ForumIAS

7 PM COMPILATION

3rd and 4th week July, 2026

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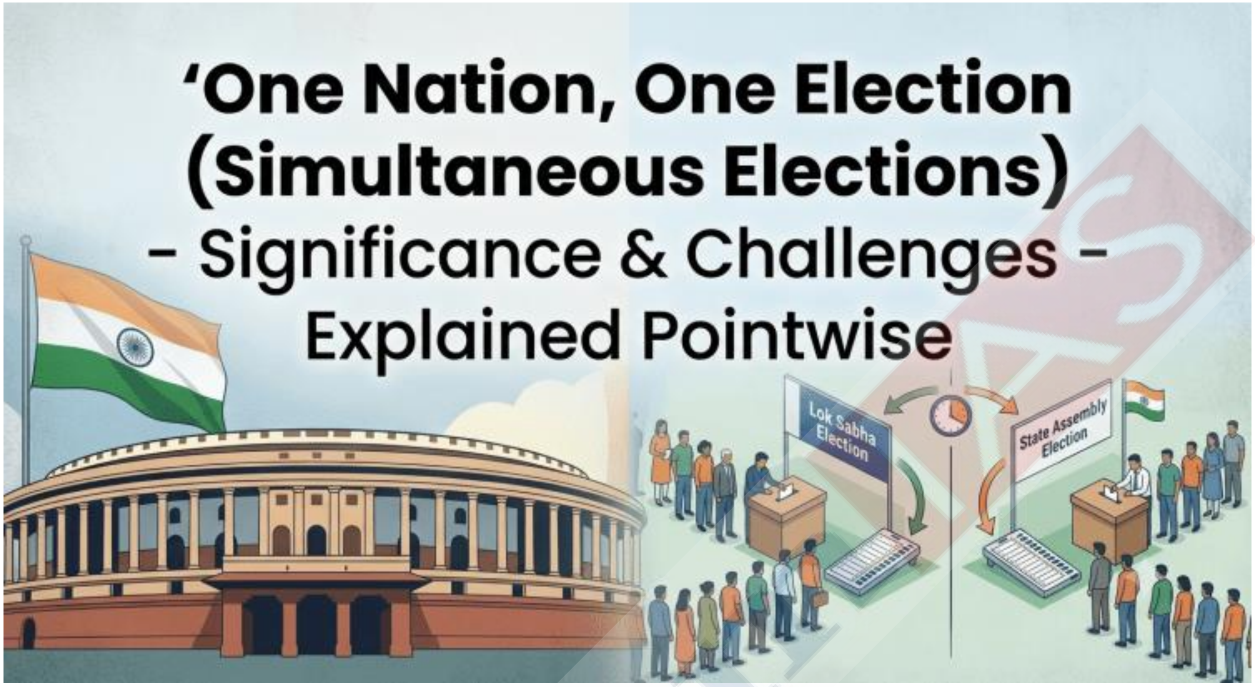
One Nation, One Election (Simultaneous Elections) – Significance & Challenges – Explained Pointwise



India's Parliament is set to take up the Constitution (129th Amendment) Bill to synchronize the Lok Sabha & all State assemblies elections. The Bill requires a 2/3rd majority in both the Houses & ratification by half the States. After a High Level Committee chaired by formed President Ram Nath Kovind, the government has committed to introduce this reform.
India's democratic framework thrives on the vibrancy of its electoral process, enabling citizens to actively shape governance at every level. Since independence, over 400 elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies have showcased the Election Commission of India's commitment to fairness and transparency. However, the fragmented and frequent nature of elections has sparked discussions on the need for a more efficient system. This has led to the resurgence of interest in the concept of "**One Nation, One Election.**"

What are Simultaneous Elections (One Nation, One Election)?

- Simultaneous elections, popularly known as "**One Nation, One Election**" (ONOE), refers to the idea of holding elections to the Lok Sabha & all State Legislative Assemblies together for the same constituency on the same day. This would allow voters to cast their ballots for both tiers of government on the same day in their constituencies, though voting could still occur in phases across the country.
- The concept of simultaneous elections is not a new idea in India. The idea is rooted in India's initial electoral system, but disrupted by political instability:

The Norm of Simultaneous Elections	○ Following the adoption of the Constitution, elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies were conducted simultaneously from 1951 to 1967. ○ The first general elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies were held together in 1951-52, a practice that continued for three subsequent general elections in 1957, 1962, and 1967.

(1951-1967)	○ For the 1957 elections, some State assemblies were even dissolved early to achieve synchronization.
Disruption of the Cycle (1968-)	○ The cycle of synchronised elections was disrupted in 1968 and 1969 due to the premature dissolution of some State Legislative Assemblies. ○ The **Fourth Lok Sabha** was also dissolved prematurely in 1970, with fresh elections held in 1971. ○ Unlike the First, Second, and Third Lok Sabha, which completed their full five-year terms, the **Fifth Lok Sabha**'s term was extended until 1977 under Article 352 because of the declaration of Emergency. ○ Since then, only a few Lok Sabha terms have lasted the full five years, such as the **Eighth**, **Tenth**, **Fourteenth**, and **Fifteenth**. Others, including the **Sixth, Seventh, Ninth, Eleventh, Twelfth**, and **Thirteenth**, were dissolved early. ○ State Assemblies have faced similar disruptions over the years. Premature dissolutions and term extensions have become a recurring challenge. ○ These developments have firmly disrupted the cycle of simultaneous elections, leading to the current pattern of staggered electoral schedules across the country.

- The idea of ONOE has been recommended by various committees & bodies from time to time such as:
  a. **Election Commission of India (1983):** In its annual report, the Commission highlighted the desirability of restoring simultaneous elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies.
  b. **Law Commission of India (170th Report, 1999):** Recommended synchronizing elections to the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies and suggested measures to maintain the stability of elected governments.
  c. **Parliamentary Standing Committee on Personnel, Public Grievances, Law and Justice (79th Report, 2015):** Endorsed the idea of simultaneous elections and proposed a phased implementation strategy.
  d. **NITI Aayog Working Paper (2017):** Advocated simultaneous elections to reduce election-related expenditure and governance disruptions caused by the Model Code of Conduct.
  e. **Law Commission of India (Draft Report, 2018):** Examined the constitutional, legal, and practical aspects of simultaneous elections and suggested necessary amendments for implementation.
  f. **High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections in India (Kovind Committee):** This committee, chaired by former President **Ram Nath Kovind**, was constituted in September 2023. It submitted its comprehensive report in March 2024, providing a detailed roadmap and recommendations for implementing "One Nation, One Election." Its recommendations were accepted by the Union Cabinet in September 2024.

What is the significance of Simultaneous Elections?

1. **Prevents Policy Paralysis:** The implementation of the Model Code of Conduct during elections disrupts routine administrative activities and developmental initiatives. This disruption not only hampers the progress of vital welfare schemes but also leads to governance uncertainty. Holding

simultaneous elections would mitigate the prolonged enforcement of the MCC, thereby reducing policy paralysis and enabling continuous governance.

2. **Mitigates Resource Diversion:** The deployment of a substantial number of personnel for election duties can lead to significant diversion of resources from their core responsibilities. ONOE would reduce the frequency of this diversion, allowing the administration to focus on its core responsibilities.
3. **Preserves Regional Party Relevance:** Holding simultaneous elections does not undermine the role of regional parties. In fact, it encourages a more localized focus during elections, enabling regional parties to highlight their unique concerns and aspirations. This setup fosters a political environment where local issues are not overshadowed by national election campaigns, thus preserving the relevance of regional voices.
4. **Enhances Political Opportunities:** Conducting elections simultaneously entails a more equitable allocation of political opportunities and responsibilities within political parties. Currently, it is not uncommon for certain leaders within a party to dominate the electoral landscape, contesting elections at multiple levels and monopolizing key positions. In the scenario of simultaneous elections, there arises greater scope for diversification and inclusivity among political workers representing various parties, allowing a wider range of leaders to emerge and contribute to the democratic process.
5. **Focus on Governance:** The ongoing cycle of elections across the country diverts attention from good governance. Political parties focus more on election-related activities to secure victories, leaving less time for development and essential governance. Synchronised elections would allow parties to dedicate their efforts to addressing the needs of the electorate, reducing instances of conflicts and aggressive campaigning.
6. **Reduced Financial Burden:** Conducting simultaneous elections could significantly cut down the financial costs associated with multiple election cycles. The Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) has claimed that ONOE could save the country nearly **₹7 lakh crore.** These savings are projected from reduced logistical costs and more efficient deployment of manpower and security forces.
7. **Mitigating Social Polarization**: Continuous election cycles make the political parties perpetually locked in aggressive campaign modes. To secure quick wins, the election campaigns often become highly polarized along caste, communal, or regional lines. Restricting campaigns to a single, focused window reduces the constant, wearying social friction that back-to-back state elections can generate.
8. **Boosting Voter Turnout**: Multiple elections leads to 'voter fatigue' – where citizens are asked to vote for local bodies, state assemblies, and parliament at completely separate times – which leads to low turnout of voters. ONOE will help in making it a singular, high-stakes national event that typically boosts overall voter participation.
9. **Positive Economic Impact:** Some studies cited by the High Level Committee (HLC) suggest that simultaneous elections could boost India's GDP growth by **1.5 to 1.6 percentage points**, primarily by creating certainty for investors and reducing economic disruption.

What are the key challenges associated with Simultaneous Elections?

1. **Major Constitutional Overhaul:** Implementing ONOE requires amending several articles of the Indian Constitution, including **Articles 83** (duration of Houses of Parliament), **85** (dissolution of Lok Sabha), **172** (duration of State Legislatures), **174** (sessions, prorogation and dissolution of State Legislatures), and potentially **356** (President's Rule). Thus, a key constitutional question is whether such amendments would violate the Basic Structure Doctrine.
2. **Impact on Federalism:** Critics argue that forcing State Assembly terms to align with the Lok Sabha's term (either by curtailing or extending them) goes against the spirit of federalism and the autonomy of States. States have their own unique political cycles and democratic mandates, and altering their terms without their full and willing consent is seen as an encroachment on their powers.

3. **Nationalization of Elections:** In a combined election, there's a strong possibility that national issues and the popularity of national leaders might overshadow regional and local concerns. Voters might simply vote for the same party at both the central and state levels, influenced by the national narrative.
4. **Disadvantage to Regional Parties:** Regional parties, which often thrive on local issues and leaders, could be significantly disadvantaged as they might struggle to compete with the resources and broad appeal of larger national parties in a simultaneous election environment. This could lead to a homogenization of political discourse.
5. **Reduced Accountability at State Level:** If State elections are always tied to national elections, the accountability of State governments to their electorates might be diluted, as their performance could be overshadowed by Central government's achievements or failures.
6. **Scenario of Hung Assemblies/No-Confidence Motions:** A major challenge is what happens if a government (either at the Centre or in a State) falls prematurely due to a no-confidence motion, a hung assembly, or a split.
7. **Questionable Claim on Economic Benefits:** The argument that simultaneous elections automatically boost economic growth is not supported by historical evidence. During the period of simultaneous elections (1952–1967), India recorded an average growth rate of around 3.5% (often termed the 'Hindu Rate of Growth'), whereas the economy grew at around 8–9% during 2003–2011, when staggered elections had become the norm.
8. **Massive Scale of Operations:** Conducting elections for the entire country (Lok Sabha, all State Assemblies, and potentially local bodies) simultaneously would be an unprecedented logistical challenge. It would require:
    - **Enormous Number of EVMs and VVPATs:** Far more than currently available, requiring massive procurement, storage, and transport infrastructure.
    - **Vast Deployment of Personnel:** A huge number of polling officials, security forces, and administrative staff would be needed, diverting them from their regular duties on an unprecedented scale.

What can be the way forward? (Kovind Committee's Recommendations)

1. **Phased Approach for Synchronization:**
    - **Phase 1: Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies:** The committee recommended that elections to the Lok Sabha and all State Legislative Assemblies should be held simultaneously.
    - **Phase 2: Local Body Elections:** Within 100 days of the Lok Sabha and State Assembly elections, elections to Municipalities and Panchayats should be synchronized.
2. **Constitutional Amendments Required:** The committee identified the need for significant constitutional amendments to facilitate simultaneous elections. Key proposed amendments/insertions include:
    - **New Article 82A:** To be inserted into the Constitution to establish the process for transitioning to a system of simultaneous elections for Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. It would empower Parliament to make laws for the conduct of simultaneous elections.
    - **Amendments to Articles 83(4) and 172(4):** These Articles, dealing with the duration of Houses of Parliament and State Legislatures, would be amended to ensure that any Lok Sabha or State Assembly elected to replace a dissolved one would serve only for the **remaining unexpired term** of the immediately preceding full term, not a fresh five-year term. This is crucial for maintaining synchronization.
    - **New Article 324A:** To empower Parliament to make laws to ensure that municipality and panchayat elections are held simultaneously with Lok Sabha and State Assemblies.
    - **Amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1951:** Necessary changes to the RPA, 1951, to align electoral procedures with the simultaneous election framework.

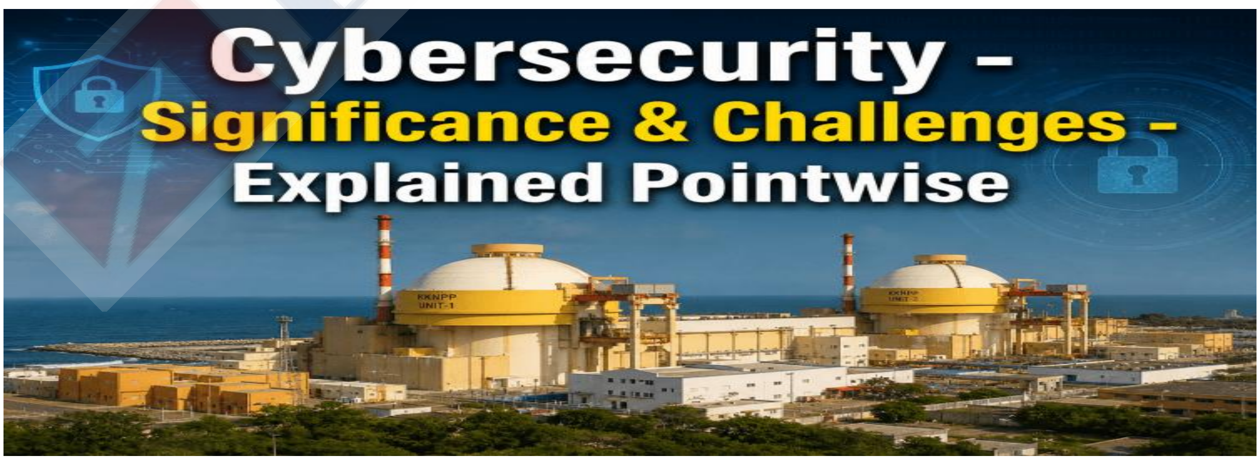
3. **"Appointed Date" and Synchronization Cycle:** The President, through a notification issued on the first sitting of the Lok Sabha after a general election, would set an "Appointed Date." All State assemblies elected after this date would have their terms aligned to conclude at the end of the Lok Sabha's full five-year term, regardless of their own individual five-year period.
4. **Handling Hung Houses/No-Confidence Motions:** In the event of a hung House, a no-confidence motion, or any other event leading to premature dissolution, fresh elections would be held. However, the new Lok Sabha or State Assembly constituted after such fresh elections would serve **only for the unexpired term** of the immediately preceding full term of the House. This ensures that the overall cycle of simultaneous elections remains intact.
5. **Constructive Vote of No-Confidence**: While the Kovind panel felt the existing parliamentary rules regarding no-confidence motions were sufficient, the **Law Commission of India** and various parliamentary panels have strongly urged adopting the **German Model** of Constructive Vote of No-Confidence – where an opposition cannot table a No-Confidence motion unless they simultaneously table a Confidence Motion proving they have the numbers to instantly form an alternate government.
6. **Logistical Preparedness:** The ECI should plan and estimate in advance, in consultation with SECs, for all logistical requirements. This includes the procurement of a large number of EVMs and VVPATs, deployment of adequate manpower, polling personnel, and security forces.
7. **Single Electoral Roll**: The committee proposed creating a single, unified electoral roll and voter ID cards for all elections, to be prepared in consultation with State Election Commissions.

Conclusion:

The High-Level Committee on Simultaneous Elections, led by former President Ram Nath Kovind, has laid the groundwork for a transformative shift in India's electoral process. By aligning the election cycles of the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies, the committee's recommendations promise to address long-standing challenges associated with frequent elections. The proposed phased approach to implementing simultaneous elections, along with constitutional amendments, could pave the way for a more efficient and stable electoral environment in India.

Read More: The Hindu, PIB, Indian Express
UPSC GS-2: Polity

Cybersecurity – Significance & Challenges – Explained Pointwise



The recent ransomware leak exposing blueprints and supplier data for the Kudankulam Nuclear Plant underscores the growing threat of cyber espionage. While the core reactor networks remained safe and isolated, breaches targeting third-party contractors expose operational vulnerabilities. It highlights that robust cybersecurity is paramount to safeguard critical infrastructure, national security, and public trust.

What is cybersecurity?

- **Cybersecurity** refers to the body of technologies, processes & practice of protecting computer systems, networks, programs, and data from digital attacks, unauthorized access, damage, or theft.
- Cybersecurity is not merely an IT issue. it is a **strategic necessity** that ensures the **confidentiality**, **integrity**, and **availability** (the **CIA Triad**) of a nation's critical information infrastructure.
- **Key Dimensions:**
    1. **Confidentiality:** Ensuring information is accessible only to authorized users.
    2. **Integrity:** Ensuring data is accurate and unaltered by unauthorized parties.
    3. **Availability:** Ensuring systems and data remain accessible when needed.
- **The Three Pillars of Cybersecurity:**

What are the major cyber threats faced by India?

1. **Ransomware Attacks**: Malicious software that encrypts/locks data, demanding ransom for release. Increasingly targets critical infrastructure and PSU contractors for e.g. the 2026 Kudankulam-linked breach.
2. **Attacks on Critical Information Infrastructure (CII)**: Targeting power grids, nuclear facilities, banking systems, telecom networks, and transport systems for e.g. 2020 Mumbai power grid outage suspected to involve Chinese state-linked malware (RedEcho).
3. **State-Sponsored Cyber Espionage**: Attributed largely to China- and Pakistan-linked Advanced Persistent Threat (APT) groups targeting defence, government, and strategic sectors for intelligence

gathering for e.g. China-linked **RedEcho** and Pakistan-linked **Transparent Tribe** continuously run target campaigns against the Indian defense sector, aerospace, and government networks.

4. **Cyberterrorism and Radicalisation**: Use of encrypted platforms and dark web by terrorist organisations for recruitment, propaganda, fundraising, and coordination.
5. **Data Breaches and Data Theft**: Theft of personal, financial, or corporate data from government portals, banks, e-commerce platforms, and healthcare systems. For e.g. AIIMS patient data breach, various Aadhaar-linked data leak controversies.
6. **Financial Cyber Fraud**: India is among the world's leading countries in digital payment volumes. However, a major concern arising from the rapid expansion of digital financial inclusion is the increasing incidence of cyber frauds, including UPI and digital payment frauds, phishing attacks, SIM-swap frauds, and banking trojans.
7. **Social Media Manipulation and Disinformation**: The spread of fake news, deepfakes, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour poses a significant threat to democratic processes, social harmony, and national security. Deepfake technology has intensified these challenges.
8. **Supply Chain and Third-Party Risks:** Attacks are increasingly entering organizations through third-party service providers or software supply chains. For e.g. Kudankulam 2026 breach – where sensitive data was compromised not from the core nuclear network, but from a contractor's third-party server.

What is the significance of cybersecurity for India's digital economy and governance?

