe to diseases for which their immunity is not developed.

7. Economic unviability- The aspiration to replicate Singapore/Hong Kong duty-free ports/free trade zones on remote Great Nicobar Island (2,000 km from Chennai and Kolkata) without a hinterland, resources or industrial backup makes it economically unviable and unrealistic.

What Should be the Way Forward?

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We must aim to address the trilemma of infrastructure development, preserving pristine biodiversity respect and being sensitive to the rights of the indigenous inhabitants, and tribals. Following measures should be adopted to address the trilemma-

1. Due regards to tribal rights- The development work must be carried out with due regard to tribal rights. This should involve proper adherence to policies like the Shompen Policy of 2015. The Shompen Policy of 2015 calls for giving priority to tribal rights over large scale development proposals.

2. Separation of security and development capabilties- The security capabilities of Andaman and Nicobar Island need to be addressed separately. This must have no linkage with the developments contemplated for Great Nicobar Island.

3. Reassesment of economic feasibility of the project- The project lies equidistant (1,300 km) from established transhipment hubs and bunkering ports of Singapore, Port Klang (Malaysia) and Hambantota (Sri Lanka). Hence the economic viability of yet another transhipment terminal in Great Nicobar Island needs to be reassessed, especially since India inaugurated its own transhipment terminal in Vizhinjam in Kerala.

4. Proper Social and Environmental Impact Assessment- Any construction under the Great Nicobar Development plan should involve a proper and detailed Environment impact assessment (as mandated by the Environment Protection Act 1986). This will make development more socially and environmentally feasible.

5. Eco-friendly Construction- The construction of infrastructure should be done using eco-friendly practices like strict adherence to GRIHA code for building construction.

6. Transparency in Data and Report- NITI Aayog and the agencies participating in planning should maintain transparency in data. The government should release the data on the rationale, the process of creation, consulted groups etc. in public domain. This will give a holistic view to critics and supporters.

7. Enhanced International Cooperation- India should enhance Cooperation with countries like Japan, South Korea etc. This will help in developing successful island development models.

8. Exploration of other Islands- Other islands in the the Nicobar group, apart from GNI, like Little Nicobar, Nancowry, Kamorta and Katchall can be explored. These could accommodate most components of such a project, without risking environmental, ecological and anthropological damage on large scale.

Conclusion

India needs to achieve the Vision of "Happy and Prosperous Islanders on ecologically-protected Islands". To achieve that, India needs to adopt development plans that are technically feasible, economically profitable and socially acceptable.

Read More- The Hindu
UPSC Syllabus- GS 3 – Infrastructure

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Judicial Appointments in India- Current Procedure, Concerns and Way Forward- Explained Pointwise

Judicial appointments in India has always been a contentious issue in India. Recently, two significant developments regarding the Supreme Court of India's Collegium have emerged – firstly, the interviews for Judicial Candidates and secondly the exclusion of Relatives in Judiciary. There has been a long drawn confrontational battle between the Government and the Judiciary over the procedural powers of appointment of Judges in India.

In this article we will look at the historical battle between Judiciary and Executive regarding Judicial appointments, the current system of Judicial appointment, the concerns around it. We will also focus on the proposed National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) which sought to replace the collegium system and the methods of judicial appointments in other countries.

What are the recent developments regarding the Supreme Court's Collegium?

1. Candidate Interviews: The Collegium will now conduct interviews for candidates recommended for promotion to High Courts. This is to improve the selection process by allowing decision-makers to directly assess the nominees.

2. Exclusion of Relatives: The Collegium plans to exclude candidates whose close family members have been or are currently judges in the High Courts or Supreme Court. This aims to promote diversity and reduce concerns about nepotism, though some qualified candidates may be excluded.

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Significance of the decision: These decisions are significant as they address long-standing issues of transparency, accountability, and diversity in the judiciary. The reforms aim to strengthen public trust in the Collegium system, ensuring a more open and fair process for selecting judges

What are the constitutional provisions regarding Judicial appointments in India? What has been the history of evolution of the present system of appointment in India?

Constitutional Provisions of Judicial Appointment	
Article 124 (2)	Every Judge of the Supreme Court shall be appointed by the President by warrant under his hand and seal after consultation with such of the Judges of the Supreme Court and of the High Courts in the States as the President may deem necessary for that purpose. In the case of appointment of a Judge other than the Chief Justice, the Chief Justice of India shall always be consulted.
Article 217	Every Judge of a High Court shall be appointed by the President by a warrant under his hand and seal after consultation with the Chief Justice of India, the Governor of the State, and, the Chief Justice of the High Court except in case of his/her own appointment.

Historical Battle between Executive and Judiciary over appointments

Colonial Rule	During the Colonial rule, the Judicial appointments were dominated by the executive branch.
Consitutional Debates	The framers of the Indian Constitution, were concerned about the potential for executive overreach in the appointments. They sought to create a balanced system of Judicial appointment to ensure judicial independence. Art 124(2) and Art 217 were aimed at balancing the powers of executive and judiciary in safeguarding judicial appointments.
Judicial Interventions	A series of rulings by the Supreme Court of India in the First, Second, and Third Judges case, led to the establishment of collegium system in India. The Judiciary gained a significant role in appointing judges, thereby reducing the executive's influence.

First, Second and Third Judges Case

First Judges Case (1981)	SC in the First Judges case ruled that consultation under Art 124 does not mean concurrence. The president in not bound by the CJI's advice.
Second Judges Case (1993)	SC overruled its previous decision in the First Judges case and asserted that 'consultation' meant 'concurrence'. The CJI is required to formulate its advice based on a collegium of judges consisting of CJI and two senior most SC-judges.
Third Judges Case (1998)	SC expanded the collegium to a five member body to include the CJI and the four senior most judges of the court after the CJI. This further entrenched judicial control over appointments.

NJAC Act and the Judicial Respose

| 99th Constitutional Amendment Act 2014 and the National Judicial Appointments | The NJAC was proposed to be an independent Commission to replace the Collegium System to appoint Judges to the higher Judiciary. **Membersip-** It was to be a six member body consisting of (a) The Chief Justice of India as the ex-officio Chairperson |

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Commission (NJAC) Act, 2014	(b) Two senior-most Supreme Court Judges as ex-officio members (c) The Union Minister of Law and Justice as ex-officio member (d) Two eminent persons from civil society. (The eminent persons were to be nominated by a committee consisting of the Chief Justice of India, Prime Minister of India and the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha. One of the eminent persons was to be nominated from SC/ST/OBC/minorities or women) **Veto Power-** The Act empowered any 2 members of the NJAC to veto a recommendation if they did not agree with it.
Fourth Judges Case (2015)	The Supreme Court declared the 99th Amendment Act and the NJAC Act as unconstitutional. Supreme Court struck down the National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC) and reaffirmed the collegium system. SC held that NJAC impinged on the independence of the Judiciary and undermined the basic structure of the Constitution.

Issues with NJAC

1. Membership Issue- The two eminent persons to be part of the NJAC need not have any expertise in Law or related to the functioning of the Courts. This would have created an avenue for the Government to appoint any person to the Commission.

2. Ambuiguity in Definitions- Certain terms were left unexplained and ambiguous in the Acts. **For ex-** Section 5(1) of the NJAC Act required the NJAC to recommend the senior-most Judge of the Supreme Court as the Chief Justice of India "if he is considered fit to hold the Office". However the criteria for fitness has not been defined.

3. Veto Power- The use of veto power by any two members could have resulted in overriding of the Judicial opinion.

4. Absence of provision of Casting Vote- The CJI had no Casting Vote. The NJAC had an even number of 6 members but the Chairperson, the Chief Justice of India, had no casting vote. A casting vote could have been useful in avoiding a deadlock (due to split in the even number of votes).