1. **Protecting Economic Value and Growth**: The digital economy is a significant and growing part of India's GDP. It contributes **13.42% of GDP.** Cybersecurity is essential to protect this economic value from being eroded by financial crimes, data breaches, and ransomware attacks.
2. **Building Digital Trust and Resilience**: India's DPI stack – Aadhaar, UPI, DigiLocker, CoWIN, ONDC - handles billions of transactions and vast citizen data. A breach or systemic compromise could undermine public trust in the entire digital governance architecture that underpins DBT, financial inclusion, and service delivery.
3. **Enabling Trust in E-Governance**: Government services (income tax e-filing, e-courts, DigiLocker, GeM procurement) depend on citizens trusting that their data is secure. Cybersecurity breaches in government systems damage the legitimacy of "Digital India" as a governance model.
4. **Securing Critical Infrastructure**: Power grids, banking, telecom, transport, and nuclear facilities are increasingly getting connected to each other. A successful attack can cause cascading economic and safety consequences. Economic sectors like BFSI (banking, financial services, insurance) are prime targets given their centrality to GDP.
5. **National Security Dimension**: Cyberattacks are now a recognized tool of hybrid warfare. Espionage, sabotage of defence networks, and disinformation campaigns directly threaten sovereignty and internal security.
6. **Enabling India's Global Digital Leadership Ambitions**: India champions DPI exports (UPI stack, Aadhaar model) to Global South countries. Credible cybersecurity practices are essential to sustaining this soft-power and technology-diplomacy role e.g. G20 DPI agenda, India-UAE UPI linkages.
7. **Protecting Citizen Rights and Constitutional Values**: Post the **Justice K.S. Puttaswamy** judgment (2017) recognizing privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21, cybersecurity is integral to operationalizing the right to privacy in the digital realm, especially under the DPDP Act, 2023.
8. **Economic Cost of Cyber Incidents**: Cyberattacks impose direct costs (ransom, remediation, downtime) and indirect costs (reputational damage, regulatory penalties, loss of investor confidence). In 2024 alone, India reported cyber fraud losses exceeding **₹22,845 crore**, with over 36 lakh fraud cases logged.

What are the major challenges in ensuring cybersecurity in India?

1. **Fragmented Institutional Architecture**: Multiple agencies such as CERT-In, NCIIPC, I4C, RBI, SEBI, and TRAI are involved in cybersecurity. However, overlapping responsibilities and limited coordination among them often create confusion in incident response and accountability. Moreover, India lacks a single unified cybersecurity authority or national cyber command to coordinate efforts effectively.
2. **Weak Supply Chain and Third-Party Security**: Weak cybersecurity practices among contractors, vendors, and third-party service providers pose a major risk to critical infrastructure. The Kudankulam data leak exposed this vulnerability, highlighting the need for mandatory cybersecurity audits of vendors in strategic sectors.
3. **Legacy and Outdated IT Systems**: Many public sector systems, especially in critical infrastructure (power, railways, PSU banks), run on legacy software with unpatched vulnerabilities, increasing exposure to exploitation.
4. **Dependence on Foreign Technology:** A significant portion of India's cybersecurity infrastructure (estimated at **30-40%** in critical segments) depends on foreign "black-box" technologies. This creates supply chain risks in a volatile geopolitical environment and undermines strategic autonomy.
5. **Shortage of Skilled Cybersecurity Workforce**: India faces a significant shortage of trained cybersecurity professionals, limiting its ability to prevent, detect, and respond to cyber threats. The country has an estimated **300,000** cybersecurity professionals, but this falls far short of demand. A shortage of **1 to 1.5 million** skilled workers is projected, with about **39,000** positions currently unfilled.
6. **Low Cybersecurity Awareness and Cyber Hygiene**: A lack of awareness about cyber threats, weak passwords, unsafe online practices, and poor adherence to security protocols make individuals and organizations vulnerable to phishing, malware, identity theft, and financial fraud.
7. **Inadequate Regulatory and Legal Framework**: India's cybersecurity governance is constrained by an evolving regulatory framework that has not fully kept pace with the rapidly changing cyber threat landscape. The primary law governing cybercrime, the **Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000**, was enacted before the emergence of modern threats such as ransomware, deepfakes, AI-enabled cyberattacks, and large-scale data breaches.
8. **Rise of Sophisticated and Evolving Threats**: Ransomware-as-a-service, AI-generated phishing/ deepfakes, and zero-day exploits evolve faster than defensive capacities. State-sponsored APT groups (often linked to China and Pakistan) possess resources and sophistication that outpace many Indian institutions' defensive capabilities.

What measures has the Government of India undertaken to strengthen India's cybersecurity architecture?

Institutions & Bodies	• **CERT-In (Indian Computer Emergency Response Team):** The national nodal agency for responding to cybersecurity incidents. It issues alerts, conducts mock drills, coordinates response, and provides guidelines on security practices. • **NCIIPC (National Critical Information Infrastructure Protection Centre):** Nodal agency for protecting **Critical Information Infrastructure (CII)**. It provides threat intelligence and advice to sectors like power, banking, and transport. • **I4C (Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre):** Established by the MHA to combat cybercrime in a coordinated manner. It manages the National Cybercrime Reporting Portal and the Cyber Fraud Mitigation Centre.

	• **NCCC (National Cyber Coordination Centre):** Operates as a control room to scan cyberspace for threats. It shares metadata with other agencies for coordinated action. • **NCSC (National Cyber Security Coordinator):** Coordinates cyber security efforts among different agencies under the National Security Council Secretariat. • **CyMAC (Cyber Multi Agency Centre):** A unified platform for real-time monitoring, threat intelligence sharing, and coordinated response among agencies like IB, CERT-In, and NCIIPC.
Legal, Regulatory and Policy Framework	• **IT Act, 2000** (amended 2008): Primary legislation criminalizing hacking, data theft, and cyberterrorism (Section 66F). • **Digital Personal Data Protection Act (DPDPA), 2023**: This Act is a major step forward, creating a comprehensive framework for processing personal data, emphasizing accountability, informed consent, and mandatory breach notifications. • **National Cyber Security Policy, 2013**: India's first comprehensive policy framework. It aims to create a secure cyber ecosystem, strengthen the regulatory framework, and train cybersecurity professionals. • **National Cyber Security Strategy**: Envisages a 5-pillar approach: **secure** (large-scale digitization), **strengthen** (proactive defence), **synergise** (institutional coordination), **skill** (capacity building), and **safeguard** (citizen protection).
Capacity Building & Awareness	• **Cyber Surakshit Bharat (CSB) Initiative**: A public-private partnership program that has trained over **1,662** Chief Information Security Officers (CISOs) and IT officials. • **CERT-In Training Programs**: CERT-In trained **12,014** officials in 2024 on securing IT infrastructure and mitigating cyberattacks. • **Cyber Swachhta Kendra (CSK)**: A citizen-centric initiative that provides free botnet cleaning and malware removal tools, extending the vision of "Swachh Bharat" to cyberspace.

What should be the way forward?

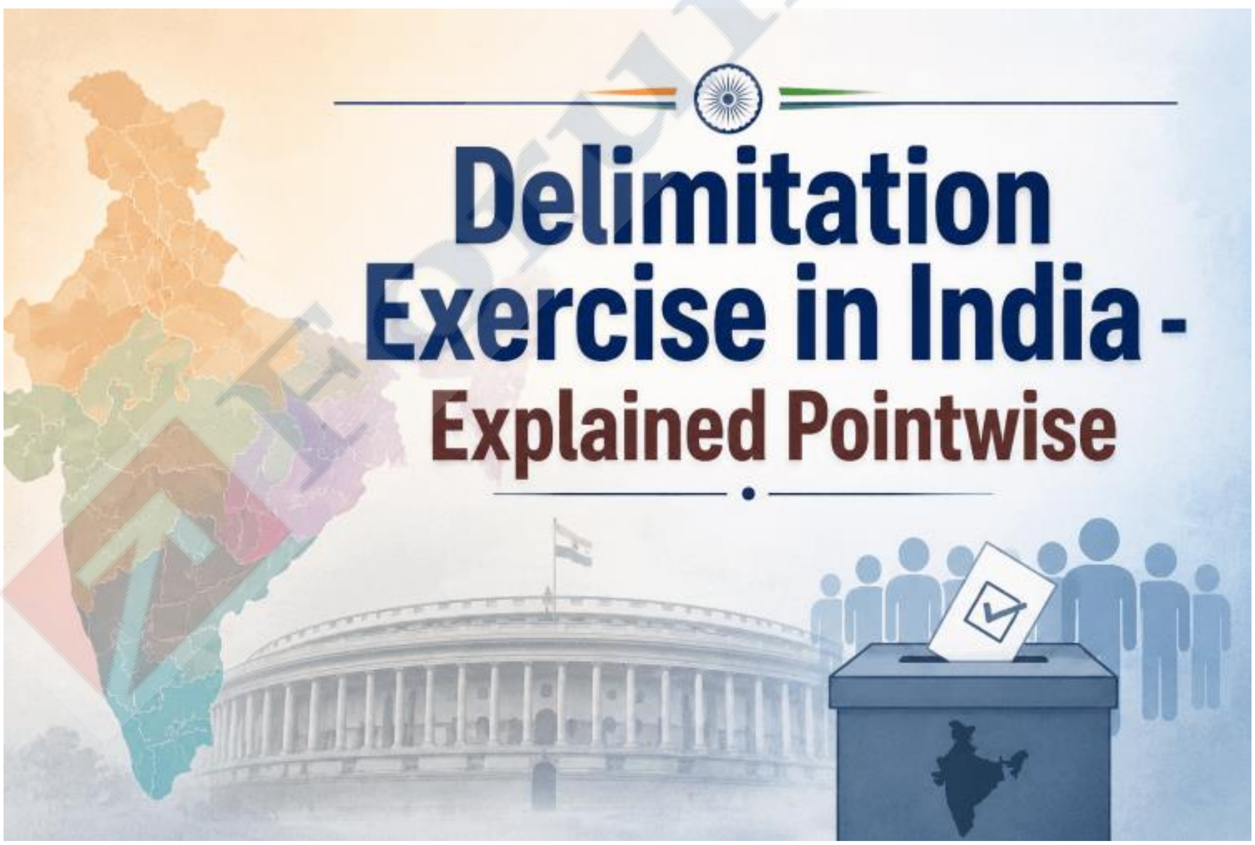
1. **Building Domestic Cyber and AI Capacity**: India must build indigenous technology across models, data, and computing infrastructure, as there is "no other option" given the sensitive nature of national systems. This includes developing sovereign alternatives in cloud, email, and operating systems to reduce dependence on foreign supply chains and protect metadata.
2. **Unified and Updated Legal Framework**: Enact a comprehensive, dedicated **Cybersecurity Act** (moving beyond the IT Act, 2000) that addresses ransomware, AI-enabled threats, and critical infrastructure protection with clear penal and civil liability provisions. Finalize and adopt a revised **National Cyber Security Strategy** to replace the outdated 2013 policy, with clear timelines and measurable targets.
3. **Strengthening Institutional Coordination**: Establish a unified national cybersecurity authority to improve coordination among agencies such as CERT-In, NCIIPC, NSCS, and sectoral regulators. This

would reduce fragmentation, ensure clear responsibilities, and provide a single point of accountability during cyber incidents.

4. **Building a Future-Ready Cyber Workforce**: India must invest in cybersecurity education, skill development, and continuous training to address the shortage of cyber professionals. Scale up dedicated cybersecurity education (undergraduate/postgraduate programs, CoEs) and public-private training partnerships to close the skilled workforce gap.
5. **Citizen Awareness and Cyber Hygiene**: Expand digital literacy and cyber awareness programmes such as Cyber Surakshit Bharat and ISEA, especially for first-time internet users, to promote safe online practices amid the rapid growth of smartphones and UPI-based transactions. Integrate basic cybersecurity education into school and college curricula.
6. **Technology and Infrastructure Modernization**: India must continuously upgrade its cybersecurity infrastructure by adopting advanced technologies such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), Machine Learning (ML), threat intelligence platforms, and secure cloud systems. Phase out legacy IT systems in critical infrastructure through time-bound modernization programs.

UPSC GS-3: Cybersecurity
Read More: The Hindu

Delimitation Exercise in India – Explained Pointwise



Every democracy must periodically redraw its electoral map to reflect population change. In India, this process is known as delimitation. The last delimitation happened in 1975, after which Indira Gandhi put a freeze until 2000. A year later, Parliament again froze the number of members of the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies till 2026. The delimitation of constituencies for the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies is to be carried out on the basis of the first Census after 2026. Due to this inordinate delay, several issues related to democracy, demography and federalism await the fifth delimitation exercise.

What is Delimitation? What is the constitutional status behind Delimitation in India?

- **Delimitation:**
    - Delimitation refers to the process of redrawing the boundaries of electoral constituencies to ensure fair representation based on population changes.
    - It is conducted by the Delimitation Commission under Articles 82 and 170 of the Indian Constitution.
    - The objective is to provide equitable representation to all regions by correcting the imbalances caused by changes in population (due to births, deaths, and migration), thereby upholding the democratic principle of "**one vote, one value.**"
- **Delimitation Commission:**
    - The Delimitation Commission is a statutory body responsible for determining the boundaries of various constituencies in the country for the purpose of elections.
    - It is appointed by the President & governed by the Delimitation Commission Act.
    - The last Delimitation Commission (2002-08) only redraw the internal constituency boundaries without reallocating seats among the States.
    - The next Commission would probably reallocate seats among States for the first time since 1976, redraw all constituencies, and create reserved constituencies for women 's 33% quota.

What is the significance of the Delimitation Exercise in India?

1. **Political Representation and Electoral Fairness:** Ensures democratic legitimacy through equitable distribution of seats in Lok Sabha and State Assemblies. **E.g.** The 2002 Delimitation Commission led to a better voter-per-MP ratio in urban and rural areas and prevented malapportionment, ensuring each MP represents roughly the same number of citizens.
2. **Upholding Democracy:** Reduces gerrymandering (political manipulation of electoral district boundaries to advantage a party, group, or socioeconomic class within the constituency) , ensuring fair electoral contests. **E.g.** Supreme Court in Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India (2006) upheld the importance of delimitation for fair democracy.
3. **Socio-Economic Equity:** The delimitation exercise enhances representation for marginalized communities and Scheduled Tribes. **E.g.** The J&K Delimitation Commission allocated more seats to Jammu to address past disparities.
4. **Strengthening of Federalism:** The delimitation process ensures equitable representation among States, balancing national unity with regional autonomy. **E.g.** The 42nd Amendment's population freeze prevented southern states with lower population growth from losing representation, thereby upholding the spirit of cooperative federalism, crucial for India's unity.
5. **Administrative Efficiency:** The delimitation exercise ensures a manageable voter-to-representative ratio, aiding governance. **E.g.** Mumbai and Bengaluru saw improved electoral administration post the 2002 exercise.
6. **Electoral Integrity and Governance:** The delimitation process aligns representation with new demographic realities, as seen in global examples like the UK Boundary Commission.

What are the concerns associated with the Delimitation Exercise?

1. **Population vs. Development:** Southern states argue that delimitation based solely on population would penalize them for successful family planning and economic development. **E.g.** Tamil Nadu's fertility rate is 1.6, while Bihar's is 3.0. According to delimitation projections, if seats were allocated purely by population in an expanded Lok Sabha of approx. 888 members, UP would rise from 80 to 151 seats & Bihar from 40 to 82, while for TN it would increase from 39 to 53 & Kerala from 20 to just 23.
2. **Federalism at Risk:** States with low population growth may feel politically marginalized, leading to North-South divide concerns. There are concerns that the Delimitation Exercise can create federal Imbalance as states with better governance may feel punished for controlling population. **E.g.** Sarkaria Commission (1983) warned against excessive centralization of power.
3. **Reduced Legislative Efficiency**: The new delimitation will increase the number of Lok Sabha seats to reflect population changes. A much larger House may reduce speaking time for each MP and make parliamentary proceedings less efficient.
4. **Disincentive to Population Control:** If states that successfully reduced population growth lose parliamentary representation after delimitation, it may discourage investments in family planning and public health, undermining the long-term objective of population stabilisation.
5. **Impact on Reservation**: Delimitation may alter the number and boundaries of constituencies reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), affecting political representation, electoral dynamics, and the interests of local communities.
6. **Manipulation:** There are concerns that political parties may influence constituency boundaries for electoral gains. **E.g.** Allegations of bias in the J&K delimitation process (2022).
7. **Delays and Political Resistance:** There are instances of increased political resistance as seen in the case of Justice Kuldip Singh-led Commission (2002) facing pushback from political parties unwilling to lose seats.
8. **Economic Disparities:** Southern states argue that higher revenue generation (GST collections, per capita income) should be factored into representation.

What Should be the Way Forward?

1. **Implement Expert Recommendations:** The following commissions have suggested the following reforms for ensuring federal balance and delimitation needs:
   - **Sarkaria Commission (1983)**: Suggested a balanced approach between federalism and national unity.
   - **Punchhi Commission (2010)**: Proposed equal weightage to population and governance needs.
2. **Ensure Transparency and Independent Oversight:** The Election Commission's autonomy should be strengthened to ensure fair delimitation process.
   - In **Kuldip Nayar v. Union of India (2006)**, SC emphasized the need for fair representation while balancing federal concerns.
   - In **TN Seshan v. Union of India (1995)**, SC highlighted the importance of an independent delimitation body.
3. **Constitutional and Legislative Reforms:** Amend Articles 81 and 82 to ensure balanced regional representation and introduce proportional representation models used in Germany and Canada.
4. **Weighted Representation Model:** Adopt a weighted formula – 80% weight for population, 20% for development indicators such as literacy, health, or sustained fertility control – similar to how Finance Commission uses composite indicators for tax devolution.
5. **Implement a Uniform Expansion**: Rather than altering the proportional share of each state based on raw population changes, the total Lok Sabha strength could expand (e.g. by 50%, from 543 to 816

seats) on a pro-rata basis. Under this model, states like Uttar Pradesh would scale up (from 80 to 120 seats), but Tamil Nadu would also scale up proportionately (from 39 to 59 seats). This ensures that the relative political weight of Southern states remains constant.

Conclusion: Delimitation is a delicate balance between democracy and federalism. While it ensures equal representation, challenges related to regional disparities, population dynamics, and governance issues must be addressed. The Supreme Court and Election Commission must play a proactive role in ensuring transparency and fairness. A balanced approach grounded in constitutional values, expert recommendations, and global best practices – is essential to uphold India's democratic and federal ethos.

Read more: [Indian Express]
UPSC Syllabus- GS 2– Issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure

Space Sector in India – Significance & Challenges – Explained Pointwise

The successful launch of **Vikram-1**, India's first privately developed orbital rocket by Skyroot Aerospace, marks a watershed moment for the country's space sector. It reflects the success of recent space-sector reforms, growing private participation, and India's transition from an ISRO-centric model towards a vibrant, innovation-driven and globally competitive space ecosystem.

What have been the recent developments in Space Sector in India?

Skyroot's Vikram-1	● On July 18, 2026, India witnessed a defining moment when **Skyroot Aerospace successfully launched Vikram-1**, the country's first privately developed orbital rocket. ● The mission, named "**Mission Aagaman**," lifted off from ISRO's Satish Dhawan Space Centre and successfully deployed its payloads into a 450 km orbit. ● This achievement makes India only the **third country** after the US and China to have a private company achieve orbital launch capability.
Explosive Growth in Private Space Startups	● Space startups such as **Skyroot Aerospace**, **Agnikul Cosmos**, **Pixxel** and **Dhruva Space** are developing launch vehicles, satellites and downstream space applications. ● IN-SPACe reports more than **300 registered space startups** as of 2026, up from 54 companies in 2020, before the 2020 reforms and creation of IN-SPACe as the single-window regulator. Other estimates put the figure **above 400**. ● India's space economy is now valued at **$8.4 billion**, having rapidly expanded since the sector opened to private investment in 2020.
Institutional Restructuring	● The Indian Space Policy 2023 formalized distinct roles: ○ **ISRO** focuses on R&D ○ **NSIL** handles commercialization ○ **IN-SPACe** authorizes private-sector space activities
Critical Docking Demonstration	● The **SPADEX mission successfully demonstrated autonomous satellite docking and undocking in space** in 2025. ● This made India the **fourth** nation to master this complex technology, which is vital for future space stations and in-orbit servicing.

Future Roadmap and Initiatives:

Gaganyaan Program	● ISRO is advancing its Gaganyaan program, which will send an Indian crew to space for the first time, showcasing India's human spaceflight capabilities ● ISRO has completed over 8,000 ground tests and plans to conduct the **first uncrewed test flight by the end of 2026.** ● By 2035, ISRO aims to establish India's own space station, the **'Bharatiya Antariksh Station' (BAS).** The revised Gaganyaan Programme includes the development of the first module of BAS and four missions to demonstrate and validate various technologies for BAS by December 2028.

Next-Generation Launch Vehicle	● ISRO is working on a Next Generation Launch Vehicle (NGLV). It will be a three-stage rocket using semi-cryogenic, liquid, and cryogenic engines ● The NGLV will replace some existing launch vehicles, such as the GSLV. The NGLV will triple the payload capacity of the LVM3 (Geosynchronous Satellite Launch Vehicle Mk III), India's most powerful rocket. Additionally, ISRO is upgrading the LVM3 with a new semi-cryogenic engine. ● In contrast to India's existing rockets, which are expendable and designed for single use, a significant portion of the NGLV will be reusable. Reusability requires that the rocket keep some of its fuel for controlled descent back to the earth's surface.
Venus Orbiter Mission (Shukrayaan)	● Formal approval was granted for India's first mission to Venus, targeted for launch in **2028.** ● The mission will study Venus's dense atmosphere using advanced aerobraking techniques.
Chandrayaan-4	● Cabinet approval was secured for Chandrayaan-4, a complex lunar sample-return mission designed to land on the Moon, collect samples, dock in lunar orbit, and safely return them to Earth using technologies validated via SPADEX.

What is the significance of Space sector in India?

Socio-Economic Impact & Grassroot Governance	1. **Agriculture & Water Security:** Satellites like **Resourcesat** map crop acreage, estimate yields, monitor soil health, and track drought conditions for insurance claims. Under the National Hydrology Project, space data helps manage groundwater and river basins. 2. **Disaster Management:** Real-time satellite imagery provides early warnings for cyclones, floods, and forest fires, dramatically reducing mortality rates during severe weather events. 3. **Digital Inclusion & Telemedicine:** GSAT satellites support tele-education (**PM e-VIDYA**) and power nearly 180 telemedicine nodes in remote and high-altitude regions like Ladakh and Siachen.

Economic importance	1. **Boost to 'Space Industrialisation':** India's space economy is valued at $8.4 billion (~2-3% of the global market) and growing rapidly since the 2020 liberalization. The development of space sector will promote **Space Industrialisation** in India, provide a boost to space-tech ecosystem and help India's space economy to reach $100 billion by 2040. 2. **Promotion of Entrepreneurship:** According to a global report published in June 2021, India has 368 private space firms, placing it 5th in the world in size after the US, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Germany. With these many firms, India is leading China (288), France (269), and Spain (206) in the private space industry. 3. **Job Creation**: Between 2014 and 2024, the sector generated an estimated $60 billion for GDP while directly and indirectly supporting millions of jobs. 4. **Source of Forex**: ISRO's commercial arm (NSIL) has launched over 430 foreign satellites from more than 30 countries, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in foreign exchange and cementing international trust. 5. **Technological Self-Reliance (Atmanirbharta)**: Space technology drives spin-off innovations in materials science (carbon composites), propulsion (3D-printed liquid engines), electronics, and telecommunication with civilian applications beyond space itself.
National Security and Strategic Autonomy	1. **Indigenous Navigation (NavIC):** India's regional satellite navigation system provides precise positioning for civilian logistics and missile guidance, ensuring military navigation is not vulnerable to foreign access restrictions during a conflict. 2. **Military Surveillance:** Specialized Earth Observation (EO) and military communication satellites provide round-the-clock border surveillance, maritime domain awareness in the Indian Ocean, and secure defense communications. 3. **Launch Infrastructure:** Native launch vehicles (LVM3, PSLV, SSLV) ensure India can independently place strategic assets into orbit without relying on foreign spaceports.
Diplomatic and Soft Power Leverage	1. **Collaboration & Voice of Global South**: International collaborations (e.g. ISRO-CNES on TRISHNA) and India's role in launching satellites for other nations position it as a reliable, cost-effective space partner for the Global South. 2. **Space Governance**: Space sector strengthens India's voice in shaping global space governance norms, especially as contested orbital resources and congestion (satellite constellations, space debris) become pressing multilateral concerns.

What is the significance of the recent successful launch of Vikram-1 for India's space sector?

1. **Milestone for Private Space Industry**: The launch of Vikram-1 marks the emergence of India's first privately developed orbital launch vehicle, showcasing the growing capabilities of domestic space startups. Thus, transforming the sector from an exclusive government domain into a thriving, collaborative ecosystem.
2. **Boost to Commercial Space Activities**: The successful launch of Vikram-1 enhances India's ability to offer cost-effective launch services in the rapidly expanding global small-satellite market. The success

makes India only the **third nation in the world** (after the US and China) to possess sovereign, private orbital launch capabilities.

3. **Strengthening of Startup Ecosystem**: It encourages investment, innovation, and entrepreneurship in the space sector, inspiring more startups to enter the industry. Skyroot itself became India's first space-tech unicorn with a **$1.1 billion valuation.** It is expected to catalyze over 400 other space startups in India, helping to grow the domestic space economy from $8 billion to a targeted $44 billion by 2033.
4. **Reduced Dependence on ISRO**: It enables ISRO to focus more on advanced research, deep-space exploration, and strategic missions while private players undertake commercial launches. This frees ISRO's budget, infrastructure, and scientific talent to focus entirely on flagship programs like **Gaganyaan**, **Bharatiya Antariksh Station**, and **Chandrayaan-4.**
5. **Attracting Domestic and Foreign Investment**: The successful launch of Vikram-1 improves investor confidence in India's space ecosystem and supports greater inflow of venture capital and FDI.
6. **Advancement of Indigenous Technology**: It demonstrates India's growing capability to design, develop, and manufacture sophisticated launch systems using indigenous expertise.
7. **Enhancing Global Competitiveness**: It positions India as a major player in the global commercial launch market, competing with established international space companies.

What are the challenges faced by the space sector in India?

1. **Budgetary Challenges:** Space sector in India faces budget constraints despite its successes in launching missions. There has been an 8% decline in budget allocations to ISRO in 2023-2024 with respect to 2022-2023. The funds allocated to the space sector are very less in comparison to other countries. The US spent 10 times and China 6 times more than India in the space sector in 2019-20.
2. **Manpower Challenges:**
   - **Vacancies**: Official Department of Space (DoS) data reveals that nearly 3 out of every 10 sanctioned posts lie vacant (5,632 positions).
   - **Brain Drain**: The booming private space sector is attracting top ISRO scientists with significantly higher salaries, stock options, and faster career progression. This includes leaders of critical projects like the LVM-3 rocket for Gaganyaan and the SpaDeX mission.
3. **Absence of a Clear Legislative Framework:** India lacks a comprehensive, codified statutory "Space Law". The **Draft Space Activities Bill**, which was introduced way back in 2017 but has not yet been passed. The sector currently operates through policy instruments (Indian Space Policy 2023) and IN-SPACe authorizations rather than a full statutory framework covering liability, insurance, licensing, and dispute resolution. This has hindered the further growth and development of the space sector in India.
4. **Underdeveloped Industrial Base**: India still relies heavily on **importing essential components** for its space program, as domestic industrial capabilities lag behind its ambitions. This reliance is compounded by high tariffs on imports, making Indian space products less competitive. For e.g. India imports over ₹2,000+ crore worth of space-grade hardware annually.
5. **Lack of robust Dispute Settlement Mechanism:** This discourages private investment in the space sector in India. The void was seen in Antrix-Devas cancelled satellite deal. The Government of India owes nearly $1.2 billion to Devas Multimedia as per an order of a tribunal of the International Chamber of Commerce.
6. **Technological Challenges:** ISRO faces challenges in upgrading its technology, such as developing more powerful launch vehicles with higher payload capacities. **For e.g.** Chandrayaan-3 took about six weeks to reach the Moon, while the failed Russian mission Luna-25 took only one week. Currently,

India uses two LVM3 rockets for uncrewed lunar missions and relies on foreign rockets like SpaceX's Falcon 9 for heavier payloads.

7. **Inadequate Space Infrastructure**: India has limited launch pads, testing facilities, tracking stations, and manufacturing infrastructure compared to major spacefaring nations. For e.g. Satish Dhawan Space Centre at Sriharikota remains the primary orbital gateway, creating scheduling friction between national flagship missions and private commercial launches.
8. **Government funding driven sector:** Some critics have argued that such massive spending by the government alone in the space sector curtails Indian government's spending capability in social sectors like poverty alleviation, education, and health which must be the priority for developing country like India.

What initiatives has the Government undertaken to strengthen the space sector?

Space Sector Reforms (2020)	Opened the space sector to **private participation** across satellite manufacturing, launch services, and space-based applications.
Indian Space Policy, 2023	Indian Space Policy 2023 is a landmark policy for the development for India's space sector. Formally defined the roles of **ISRO** (focused on advanced R&D and deep space), **NSIL** (commercializing operational technology), and **IN-SPACe** (enabling non-government entities). It provides legal clarity allowing private companies to own, build, and operate space assets, rockets, and ground stations.
IN-SPACe	It aims to provide a level-playing field for private companies to use the Indian space architecture. IN-SPACe acts as a channel between ISRO and any private players that want to participate in space activity, thereby culling lengthy bureaucratic procedures.
New Space India Limited (NSIL)	It is a Central Public Sector Enterprise under the Department of Space that was established in 2019. It has been mandated to transfer the technologies emanating out of the Indian space programme and enable Indian industry to scale up high-technology manufacturing base.
FDI Policy	The government has amended its foreign direct investment (FDI) policy to allow 100% FDI in most space sectors. However, there are some limits on satellite manufacturing (74%) and launch infrastructure (49%).
Technology Transfer from ISRO	ISRO has transferred numerous technologies to industries and startups. It helps domestic firms develop indigenous launch vehicles, satellites, and space applications.
Access to Space Infrastructure	Private companies are allowed to utilize ISRO's launch pads, testing facilities, laboratories, and tracking networks. This helps in reducing the infrastructure costs for startups and emerging firms.
Dedicated Small Rocket Spaceport	Construction commenced on India's second rocket launchpad at Kulasekarapattinam, Tamil Nadu. Dedicated primarily to **SSLVs**, this coastal

(Kulasekarapattin am)	launchpad enables direct south-bound polar launches without needing expensive dogleg maneuvers over Sri Lanka.
Dedicated Financing Instruments	A **₹1,000 crore Venture Capital Fund** (2025-26 to 2029-30) to support space startups, addressing the capital-intensive, long-gestation nature of hardware ventures. A **₹500 crore Technology Adoption Fund** to help commercialize indigenous technologies developed by non-government entities.
Talent Retention	The exodus of top ISRO scientists to the private sector is a pressing problem. The government's primary response has been to introduce stricter exit rules for scientists involved in critical missions like Gaganyaan, to slow the attrition.

What should be the Way forward?

1. **Infrastructure Status**: A key demand is to formally classify "**Space & Satellite Infrastructure**" as a distinct infrastructure sub-sector. This would unlock access to long-term, low-cost capital from banks and financial institutions, a critical need for capital-intensive space projects with long gestation periods.
2. **Push for greater privatization:** India should create space policies that boost private sector investment and focus on commercial growth. The Department of Space can award contracts to Indian companies to develop reusable, heavy-lift rockets. A milestone-based funding mechanism, where payments are made to private players after meeting specific objectives at each stage, would ensure accountability and reduce cost overruns.
3. **Strengthen the Regulatory Framework**: Establish a comprehensive legal framework covering licensing, liability, insurance, intellectual property rights, and space debris management. Also, ensure policy stability and ease of doing business for private players.
4. **Passage of Space Activities Bill:** The passage of the Space Activities Bill should also be done in order to give private players greater clarity and protection. This should involve proper consultation and discussions with the concerned stakeholders.
5. **Expand Space Infrastructure**: Develop additional launch pads, testing facilities, tracking stations, and space parks through public-private partnerships. Improve access to common infrastructure for startups and MSMEs.
6. **Develop a Skilled Workforce**: Establish joint degree and research programs between ISRO, IIST, and premier IITs focused on niche areas like space robotics, satellite propulsion, and space medicine. Streamline DoS recruitment processes to clear technical vacancies promptly, ensuring flagship missions like Gaganyaan, BAS, and Chandrayaan-4 have dedicated engineering teams.
7. **Setting up Space Dispute Tribunal:** The plan to set up an independent tribunal to adjudicate disputes among private space entities should be implemented promptly.
8. **Enhanced International Collaboration:** India must do more collaboration and research with pioneer countries like the US & Russia, who have already ramped up their space infrastructure.

Conclusion: Indian Space sector possesses huge untapped potential which can be realized with adequate policy measures by the government. This would boost the confidence of the private sector and deliver optimum results, thereby helping the country acquire the top spot in the global space industry.

Read more: [The Hindu]

UPSC Syllabus- GS 3- Space

India's Cotton Sector (White Gold) – Significance & Challenges – Explained Pointwise

Cotton is one of India's most important cash crops and contributes about 23% of global fibre production. It supports nearly **6 million farmers** and provides employment to around **40–50 million people** in cultivation, processing, textiles, and trade. Often called **"White Gold,"** cotton is a major source of export earnings. India's cotton sector is characterized by large-scale cultivation, rich cotton diversity, and a strong textile industry. Government initiatives such as MSP procurement, the Mission for Cotton Productivity, and Kasturi Cotton Bharat are helping improve productivity, quality, and global competitiveness.

What are the key dimensions of India's Cotton Sector?

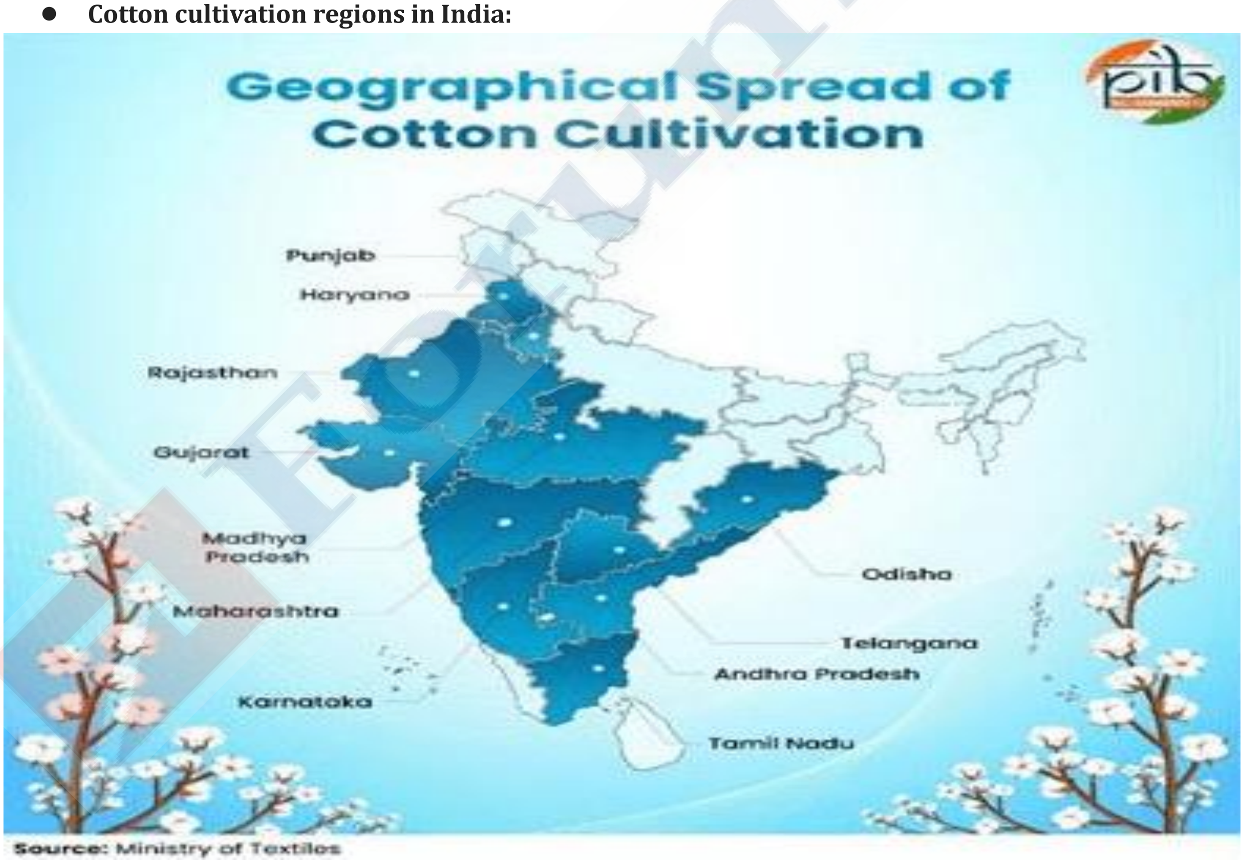
- Cotton is one of the most important commercial crops cultivated in India.
- It accounts for around **23%** of global fibre production. The crop supports the livelihoods of around **6 million** cotton farmers. It also sustains employment for another **40-50 million** people engaged in related activities such as cotton processing and trade.
- Beyond clothing, cotton plays a vital role in earning foreign exchange through exports of fibre, yarn, fabrics and garments.
- Due to its economic importance in India, it is also termed as **"White-Gold"**.
- India is the only country that cultivates all four recognized cotton species. These include:
    1. **G. Arboreum**
    2. **G. Herbaceum** (commonly referred to as **Asian cotton**)
    3. **G. Barbadense** (known as **Egyptian cotton**)

4. **G. Hirsutum** (known as **American upland cotton**) – it accounts for nearly **90%** of hybrid cotton production in India. All **Bt cotton** hybrids currently cultivated in the country belong to this species.

- In addition to botanical diversity, cotton in India is also classified by staple length. This length determines fibre quality and end use. The country produces the full range of staple categories:

Staple Categories	**Staple Length (in mm)**
Short Staple	20 and below
Medium Staple	20.5 to 24.5
Medium Long Staple	25.0 to 27.0
Long Staple	27.5 to 32.0
Extra-Long Staple	32.5 and above

- **Cotton cultivation regions in India:**



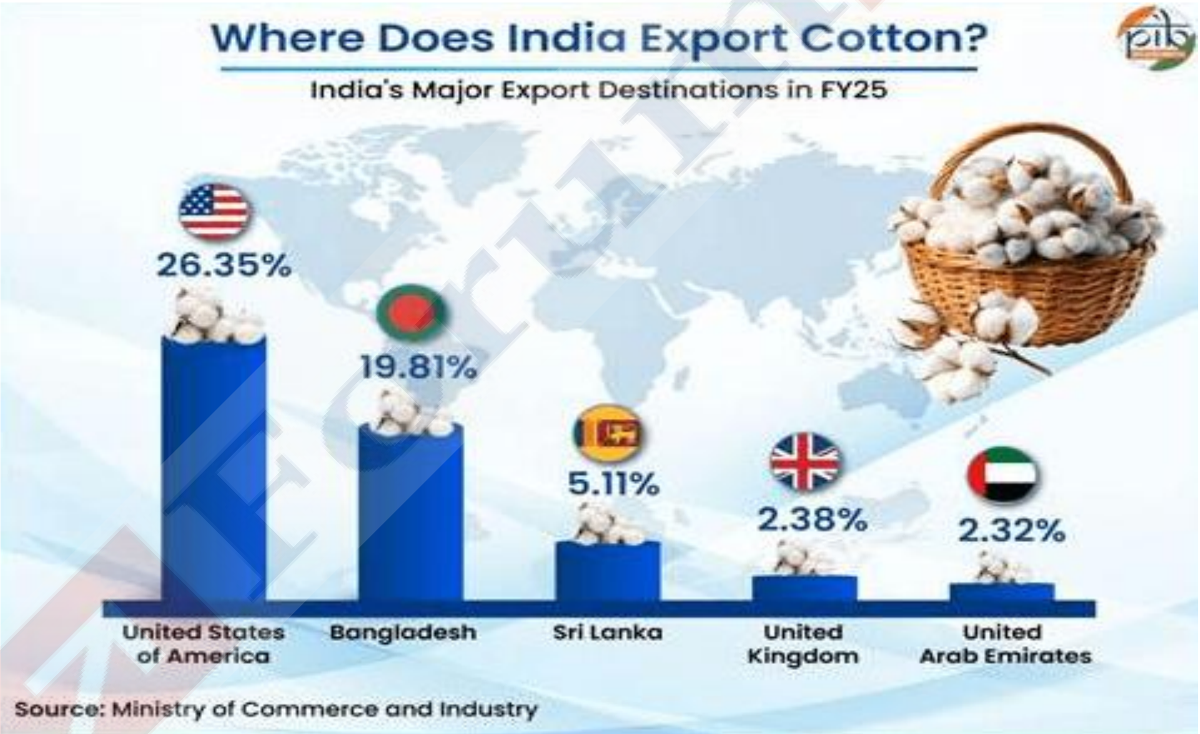
Source: PIB

- Cotton production in India is largely concentrated in **9 major states**, grouped into **3 distinct agro-ecological zones:**
    1. **Northern Zone** comprising Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan

2. **Central Zone** comprising Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Madhya Pradesh
3. **Southern Zone** comprising Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, and Karnataka

What is the significance of Cotton Sector for India?