5. Possibility of executive Over reach- The NJAC had the power to frame regulations laying down the criteria of suitability, and the procedure of appointing judges of the SC and the HCs. The Parliament had the power to nullify these regulations, thus giving over-riding powers to the Legislature over Judiciary.

What is the present System of Judicial Appointment in India?

Through the judgments in the four judges case, the SC has firm control over the Judicial appointments in India.

Collegium-led Appointment- The Judicial Appointments and transfers (Higher Judiciary, Supreme Court and the High Courts) are undertaken through the 'Collegium System'.

> The Collegium of the Supreme Court is a 5-Judge body, headed by the Chief Justice of India. It includes 4 senior-most Judges of the Supreme Court. The Collegium recommends the name of Judges to be appointed to the Court.

Executive Background Checks- The Government also undertakes background checks of the candidates through its agencies like Intelligence Bureau (IB). The Government may raise objections to the choice and ask for clarification. The Government can return the recommendations of the Collegium for reconsideration. However, if the recommendations are reiterated, the Government must accept them (SC Judgment).

What are the benefits of the Collegium System?

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1. Checks Interference of the Executive- The collegium system isolates Judiciary from the influence of Executive and Legislature. It ensures independence of the Judiciary. **For ex-** The interference of the Executive in Judicial appointments during Emergency when several settled conventions were disrupted like appointment of senior-most Judge as the Chief Justice.

2. Executive as Main Litigant- The Government is the main litigant in Courts accounting for ~50% of the cases. Prominence to the Executive in appointments may impact impartiality of the Judiciary in adjudication.

3. Lack of Expertise- Executive may lack the expertise regarding requirements of a Judge. The Judiciary may be the best 'judge' in this regard.

4. Safeguarding the Constitution- Excessive Government control over Judiciary can make the Judges vulnerable to external influence. Judicial Independence is absolutely essential to safeguard the Constitution and underlying principles like Right to Life, Right to Privacy etc.

What are the concerns associated with the Collegium System?

1. Lack of constitutional Status- The Collegium is not prescribed in the Constitution. Article 124 mentions consultation, which the SC interpreted as 'concurrence' in Second Judges Case (1993). **For Instance-** During the hearing against the NJAC, the then SC Bar President had argued that the Constituent Assembly had considered a proposal for making Judges' appointment 'in concurrence' with the CJI but had eventually rejected it.

2. Transparency issues- There is no official procedure for selection or any written manual for functioning of the Collegium. The parameters considered for selection (or rejection) are not available in the public domain.

3. Accountability issues- The selections of Judges by the Judges is considered undemocratic. Judges are not accountable to the people or any other organ of the State (Legislature or Executive). It can add an element of arbitrariness in functioning.

4. Allegations of Nepotism- Critics of the system argue that collegium system has led to 'Uncle Judges' wherein near relatives, kith and kin of sitting Judges are appointed to the higher judiciary leading to nepotism.

5. Subjectivity and bias in appointments- The absence of transparency, accountability and external checks creates space for subjectivity and individual bias in appointments. **For ex-** Ignoring the principle of seniority in some cases.

6. Lack of Global Equivalent- India is perhaps the only country where Judges appoint other Judges without involvement of any other organ of the State.

What are the Global best practices of appointment of Judges?

In most of the countries, the judicial appointments are made by a committee established by the administrative and legislative branches of government.

UK	Constitutional Reform Act, 2005, introduced by the U.K., established two Commissions for the purpose of choosing judicial service candidates. These commissions have representation both from the judiciary as well as the executive.
South Africa	South Africa has a Judicial Service Commission (JSC) that advises the President to appoint judges. This service commission has representation from diverse branches of the government.

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France	Judges are chosen through a process involving the High Council of the Judiciary (Conseil Supérieur de la Magistrature) or, in the case of lower courts, by the Minister of Justice who may consult or receive advice from the High Council.

What should be the Way Forward?

1. Revival of NJAC by getting rid of its criticism- The NJAC can be reworked by taking into account the views of the judiciary, the executive, and civil society, as in case with other countries. However, the infirmities in the act like Veto power, lack of decisive vote with the CJI and lack of defined membership criteria must be removed.

2. Finalization MoP- The Government and Judiciary should cooperate to finalize the Memorandum of Procedure (MoP) regarding judicial appointments. The MoP should have clear guidelines like transparency, eligibility criteria, mechanism for complaints against candidates etc.

3. Bring Transparency- The Judiciary should bring more transparency in the process of appointments. Collegium must disclose the reasons for selection and rejection of a candidate. The law commission's 230th Report (2012) recommendation– that that the Judges, whose kith and kin are practicing in a High Court, should not be appointed in the same High Court, must be implemented.

4. All India Judicial Services (AIJS)– Several experts have argued for establishment of All India Judicial Services (AIJS) to improve the quality of judges in the lower Judiciary. This should be consulted and implemented post consensus among all stakeholders.

5. Secretariat- Experts recommend that a well-resourced independent secretariat for judicial appointments should be established. There should be a comprehensive candidate database as well. It is necessary to be aware of vacancies in advance in order to facilitate quick judicial appointments.

Conclusion

In this context, the Government and the Judiciary must resolve the differences amicably and arrive at a system that is a best fit between the two: NJAC and the Collegium System.

The system of Judicial Appointments should be improved expeditiously. Judicial vacancy is one of the major reason for judicial pendency. All organs of the State should cooperate with each other with right citizen-centric spirit to ensure smooth functioning.

Till a new system is established, the Government should adhere to the recommendations of the Collegium and make the appointments in a prompt manner. Delay in appointments and needless friction should be avoided.

> **Read More-** The Hindu
> **UPSC Syllabus- GS 2-** Issues Related to Judiciary

MSP Guarantee Law- Pros and Cons- Explained Pointwise

As Sanmyukta Kisan Morcha (non-political) leader Jagjit Singh Dallewal's hunger strike enters its 43rd day, farmers have declared a nationwide tractor march on January 26 to protest against the Central government. Besides the MSP guarantee, farmers are demanding a debt waiver, pension, no hike in electricity tariffs, withdrawal of police cases, and justice for the victims of the 2021 Lakhimpur Kheri violence.

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Source- India Today

What is MSP? What are the Different Methods of Calculation?

MSP- The Minimum Support Price (MSP) for a commodity refers to the price at which the government is obligated to purchase the produce from farmers in the event that the market price falls below this threshold.

Process of awarding MSP-
a. MSP is based on the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP). The CACP submits its recommendations to the government in the form of Price Policy Reports every year. It considers various factors such as cost of production, demand and supply, market price trends, inter-crop price parity.
b. The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) chaired by the Prime Minister of India takes the final decision (approve) on the level of MSPs, after considering the Price Policy Report, views of the state governments and overall demand-supply situation in the country.
c. Food Corporation of India (FCI) is the nodal agency for procurement, along with State agencies, at the beginning of the sowing season.

MSP for Different Crops- Government fixes MSP for 22 mandated agricultural crops and Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) for sugarcane.

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CROPS COVERED UNDER MSP

KHARIF CROPS (14)

1. Paddy
2. Jawar
3. Bajara
4. Ragi
5. Maize
6. Arhar
7. Moong
8. Urad
9. Cotton
10. Ground Nuts
11. Sunflower
12. Soyabean
13. Sesamum
14. Nigerseed

RABI CROPS (7)

1. Wheat
2. Barley
3. Gram
4. Masur
5. Rapeseed& Mustard
6. Safflower
7. Torai

CALENDAR YEAR CROPS (4)

1. Copra
2. De-husked Coconut
3. Jute
4. Sugar Cane (FRP)

- CACP recommends MSP for **22** crops before the sowing period each year
- MSP derived for Toria based on MSP for Rapeseeds and Mustard and for De-husked Coconut on the Basis of MSP of Copra.
- Fair and Remunerative prices for Sugar is also declared

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Different Production Costs Considered While Fixing MSP Regime

A2	All paid-out costs directly incurred by the farmer, either in cash and kind, on seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, hired labour, leased-in land, fuel, irrigation.
A2+FL	Imputed value of unpaid family labour is added to the A2 cost to derive A2+FL.
C2	Estimated land rent and the cost of interest on the money taken for farming is added to A2+FL to get the C2 production cost. It is a more comprehensive production cost.