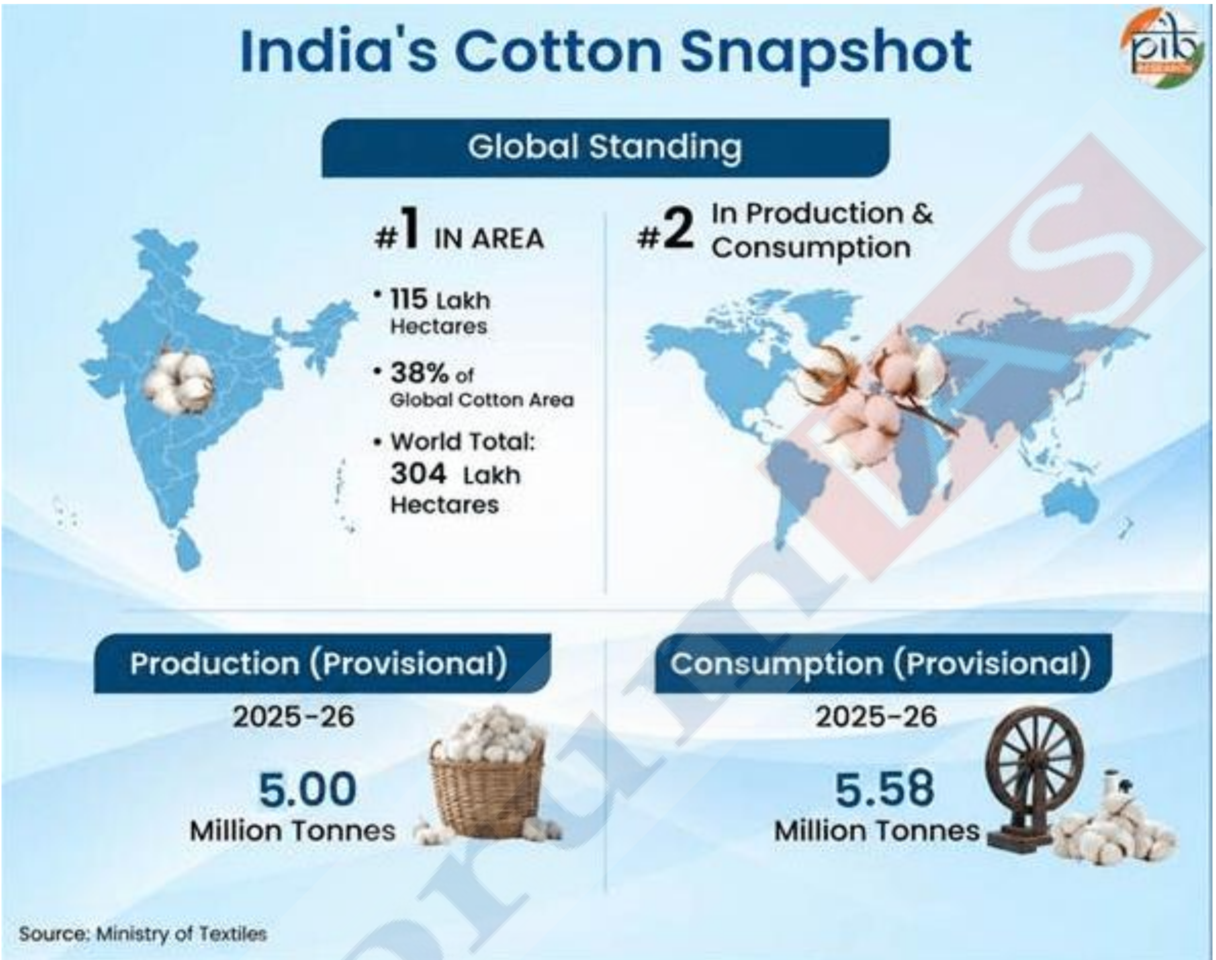
1. **Contribution to the Economy**: Cotton is the primary raw material for India's textile sector, which is a major contributor to manufacturing GDP. The broader textile sector contributes around **2% to India's GDP** and roughly **11% to overall manufacturing Gross Value Added (GVA).**
2. **Livelihood & Employment Generation**: Cotton sustains the livelihoods of nearly **60 lakh farmers** directly, and generates employment for an estimated **4-5 crore people** in allied activities like ginning, pressing, spinning, weaving, processing, and trade – making it one of the largest employment-generating crops in Indian agriculture.
3. **Backbone of the Textile Industry**: Cotton is the primary raw material for India's textile sector, which is a major contributor to manufacturing GDP and one of the largest sources of industrial employment in the country.
4. **Foreign Exchange Earnings**: Cotton is one of the largest contributors to India's net foreign exchange earnings through exports – which include – raw cotton, intermediate products like yarn and fabric, and finished products such as garments, made-ups, and knitwear. In FY26 alone, Cotton Textiles generated over **$9.3 billion in export value** (accounting for nearly 29% of total textile exports).



Source: PIB

5. **Rural Development**: As a major commercial crop, cotton provides much higher farmer income potential compared to many food grains, making it central to the rural cash economy in cotton-growing states like Gujarat, Maharashtra, Telangana, and Punjab. It supports diversification of the cropping pattern away from staple grains, contributing to agricultural income resilience in semi-arid and rain-fed regions.
6. **Enhances Global Trade Competitiveness**: India ranks **second** globally in both **cotton production and consumption.** It accounts for **~20% of global cotton production,** holds the **world's largest**

cotton acreage (38% of global cultivated land), and accounts for about 3.37% of total world exports. As one of the world's largest cotton producers, India occupies an important position in global textile and apparel value chains.



Source: PIB

What are the major challenges confronting India's Cotton Sector?

1. **Low Productivity**: Despite having the largest cotton acreage in the world, India's per-hectare yields (440 kg/ha) remain significantly lower than major competitors like China (~2,311 kg/ha), Brazil (~1,943 kg/ha), and the US (~976 kg/ha), reflecting a persistent productivity gap.
2. **High Cost of Cultivation**: Cotton picking is a labor-intensive process, accounting for **30-35% of total cultivation costs**. Acute labor shortages during the peak picking season make this dependence increasingly unsustainable, yet a lack of investment in research for mechanization-ready varieties and suitable equipment holds back progress.
3. **Pest and Disease Attacks**: Pests like the **Pink Bollworm** and **Whitefly** have developed widespread resistance, leading to major crop failures in Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Punjab. Widespread resistance of the pink bollworm to existing Bt cotton has emerged as a major threat to yields and quality, undermining the very technology that once boosted Indian cotton output.
4. **Climate Change and Weather Risks**: A large share of cotton cultivation remains rain-fed (62% cotton grown in rainfed regions), making it highly vulnerable to erratic monsoons, droughts, and untimely heavy rains. Climate change is expected to increase the frequency of such disruptions, threatening long-term yield stability.

5. **Limited Adoption of Technology**: The sector has not seen a major technological breakthrough since the introduction of Bt cotton over two decades ago. Newer, next-generation genetically modified (GM) technologies, such as herbicide-tolerant (Ht) cotton, have been approved for cultivation in some countries but remain stuck in India's regulatory process.
6. **Sustainability and Environmental Concerns**: Conventional cotton cultivation's heavy water and chemical input requirements raise sustainability concerns, especially as global textile buyers push for organic, regenerative, and traceable cotton sourcing.

What initiatives has the government undertaken to boost the Cotton Sector?

MSP and Procurement Support	● Annual fixation of **Minimum Support Price (MSP)** for seed cotton (kapas) by CACP recommendation. ● **Cotton Corporation of India (CCI)** conducts MSP procurement operations whenever market prices fall below MSP. ● Cabinet approval of a **₹1,718 crore MSP fund** routed through CCI to support continued procurement operations and safeguard farmer incomes amid price pressures.
Mission for Cotton Productivity	● It is a five-year plan (2026-27 to 2030-31), which was approved in May 2026. ● Aligned with the **'5F' vision** of farm, fibre, factory, fashion and foreign, the initiative seeks to enhance farmer incomes and ensure a steady supply of quality cotton. ● The Mission aims to transform the sector by focusing on three key pillars: 1. **Boosting Productivity Through Technology** 2. **Empowering Farmers and Ensuring Quality** 3. **Expanding the Fibre Base**
Trade Policy Interventions	● Extension of the **11% import duty waiver on cotton** to ensure adequate raw material availability for the domestic textile and spinning industry, especially when domestic production hit a 15-year low.
Kapas Kisan Mobile App	● It enables farmers to access MSP information, locate nearby procurement centres, track payments, and access best farming practice advisories, improving transparency and reducing information asymmetry in cotton marketing.
Kasturi Cotton	● A joint initiative between the Ministry of Textiles, the Cotton Corporation of India (CCI), and TEXPROCIL. ● Aims to brand high-quality Indian cotton for global markets, enhancing traceability, quality assurance, and India's positioning in premium international cotton and textile markets.

MITRA (Mega Integrated Textile Region and Apparel) Parks	● Introduced to support integrated textile infrastructure development to strengthen the downstream value chain from cotton to finished garments, boosting global competitiveness and investment attraction.
SAMARTH (Scheme for Capacity Building in the Textile Sector)	● It addresses skill shortages across the cotton-to-textile value chain, with a target of training 10 lakh people to support ginning, spinning, weaving, and garmenting industries.

What should be the way forward?

1. **Bridging the Productivity Gap**: Accelerate the rollout of Mission for Cotton Productivity with clear, state-wise yield targets, and scale up access to improved seed varieties, precision agriculture, and soil-health-based fertilizer use for smallholder farmers.
2. **Improve Water Use Efficiency**: Expand subsidized access to precision drip irrigation and micro-irrigation, particularly in rain-fed cotton belts, to reduce climate vulnerability and water intensity simultaneously.
3. **Strengthen Pest and Disease Management**: Fast-track a transparent, science-based regulatory review of next-generation Bt/GM cotton technologies to address pink bollworm resistance, balancing biosafety concerns with the urgent productivity need.
4. **Develop Climate-resilient Varieties**: Promote climate-resilient, drought-tolerant cotton varieties suited to erratic monsoon patterns, and strengthen weather-based crop insurance uptake among cotton farmers.
5. **Enhance Quality of Cotton Produce**: Introduce price premiums for farmers based on fibre quality parameters like staple length and strength – that would encourage the production of superior cotton.
6. **Develop Robust Supply Chains**: Deepen implementation of MITRA textile parks and SAMARTH skilling to help India move up the value chain from raw cotton and yarn exports toward higher-value finished garments and technical textiles.
7. **Boost Export Competitiveness**: Expand the Kasturi Cotton initiative with robust digital traceability (blockchain-based certification) to strengthen India's positioning in global markets increasingly demanding sustainable and traceable cotton.

UPSC GS-3: Agriculture
Read More: PIB

Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) – Significance & Concerns – Explained Pointwise

The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA), 2010 regulates the acceptance and utilisation of foreign funds by individuals, associations and NGOs to ensure transparency and safeguard national interests. The government's newly notified **FCRA Amendment Rules 2026** significantly tighten compliance. They mandate purpose-specific and geographical registration, hold "key functionaries" personally liable, expand social media disclosures, and require utilizing 75% of existing funds before receiving new installments.

What is the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA)?

- The Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) is a law that regulates the acceptance and utilization of foreign contributions or hospitality by individuals, associations, and companies to ensure they do not adversely affect national security, public order, or national interest.
- Enforced by the **Ministry of Home Affairs**, it prevents foreign entities from influencing India's internal politics, media, and public discourse.

What are some of the important provisions of the FCRA?

1. **Mandatory Registration or Prior Permission:** Organizations with cultural, educational, economic, or social programs must be officially registered with the Central Government to receive foreign contributions. Alternatively, they must obtain 'Prior Permission' for specific grants.

2. **Prohibited Entities:** Certain individuals and professions are entirely banned from accepting foreign contributions. These include election candidates, journalists, newspaper/media owners, judges, government servants, political parties, and members of legislative bodies.
3. **Registration and Renewal**: The Central Government grants registration, which is valid for **five years** and must be renewed within six months of expiry to remain valid. Newer organizations can seek 'prior permission' for a specific project from a specific donor.
4. **Banking and Utilization Rules**:
    - All foreign contributions must be received in a **single, exclusive FCRA bank account** at the State Bank of India's main branch in New Delhi.
    - Organizations can open additional accounts in scheduled banks solely for the **utilization** of these funds, but they must report this within 45 days.
    - The law caps the use of foreign funds for administrative expenses at **20%.**
    - The funds cannot be used for speculative business and must be utilized strictly within India for the approved purpose.
5. **Accounting and Reporting**: Recipients must maintain separate accounting records and file an annual online return in **Form FC-4** by December 31st each year. The return must be certified by a chartered accountant and include a balance sheet and income/expenditure statement. Records must be preserved for six years.
6. **Surrender and Cancellation of Registration:** The Central Government can suspend or cancel an organization's FCRA registration if there are violations of the Act. Organizations can also voluntarily surrender their registration, after which their foreign funds and related assets are transferred to a designated government authority.

What are the key objectives of the FCRA?

1. **Regulating the Acceptance of Foreign Funds**: The FCRA provides a structured mechanism to monitor who is bringing money into the country from abroad. It ensures that any individual, association, or company receiving foreign hospitality or cash is strictly registered, verified, and trackable.
2. **Preventing Activities Detrimental to National Interest**: A major objective is to block foreign entities from funding proxy agendas inside India. The law seeks to prevent foreign contributions from being used for activities that could pose a threat to:
    a. The sovereignty and integrity of India.
    b. Public interest or internal security.
    c. Strategic, scientific, or economic interests of the state.
    d. Harmony between religious, racial, social, linguistic, or regional groups.
3. **Insulating India's Democratic Institutions**: By placing a blanket ban on political parties, candidates, judges, legislators, and mainstream journalists, the objective is to ensure that domestic policy and public opinion are shaped exclusively by Indian citizens, not foreign donors.
4. **Enhancing Transparency & Accountability**: The Act forces NGOs and social organizations to be entirely transparent about how they use foreign aid. It requires registered entities to submit annual returns, audited accounts, and financial statements detailing the exact source and utilization of foreign funds.

What are the key changes introduced by the latest amendments to the FCRA Rules?

1. **Activity & Geographic Restrictions:** Registrations are now strictly activity-based and geography-based. Organizations must declare specific approved states/union territories of operation, utilize funds for designated purposes, and declare their social media accounts.

2. **No Proselytisation:** While faith-based activities like maintenance of worship places, religious education, and community kitchens are permitted, they strictly exclude proselytisation or religious conversion.
3. **Reasonable Activity Clause:** Organizations must utilize a minimum of ₹10 lakh in foreign funds over two financial years to demonstrate active operations.
4. **Vesting of Assets:** If an organization's FCRA registration is cancelled, surrendered, or expires without renewal, its foreign contributions and physical assets provisionally vest in a government-appointed Designated Authority.
5. **Permanent Takeover:** If registration is not restored, the assets permanently vest with the Authority, which may sell them or transfer them to government bodies, with proceeds credited to the Consolidated Fund of India.
6. **Expanded Definitions:** The definition of "key functionaries" now encompasses trustees, partners, governing body members, and anyone controlling the organization.
7. **Foreigner Restrictions:** Organizations with foreign nationals (other than OCI or Persons of Indian origin) as key functionaries are generally ineligible for registration unless specifically cleared by the central government.
8. **Usage Caps & Staged Receipts:** Subsequent installments of foreign funds can only be released after at least 75% of the prior installment has been spent and verified.
9. **Restrictions on "News" Activities**: Organizations must declare if they publish any books or articles, as they are prohibited from producing or broadcasting "news or current affairs" under the Act.

What is the significance of the FCRA?

1. **Sovereignty and National Security:** The primary purpose of FCRA is to protect the sovereignty & national security. It was enacted to ensure that the foreign money cannot be used to:
    - Fund **political destabilisation** or influence electoral outcomes.
    - Support **separatist or secessionist movements** (e.g., concerns about foreign funding to organisations in Kashmir, Northeast India).
    - Advance **religious conversion** activities that may cause communal friction.
    - Undermine **strategic national interests** through NGO-led campaigns against defence, nuclear, or infrastructure projects.
2. **Regulation of Civil Society and NGO Ecosystem**: India has one of the world's largest NGO sectors. FCRA is the **primary regulatory lever** governing the approximately 16,000–22,000 organisations registered to receive foreign funds.
3. **Ensuring Transparency and Accountability**: The Act creates a strict compliance regime. It requires NGOs to register, report their foreign receipts and expenditures in detail, and use funds only for their stated purposes, thereby making the flow and use of foreign money transparent.
4. **Enforcing Compliance**: In recent years, the government has used the FCRA to significantly increase scrutiny. This is evident in the cancellation of over 20,000 FCRA registrations of organizations for non-compliance.

What are the major criticisms of the FCRA framework in India?

1. **Vagueness of Key Provisions**: The Act prohibits activities "detrimental to national interest" or affecting "public order, security of State, harmony between religious, racial, linguistic or regional groups" — but these terms are **not defined** in the Act.
2. **Weaponisation Against Dissent**: The FCRA has often been criticised for being selectively enforced to silence organisations critical of government policies. Between 2014 and 2022, over **20,000 FCRA registrations** were cancelled — a scale critics argue cannot be explained by genuine security concerns alone.

3. **The Sub-Granting Ban**: India's civil society ecosystem historically functioned on a **hub-and-spoke model** — larger, registered organisations received foreign funds and channelled them to smaller, specialised grassroots groups. The ban effectively **severs this ecosystem**, leaving smaller organisations — often working with the most marginalised communities — without funding.
4. **The 20% Administrative Cost Cap**: The reduction of the administrative expense ceiling from **50% to 20%** of foreign contributions has drawn sharp criticism. The cap does not reflect **ground realities** of non-profit operations in India, where costs of compliance, rent, travel to remote areas, and staff training are substantial. For many organisations — particularly advocacy, legal aid, and research bodies where **human capital is the primary resource** — staff salaries alone exceed 20% of total expenditure.
5. **SBI New Delhi Main Branch Requirement**: The mandatory requirement that all FCRA-registered organisations maintain their **designated account only at SBI's New Delhi Main Branch** has been widely criticised. Organisations based in **Chennai, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, or rural areas** must operate a bank account 1,000+ kilometres away from their operations. It creates **severe practical difficulties** — physical banking, cheque clearing, cash management, and local vendor payments all become complicated.
6. **Due Process Deficits**: The procedural framework for **suspension and cancellation** of FCRA registration has been criticised for inadequate safeguards:
    - The MHA can **suspend registration for 180 days** on the basis of pending inquiry — effectively shutting down an organisation for six months without any finding of wrongdoing.
    - The **appellate mechanism** (appeal to the High Court) is expensive and slow — organisations may cease to exist financially before judicial relief is obtained.
    - There is **no independent adjudicatory body** — the MHA is simultaneously the regulator, prosecutor, and decision-maker, violating basic principles of **natural justice and institutional separation.**
7. **Chilling Effect on Legitimate Civil Society Activities**: Organisations avoid taking on **controversial causes** — environmental litigation against state projects, minority rights cases, anti-corruption campaigns — for fear of FCRA action. This progressively **depoliticises Indian civil society**, leaving only service-delivery organisations (which are less threatening to state power) while advocacy and rights organisations are weakened.
8. **Disproportionate Impact on Marginalised Communities**: The cumulative effect of FCRA restrictions falls most heavily on **India's most vulnerable populations.** Organisations working with **Adivasi communities** on land and forest rights — which frequently conflict with state and corporate interests — face disproportionate FCRA scrutiny.
9. **International Law and Human Rights Concerns**: The FCRA framework has been criticised as incompatible with India's **international human rights obligations:**
    - The **UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders** (1998) recognises the right of civil society to seek and receive funding — including from foreign sources — for legitimate rights work.
    - The framework potentially violates **Article 22 of the ICCPR** (freedom of association), to which India is a party.