CACP reckons only to A2+FL cost for return. Currently, the MSP is fixed at 50% over the A2+FL cost.

NOTE-

1. C2 costs are used by CACP primarily as benchmark reference costs (opportunity costs) to see if the MSPs recommended by them at least cover these costs in some of the major producing States.

Read More- Minimum Support Price (MSP)

What is the argument in favour of MSP Guarantee Law?

1. Financial security- Legally guaranteed MSP would ensure farmers fixed remunerations to the farmers by financially securing them against the vagaries of price instability in the market.

2. Risk Cover- Legal guarantee to MSP would provide security to farmers from the risk of crop failure due to climate change, pests attacks and crop diseases.

3. Promotion of crop diversification- MSP law would promote crop diversification as farmers would be incentivised to grow less water-intensive crops like pulses and millets rather than water guzzling crops like rice, wheat and sugarcane.

4. Baseline or benchmark price- MSP sends a price-signal to the market that if merchants don't offer higher than MSP prices, the farmer may not sell them his produce. Thus, it ensures that the market prices will not be drastically lower than MSP.

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5. Solution to rural economic Distress- Minimum Support Price (MSP) can help in injecting financial resources into the rural sector. This will help in solving the problem of rural economic distress, which has been exacerbated due to demonetisation and COVID-19. **For ex-** Increase in MSP would increase the disposable income of farmers and agricultural labourers which in turn would boost the economy.

6. Right to Farmers- According to Shanta Kumar Report, only 6% of the farm households are able to sell wheat and rice to the government at the MSP rates. MSP Law would give legal rights to farmers to sell their produce to Govt agencies like FCI at MSP, in case they fail to get commensurate prices from the market.

What are the arguments MSP Guarantee Law?

1. Huge Fiscal burden on Govt exchequer- Legal guarantee to MSP would put huge fiscal burden on the Govt exchequer. This would increase the fiscal deficit of the Government and will have deleterious effects on the economy. **For ex-** According to an estimate, Rs. 5 trillion would be required for implementation of MSP Law.

2. Risk of undervaluation of crops with low yields- It would change the production pattern of crops in the country as farmers would try to grow crops with higher yields even if they are not suitable to their region. **For ex-** Farmers growing Cotton (Kharif crop) instead of millets in the drought prone region of Marathawada.

3. Increase in Food Inflation- Higher procurement cost due to MSP will result in increased prices of foodgrains, which would eventually affect the lower middle class and the poor.

4. Market Distortionary and economically unsustainable practice- Legal guarantee to MSP will push away private traders whenever production is more than demand. This, in turn, will lead to government becoming the de-facto primary buyer of most MSP- farm produce, which will be economically unsustainable. **For ex-** Withdrawal of the Maharashtra government 2018 order, which made it illegal for a private trader to purchase any agricultural produce below the government-fixed MSP.

5. Adverse Impact on India's farm exports- If the MSP is higher than the prevailing rates in the international market, it will adversely affect India's farm exports, which has seen remarkable growth in recent years.

6. Violation of WTO subsidies principle- MSP law would lead to violation of the WTO subsidies principles and India would face opposition in the WTO dispute settlement bodies by the developed nations. **For ex-** US win against China at WTO in 2019 in case related to China's MSP support to its agricultural sector.

7. Induce MSP demands from other agri-allied sectors- Farmers engaged in agri-allied sectors like dairy, horticulture, pisciculture will start demanding MSP, if the Centre makes a law to guarantee 100% MSP procurement for the crops.

8. Storage and disposal Problems- MSP guarantee will create storage and disposal problems for crops such as Niger seed, Sesamum or safflower which will have few takers through PDS system.

What has been the government of India's approach to ensure support to farmers?

The government has taken the 'income support' approach (like Centre's PM-Kisan Samman Nidhi or the Telangana government's Rythu Bandhu) approach instead of the 'price support' approach (in the form of legal guarantee to MSP).

Government has also been providing support to farmers through other schemes which are not violative of the WTO principles.
a. Supplementary income transfers under PM-KISAN
b. Crop insurance under Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojna (PMFBY)
c. Better access to irrigation under Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana (PMKSY)

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d. Creation of agriculture infrastructure through Agri Infrastructure Fund (AIF) with a size of Rs. 100,000 crore

e. Production loan to dairy & fishery farmers besides agricultural crops through Kisan Credit Cards (KCC).

What should be the way forward?

1. Price Deficiency Payment Schemes- Both NITI Aayog and Economic Survey have recommended Price Deficiency Payment schemes, in which the government pays the farmers the difference between modal rate (the average prices in major mandis) and the MSPs. For ex- Price deficiency payment schemes of Madhya Pradesh (Bhavantar Bhugtan Yojana), Haryana (Bhavantar Bharapai Yojana) can be launched as Central Sector Scheme.

2. Market Intervention Scheme- Market Intervention Schemes can be launched, under which the state government procures perishable commodities like vegetable items to ensure minimum assured price to the farmers.

3. Creation of Agriculture infrastructure- Instead of bypassing the market by using MSPs, the government should make efforts to enable farmer participation in the market by creating modern world-class agriculture infrastructure like Cold Storage facilities.

4. Support to the Farmer's Producers Organisations (FPOs)- Adequate financial support to FPOs, would result in better price realisation for farmers. **For ex-** Aim to replicating the success of AMUL in agriculture through FPOs.

5. Gradual expansion of crops under MSP- The government can gradually expand the list of crops eligible for MSP support, to encourage crop diversification and reduce the dominance of rice and wheat. This will provide farmers with more choices and promote the cultivation of crops in line with market demand.

> **Read More-** The Print
> **UPSC Syllabus- GS-3** Issues related to MSP

India-Afghanistan Relations- Explained Pointwise

Recently, India's foreign secretary meets the Taliban minister for the first time in Dubai January 2025. India-Afghanistan relations have been shaped by geography, history, and strategic interests. Afghanistan has historically served as a bridge between South Asia and Central Asia, fostering trade, cultural exchanges, and political alliances. However, its geopolitical significance has also made it a hotspot for great power rivalries.

In recent years, India has emerged as a key partner in Afghanistan's development and stabilization efforts. The return of the Taliban in 2021 marked a significant turning point, prompting India to recalibrate its policy to safeguard its strategic interests and historical ties.

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Source- Hindustan Times

What is the historical background of Indo-Afghan Relations?

Ancient Links and Cultural Exchange

1. **Indus Valley Civilization**: Indo-Afghan relations trace back to the Indus Valley Civilization, with trade and cultural exchanges flourishing between the two regions.
2. **Silk Road Connection**: Afghanistan's position on the Silk Road facilitated trade and cultural exchanges between India and Central Asia.
3. **Shared Heritage**: The Gandhara civilization, based in modern-day Afghanistan, influenced Indian art and culture, notably in Buddhist sculptures like the Bamiyan Buddhas.
4. **Religious and Epic References**: Ancient Indian texts like the Mahabharata and Rigveda mention Afghanistan, underscoring longstanding ties. Emperor Ashoka's efforts to spread Buddhism to Afghanistan further highlight historical connections.

Medieval Period and Islamic Empires

1. **Durrani Empire**: Under Ahmad Shah Durrani in the mid-18th century, Afghanistan became a regional power influencing Indo-Afghan ties.
2. **Mughal Empire**: Afghan rulers like Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire, shaped Indian history, bringing Indo-Persian art, architecture, and literature into India.