What reforms are needed to make the FCRA regime more effective and balanced?

1. **Expedite Processing Times:** Introduce strict, legally binding service-level agreements (SLAs) for processing FCRA registration, renewal, and prior permission requests to prevent administrative backlogs and project disruptions.

2. **Grievance Redressal Mechanisms:** Establish an independent ombudsman or a dedicated grievance redressal cell within the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) to allow non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to appeal licensing delays or arbitrary cancellations transparently.
3. **Rationalize Administrative Caps:** Revisit the restriction that caps administrative expenses at 20% of foreign funds. Many specialized development and advocacy organizations require higher operational and administrative budgets to function efficiently.
4. **Re-permit Sub-Granting**: Reintroduce sub-granting but attach strict **"chain-link responsibility"** to it. The primary recipient NGO would remain legally and financially accountable for verifying the end-use of the funds by the smaller partner. This maintains transparency without cutting off the financial lifeblood of micro-level community organizations.
5. **Standardize & Define Vague Terminology**: Terms like "national interest," "public order," and "harmonious relations" must be given **precise, narrow definitions**. Clear legal definitions eliminate ambiguity, giving NGOs a transparent blueprint of boundaries they cannot cross, rather than leaving them vulnerable to shifting political definitions of what is "acceptable" work.
6. **Rationalising the SBI New Delhi Main Branch Requirement**: The mandatory SBI New Delhi Main Branch account should be **replaced with a designated account at any scheduled commercial bank**, with real-time reporting to a central FCRA monitoring system.
7. **Adoption of the UN Framework on Civil Society Funding**: India should align FCRA with the **UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders** and the recommendations of the **UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Association**, which recognise the right of civil society to **seek, receive, and utilise resources —** including from foreign sources — for legitimate rights work.

Conclusion: A reformed FCRA should rest on three foundational principles – **Proportionality, Institutional independence & Democratic legitimacy.** A framework built on these principles would better serve India's twin interests: protecting national sovereignty from genuine foreign interference while preserving the civil society ecosystem that is indispensable to a functioning democracy.

UPSC GS-2: Civil Society
Read More: The Hindu, The Hindu

Plurilateral Trade Agreements (PTAs) – Explained Pointwise

India has consistently opposed plurilateral trade agreements, arguing that they undermine the WTO's consensus-based, multilateral framework and marginalize developing countries. However, this stance is increasingly questioned by both developed and developing nations like Cambodia & Gambia, which view plurilateral agreements as pragmatic instruments for advancing trade liberalization amid prolonged deadlocks in multilateral negotiations – thus, alleging India for holding up the WTO reform process.

What are Plurilateral Trade Agreements (PTAs)?

- Plurilateral Trade Agreements (PTAs) are trade deals between a subset of World Trade Organization (WTO) members, making them distinct from agreements that bind all members. They represent a flexible approach to making trade rules when achieving a global consensus is difficult.
- They cover specific sectors or issues, as opposed to multilateral agreements which bind all WTO members.

- They exist under the **WTO framework but outside the "single undertaking" principle.**
- **Annex 4** of the **Marrakesh Agreement** (WTO's founding treaty) allows plurilateral agreements as an exception to the multilateral consensus model.
- **Examples of PTAs:**
    - **Within the WTO (Annex 4 Agreements):**
        - Agreement on Trade in Civil Aircraft
        - Agreement on Government Procurement (GPA)
        - Information Technology Agreement
    - **Outside the WTO** (but within WTO framework) (**Joint Statement Initiatives**): Agreements on **E-commerce**, **Investment Facilitation for Development**, **MSMEs**, and **Domestic Services Regulation.**
    - **Mega-Regional Agreements:**
        - Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)
        - Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)

Why are PTAs Becoming Popular?

1. **Slow Progress in WTO Negotiations**: Under the World Trade Organization (WTO), major agreements require consensus among all 160+ member states (**Single Undertaking Principle**). Given the deep divergence in priorities between developed, developing, and emerging economies, reaching universal consensus has become nearly impossible for e.g. last major multilateral outcome was the Trade Facilitation Agreement (2013, Bali).
2. **Faster Decision-Making**: With fewer participating countries, negotiations are quicker and consensus is easier to achieve. For e.g. Negotiating among 15 to 40 like-minded nations takes significantly less time than coordinating among the entire global membership.
3. **Addressing Emerging Trade Issues**: Rather than attempting comprehensive economy-wide deals, PTAs allow countries to zero in on specific sectors (e.g. e-commerce, investment facilitation, or green tariffs) where shared standards are urgently needed.
4. **Dysfunction of the WTO Dispute Settlement System**: The Appellate Body has been non-functional since 2019 due to the US blocking judge appointments, weakening confidence in multilateral enforcement. This pushes countries toward alternative cooperative arrangements (plurilaterals, regional/bilateral FTAs) where they can shape rules directly rather than relying on a broken adjudication mechanism.
5. **Greater Flexibility**: Plurilaterals let reform-minded countries move ahead without being held hostage by the most reluctant member. Countries with shared interests (e.g. digital economies, similar development levels) can set higher, more ambitious standards among themselves.
6. **Response to Unilateralism:** As major powers resort to unilateral tariffs and protectionist industrial policies, like-minded middle powers and trading partners use PTAs to safeguard predictable, rules-based access within their regional or thematic coalitions.
7. **Supply Chain Resilience:** PTAs enable member states to construct secure, trusted supply networks among partners that share similar regulatory and data-governance frameworks.

What has been India's approach towards Plurilateral Trade Agreements?

- India's approach to Plurilateral Trade Agreements (PTAs) is defined by a strong, principled opposition rooted in its commitment to the traditional, consensus-based multilateral system of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

- While Western economies and major trading blocs view plurilateral agreements (called **Joint Statement Initiatives (JSIs))** as a pragmatic way to bypass WTO gridlock, India views them as a potential threat to the multilateral trading system and developing-nation interests.
- This stance has made India a central figure in the global debate on the future of trade rule-making, often putting it at odds with a large coalition of other countries.

What are the major concerns associated with Plurilateral Trade Agreements for India?

1. **Erosion of the Multilateral Trading System**: PTAs may weaken the WTO's consensus-based multilateral framework by creating exclusive trade arrangements. India fears that normalizing PTAs will transform the WTO into a two-tier, fragmented institution where major trading powers dictate the direction of global trade rules outside of consensus mechanisms.
2. **Limited Policy Space**: Stringent commitments may restrict India's flexibility in framing policies on agriculture, industry, digital economy, and public procurement. For e.g.:
    - **E-commerce**: Binding rules on data flows, source code disclosure, and customs duty moratoriums could restrict India's ability to pursue data localization, digital taxation (equalization levy), and infant digital industry protection.
    - **Investment facilitation**: Commitments on transparency and streamlined approval processes could constrain India's regulatory flexibility on FDI screening, especially from geopolitically sensitive sources (e.g. Restrictions on bordering countries).
3. **Unequal Bargaining Power**: Plurilateral tracks are often driven by developed economies and large trading blocs (EU, US, China) with greater technical and legal capacity. Developing countries like India risk being pressured into commitments without adequate preparation time or expertise.
4. **Dilution of Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT)**: S&DT provisions (longer implementation timelines, lower commitment levels for developing countries) were multilaterally negotiated, PTAs risk setting new baseline standards that implicitly pressure developing countries to conform without corresponding flexibilities.
5. **High-Standard Trade Rules**: PTAs often include strict provisions on intellectual property, digital trade, labour, and environmental standards, making compliance difficult.
6. **Lack of Legal Mandate**: India contends that certain plurilateral issues, such as investment facilitation, fall outside the WTO's traditional mandate, which is focused on trade in goods and services.

What are the potential benefits of Plurilateral Trade Agreements for India?

1. **Faster Access to Rule-Making on Emerging Issues**: Participating selectively in PTAs allows India to shape rules early on digital trade, e-commerce, and investment facilitation rather than being a passive rule-taker once standards are set by others and later converted into multilaterals.
2. **Boost to Services and Digital Exports**: India is a **major services exporter**. Plurilateral agreements on services domestic regulation (streamlining licensing, qualification, and authorization procedures) could reduce non-tariff barriers Indian service providers face abroad.
3. **Attracting Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)**: Pacts like the Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) agreement aim to simplify administrative procedures, speed up investment clearances, and enhance transparency. Participating in such frameworks signals to global multinationals that India is an open, low-risk destination for foreign manufacturing and capital.
4. **Integration with Global Value Chains (GVCs)**: Plurilateral discussions on MSME-friendly trade facilitation (simplified customs procedures, information portals, reduced compliance burden) directly support India's push to integrate MSMEs into export value chains.

5. **Enhancing Competitiveness**: Greater competition can encourage Indian industries to improve productivity, quality, and efficiency – which will help in improving the competitiveness of Indian exports in global market.
6. **Strategic Alignment with Trusted Partners**: Selective plurilateral participation lets India align with like-minded economies (for e.g. Indo-Pacific partners) on supply chain resilience and digital economy norms, reinforcing India's broader geo-economic positioning (China+1) without the full complexity of comprehensive FTAs.

UPSC GS-3: Indian Economy
Read More: Indian Express

Fast Track Courts – Significance & Challenges – Explained Pointwise

Recently, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the government's decision to set up fast-track courts specifically to ensure swift and stringent punishment for those involved in **public examination paper leaks** . This initiative is aimed at safeguarding the interests of students and acts as a deterrent against examination fraud.

What are Fast Track Courts?

- Fast Track Courts (FTCs) are **special courts established to ensure the speedy disposal of specific categories of cases**, particularly those involving serious crimes, long-pending cases, and matters of public importance.
- They aim to reduce judicial delays, improve access to justice, and strengthen public confidence in the justice delivery system.

- Unlike regular courts that handle a wide variety of civil and criminal matters on a general roster, FTCs are designed to operate with relaxed procedural delays, holding **daily or short-interval hearings** to resolve designated cases within strict timelines.
- They are established under **State enactments/High Court notifications**, and are not a separate constitutional court. They function within the existing judicial hierarchy (usually at Sessions Court level), staffed by additional judges (often on contractual/ad-hoc basis).
- The establishment of FTCs is a joint responsibility between the Union and State governments. While the Centre provides policy and financial support, states must set up the courts in consultation with their High Courts.

How has the Fast Track Court system evolved in India?

11th Finance Commission (2000)	FTCs were first recommended by the **11th Finance Commission (2000)** to address long-pending cases clogging the lower judiciary, particularly cases involving undertrial prisoners who had been in jail for extended periods.
14th Finance Commission (2015)	The **14th Finance Commission** further recommended setting up 1,800 such courts to handle heinous crimes, cases involving women, children, and the elderly, and property disputes pending for over five years.
Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs)	Following the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2018 and Supreme Court directives, the Centre launched a **Centrally Sponsored Scheme** in October 2019 funded via the **Nirbhaya Fund**. This established dedicated **Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs)** exclusively handling rape cases under the Indian Penal Code and cases under the **POCSO (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) Act.**

Thus, 2 types of FTCs have evolved over time in India:

1. **General Fast Track Courts (FTCs):** FTCs which were recommended by 11th & 14th Finance Commissions. As of January 2026, **862 such courts** were functional across 21 States and Union Territories.
2. **Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs):** FTCs which were established under the Centrally Sponsored Scheme. These courts are centrally funded and exclusively dedicated to the time-bound trial of rape cases and offenses under the POCSO Act. As of mid-2026, **774 such courts** are functional across the 29 States and Union Territories.

What is the significance for Fast Track Courts in India?

1. **Ensures Speedy Justice**: FTCs process cases much faster than regular courts. In 2024, Fast Track Special Courts (FTSCs) disposed of about **9.5 cases per month** compared to around 3.3 by regular courts. In the same year, these courts achieved a remarkable disposal rate of **96.28%**, resolving 85,595 out of 88,902 new cases filed.
2. **Reduces Case Pendency**: FTCs have collectively disposed of millions of cases, with general FTCs resolving over **4 million cases** in the last three years alone. Thus, FTC allows regular courts to focus

on general caseload while specialized courts handle time-sensitive categories. This directly addresses the massive backlog plaguing the regular judicial system.

3. **Victim-Centric Approach**: These courts are designed to be more sensitive to survivors. This includes establishing **Vulnerable Witness Deposition Centers (VWDCs)** to make the court environment less intimidating for children and victims, and recommending child psychologists to assist with trial procedures
4. **Strengthens Public Confidence**: Swift investigation-to-conviction timelines in cases of rape and child sexual abuse are seen as strengthening the **deterrent effect** of criminal law, addressing public perception that delayed justice emboldens offenders.
5. **Helps Fulfil Constitutional Mandate**: The Supreme Court of India recognizes the **Right to a Speedy Trial** as a fundamental component of the Right to Life and Personal Liberty under Article 21. By holding continuous hearings with limited adjournments, FTCs operationalize this constitutional guarantee by providing a dedicated mechanism to prevent prolonged undertrial detention and case delays.

What are the key challenges faced by Fast Track Courts in India?

1. **Shortage of Judges**: Vacancies in the subordinate judiciary reduce the effectiveness of Fast Track Courts. For e.g. in Maharashtra, of the 138 sanctioned fast-track courts, only **58** are functional, primarily due to a lack of judges.
2. **Inadequate Infrastructure**: Remote and rural FTCs face severe technological limitations, lacking modern digital case-management systems, video-conferencing facilities, and dedicated child-friendly spaces required for sensitive POCSO trials.
3. **Low Conviction Rate**: In 2024, conviction rates in these courts were alarmingly low in many states. For instance, West Bengal recorded just **2%**, Jammu & Kashmir **4.5%**, and Andhra Pradesh **5.2%**. Even Delhi, with its lengthy trials, had a conviction rate of only **8.6%.**
4. **Heavy Case Load**: While FTSCs have high clearance rates (~9.5 cases resolved per month per judge compared to ~3.3 in regular courts), the sheer volume of newly instituted cases keeps cumulative pendency high. As of recent filings, over **2.4 lakh cases remained pending** in FTSCs nationwide due to high institution rates.
5. **Poor Resource Allocation**: The funding and operational responsibility for these courts is shared between the central and state governments. Some states struggle to allocate the necessary resources, leading to a huge disparity in performance.
6. **Delays in Investigation:** Delays in police charge-sheets, slow execution of summons, and difficulty in ensuring witness attendance frequently force judges to grant adjournments, stalling the trial timeline.
7. **Lack of Uniform Implementation**: While funding and guidelines are established centrally, execution, court creation, and staff recruitment depend on State Governments and High Courts. Variations in state budgets lead to uneven implementation across regions.

What measures can be adopted to improve the effectiveness of Fast Track Courts?

1. **Fill Judicial Vacancies**: Move away from ad-hoc/contractual appointments toward a **dedicated, permanent cadre of judges** for FTCs to ensure continuity, accumulated expertise (especially in POCSO/rape trials), and reduced disruption from judge turnover.
2. **Strengthen Court Infrastructure**: Ensure **dedicated courtrooms** for every sanctioned FTC/FTSC rather than shared time-slots with regular courts. Accelerate integration with the **e-Courts Mission** (Phase III) for digital case management, e-filing, and virtual hearings to cut procedural delays.
3. **Increase Financial Support**: Rather than relying on short-term extensions of centrally sponsored schemes (like those funded under the Nirbhaya Fund), the central and state governments must permanently absorb FTSCs into the regular judicial budget.

4. **Improve Inter-Agency Coordination**: Set up **coordination committees** at the district level linking police, prosecution, forensic labs, and the judiciary to synchronize timelines from FIR to trial. Fix **statutory time limits** at each stage (investigation, chargesheet filing, trial completion) with accountability mechanisms for delays.
5. **Expand the Scope Where Necessary**: Consider extending the FTC model to other backlog-heavy, socially urgent categories (cyber crimes, crimes against senior citizens) based on lessons learned from POCSO/rape FTSCs.
6. **Strengthen Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR)**: Promote mediation, arbitration, and Lok Adalats for suitable civil disputes, allowing Fast Track Courts to focus on serious criminal cases.

UPSC GS-2: Indian Polity
Read more: Indian Express

Indus Water Treaty – Significance & Concerns – Explained Pointwise

Indus Water Treaty, negotiated in 1960 between India and Pakistan, is a landmark transboundary water-sharing mechanism. The Treaty has **12 Articles** & **8 Annexures** (from A to H). It has survived 4 wars, decades of cross-border terrorism against India by Pakistan, and a long history of antagonism between the two countries. However, disagreements have persisted among both India and Pakistan over the treaty. Following the 2025 Pahalgam terror attack, India has placed the treaty in abeyance and is seeking its review and modification. Before placing the Indus Waters Treaty in abeyance, India had sought amendments to the treaty in 2024, citing dissatisfaction with the dispute resolution process and alleging Pakistan's continued **intransigence** in implementing its provisions. Meanwhile, Pakistan has consistently objected to India's construction of the **Kishenganga** and **Ratle** hydroelectric projects, alleging violations of the treaty.

What is the History behind the introduction of the Indus Water Treaty? What are its main provisions?

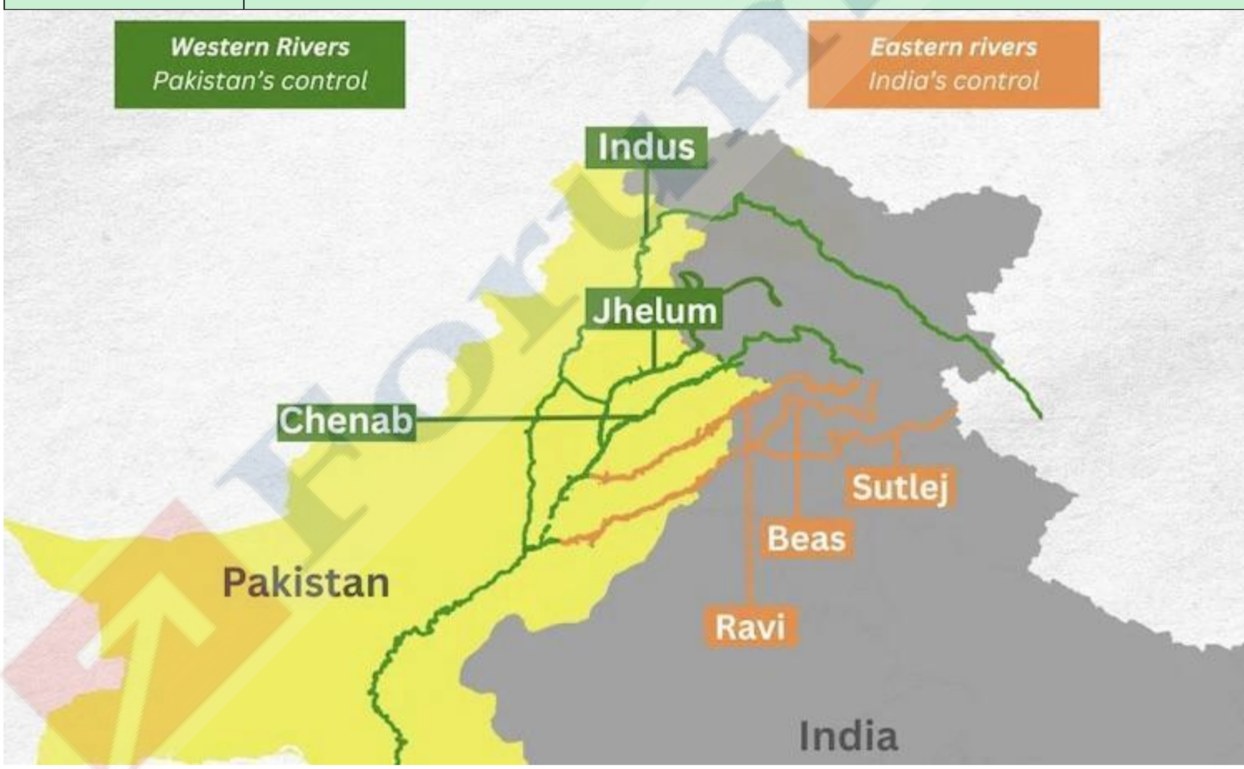
History Behind the Indus Water Treaty

Pre Independence	Preceding partition, the six rivers of the Indus basin, which originated in the Himalayas/Tibet (Indus, Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Jhelum and Chenab) was a common network, for both India and Pakistan.
At the Time of Partition	The partition of India raised questions about the distribution of water between the two nations. Since the rivers flowed from India, Pakistan felt threatened by the prospect of control of river waters by India.
Inter-Dominion Accord (May 4, 1948)	The Inter-Dominion Accord of May 4, 1948 laid out that India would release enough water to Pakistan in return for annual payments (by Pakistan). However, the problems of this arrangement were soon realized and it was considered necessary to find an alternative solution.
Indus Water Treaty 1960	India and Pakistan signed the Indus Water Treaty with the intervention of the World Bank in 1960. Precise details were laid out regarding the way in which the waters would be distributed.