British Period (19th-20th Century)

1. **Anglo-Afghan Wars**: British India's attempts to control Afghanistan as a buffer state against Russia strained regional dynamics.
2. **Partition of India**: Post-1947, Afghanistan refused to recognize Pakistan's creation, supporting Pashtun autonomy and influencing Indo-Afghan relations.

Post-Independence and Cold War Period

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1. **1947-1979**: India maintained friendly ties with Afghanistan, formalized by the Indo-Afghan Friendship Treaty (1950).
2. **Soviet Invasion (1979-1989)**: India supported Soviet-backed Afghan governments, while Pakistan and the U.S. aided Mujahideen forces.
3. **Kandahar Hijacking Incident (1999)**: The hijacking of Indian Airlines Flight 814 highlighted security concerns with the Taliban regime.

Post-Taliban Era (2001-Present)

1. **Strategic Partnership**: India invested heavily in Afghanistan's reconstruction, funding infrastructure projects like the Zaranj-Delaram Highway and Afghan Parliament Building.
2. **Challenges Post-2021**: The Taliban's return has strained relations, forcing India to evacuate its embassy and recalibrate its approach.

What is the importance of Afghanistan to India?

Afghanistan holds significant political, strategic, and economic importance for India:

Geostrategic Significance

1. **Gateway to Central Asia**: Afghanistan serves as a vital link for India's access to energy-rich Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan.
2. **Countering Pakistan's Influence**: A stable Afghanistan reduces Pakistan's strategic depth, supporting India's geopolitical interests.
3. **Chabahar Port Connectivity**: India's investment in Iran's Chabahar Port facilitates trade with Afghanistan, circumventing Pakistan.

Regional Security

1. **Terrorism Concerns**: Afghanistan's stability directly impacts India's security, especially concerning cross-border terrorism and groups like the Haqqani network.
2. **Taliban-Pakistan Nexus**: A Taliban-dominated Afghanistan raises fears of increased Pakistani influence and destabilization in Kashmir.

Economic Significance

1. **Trade and Transit**: India-Afghanistan air freight corridors and the Chabahar Port boost bilateral trade.
2. **Natural Resources**: Afghanistan's rich reserves of minerals like lithium, copper, and rare earths present opportunities for India.

What are the areas of engagement between India- Afghanistan?

Developmental Assistance

1. **Infrastructure Projects**:
   a. **Zaranj-Delaram Highway**: Connects Afghanistan to the Iranian border.
   b. **Salma Dam**: Provides irrigation and electricity.
   c. **Afghan Parliament Building**: A symbol of bilateral cooperation.
2. **Healthcare and Education**: India has built hospitals and provided scholarships for Afghan students.

Trade and Economic Relations

1. **Air Freight Corridor**: Facilitates direct trade bypassing Pakistan.
2. **Chabahar Port**: Enhances Afghanistan's connectivity to global markets.

Regional Security and Counterterrorism

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1. **Capacity Building**: India trains Afghan security forces to counter terrorism.
2. **Taliban Dynamics**: India cautiously engages with the Taliban, focusing on its security concerns.

Humanitarian Assistance

1. **Crisis Support**: India has provided food grains and COVID-19 vaccines to Afghanistan.
2. **Community Projects**: Over 200 programs, including schools and water supply systems, have been implemented.

What are the roadblocks in India-Afghanistan relations?

Political Instability in Afghanistan

1. **Taliban Takeover (2021)**: The lack of an inclusive government complicates bilateral ties.
2. **Uncertain Governance**: India's projects face risks under the Taliban regime.

Security and Pakistan Factor

1. **Strategic Depth Doctrine**: Pakistan's influence over the Taliban undermines India's interests.
2. **Cross-Border Terrorism**: Taliban-Pakistan ties threaten Kashmir's stability.

Geographic Connectivity Barrier

1. **Geographic Disconnect**: India lacks direct land access to Afghanistan.
2. **Limited Air Corridors**: Air freight corridors are not a comprehensive solution

Drug trafficking

Afghanistan is the world's largest producer of opium, and the drug trade has contributed to instability and violence in the region, affecting both India and Afghanistan.

How should India reshape its relations with Taliban-led Afghanistan?

Strategic Recalibration

1. **No Recognition Yet**: India has not recognized the Taliban regime, advocating for an inclusive government.
2. **Assistance-Driven Approach**: India prioritizes humanitarian aid over military involvement.

Cautious Diplomacy

1. **Embassy Operations**: India resumed limited operations in June 2022 for assistance activities.
2. **High-Level Engagements**: India's foreign secretary met the Taliban foreign minister in Dubai (2025), signaling cautious engagement.

Adherence to UN Resolutions

1. **Guiding Principles**: India aligns its policy with UN Security Council Resolution 2593, advocating peace, counterterrorism, and human rights.

Recent Developments

1. **Development Projects**: Discussions on re-engaging in Afghan development initiatives have begun.
2. **Taliban Acknowledgment**: The Taliban has appreciated India's humanitarian efforts, indicating a potential thaw in relations.

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Conclusion

India's relationship with Afghanistan is deeply rooted in history and shaped by strategic interests. Despite challenges, India remains committed to fostering stability, development, and regional peace in Afghanistan. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, India's cautious yet proactive approach will be crucial in safeguarding its interests while contributing to Afghanistan's reconstruction and stability.

Read more- The Indian Express
UPSC Syllabus- GS 2- India and its neighborhood- relations.

India-Canada Relations- Explained Pointwise

Amid mounting political discontent and widespread public dissatisfaction, Justin Trudeau's resignation as Prime Minister of Canada marks a pivotal moment in Canadian politics. After facing growing calls to step down, Trudeau's exit signals a leadership transition within the Liberal Party, setting the stage for new political dynamics.

This development carries profound implications, not just for Canada's domestic governance but also for its international relations, especially with India, a key partner whose ties with Canada have faced challenges under Trudeau's tenure.

What is the history of India Canada Relations?

Establishment of Relations	India-Canada established diplomatic relations in 1947. This relationship was to be built upon built shared traditions of democracy, pluralism and strong interpersonal connections.
Phase of Thaw and Deterioration in Political Domain	India Canada relations witnessed deterioration in the political domain despite economic engagement, regular high-level interactions and long-standing people-to-people ties. **Thaw in India Canada Political Relations Canada's support for Plebiscite in Kashmir-** Canada supported a plebiscite in the Indian state of Kashmir in 1948. **Canada's opposition to India's nuclear tests-** In the aftermath of the nuclear tests, India's relations with Canada deteriorated as Canada recalled its high commissioner to India following the nuclear tests. India's reluctance to accede to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) further widened the gulf between New Delhi and Ottawa for many years. **Khalistan Issue-** Relations between India and Canada have remained strained due to Canada's alleged leniency toward supporters of Khalistan.
Phase of Renewal of Bonhomie	However, during the tenure of Conservative Party's Stephen Harper as Canadian PM from 2006 to 2015, Canada and India enjoyed strong relations. This period was marked by 19 high-level visits from Canada to India and the joint celebration of 2011 as the Year of India in Canada. Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Canada in 2015 was the first bilateral visit by an Indian PM since 1973. India Canada relation was elevated from bilateral relation to a strategic partnership. The government

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	hailed the visit with the assumption that decades of mistrust over the Khalistan issue could be brushed aside.
Phase of Deterioration	However, India Canada diplomatic relations have deteriorated further since 2015 due to the Khalistan protests that have increased in the recent times.

The Khalistan Shadow over India Canada Relations over the years

During Militancy In Punjab

1982- Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau (Justin Trudeau's father) declined to extradite Talwinder Singh Parmar accused of killing two police officers in Punjab.

1984- In the aftermath of Operation Bluestar (launched by the Indian army to root out militants from the Golden Temple in June 1984) bolstered the Khalistan movement among the diaspora.

1985- Babbar Khalsa(Khalistan separatist organisation) orchestrated the bombing of Air India Kanishka in June 1985 which resulted in 331 civilian deaths.

Post 2015 Period

2015- Justin Trudeau's proximity to individuals sympathetic to Khalistan's cause strained bilateral relations.

2017- The then Punjab Chief Minister Capt Amarinder Singh refused to meet Canadian Defence Minister Harjit Singh Sajjan, accusing him of associating with separatists.

2018- India got aggravated when Jaspal Atwal convicted of attempting to assassinate an Indian Cabinet minister in 1986 was invited to dine with Trudeau during his Visit to India. Trudeau got a cool reception during his visit to India when he was received at the airport by Minister of State for Agriculture Gajendra Singh Shekhawat instead of PM Modi.

2019- The annual 'Public Report on the Terrorist Threat to Canada' released in December 2018, mentioned 'Sikh extremism' and Khalistan for the first time. However, in 2019 Canada revised the report just a day before Vaisakhi, removing all mentions of Khalistan and Sikh extremism.

2020- India accused Trudeau of inciting extremists when he expressed concerns about New Delhi's response to the farmers' protest and pledging support for their rights.

2022- In March 2022, Trudeau's Liberal Party formed an alliance with the New Democratic Party (NDP), led by **Jagmeet Singh**, who openly endorsed the Khalistan Referendum on Canadian soil.

2023- During the recent G20 summit in New Delhi, PM Modi conveyed 'strong concerns' about 'continuing anti-India activities of extremist elements' in Canada.

What are the concerns with the recent diplomatic fallout between India-Canada?

1. Impact on India Canada FTA- The diplomatic rift has stalled discussions on a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement between India and Canada, which was previously seen as a pathway to enhancing trade ties.

2. Impact on India Canada Trade Relations- Canada contributes to around 1% to India's trade, and also accounts for 25% of pulses and 5% of fertilizer imports. The recent fallout endangers the bilateral trade between the two countries.

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3. Impact on Canadian Investment in India- From 2020 to 2023, Canada was the 18th-largest foreign investor in India, contributing $3.31 billion. Canadian pension funds, like the Canadian Pension Plan Investment Board (CPPIB) and Caisse de dépôt et placement du Québec (CDPQ), have invested over $75 billion cumulatively. These funds hold stakes in major Indian companies like Kotak Mahindra Bank, Paytm, Zomato, and Infosys, viewing India as a prime investment destination. The recent fallout creates uncertainities around Canadian Investments in India.

4. Impact on Indian Remittances- India, the world's largest recipient of remittances, received $125 billion in 2023, with Canada among the top 10 sources. In 2021-22, Canada contributed 0.6% of India's remittances.

5. Impact on mobility of Indian Students- Canada is a key destination for Indian students, with about 427,000 Indian Students studying in Canada. There are concerns of mobility of students for studies in Canada.

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What is the Significance of India-Canada Relations?

1. Cooperation in Indo-Pacific- Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy has listed India an important partner in the Indo-Pacific region. It has marked out China as an "increasingly disruptive global power", while referring to India as a "critical partner" with shared traditions of democracy and pluralism.

2. Trade and commerce – India is Canada's tenth-largest trading partner. Bilateral trade between India and Canada stands at USD 5 billion. More than 400 Canadian companies have a presence in India and more than 1,000 companies are actively pursuing business in the Indian market. Canadian pension funds have pledged over USD 55 billion in investments between 2014 and 2020. Canada and India are working toward a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement and a Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (FIPA).

[Figures in billion US Dollars]

Details	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
India's Exports	1.692	1.841	2.065	1.754	2.064	2.581
India's Imports	1.477	1.667	2.268	1.881	2.024	2.635
Total	3.169	3.508	4.333	3.635	4.088	5.216

[Source: Statistics Canada]

Source-Statistics Canada

3. Development Cooperation- Canada has invested nearly $24 million in 2018-2019 to support 75 projects in India through its Non profit organisations like Grand Challenges Canada.

4. Energy sector – India and Canada signed a Nuclear Cooperation Agreement (NCA) in 2010 for which a Joint Committee on Civil Nuclear Cooperation was constituted by both the countries. Uranium supply deal has been signed during PM Modi's visit in 2015.

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5. S&T and Space- ISRO and CSA (Canadian Space Agency) have signed MOUs for cooperation in the field of exploration and utilisation of outer space. ANTRIX, the Commercial arm of ISRO, has launched many Canadian Satellites.

6. Education Sector- Since 2018, India has been the largest source country for international students in Canada. This has helped Canadian universities and colleges to provide subsidised education to domestic students.

7. Indian Diaspora- Canada hosts one of the largest Indian diaspora in the world numbering 1.6 million (PIOs and NRIs) which account for more than 3% of its total population. The diaspora has done commendably well in every sector in Canada. In the field of politics, the present House of Common (total strength of 338) has 22 Members of Parliament of Indian-origin.

What are the other challenges in the Relations between the two countries?

1. Khalistani separatist factor- It is the single most important challenge between India and Canada. The Canadian government's Policy of balancing the Sikh assertions and its relations with India, has jeopardised the India Canada Relations.

2. Attacks on Indian Consulates and Indian Diaspora- The attacks on Non-Sikh Indian Diaspora, Indian Consulates and Temples have further strained the India Canada Relations.

3. Trade Challenges- Structural impediments such as complex labour laws, market protectionism, and bureaucratic regulations have been roadblocks for Indo-Canadian trade relations. Bilateral agreements, such as the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and Investment Promotion and Protection Agreements (BIPPA), have been in negotiation for long time and no progress has been reached by both the countries. Before the G20 summit, the Canadian government independently halted trade negotiations with India. All these have contributed to low Indo-Canadian trade.

4. Close relationship of China and Canada- There is a close relationship between the current federal government of Canada and the Chinese Communist Party's government. This has also strained India-China relation.

What Should be the way forward?

In recent times, Government of India has effectively conveyed to Canada that they cannot simultaneously have good relations with India while allowing anti-India separatist movements on their soil.

1. Constructive and Sustained Engagement- India will have to build a constructive and sustained engagement with the Sikh diaspora, dispel the misinformation propagated by the Khalistani separatists and showcase the sense of contentment prevailing in Punjab.

2. New Framework of Cooperation- There is a need to develop a new framework of cooperation that is more pragmatic and that emphasises on mutually beneficial areas, such as trade, energy, infrastructure and transport, for better Indo-Canadian relations.

3. Dehypenation- India and Canada must dehypenate their political contestations over the Khalistan issue and their trade and investment relations. Both the countries must look to be back on the trade negotiations table back soon to finalise the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the two countries.

4. Civil Society and Track II Diplomacy- India and Canada must encourage civil society organisations and Track II diplomacy initiatives to foster people-to-people connections, dialogue, and conflict resolution efforts.

5. Media and Public Diplomacy- Promotion of responsible reporting to ensure that media coverage and public discourse accurately reflect the complexities of the relationship and the efforts being made to strengthen it.

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Digital Personal Data Protection Rules 2025- Explained Pointwise

Recently, the draft of **Digital Personal Data Protection Rules 2025** has been drafted in order to provide necessary details and implementation framework of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 (DPDP Act) 2023. The DPDP Act, 2023 (DPDP Act) had received the assent of the Hon'ble President on 11th August 2023.

Features of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023
1. Fairness- Organizations must use personal data in a way that is fair and transparent to the individuals involved.
2. Consent- Personal data can only be processed for a lawful purpose after the individual's consent is obtained.
3. Data protection- Individuals have the right to obtain information about how their data is processed, and request corrections or erasure.

Framework/Components of Digital Data Protection

1. Data principal- The individual whose personal data is being handled. For children, their parents or legal guardians are the data principals. For people with disabilities, their legal guardians are the data principals.

2. Data fiduciaries- The entity that determines how and why personal data is processed. It is also responsible for ensuring the data is accurate, secure, and is erased when it is no longer needed.

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3. Data Protection Board (Board)- It functions as a digital office to oversee compliance and address grievances. The Act empowers Chairperson and Members to act on matters, with decisions made by majority vote.