Main Provisions of the Indus Water Treaty:

Eastern Rivers with India	Under the Indus treaty, all the waters of **3 eastern rivers** namely **Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas** (with a mean annual flow of 33 Million Acre-feet (MAF)) were allocated to India for exclusive use.
Western Rivers with Pakistan	Pakistan gets control of **3 Western Rivers** (**Chenab**, **Indus** and **Jhelum**) with a mean annual flow of 80 Million Acre-feet (MAF).
Western River Water utilization permitted for India	The Indus River treaty allows India to utilize the waters of Western Rivers for: **a. Limited irrigation use** **b. Non-consumptive use:** For applications such as power generation, navigation etc. This, allows India to generate hydroelectricity through a run-of-the-river projects (without the storage of waters) on the western rivers, subject to specific criteria for design and operation. **c. Storage level permitted:** India can store up to 3.75 MAF of water of the Western Rivers for conservation and flood storage purposes.
Restrictions on India	India cannot significantly alter the flow of the Western Rivers in a manner that adversely affects Pakistan. Hydropower projects must comply with detailed design and operational criteria laid down in the Treaty.

Water Division Ratio	The Indus Water treaty gives India 20% of the water from the Indus River System and the rest 80% of the water to Pakistan.
Dispute Resolution Mechanism	The Indus Water Treaty provides a **3-step dispute resolution mechanism**. **a. Permanent Indus Commission:** The disputes of the parties can be resolved at the Permanent Commission, or can also be taken up at the inter-government level. **b. Neutral Expert (NE):** In case of unresolved questions or 'differences' between the countries on water-sharing, such as technical differences, either side can approach the World Bank to appoint a Neutral Expert (NE) to come to a decision. **c. Court of Arbitration:** If either party is not satisfied with the Neutral Expert's decision or in case of 'disputes' in the interpretation and extent of the treaty, matters can be referred to a Court of Arbitration.
Hydrological Data Sharing	Both nations must regularly exchange daily data on river flows, water withdrawals, and reservoir levels.
Flood Warnings	India is obligated to share advance flood warning data during the monsoon season.



Source: Insightful Geopolitics

What has been the significance of the Indus Water Treaty?

The Indus Waters Treaty has been largely successful in maintaining water cooperation between India and Pakistan for over 60 years, despite periods of political tensions and conflict between the two countries.

1. **Generous towards lower riparian state:** It is the only water pact that compels an upper riparian state to defer to the interests of a downstream state. Pakistan has been given 80% share in the river water system. This is 90 times greater volume of water than Mexico's share under a 1944 pact with the US.
2. **Surviving Major Conflicts:** The most striking feature of the IWT is its durability. Despite two major wars between India and Pakistan (1965 and 1971), the Kargil conflict (1999), and decades of cross-border terrorism, the treaty stayed functional for over six decades without being formally revoked.
3. **India's Generosity:** India's respect for the values of trans-boundary river treaty is also a major factor behind the successful functioning of the treaty. India chose not to invoke the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, to withdraw from the Indus Water Treaty in the face of terror attacks like Indian Parliament in 2001, Mumbai in 2008, Uri in 2016 and Pulwama in 2019.
4. **India's Green Revolution:** Securing full, unrestricted rights over the Eastern rivers (Sutlej, Beas, Ravi) enabled India to construct massive storage and irrigation projects like the **Bhakra-Nangal Dam** and the **Indira Gandhi Canal**, driving the agricultural success of Punjab, Haryana, and Rajasthan.
5. **Structured Dispute Resolution:** The treaty established a clear, three-tier framework (**Commissioners → Neutral Expert → Court of Arbitration**) to prevent technical disagreements from escalating into geopolitical deadlocks. This model has been studied globally as a masterclass in conflict resolution for transboundary basins.
6. **Framework for Institutionalized Bilateral Engagement**: The **Permanent Indus Commission**, meeting annually even during periods of active conflict, provided a rare, continuous channel of India-Pakistan bilateral engagement, illustrating the value of functional/technical diplomacy insulated from political relations.

What are the concerns with the Indus Water Treaty?

India's Concerns:

1. **Disproportionate water allocation:** The treaty has resulted in unequal sharing of the waters with 80% allotment to Pakistan & only **20% of the Indus system's total flow** allotted to India, despite India's larger share of the basin's catchment area within its territory. It is the only water-sharing pact in the world that compels upper riparian State to defer to the interests of the downstream State.
2. **Prevents India from building any storage systems on Western Rivers:** Despite the Indus water treaty providing for certain exceptional circumstances for building storage systems on Western Flowing Rivers, Pakistan has deliberately stopped such efforts. The extensively technical nature of the treaty allows Pakistan to stall legitimate Indian Projects.
3. **Pakistan's continued "intransigence" in India's Hydroelectric Projects:** The treaty permits India to build run-of-the-river (non-storage) hydroelectric projects on the Western rivers. However, Pakistan regularly objects to Indian project designs – such as the **Kishanganga (330 MW)** and **Ratle (850 MW)** projects. While Pakistan has built hydropower projects on its rivers, it objects to similar initiatives by India.
4. **Dispute Resolution Mechanism Breakdown**: Pakistan has directly approached arbitration at The Hague, bypassing the treaty-mandated dispute resolution process. Its proposal to invoke the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) for these hydropower projects violates the graded dispute settlement mechanism prescribed under Article IX of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT).
5. **Old and Outdated Treaty:** According to the Departmentally Related Standing Committees on Water Resources report of 2021, present day pressing issues such as climate change, global warming and environmental impact assessment have not been taken into account by the Treaty. Some of the factors which have become important but are not taken into account by IWT are:

- **Accelerating Glacial Melt:** Himalayan glaciers feeding the Indus system are retreating rapidly.
- **Erratic Monsoon & Flooding Patterns:** Extreme weather events cause unpredictable surges, siltation, and seasonal droughts.
- **Water Stress**: The Indus basin, which has been ranked as the world's second most over-stressed aquifer by NASA in 2015, has been severely affected by climate change.
- **Lack of Environmental Flow Mandates:** The treaty lacks provisions for maintaining minimum "ecological flows" needed to preserve river ecosystems, manage heavy silt accumulation, or protect coastal deltas in downstream regions.

6. **Loss to Indian States in the Indus Basin:** There have been substantial economic losses to the Indian States in the Indus River Basin. **For e.g.** According to J&K Govt's hired consultant report, J&K has been suffering economic losses due to the Indus Water Treaty which severely restrict the state's agricultural expansion, storage capacities, and vast run-of-the-river hydroelectric potential.
7. **New Engineering Practices**: Engineering practices have evolved significantly since 1960. Modern dam design emphasizes enhanced safety and sustainability through features such as low-level outlets, drawdown flushing, gated spillways, advanced sediment management, and flexible reservoir operations. These technologies were either unavailable or not widely accepted when the Indus Waters Treaty was negotiated.
8. **Pakistan's Water Crisis Claim**: Pakistan's water crisis stems primarily from inefficient water management, outdated irrigation infrastructure, chronic canal seepage, and inadequate storage capacity rather than upstream water availability. These are domestic governance & infrastructure issues that cannot be reasonably attributed to India's hydropower projects.
9. **India's Call for Review and Modification of the Indus Waters Treaty**: India issued formal notices in 2023 and again in 2024 seeking a **review and modification** of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT). The inclusion of the term **"review"** in the latest notice reflects New Delhi's intent to revisit and renegotiate the 64-year-old treaty. This is consistent with **Article XII(3)**, which permits amendments to the treaty through a new agreement duly ratified by both governments.

Pakistan's Concerns:

1. **Downstream vulnerability:** Pakistan's agriculture, particularly in Punjab and Sindh, remains critically dependent on Western River flows, making it structurally vulnerable to any upstream disruption by India regardless of the treaty's legal guarantees.
2. **Accusations of 'Water Terrorism':** Pakistan accused India of "water terrorism" for the Shahpurkandi barrage project, despite the project's compliance with the IWT.
3. **Environmental Flow Issues:** Pakistan insists on maintaining environmental flows, supported by the 2013 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on India's obligation to release flows downstream of the Kishanganga project.
4. **Unilateral Suspension is Illegal**: Pakistan and international legal experts argue that India's 2025 decision to place the treaty in abeyance is a violation of international law and the treaty itself, which does not allow for unilateral suspension.

Read More- Need to amend the Indus Waters Treaty

What Should be the Way Forward?

1. **Amending the Treaty Under Article XII**: Article XII(3) of the treaty permits modification through a mutually agreed-upon bilateral agreement. Both nations should use this provision to formally negotiate an updated, modernized framework rather than letting the treaty lapse into complete paralysis.

2. **Integration of Ecological Perspectives:** The ecological perspectives must incorporate Environmental Flows (EF) to protect river ecosystems, manage siltation, and prevent ecological degradation in coastal deltas, as suggested by the Brisbane Declaration and the 2013 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on Kishanganga.
3. **Recognisation of Climate Change Impacts:** Strategies must be developed to manage climate change effects. India should explore the possibility of using climate change as a 'change in circumstances' to initiate conversation on renegotiation of the IWT.
4. **Dynamic Hydrological Data:** The 1960 framework relies on static historical river flow averages. An updated treaty must incorporate **climate resilience measures**, accounting for accelerating Himalayan glacial melt, shifting monsoon cycles, and extreme weather events.
5. **Incorporation of International Legal Standards:** The treaty provisions must be aligned with the 1997 UN Watercourses Convention and the 2004 Berlin Rules on Water Resources for sustainable water use.
6. **Full Utilization of Eastern River Allocations:** India must rapidly complete its pending storage and diversion projects (e.g. Shahpurkandi Dam, Ujh Multipurpose Project, and Ravi-Beas links) to ensure zero unutilized water flows uncaptured into Pakistan.
7. **Accelerating Run-of-the-River Hydropower:** Expedite run-of-the-river power projects on the Western rivers (Jhelum, Chenab, and Indus) such as Sawalkot HEP, Pakal Dul HEP, Ratle HEP, within permitted parameters to tap the region's estimated **20,000+ MW** clean energy potential.
8. **Use of pressure tactic in case of escalation:** As suggested by some experts, in case of escalation of hostilities by Pakistan in future, India can suspend the meetings of Permanent Commission. If the first state of dispute redressal is not functional, the subsequent two steps of 3-tier dispute redressal don't kick in.
9. **Strengthen India's Position as an Upper Riparian While Preserving Legal High Ground**: India should ensure that any infrastructure development or water-related decisions rigorously comply with international water law principles to preserve its legal and diplomatic credibility in ongoing arbitration and future negotiations.

Conclusion:

The Indus Waters Treaty, despite being resilient, is under increasing strain due to geopolitical tensions because of Pakistan's continued support to cross-border terrorism, climate stress, and domestic water needs. While India has the right to re-evaluate its approach, outright suspension poses significant strategic and legal challenges. A calibrated approach of assertive diplomacy, technical readiness, and treaty modernization is the best path forward.

INDUS WATER TREATY

Key Provisions

River Water Distribution	Eastern Rivers- Ravi, Sutlej, and Beas with India. Western Rivers- Chenab, Indus and Jhelum with Pakistan India's Share- 20% and Pakistan's Share- 80%
Western River Water utilization permitted for India	Non Consumptive Use of Western River Water like construction of Run of River Hydroelectric Plants Permitted to India.
Dispute Resolution Mechanism	3 stage Dispute Resolution Mechanism Stage 1- Permanent Commission Stage 2- Neutral Expert (NE) Stage 3- Court of Arbitration

Significance of the Treaty

1. Successful Model- Only cross border water sharing treaty between two nations in Asia. Treaty between two rivals.
2. Generous towards lower riparian state- Pakistan's share is about 90% greater than Mexico's share in the 1944 treaty with US.
3. Passed the Crisis test- The Permanent Commission has met even during the 1965 and 1971 wars.

Concerns with the Treaty

India's Concerns

1. Dispute over India's Hydroelectric Projects- Pakistan has raised objections on Ratle and Kishanganga Projects.
2. Climate Change Impact- Indus River System is the most water stressed according to NASA.
3. Loss to Indian States in the Indus Basin- J&K and Punjab Complain of million dollar losses

Pakistan's Concerns

1. Lower Riparian Concerns- infrastructure developments will reduce downstream flows
2. Accusations of 'Water Terrorism'- Pakistan has raised objections regarding the Shahpurkandi barrage project.

Way Forward

1. Integration of Ecological Perspectives and Recognisation of Climate Change Impacts.
2. Enhanced Water Data-Sharing
3. Incorporation of International Legal Standards like 1997 UN Watercourses Convention and 2004 Berlin Rules on Water Resources for sustainable water use
4. Pro activeness on India's Part in utilization of allocated water share like desilting of canals and run-off river hydroelectric plants.

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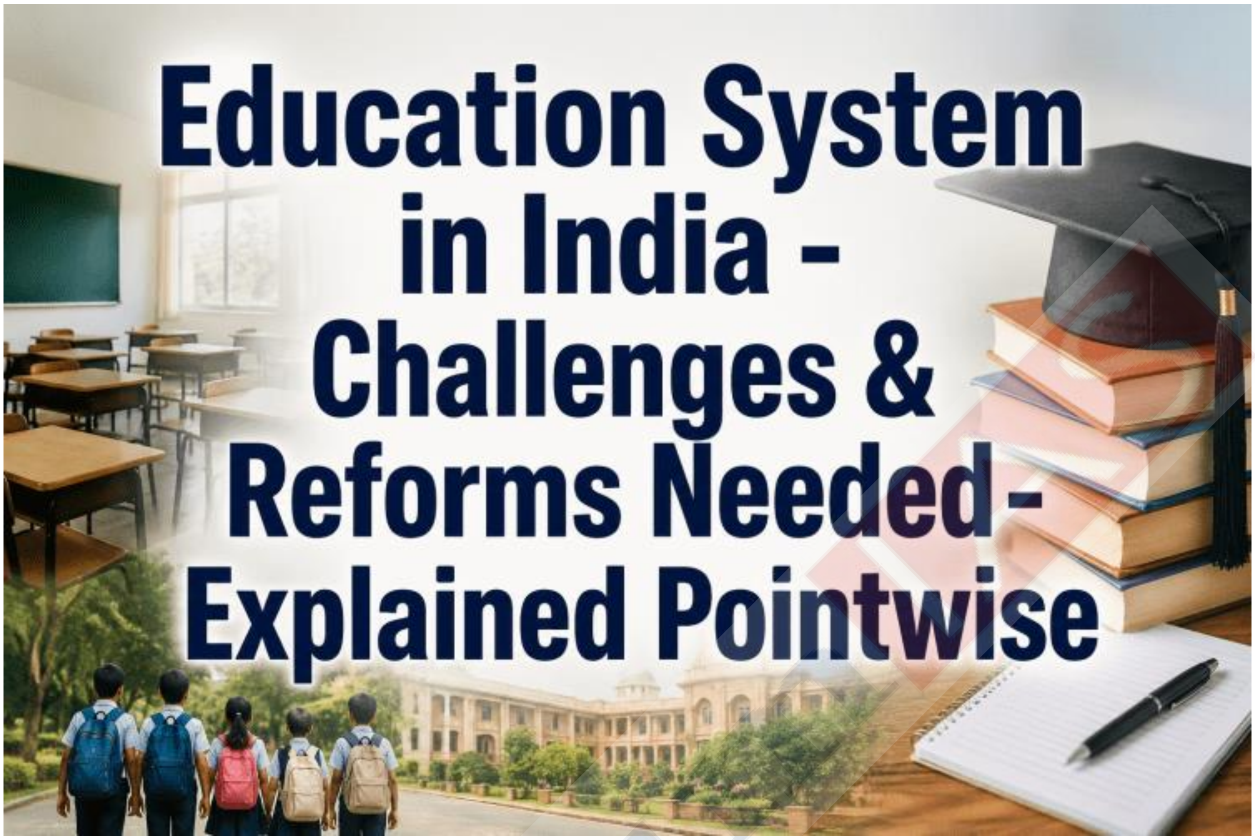
Education System in India – Challenges & Reforms Needed – Explained Pointwise



India's vast education system faces deep structural challenges, balancing massive scale with quality imperatives. The recent student protests in Delhi – triggered by examination paper leaks and administrative lapses – underscore the urgent need for systemic reforms. Modernizing the sector demands accountability, quality, and credibility in education while aligning the system with the aspirations of a young India.

What are the key features of the Education System in India?

- India's education system is one of the **largest in the world**, comprising over 1.5 million schools,1,000+ universities & serving over 250 million students across public and private sectors.
- It is governed under a **concurrent list subject** (education moved from State to Concurrent List via the **42nd Constitutional Amendment, 1976**) – enabling both the Union and State Governments to legislate and formulate policies.
- The education system can be broadly classified into two categories:

School Education	○ Managed by central/state school boards (CBSE, ICSE, State Boards) under the Department of School Education and Literacy (Ministry of Education). ○ The old 10+2 system has been restructured into a **5+3+3+4 model** – which include: 1. **Foundational Stage** (5 years): Pre-school to Grade 2 2. **Preparatory Stage** (3 years): Grades 3-5 3. **Middle Stage** (3 years): Grades 6-8 4. **Secondary Stage** (4 years): Grades 9-12

Higher Education	○ Encompasses post-secondary education, including undergraduate degrees, master's programs, diplomas, and research degrees (Ph.D.). ○ Regulated by central councils and bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC) and All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) under the Department of Higher Education.

- However, the education system also include:
  1. **Early Childhood Care & Education (ECCE):** Historically treated as separate (under welfare programs like Anganwadis), preschool education (ages 3–6) is now formally integrated into the **Foundational Stage** of school education under the 5+3+3+4 structure.
  2. **Vocational & Technical Education (VET/TVET):** Skill development (e.g. ITI diplomas, vocational training, polytechnics) begins in secondary school and extends into higher education. It acts as a bridge connecting both tiers to direct workforce entry.

What is the significance of education for India's socio-economic development?

1. **Promotes Human Capital Development**: India possesses one of the world's youngest populations, with over **62% of its citizens in the working-age group (15–64 years).** Education converts a large population from a demographic burden into a productive economic asset.
2. **Generates Employment**: Education enhances employability by equipping individuals with knowledge, technical skills, and vocational training. It prepares a skilled workforce, promotes entrepreneurship, reduces unemployment, and supports economic growth by meeting the evolving demands of industry and the services sector.
3. **Drives Economic Growth**: Education enhances labor efficiency, helps workers transition from agriculture to more advanced manufacturing and service sectors, and makes the economy more competitive and attractive to foreign investment. For e.g. strategic integration of technology like AI into education could potentially boost India's GDP growth by up to 1% annually.
4. **Reduces Poverty**: Education acts as the most reliable engine for intergenerational upward mobility. A formal education enables children from agrarian or informal-sector families to secure formal, higher-paying jobs, directly lifting households out of multi-dimensional poverty.
5. **Gender Empowerment**: Female education has strong correlations with reduced fertility rates, improved maternal and child health outcomes, and higher female labour force participation.
6. **Fostering Innovation & Entrepreneurship**: Higher education institutions such as the IITs, NITs, and IISc-feed directly into India's thriving startup ecosystem, driving technological solutions tailored to local and global challenges (e.g. agritech, clean energy, and affordable healthcare).

What are the major challenges faced by the Education System in India?

1. **Poor Learning Outcomes**: ASER (Annual Status of Education Report) surveys have repeatedly shown a large proportion of Grade 5 students unable to read Grade 2-level text or perform basic arithmetic, indicating a serious learning crisis despite high enrollment rates.
2. **High Dropout Rates**: Dropout rates remain high at secondary level, with socio-economic factors (child labour, early marriage, migration) disproportionately affecting girls and disadvantaged communities.
3. **Urban-Rural Divide:** There is a stark gap in infrastructure and resources between urban and rural areas, with rural schools often lacking basic facilities and struggling to attract quality teachers.
4. **Teacher Shortage and Quality Issues**: India faces acute teacher shortages, with over 10 lakh vacancies and 1.1 lakh single-teacher schools nationwide. Compounding this, nearly 11% of foundational teachers remain underqualified, severely eroding classroom instruction quality.