What are the salient features of Draft Digital Personal Data Protection Rules 2025?

Notice to be given by Data Fiduciary to Data Principal	Data Fiduciaries must provide Data Principals with clear and understandable notices for informed consent. **The Notices must include-** a description of personal data being processed, the purpose and services associated with the processing, and details for withdrawing consent, exercising rights, or filing complaints.
Consent Management	**Consent Requirements-** Data processing requires prior, clear, and informed consent from Data Principals, which may be withdrawn at any time. **Consent Manager Role-** Consent Managers to facilitate granting, tracking, and withdrawal of consent.
Obligations of Data Fiduciaries	**Significant Data Fiduciaries (SDF):** Additional obligations include- a. Annual Data Protection Impact Assessments and audits. b. Ensuring algorithms do not harm Data Principals' rights. c. Restricting specific personal data transfers outside India. **General Obligations:** Maintain transparency in processing activities. **Publish terms of service** and grievance redressal mechanisms.
Rights of Data Principals	**Access and Erasure:** Right to access personal data or request its erasure via mechanisms published by Data Fiduciaries. **Grievance Redressal:** Data Fiduciaries must respond to grievances within specified timeframes. **Nomination:** Data Principals can nominate individuals for exercising their rights in case of incapacity or death. **Transparency:** Fiduciaries must provide clear information about data collection, processing, and sharing practices.
Processing of Personal Data Outside India	**Condition for Transfer** a. Transfers to foreign entities are subject to government-specified requirements. b. Restrictions apply to data critical for national interests, as determined by the government.
Processing by State for Subsidies and Benefits	The State may process personal data under specific conditions for issuing subsidies, benefits, or services and must be linked to laws, policies, or public funds.
Reasonable Security Safeguards	Data Fiduciaries must take **adequate security measures**, including: a. Encryption, obfuscation, and access control. b. Logs and monitoring to detect unauthorized access. c. Retention of logs and personal data for at least one year unless otherwise specified by law. d. Contractual safeguards when engaging Data Processors.
Personal Data Breach Intimation	**Data Fiduciaries must promptly inform affected Data Principals of breaches**, detailing: a. The nature, extent, and consequences of the breach. b. Steps taken to mitigate risks. c. Contact information for queries.

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	Breaches must also be reported to the Board within 72 hours or a longer period allowed.
Erasure of Personal Data	a. Data Fiduciaries **must erase personal data** if the specified purpose is deemed no longer valid. b. Principals **must be notified 48 hours before such erasure**, allowing them to log in or otherwise interact to retain the data.
Consent for Data of Children or Persons with Disabilities	a. Fiduciaries **must obtain verifiable consent** from parents or lawful guardians before processing a child's data. b. Verification may **involve identity checks** through reliable details or tokens issued by authorized entities like Digital Locker service providers.
Government Powers	a. **Information Requests-** The government may request data from Fiduciaries for purposes listed in the Seventh Schedule. b. **Restrictions on Disclosure-** Fiduciaries must seek prior written approval before disclosing sensitive data in cases affecting sovereignty, security, or public order.

What are the advantages of the Digital Personal Data Protection Rules 2025?

The Digital Personal Data Protection Rules 2025 provide for a *"LIGHT BUT TIGHT"* framework.

L: Legal Certainty- Provides clear legal guidelines for businesses and individuals, reducing ambiguity and legal risks.

I: Increased Trust and Consumer Confidence- Builds trust between individuals and organizations by demonstrating a commitment to data privacy and security.

G: Global Competitiveness- Aligns with international data protection standards, facilitating cross-border data flows and fostering a competitive digital economy.

H: Harmonized Approach- Promotes consistency and predictability in data protection practices across different sectors and jurisdictions.

T: Technological Innovation- Drives innovation in privacy-enhancing technologies, such as data anonymization, differential privacy, and secure multi-party computation.

B: Business Benefits- Improves organizational security, reduces the risk of data breaches and their associated costs, and enhances brand reputation.

U: User Empowerment- Empowers individuals with control over their personal data, fostering a sense of agency and trust in the digital world.

T: Trustworthy Data Ecosystems- Fosters the development of trustworthy data ecosystems where data can be used responsibly and ethically for innovation and societal benefit.

T: Technological Advancement- Encourages the development of privacy-preserving technologies that enable innovation while respecting individual rights.

I: Improved International Relations- Facilitates smoother data flows and cooperation on data protection issues between countries.

G: Greater Global Interoperability- Enables seamless data flows across borders while ensuring adequate protection for individuals.

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H: Harmonized Global Standards- Contributes to the development of harmonized global standards for data protection, reducing complexity for businesses operating internationally.

T: Thriving Digital Economy- Creates a level playing field for businesses, fostering innovation and competition in a data-driven economy.

What are the Challenges associated with this framework?

The rules does not provide for a *"NOT SO LIGHT"* framework.

N: New Technologies

a. Emergence of AI, IoT, and other disruptive technologies- These technologies present unique challenges for data protection, such as algorithmic bias, lack of transparency, and the potential for misuse.

b. Difficulty in keeping up with rapid technological advancements and agile and adaptable legal and regulatory framework.

T: Technological Limitations

a. Limitations of existing technologies- Challenges in implementing robust security measures to protect data from cyber threats like hacking, ransomware, and data breaches.

b. Difficulty in ensuring data privacy in decentralized environments like blockchain.

S: Social Impact

a. Digital Divide- Exacerbation of existing digital divides, impacting marginalized communities and limiting their access to digital services and opportunities.

b. Social Surveillance- Potential for misuse of data for mass surveillance and social control.

c. Impact on Human Rights- Potential for data protection measures to inadvertently restrict freedom of expression, association, and other fundamental rights.

O: Operational Challenges

a. Difficulties in implementing and enforcing data protection regulations within organizations.

b. Lack of awareness and training among employees on data protection best practices.

c. Challenges in identifying and mitigating data breaches effectively.

T: Transparency and Accountability

a. Lack of transparency in data processing practices, making it difficult for individuals to understand how their data is being used.

b. Difficulty in holding organizations accountable for data breaches and other violations of data protection laws.

I: International Cooperation

a. Challenges in coordinating data protection policies and enforcement across borders.

b. Navigating the complexities of international data transfers and compliance with foreign data protection laws.

G: Global Trends

a. Keeping pace with evolving global trends in data protection and adapting to international best practices.

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b. Addressing the challenges posed by the increasing globalization of data flows.

H: Human Rights Considerations

Ensuring that data protection measures respect and protect fundamental human rights, including privacy, freedom of expression, and equality.

T: Trust and Confidence

Building and maintaining public trust in the data protection framework and the institutions responsible for its enforcement.

What Should be the Way Forward?

1. Awareness & Education- Continuously educate the public, businesses, and government officials on data protection rights, responsibilities, and best practices.

2. Data Protection Impact Assessments (DPIAs)- Promote the proactive use of DPIAs by organizations to identify and mitigate potential risks to privacy and data security.

3. Enforcement & Compliance- Robust enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with the DPDP Act. Strengthen the investigative and enforcement powers of the Data Protection Board, including the ability to impose meaningful penalties.

4. Quality Assurance- Ensure the quality and effectiveness of data protection measures through regular audits, inspections, and certifications. Develop and implement robust certification schemes for organizations that demonstrate compliance with data protection standards.

5. User-Centric Approach- Prioritize the needs and interests of individuals by empowering them with control over their personal data.

6. Adaptive Framework- The framework should be flexible and adaptable to the rapidly evolving digital landscape. Regularly review and update the DPDP Act and its implementing rules to address emerging challenges and technologies.

7. Technological Advancements- Leverage technology to enhance data protection, such as through the use of privacy-enhancing technologies like differential privacy and federated learning.