5. **Inadequate Infrastructure**: Despite improvements, infrastructure gaps persist. Only **67.4%** of schools have internet access (UDISE+ 2025-26), limiting digital learning, while deficiencies in classrooms, laboratories, libraries, and sports facilities continue to affect quality education.
6. **Low Public Expenditure**: India's public expenditure on education (**~4.3%**) has consistently remained below the recommended **6% of GDP target** (set by the Kothari Commission, 1966, and reaffirmed by NEP 2020), constraining infrastructure upgrades, teacher recruitment, and quality initiatives.
7. **Weak Research and Innovation**: India's higher education system faces inadequate research funding, weak industry-academia collaboration, and limited innovation. India's **Gross Expenditure on Research and Development (GERD)** remains around **0.6-0.7% of GDP**, significantly lower than many leading economies, constraining research quality and global competitiveness.
8. **Low Vocational Training:** Less than 5% of India's formal workforce has received formal vocational training (compared to over 70% in nations like Germany or South Korea).
9. **Graduate Unemployability:** A large portion of engineering, management, and arts graduates emerging from tier-2 and tier-3 colleges lack industry-relevant technical, analytical, or communication skills, creating a mismatch between degree possession and job market demands.
10. **Examination System Credibility:** Paper leaks, technological glitches, and administrative controversies in high-stakes competitive and recruitment examinations continue to pose a threat to public confidence in meritocratic selection systems.
11. **Governance and Regulatory Fragmentation**: Multiplicity of regulatory bodies (UGC, AICTE, NCTE, state boards) creates overlapping jurisdictions and bureaucratic delays. NEP 2020's proposed unified Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) remains unimplemented years after the policy's release.

What initiatives has the Government undertaken to strengthen the Education System in India?

[National Education Policy (NEP), 2020]	• It aims to transform the education system by making it **holistic, multidisciplinary, flexible, inclusive, skill-oriented, and globally competitive**, while aligning it with the needs of the 21st century. • Replaces the **10+2** system with a **5+3+3+4** curricular and pedagogical structure corresponding to the age group of **3-18 years**. • Gives top priority to achieving universal foundational literacy and numeracy through the **NIPUN Bharat Mission**. • Recommends the use of the **mother tongue/regional language** as the medium of instruction, preferably up to **Class V.** • Promotes multidisciplinary institutions, multiple entry and exit options, and the **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)**.
Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009	• Enacted under **Article 21A** of the Constitution. • **Free and compulsory education** for all children between **6 and 14 years** in a neighbourhood school. • **25% reservation** for children belonging to **Economically Weaker Sections (EWS)** and **Disadvantaged Groups (DG)** in **private unaided schools** at the entry level. • Prescribes **minimum norms and standards** for school infrastructure, pupil-teacher ratio (PTR), teacher qualifications, and learning environment.

Teaching Quality	• **National Professional Standards for Teachers (NPST)**: India's first initiative to assess & classify teachers as – Proficient, Expert, or Advanced – against uniform national standards, with career progression tied to this ladder. • **NISHTHA (National Initiative for School Heads' and Teachers' Holistic Advancement):** Capacity-building program providing continuous professional training for teachers, headmasters, and Anganwadi staff across elementary, secondary, and foundational levels.
Schemes/ Missions	• **Samagra Shiksha Abhiyan:** An overarching scheme for school education (pre-school to Grade 12) that subsumed earlier programs (SSA, RMSA, and Teacher Education) to improve school infrastructure, gender equity, and digital classrooms • **NIPUN Bharat Mission**: Aims to ensure **Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)** for all children by the end of Grade 3. • **PM SHRI (PM Schools for Rising India):** A Centrally Sponsored Scheme aimed at developing over **14,500 schools** as exemplar institutions showcasing the full implementation of NEP 2020. These schools feature green infrastructure, modern ICT labs, and 21st-century skill integration.
Digital Initiatives	• **National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR)**: Creates a digital framework for improving governance, service delivery, and access to quality education. • **DIKSHA Platform:** Provides digital learning resources, e-content, teacher training, and online learning materials for students and teachers. • **PM eVIDYA**: Promotes digital education through television channels, online platforms, radio, and podcasts to ensure continuity of learning. • **SWAYAM and SWAYAM Plus:** Free online course repositories offering high-quality college lectures and industry-developed skilling courses across diverse sectors.

What measures can be adopted to improve the quality of education in India?

1. **Increase Public Investment in Education**: Progressively increase central and state budgetary allocations to reach the long-targeted **6% of GDP** mark (up from ~4.3%), directing funds specifically toward lab infrastructure, sanitation facilities, and research facilities.
2. **Strengthen Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN)**: Ensure effective implementation of the **NIPUN Bharat Mission** to enable every child to attain foundational literacy and numeracy by **Grade 3**, through improved teaching methods, teacher training, continuous assessment, and adequate learning resources.
3. **Improve Teacher Quality**:
    - Phase out short-term, low-quality commercial teacher training institutes in favor of rigorous, university-affiliated 4-year integrated programs (as envisioned in NEP 2020).
    - Institutionalize mandatory 50+ hours of annual continuous professional training for all teachers via platforms like NISHTHA.
    - Unburden public school teachers from routine administrative tasks, census work, and scheme management so their primary focus remains on instruction.

4. **Upgrade School Infrastructure**: Provide well-equipped classrooms, laboratories, libraries, clean toilets, safe drinking water, electricity, sports facilities, and digital infrastructure. Improved school infrastructure enhances learning outcomes, increases attendance, reduces dropout rates, and ensures a safe, inclusive, and conducive learning environment.
5. **Strengthen Vocational Education**: Expand vocational education through industry partnerships, internships, apprenticeships, and skill-based courses aligned with market needs. Integrating vocational training into school and higher education will enhance employability, entrepreneurship, and workforce readiness.
6. **Improve Research and Innovation**: Increase investment in research, strengthen industry-academia collaboration, operationalize the National Research Foundation (NRF), and promote multidisciplinary research, innovation, patents, and entrepreneurship to enhance India's global competitiveness and knowledge-based economy.
7. **Improve Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)**: Strengthen Anganwadis, expand quality pre-primary education, train ECCE workers, and ensure age-appropriate learning, nutrition, and healthcare to build strong cognitive, social, and emotional foundations for lifelong learning and development.
8. **Ensuring Fair and Transparent Exams:** Restoring public trust by reforming high-stakes exams like NEET with better technology and longer consultation periods for changes, and potentially exploring online formats to reduce leak risks.
9. **A Unified Regulatory Framework:** The proposed **Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025**, aims to create a single, simplified, and transparent regulatory body for higher education, replacing multiple legacy regulators like UGC and AICTE.

UPSC GS-2: Social Justice (Education)
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Urban Fire Disasters in India – Reasons & Solutions – Explained Pointwise

Rapid urbanisation, overcrowded buildings, and poor compliance with fire safety norms have led to a worrying rise in fire incidents across Indian cities. Last month, the devastating fire in Lucknow's Aliganj area, which claimed at least 15 lives, has once again exposed critical gaps in safety enforcement and emergency preparedness. In the same month, fire in a bed & breakfast facility occurred in Malviya Nagar, Delhi, caused by illegal construction with no emergency exit. These tragedies underscore the urgent need to strengthen fire safety regulations, conduct regular audits, and build resilient urban infrastructure to prevent the recurrence of such avoidable disasters.

What are fire disasters, and why are they considered a major urban hazard in India?

- A **fire disaster** is an uncontrolled, large-scale outbreak of fire that spreads rapidly, causing extensive property damage, severe economic losses, environmental harm, and most critically, injuries or loss of human life. Unlike slow-onset disasters, fires spread rapidly and can be catastrophic within minutes.
- According to the **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)**, India records over **1.5–2 lakh fire accidents annually**, resulting in approx. 13,000-15,000 deaths annually. Fire-related deaths consistently rank among the leading causes of accidental fatalities.
- They are considered a major urban hazard because the rapid and often unplanned growth of Indian cities has created a "perfect storm" of conditions that make fires both more likely and more deadly.

What are the different types of fire-related disasters in India?

Urban and Structural Fires	1. **Commercial & High-Rise Fires:** Occur in shopping malls, office complexes, and high-rise apartments. They are typically caused by electrical short-circuits, overloaded meters, or poorly maintained centralized air conditioning (HVAC) systems. 2. **Educational Institutions & Assembly Fires:** Fires in schools, private coaching institutes, and movie theaters. These frequently turn into disasters due to overcrowding, highly flammable false ceilings, and a lack of secondary emergency exits. 3. **Slum Fires:** Highly frequent in mega-cities. Because slums are built using combustible materials (tarpaulin, wood, plastic) and rely heavily on illegal electrical hookups or domestic LPG cylinders, a single spark can wipe out an entire neighborhood in hours. 4. **Hospital Fires:** Particularly tragic as victims have limited mobility. They are often triggered by the continuous, heavy electrical load required for life-support systems, ventilators, and oxygen-rich environments.
Industrial and Chemical Fires	1. **Chemical & Pharmaceutical Plant Fires:** These are incredibly dangerous because they involve toxic chemicals that release poisonous gas clouds when burned, requiring specialized chemical-foam firefighting rather than water. 2. **Textile and Paper Mill Fires:** These facilities stock massive inventories of highly flammable raw materials. Once a fire catches, the airborne fibers accelerate the spread rapidly across the shop floor. 3. **Illegal Firework Factory Explosions:** A recurring disaster type, particularly in hubs like Sivakasi (Tamil Nadu). They usually happen in unorganized, small-

	scale units operating without any safety clearance, where gunpowder is handled manually.
Wildfires (Forest Fires)	1. **Himalayan Pine Forest Fires:** Highly prevalent in Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh during the dry pre-monsoon months (March to June). The dry, fallen needles of *Pinus roxburghii* (Chir Pine) are highly resinous and catch fire instantly. 2. **Central and Southern Deciduous Fires:** Occur in states like Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha. They are often triggered naturally by lightning, or by humans accidentally when burning dry leaves to collect forest produce like Mahua flowers or Tendu leaves.
Transport and Infrastructure Fires	1. **Railroad Fires:** Break out in passenger trains, often due to short-circuits in air-conditioned coaches, pantry car gas leaks, or passengers illegally carrying inflammable materials like firecrackers or kerosene. 2. **Electric Vehicle (EV) Battery Fires:** Thermal runaway in Lithium-ion batteries – often caused by poor thermal management or low-quality cell sorting – has led to sudden, explosive fires in electric two-wheelers and buses. 3. **Oil & Gas Pipeline/Refinery Fires:** Rare but catastrophic incidents involving crude oil pipelines or storage depots. They cause intense, high-temperature blazes that can burn for days.

Why Fires Are a Severe Major Hazard in Indian Cities?

1. **Extreme Population & Spatial Density:** Urban spaces in India, especially commercial hubs like Delhi's Chandni Chowk or Burrabazar in Kolkata, feature highly congested buildings packed tightly together. Once a fire starts, it easily leaps from one building to the next.
2. **Haphazard Overhead Wiring & Electrical Infrastructure:** Electrical short-circuits are the root cause of over **70-80%** of all urban fires in India. Walk down almost any older urban street, and you will see a chaotic web of tangled electrical wires. Overloaded transformers and poorly maintained commercial meters frequently spark explosions.
3. **Inadequate Emergency Access (The "Narrow Lane" Problem):** Many fire disasters turn tragic simply because massive fire tenders (engines) cannot physically navigate the extremely narrow, winding lanes of older city centers or informal settlements (slums).
4. **Widespread Violations of the National Building Code (NBC):** Many high-rises, coaching hubs, and commercial complexes skimp on safety. Common violations include missing fire exits, blocked staircases used as storage, absent or non-functional sprinkler systems, and the use of cheap, highly flammable building and interior materials.
5. **Mixed Land-Use Anomalies:** It is very common in India to find small-scale manufacturing units, chemical storage facilities, or illegal commercial kitchens operating inside purely residential buildings. This brings highly combustible materials right into people's homes.
6. **The "Flue" Effect in High-Rises:** When high-rise buildings are constructed without proper fire barriers between floors, open stairwells, elevator shafts, and internal utility ducts act like giant chimneys. If a fire starts on the ground floor, the heat and toxic smoke are sucked violently upward, trapping hundreds of people on upper floors.

7. **The "Chalta Hai" (Casual) Attitude toward Audits:** Fire NOCs (No Objection Certificates) are legally required for commercial buildings, but regular compliance audits are frequently bypassed. Building owners often install fire extinguishers to pass an initial inspection, but fail to maintain them, leaving them depressingly useless when a real crisis strikes.
8. **Illegal and Unauthorized Construction:** A pattern emerges in many fire tragedies: buildings operating with far more rooms, or for entirely different purposes, than they were approved for. The recent deadly fire at a bed-and-breakfast in Delhi's Malviya Nagar is a prime example, where a building licensed for six rooms was allegedly operating with 25, with a single blocked exit and a basement kitchen where the fire likely started. These "clandestine modifications" often bypass safety rules for wider roads, setbacks, and fire escapes, creating death traps.
9. **Modern Security as a Trap:** Ironically, features meant to enhance security can become lethal in a fire. Electronic smart locks, biometric systems, and security grills can fail in extreme heat or lock occupants in, while locked terrace access and sealed balconies block potential escape routes.

What are the major initiatives undertaken by the government to improve fire safety and fire disaster management in urban areas?

1. **Modernization of Fire Services:** Backed by the 15th Finance Commission recommendations, the central government is providing Rs 5,000 crore to states to procure modern firefighting equipment (e.g., hydraulic platforms and turntable ladders), expand infrastructure to local levels, and implement legal reforms.
2. **Disaster Management Framework:** The Disaster Management Act, 2005 established the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) and the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) to provide rapid, specialized responses to both natural and human-induced disasters, including fires.
3. **The National Building Code (NBC):** Issued by the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), Part 4 of the NBC deals exclusively with 'Fire and Life Safety'. It mandates structural requirements like compulsory fire exits, automated sprinkler systems, fire-resistant construction materials, and clear setback spaces.
4. **Mandatory Fire Risk Assessments and Audits:** Across states, authorities have vastly intensified the frequency of surprise checks. Properties like high-rises, factories, hotels, and schools are legally required to perform regular electrical and fire audits to maintain their **Fire NOC (No Objection Certificate).**
5. **NDRF and SDRF Specialized Battalions:** The **National Disaster Response Force (NDRF)** consists of highly trained battalions strategically stationed across India. They are uniquely equipped to handle industrial and **CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear)** fire emergencies that are beyond the capacity of local municipal firefighters.
6. **Dial 112 Emergency Response Support System (ERSS):** This pan-India unified emergency number integrates police, fire, and medical services to reduce emergency response times drastically.
7. **Aapda Mitra Scheme:** A community-oriented program dedicated to training 100,000 local volunteers in highly vulnerable multi-hazard districts to act as first responders during fire and other emergencies.
8. **National Fire Service Week:** Observed annually across the country, this initiative is used by public and private sectors to run massive mock evacuation drills, test internal hydrant networks, and train normal citizens on how to operate basic fire extinguishers.

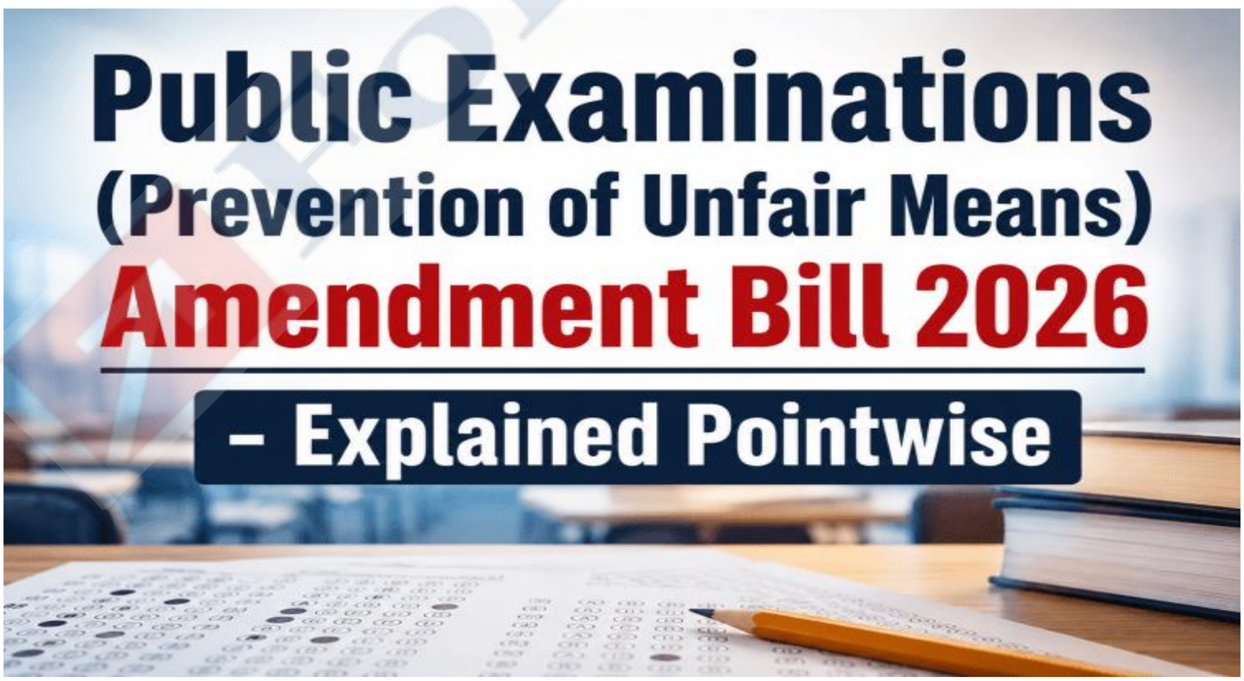
What measures are needed to improve fire preparedness and emergency response systems in urban areas?

1. **Enacting a Uniform National Fire Safety Code:** Fire services are currently treated as a state or municipal subject, resulting in highly fragmented regulations. India needs a uniform, legally binding National Fire Safety Code implemented stringently across all states.

2. **Third-Party Digital Fire Audits:** Rather than relying on sporadic manual checks by understaffed departments, cities should mandate annual, independent third-party fire safety audits. These audit reports should be linked to an online public database, meaning a building's commercial license or insurance automatically expires if they fail compliance.
3. **Mandatory Building Compartmentalisation:** Large floors must be structurally divided into independent fire zones using fire-rated doors and fire-resistant walls. This traps the flame and smoke in one specific zone for at least 60–120 minutes, giving occupants time to escape.
4. **Anti-Smog and Smoke Management Systems:** Since smoke inhalation causes the vast majority of fatalities, urban high-rises must feature automated mechanical ventilation systems that actively extract toxic gases from corridors during a fire.
5. **Tactical "Mini-Tenders" for Congested Areas:** For dense, historic markets and informal settlements, traditional heavy fire trucks are useless. Municipalities must invest in fleets of agile, customized mini-tenders and motorcycle-mounted water mist systems capable of threading through narrow alleyways.
6. **Mandatory Neighborhood Fire Drills:** Much like earthquake drills in prone areas, schools, high-rises, and major commercial hubs should legally be required to conduct seasonal evacuation drills so occupants intuitively know exit routes.
7. **Curriculum-Level Education:** Fire safety literacy – understanding electrical overloading, how to properly handle LPG cylinders, and how to operate an extinguisher – needs to be embedded directly into school curricula across the country.

UPSC GS-3: Disaster Management
Read More: The Hindu

Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill 2026 – Explained Pointwise



Recently, the Lok Sabha passes the **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026.** The Bill brought in response to recurring paper leak controversies, including the NEET 2026 paper leak controversy, which exposed continuing gaps in the original Act's deterrence framework, the Amendment Bill enforces stringent penalties.

What are the important provisions of the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act 2024?