8. Evaluation & Continuous Improvement- Regularly evaluate the effectiveness of the DPDP Act and its implementation.

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UGC Guidelines on Vice-Chancellor appointments- Explained Pointwise

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

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UGC Guidelines

What are the features of new UGC Guidelines?

The new guidelines streamline the VC and teacher appointment criteria and procedure in higher education institutions.

VC Appointment	**a. Specifies the Search-cum-Selection Committee composition-** Clearly defines composition- Nominees of the Chancellor/Visitor, UGC Chairman, and University's apex body (Ex-Senate). **b. Expansion of eligibility of VC by adding a third category-** Professionals with 10+ years of experience in industry, public administration, public policy, or public sector undertakings, with proven academic contributions, will also be eligible for VC appointment. **c. Alignment with NEP 2020 goals-** The guidelines emphasize leadership, governance, and collaboration skills of appointed VC. This is in alignment with the NEP 2020 goals.
Teacher Recruitment	**a. New approach of Selection-** It discontinues API-based shortlisting from 2018 regulations, which relied on quantitative metrics (Ex- Publication counts). The new guidelines introduces a qualitative, holistic approach, focusing on- Innovation in teaching, Societal contributions, Promoting Indian knowledge systems, and Multidisciplinary expertise. **b. Flexibility in UGC-NET-** It allows candidates to qualify in a subject of choice, regardless of degree disciplines. This encourages multidisciplinary expertise. **c. Removal of cap on contract-based Faculty-** Removes the 10% cap on contract-based appointments but mandates rigorous selection and periodic

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	reviews to ensure quality.
	d. Promoting Indian Languages & Cultural Heritage- The guidelines encourage academic work in regional languages and contributions to Indian knowledge systems.
NEP 2020 Alignment	The guidelines aim to break down disciplinary silos and encourage interdisciplinary teaching and research. It also focuses on enhancing the quality, inclusivity, and innovation in higher education.

What have been the latest cases of Centre-state conflicts over VC appointments?

Kerala	In 2023, a Bill was passed to replace the Governor with eminent educationists as Chancellors. The Bill is pending for Presidential assent.
Karnataka	In December 2024, the Assembly passed a Bill to replace the Governor with the Chief Minister as Chancellor for a state university. A similar Bill for other universities is under consideration.
Maharashtra	In 2021, the state sought to restrict the Governor's powers in VC appointments, but the Bill was withdrawn in 2022 under a new government, restoring the Governor's authority.
Tamil Nadu	In 2022, two Bills to allow the state government to appoint VCs were passed but these remain unapproved by the Governor.

What is the rationale of UGC for introduction of these guidelines?

1. Holistic Evaluation- The regulations replace the rigid Academic Performance Indicator (API) system with a more qualitative approach. This shift aims to recognize diverse forms of academic impact beyond mere numerical scores.

2. Inclusivity and Flexibility- The draft introduces dedicated pathways for recruiting individuals from varied backgrounds, including sportspersons, artists, and those with disabilities.

3. Interdisciplinary Teaching- By allowing candidates to teach in areas aligned with their highest qualifications rather than their previous academic focus, the regulations promote an interdisciplinary approach to education.

4. Clearer Processes- The draft regulations enhance transparency in recruitment and promotion processes by establishing clear guidelines and accountability measures.

5. Cultural Preservation- The encouragement of Indian languages in academic publications and degree programs is another significant aspect of the regulations. This initiative aims to make education more accessible and culturally relevant, promoting a sense of identity within the academic framework

What are the concerns with the new UGC Guidelines?

1. States' Concerns- States contend that the draft regulations erode state autonomy in higher education. Central dominance in VC appointments is seen as a direct assault on federalism.

2. Subjectivity concerns- Critics fear that Qualitative assessments may lead to inconsistencies without clear rubrics.

3. Politicization concerns- Increased role of governors in VC appointments raises concerns about politicization and autonomy.

4. Over-Reliance on Contract Faculty- The removal of cap on contract-based faculty raises potential fear of its impacts on job security and academic integrity.

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5. Resource Disparities- Structural issues like uneven funding and infrastructure remain unaddressed.

6. Casualization of Faculty- The removal of a cap on contractual appointments and provisions for hiring non-academic professionals (Professors of Practice) are seen as threats to permanent faculty positions, service conditions, and academic integrity.

What Should be the Way Forward?

The way forward should be the "HOLDER" approach.

H: Holistic Assessment– Continue to emphasize a comprehensive evaluation of faculty, considering teaching, research, community engagement, innovation, and other contributions beyond traditional metrics.

O: Openness and Transparency- Ensure transparent and accountable processes for recruitment, promotions, and grievance redressal.

L: Leadership and Governance- Strengthen university governance by promoting effective leadership and ensuring institutional autonomy.

D: Diversity and Inclusion- Foster a diverse and inclusive academic community by promoting equity and addressing systemic barriers.

E: Excellence and Innovation- Encourage academic excellence and innovation through research, teaching, and community engagement.

R: Resource Allocation and Sustainability- Ensure equitable resource allocation and address systemic issues such as inadequate funding and infrastructure.

Overall, the UGC Regulations 2025 represent a progressive step towards transforming faculty recruitment and promotion in Indian higher education. If implemented effectively, they could lead to a more inclusive, flexible, and dynamic academic environment that recognizes diverse contributions while aligning with national educational goals. However, successful implementation will depend on addressing stakeholder concerns and navigating governance challenges within India's complex federal system.

California Wildfires and Forest Fires in India- Explained Pointwise

Deadly **California Wildfires** have devastated Los Angeles, fueled by strong winds and exceptional dryness. The deadly wildfires has left over scorched field of 62 square miles, leaving thousands displaced and at least two dozen dead. While the exact cause of the forest fires is unknown, there are various possible causes of the Californian wildfires. The **California forest fires** has brought the issue of forest fires into the spotlight. In this article, we will also look at the scenario of forest fires in India.

Possible Causes of California Wildfires
1. Wet Weather Followed by Dry Conditions- Unusually wet winters in 2022 and 2023 led to extensive vegetation growth (trees and shrubs). This winter has been exceptionally dry, drying up the vegetation, making it highly flammable. Southern California has experienced the driest start to winter on record, with only 0.03 inches of rain since October.
2. Santa Ana Winds- Santa Ana winds, common in California, have been unusually strong this year (up to 50 mph) which have intensified the fires. High pressure which has been built in the Great Basin and pushes dry, warm winds towards Southern California, which speeds up the flames and spreads the fire faster.
3. Climate Change- Climate Change has lengthened the wildfire season in recent years, with the peak

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> season shifting from August to July. The wildfire season has lengthened in recent years, with the peak shifting from August to July.

What is Forest Fire? What is the Status of Forest Fires in India?

Forest Fire- A forest fire is an uncontrolled fire that destroys large parts of the forest. November to June is considered to be forest fire season in India. The Peak fire season typically begins in late February and spans about 12 weeks.