Definition of 'Unfair Means' under the Act	Section 3 of the Act explicitly lists **15 actions** that amount to using unfair means in public examinations "for monetary or wrongful gain": 1. **Leakage of question paper** or answer key and colluding in such leakage. 2. Participating in **collusion** with others **to effect leakage** of question paper or answer key. 3. Accessing or taking **possession of question paper** or an OMR sheet without authority. 4. **Providing solutions** to questions by any unauthorized person during a public exam. 5. Directly or indirectly **assisting the candidate** in any unauthorized manner. 6. **Tampering with answer sheets,** including OMR sheets. 7. **Altering the assessment** except to correct a bona fide error without any authority. 8. **Willful violation of norms or standards** set up by the Central Government for conduct of a public examination on its own or through its agency. 9. **Tampering with any document** necessary for shortlisting of candidates or finalizing the merit or rank of a candidate in a public examination. 10. **Deliberate violation of security measures** to facilitate unfair means in conduct of a public examination. 11. **Tampering with the computer network** or a computer resource or a computer system. 12. **Manipulation in seating arrangements**, allocation of dates and shifts for the candidates to facilitate adopting unfair means in examinations. 13. **Threatening the life, liberty or wrongfully restraining persons** associated with the public examination authority or the service provider or any authorised agency of the Government; or obstructing the conduct of a public examination. 14. **Creation of fake website** to cheat or for monetary gain. 15. **Conduct of fake examination**, issuance of fake admit cards or offer letters to cheat or for monetary gain.
Definition of 'Public Examinations' under the Act	Section 2(k) of the Act defines a "**public examination**" as any examination conducted by a "public examination authority" listed in the Schedule of the Bill. **Public Examination Authorities under the Act:** 1. Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) 2. Staff Selection Commission (SSC) 3. Railway Recruitment Boards (RRBs) 4. Institute of Banking Personnel Selection (IBPS)

	5. National Testing Agency (NTA) 6. Ministries or Departments of the Central Government and their attached and subordinate offices for recruitment of staff. 7. Such other authority as may be notified by the Central Government.
Punishments Under The Act	● Section 9 of the Act deals with the nature of offences. ● **Nature of Offences:** The offences under the new Bill have been made Cognizable, Non-bailable and Non-compoundable. 1. **Cognizable:** An arrest can be made without a warrant. 2. **Non-bailable:** Bail will not be a matter of right. A magistrate will determine whether the accused is fit to be released on bail. 3. **Non-compoundable:** A non-compoundable offence is one in which the case cannot be withdrawn by the complainant even when the complainant and the accused have reached a compromise. A trial will necessarily follow for the accused. ● **Punishments under the Act:** 1. **Punishment for any person or group of persons resorting to unfair means:** 3–5 years in prison and fine up to Rs. 10 Lakh. In case of failure to pay the fine, additional punishment as per the provisions of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 will be imposed. 2. **Punishment in case of Organised Paper Leak:** 5-10 years in prison and fine of more than Rs 1 crore rupees. In case of failure to pay the fine, additional punishment as per the provisions of Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita 2023 will be imposed. 3. **Punishment for Service Provider:** Fine of Rs 1 cr and are further barred from conducting future examination for period of 4 years.
Liability of Service Providers	Service providers involved in conducting examinations (such as agencies handling logistics, printing, transport, IT systems, or security) are liable if they facilitate or participate in unfair practices.
Investigation	Investigations can be conducted only by officers **not below the rank of Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP)/Assistant Commissioner of Police (ACP)** or equivalent.
Protection of Genuine Candidates	The Act primarily targets **organized cheating networks, officials, and service providers**, rather than candidates who are victims of systemic failures. The students/candidates appearing in exams are kept outside the Act's purview and continue to be governed by the conducting agency's existing rules.

What are the major amendments proposed under the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026?

1. **Stricter Punishment for Individuals**:
    - Enhances punishment for offences under the Act from **3–5 years** to **5–10 years** imprisonment.
    - Increases the maximum fine from **₹10 lakh to ₹50 lakh.**
2. **Higher Penalties for Service Providers**:
    - Raises the maximum fine on service providers involved in unfair practices from **₹1 crore to ₹5 crore.**
    - Extends their debarment from conducting public examinations from **4 years to 8 years**.
3. **Tougher Action against Officials of Service Providers**:
    - Increases the minimum imprisonment for directors or senior management found complicit from **3 years to 5 years.**
    - Raises the fine from **₹1 crore to ₹5 crore.**
4. **Stronger Punishment for Organised Crime**:
    - Increases the minimum imprisonment for organised examination fraud from **5 years to 7 years.**
    - Enhances the minimum fine from **₹1 crore to ₹10 crore.**
5. **Constitution of Special Task Forces (STFs)**: Empowers the Central Government to constitute **Special Task Forces** to investigate paper leaks and other examination-related offences.
6. **Time-Bound Investigation**: Mandates completion of investigations within **2 months** by the investigating agency, Central Investigating Agency, or Special Task Force.
7. **Establishment of Special Fast Track Courts**: Requires every State and Union Territory to designate **Special Fast Track Courts** for offences under the Act, in consultation with the concerned High Court.
8. **Time-Bound Trial**: Provides for **day-to-day trial** and mandates completion of the trial **within 3 months** from the filing of the charge sheet.
9. **Appointment of Special Public Prosecutors**: Empowers States and Union Territories to appoint **Special Public Prosecutors** to conduct cases before the Special Fast Track Courts.
10. **Appeal Mechanism**: Provides that appeals from Special Fast Track Courts shall lie before a **Division Bench (two judges) of the High Court**. Appeals should, as far as possible, be disposed of **within 3 months** of admission.

What are the advantages of the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026?

1. **Stronger Deterrence**: The amendment introduces significantly harsher penalties to strongly discourage organized crime syndicates and individuals from engaging in malpractices like paper leaks. Higher imprisonment terms and enhanced monetary penalties act as a stronger deterrent against paper leaks and examination fraud.
2. **Protects the Integrity of Public Examinations**: The strict legal safeguards help rebuild student, parent, and institutional trust in recruitment and entrance examinations (like NEET, JEE, CUET, UPSC, and SSC) after high-profile leak controversies.
3. **Ensures Speedy Justice**:
    - By mandating designated Fast-Track Sessions Courts in every state/UT, cases will be tried on a day-to-day basis rather than lingering in standard court backlogs.
    - Setting a **2-month investigation limit** and a **3-month trial limit** (plus a 3-month appellate window) guarantees swift justice, preventing evidence from cooling off or witnesses being influenced.

4. **Enhances Accountability of Service Providers**: Imposes stricter penalties and longer debarment on agencies responsible for conducting public examinations, ensuring greater accountability.
5. **Strengthens Investigation Mechanisms**: The **Special Task Force** provision allows the central government to mobilize dedicated, specialized investigative resources for complex, often interstate paper-leak networks, rather than relying solely on local police who may lack the reach or resources to trace organized rackets operating across state lines.
6. **Improves Transparency**: Creates a more transparent and secure examination process by discouraging unfair means and strengthening oversight.
7. **Protects Meritorious Candidates**: By imposing systemic penalties strictly on perpetrators, cartels, and complicit officials, the law protects genuine test-takers from having their hard work invalidated by blanket re-examinations.
8. **Restores Public Confidence**: Helps rebuild trust in public recruitment and entrance examinations following recent paper leak controversies and student protests.

Read More- The Public Examinations Bill 2024

What are the major concerns associated with the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Amendment Bill, 2026?

1. **Focus on Punishment Rather than Prevention**: The Bill primarily enhances penalties but does not sufficiently address the root causes of paper leaks, such as weak examination governance, poor security protocols, and administrative lapses.
2. **Mandatory Timelines May Be Difficult to Achieve**: The requirement to complete investigations within **2 months** and trials within **3 months** may be impractical given the shortage of investigators, prosecutors, and judges. Also, while the Bill prescribes a 2-month investigation period, it does not specify the consequences or procedure if this timeline is not met.
3. **Implementation Challenges**: Establishing **Special Fast Track Courts**, appointing **Special Public Prosecutors**, and creating **Special Task Forces** will require substantial financial and administrative resources.
4. **Limited Coverage**: The legislation primarily applies to specified Central Government public examinations. Unless States enact similar laws or adopt corresponding measures, many State-level examinations may remain outside its ambit.
5. **Ignoring Vulnerabilities:** Severe penalties do not inherently fix systemic vulnerabilities in the examination pipeline, such as decentralized question paper printing, unverified private test center hosts, or weak cybersecurity protocols during digital transmission.
6. **Unemployment and Pressure:** The Bill treats paper leaks primarily as a law-and-order issue, leaving the underlying structural drivers: extreme job scarcity, delayed recruitment cycles, and the immense socio-economic pressure on millions of candidates competing for a limited pool of government jobs.

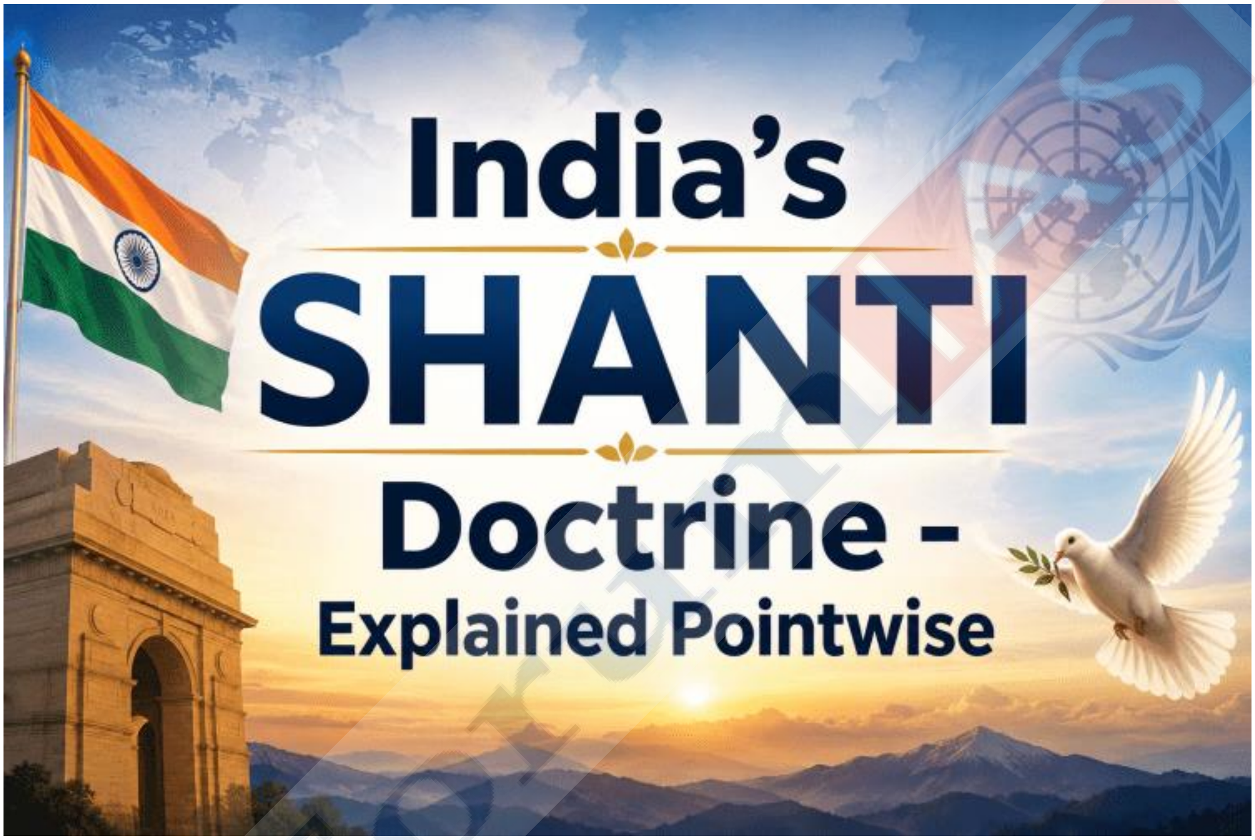
Conclusion

The Public Examinations Amendment Bill is a remarkable step by the Central Government to protect the interests of student community who give their life and soul for the preparation of public examinations. However, stricter punishment must be complemented by stronger administrative systems, secure technology, transparent examination processes, and institutional accountability to effectively curb examination fraud.

Read More- The Indian Express

UPSC Syllabus– GS 2- Government policies and interventions for the development of various sectors (Bills and Acts)

India's SHANTI Doctrine – Explained Pointwise



Recently, the External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar introduced SHANTI (**S**ecuring **H**olistic **A**dvancement through **N**orms, **T**rust and **I**ntegrity) during the launch of India's campaign for a non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) for the 2028-29 term. SHANTI provides a normative framework for shared maritime spaces & Bay of Bengal can serve as the ideal region to operationalize it before expanding it across the much wider Indo-Pacific region.

What is India's SHANTI Doctrine?

- **SHANTI Doctrine** is a **foreign policy and global governance vision** unveiled by the External Affairs Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar during the launch of India's campaign for a **non-permanent seat on the UN Security Council (UNSC) for the 2028–29 term.**
- It presents India's approach towards building a **secure, peaceful, and equitable world** based on **rules, cooperation, and inclusive development.**
- SHANTI stands for: **S**ecuring **H**olistic **A**dvancement through **N**orms, **T**rust and **I**ntegrity.
- SHANTI is India's latest strategic framework, building upon the earlier **SAGAR** (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and **MAHASAGAR** frameworks.

How has India's maritime/foreign policy doctrine evolved in last 10 years?

The **SAGAR**, **MAHASAGAR**, and **SHANTI** doctrines represent three distinct, sequential stages in the evolution of India's maritime strategy and foreign policy.

SAGAR (2015)	• **S**ecurity **A**nd **G**rowth for **A**ll in the **R**egion • Focused on immediate littorals and island states i.e. the Indian Ocean Region (e.g. Maldives, Mauritius, Seychelles, Sri Lanka). • Position India as the primary **"Net Security Provider"** and emergency first responder in the IOR. • **Core objective:** Inclusive regional development and freedom of navigation.
MAHASAGAR (2025)	• **M**utual and **A**ligned **H**olistic **A**dvancement for **S**ecurity and **G**rowth **A**cross **R**egions • Extends to Southeast Asia, Pacific Island nations, Africa, and Latin America. • Consolidate influence across the Global South to counter assertive rise of China (e.g. China's Belt and Road Initiative). • **Core objective:** Strategic partnership and economic diversification for developing nations.
SHANTI (2026)	• **S**ecuring **H**olistic **A**dvancement through **N**orms, **T**rust and **I**ntegrity • Anchor area begins in the **Bay of Bengal** (via BIMSTEC), extending to global platforms (UNSC). • Establish a **rules-based, trust-driven operational framework** focused on non-military, demand-driven cooperation. • **Core objective:** Rules-based governance, multilateral institutional reform, and peaceful dispute resolution.

What is the significance of India's SHANTI Doctrine?

1. **Strengthens India's Bid for UNSC Term**: SHANTI provides a values-based campaign platform for India's candidature for the **2028–29 non-permanent seat**, competing against Tajikistan for the sole Asia-Pacific Group slot.
2. **Supports India's UNSC Aspirations**: By explicitly mentioning that reform limited only to the non-permanent category would be a "failure," SHANTI boosts India's **permanent seat ambition** even while pursuing a non-permanent term.
3. **Promotes Rules-Based Global Order**: The SHANTI Doctrine reaffirms India's commitment to international law, the UN Charter, peaceful dispute resolution, and multilateralism. Thus, it will help in fostering a stable, predictable, and equitable global order based on shared norms and mutual trust.
4. **Advances the Interests of the Global South**: The SHANTI Doctrine reinforces India's role as the voice of the Global South by advocating equitable global governance, greater representation in international institutions, development cooperation, climate justice, and inclusive, sustainable growth.

5. **Strengthens Maritime Security**: The SHANTI Doctrine complements **SAGAR** and **MAHASAGAR** by promoting a **free, open, secure, and rules-based maritime order**, strengthening maritime cooperation, ensuring freedom of navigation, and enhancing security across the Indo-Pacific region.
6. **Promotes Peace and Stability**: The SHANTI Doctrine emphasizes peaceful dispute resolution, and dialogue-based conflict management, contributing to regional and global peace, stability, and a rules-based international order.
7. **Encourages Responsible Use of Technology**: The SHANTI Doctrine advocates the ethical, secure, and inclusive use of emerging technologies such as Artificial Intelligence, cyber technologies, and digital platforms through international cooperation, robust governance, and global standards.
8. **Strengthens India's Indo-Pacific Strategy**: The SHANTI Doctrine complements the **Act East Policy**, and the **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)** by promoting a free, open, inclusive, and rules-based Indo-Pacific through enhanced maritime cooperation, connectivity, and regional partnerships.

How can the Bay of Bengal play an important role in implementing India's SHANTI Doctrine?

1. **Strengthening Maritime Security**: The SHANTI doctrine enables India to enhance maritime security in Bay of Bengal through coordinated naval exercises, Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), intelligence sharing, and joint efforts against piracy, terrorism, trafficking, and illegal fishing.
2. **Promoting a Rules-Based Maritime Order**: SHANTI enables India to uphold **UNCLOS**, freedom of navigation, peaceful dispute resolution, and respect for international maritime law, fostering stability, trust, and secure maritime commerce in the Bay of Bengal region first & then in the Indo-Pacific region.
3. **Enhancing Regional Connectivity**: SHANTI Doctrine will enhance the regional connectivity in the Bay of Bengal littoral countries by improving multimodal connectivity through the **Kaladan Project**, **India-Myanmar-Thailand Trilateral Highway**, ports, and coastal shipping, fostering trade, economic integration, and regional trust.
4. **Advancing the Blue Economy**: The SHANTI Doctrine promotes sustainable fisheries, marine resource management, offshore renewable energy, maritime tourism, and resilient port infrastructure in the Bay of Bengal, fostering inclusive growth, regional cooperation, and environmental sustainability.
5. **Climate Resilience & Disaster Management:** The Bay of Bengal is one of the world's most cyclone-prone marine basins, directly threatening millions of coastal residents. Under the SHANTI doctrine's widened security scope, India leads joint HADR exercises & early-warning data sharingacross the littoral states.
6. **Strengthening BIMSTEC**: SHANTI will eventually help in strengthening & operationalizing the **BIMSTEC** by enhancing regional cooperation in maritime security, trade, connectivity, disaster management, and capacity building, while fostering trust, inclusive development, and a rules-based order in the Bay of Bengal.

What are the major challenges in implementing India's SHANTI Doctrine?

1. **Veto Power and Structural Stalemate:** The core pillar of SHANTI calls for reforming the UNSC. However, the five permanent members (P5) remain reluctant to dilute their veto powers or agree on text-based negotiations, making it difficult for India to achieve concrete reforms and expand the Security Council.
2. **Regional Security Threats**: Persistent terrorism, piracy, illegal fishing, trafficking, maritime disputes, and transnational crime in the Indo-Pacific and Bay of Bengal can undermine regional stability, making effective implementation of the **SHANTI Doctrine** more challenging.
3. **China's Expanding Maritime Presence**: China's expanding naval deployments, port infrastructure under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and growing influence in the Indian Ocean challenge India's efforts to promote a secure, rules-based, and cooperative maritime order under the SHANTI Doctrine.

4. **Weak Regional Cooperation**: Divergent strategic interests, political differences, and uneven institutional capacities among regional countries can hinder consensus-building, limiting effective cooperation on maritime security, connectivity, climate action, and implementation of the SHANTI Doctrine.
5. **Climate Change and Natural Disasters**: Frequent cyclones, sea-level rise, and coastal erosion in the Bay of Bengal threaten maritime infrastructure, connectivity, and livelihoods, making climate resilience, disaster preparedness, and regional cooperation essential for the effective implementation of the SHANTI Doctrine.
6. **Resource Constraints**: Implementing the SHANTI Doctrine requires sustained investment in maritime infrastructure, naval modernization, connectivity projects, technology, capacity building, and development partnerships. Limited financial and institutional resources may constrain its effective implementation and long-term sustainability.
7. **Erosion of Strategic Autonomy:** India's broader maritime challenges involve balancing its desire to counter China's influence without engaging in the arms race or becoming entangled in formal alliances – which is a tightrope walk that impacts all its maritime doctrines.

Conclusion: The success of the **SHANTI Doctrine** will depend on India's ability to strengthen the regional institutions, build maritime and technological capacities, and translate its vision of **Norms, Trust, and Integrity** into practical outcomes through sustained diplomacy and partnerships.

UPSC GS-2: International Relations
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