Forest Fire Prone Regions- According to the India State Forest Report (ISFR) 2019, 21.67% of India's geographical area is forest. Of that, Forests in Assam, Mizoram and Tripura have been identified as 'extremely fire-prone'. Dry deciduous forests are highly susceptible to severe fires.
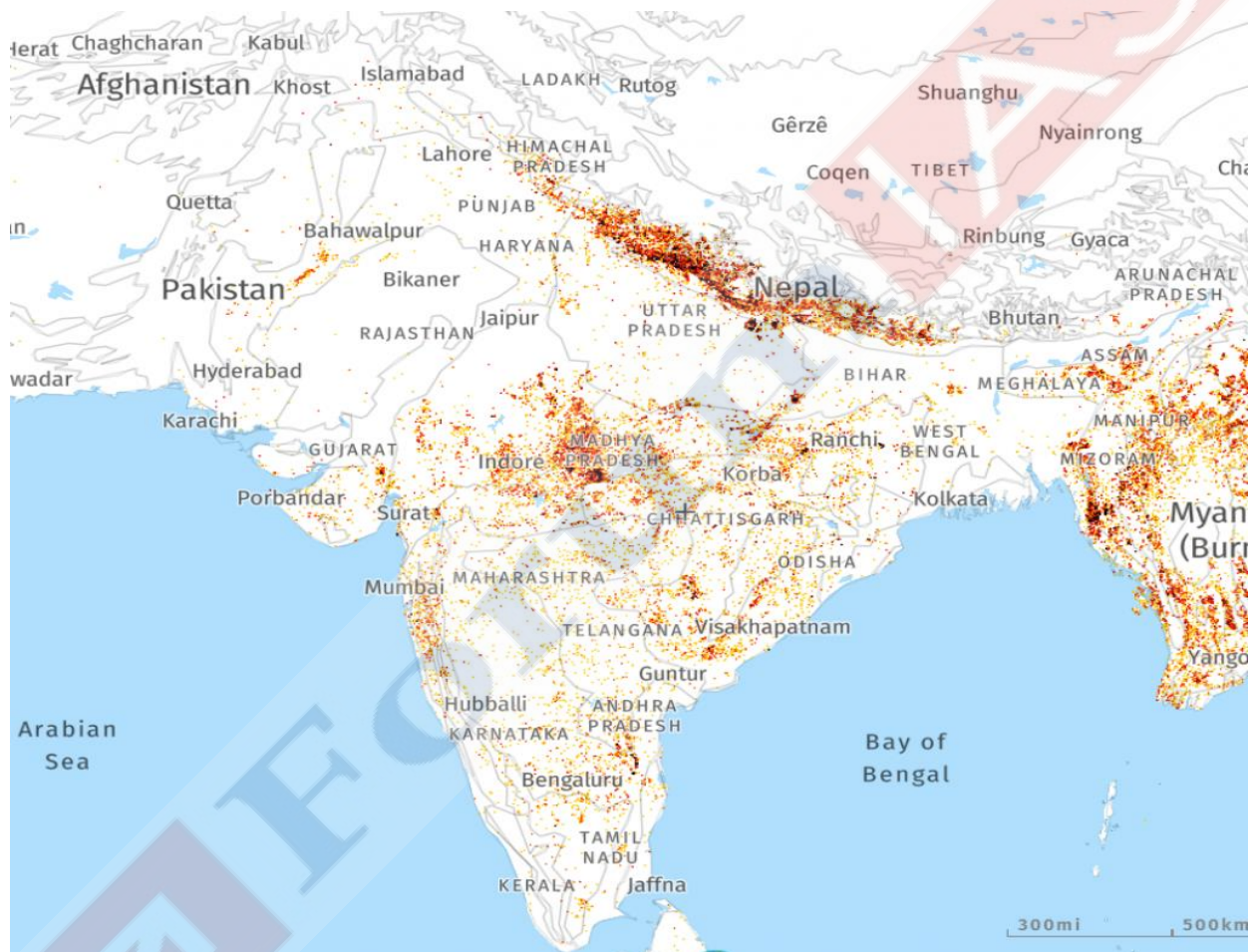
Source-DTE

What are the reasons behind Forest Fires in India?

There are both natural and anthropogenic causes of forest fires in India. These are mentioned below-

Natural Causes

a. Lightning- A lightning strikes power cables, trees, or rocks can produce a spark trigerring forest fires.

b. Volcanic eruption- Hot magma in the earth's crust is usually expelled out as lava during a volcanic eruption. The hot lava then flows into nearby fields or lands to start wildfires.

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c. Heat patterns- Increased temperatures due to global warming make the forests more vulnerable to forest fires. Rising atmospheric temperatures and dryness (low humidity) make favourable circumstances for a fire to start.

d. Lack of soil moisture- The dryness in the soil triggers fire in forests. **For ex-** The recent Uttarakhand wildfires have been caused due to this.

e. Natural availability of materials trigerring forest fire- In India, availability of large quantities of dry wood, logs, stumps, dead leaves, dry grass and weeds in forest lands are also reasons of forest fires.

Anthropogenic Factors

a. Smoking- Smoking is the leading cause of forest fires globally. Throwing away the cigarette butts without completely extinguishing them can lead to wildfires.

b. Campfires- During camping or outdoor activities, people normally leave lit fires or combusting materials unattended. This ignites wildfires.

c. Burning Debris- Wastes and trash on several occasions are burned to ashes as a way of reducing the accumulation of rubbish. This also leads to forest fires in India. **For ex-** The recent Simlipal Forest fire.

d. Slash and Burn Cultivation- This is one of the major reason for the fire in India's Northeastern region.

Why peak forest fires occur during the spring?

Spring in India occurs between March and April. In India, the occurrence of wildfires will be at peak during spring season. The reasons are as follows-

a. Less rainfall during the winter months- Less rainfall during winter months reduce the soil moisture in forests. The forest soil loses the capacity to control the fire on its own. **For ex-** The recent Uttarakhand forest fires.

b. Large availability of combustible materials- The large availability of combustible materials like dry wood, logs, stumps, dead leaves, dry grass and weeds, increase the intensity of forest fires. Further, strong winds enhance the intensity of forest fires.

What is the Impact of forest fires in India?

a. Loss of Ecosystems and Biodiversity- Forest fires destroy the habitats and the intricate relationships of diverse flora and fauna, leading to loss of ecosystems and biodiversity. **For ex-** Extinction of wildlife in India.

b. Forest Degradation- Forest fires reduce the quality of certain forest features like soil fertility, biodiversity, and ecosystems.

c. Impact on livelihood- According to the 2011 census, 1.70 lakh villages in India have proximity to forests. The livelihood of several crores of people is dependent on fuelwood, bamboo, fodder, and small timber. Forest fires directly impact their livelihood.

d. Air Pollution- Forest fires reduce carbon sequestration, and instigate huge clouds of smoke leading to massive air pollution.

e. Soil Degradation- Forest fires kill beneficial soil microorganisms that are responsible for breaking down the soil and promoting soil microbial activities. Further, the wildfires also make soils vulnerable to soil erosion.

f. Destruction of Watersheds- Forest fires lead to the destruction of wetlands of forest, which are protected by the forest.

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What are the Government initiatives for forest Fires in India?

Forest Fire Alert System(FFAS)	Forest Survey of India(FSI) developed a Forest Fire Alert System (FFAS). This system has been developed to monitor wildfires in real-time.
MODIS (Moderate Resolution Imaging Spectroradiometer) Sensors	Using these sensors, the real time information on forest is collected and sent to the Forest Survey of India. The FSI forwards the data by email to state, district, circle, division, range and beat levels. People in the locality receive SMS alerts.
National Master Plan for Forest Fire Control	The government prepared the National Master Plan for Forest Fire Control. Under this, the government aims to introduce a coordinated and integrated fire-management programme.

What should be the Way Forward to reduce Forest Fires?

a. Capacity Development- Capacity development of forest departments' officials at different levels (national, regional, local) to reduce the vulnerability of Indian forests fire.

b. Forest Control Manuals- Creation of forests fire control manuals for field staff helps in early detection, reporting and controlling the fires.

c. Comprehensive forest fire policy- A cohesive policy or action plan should be formulated to set forth the guiding principles and framework for wildfire Management. The policy should also incorporate the dimension of climate change.

d. Indigenous knowledge- Using indigenous knowledge and techniques of local and tribal people in comprehensive wildfire management.

e. Infrastructure creation- Improving the Staffing and capacity of firefighters in the country. **For ex-** Construction of watchtowers and crew stations, hiring seasonal fire watchers to spot fires etc.

f. Development of Technology- Modern firefighting techniques such as the radio-acoustic sound system for early fire detection and Doppler radar should be adopted. We must also aim at developing a National Fire Danger Rating System (NFDRS) and Fire Forecasting System for faster detection and control of fire.

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