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# DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

## FOR UPSC CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION

**DATE: 22/10/2025 (WEDNESDAY)**



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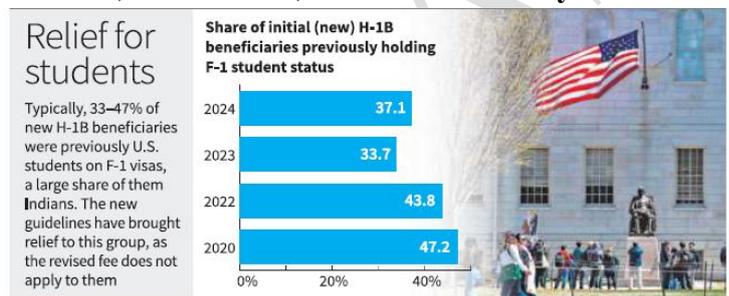**#317/A SKB Arcade, D. Subbaiah Road, Ramaswamy Circle, Mysuru–570004**

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# 1. NEW H-1B VISA FEE EXEMPTION FOR STATUS CHANGES – U.S. GOVERNMENT CLARIFICATION

## 1. Context and Background

- **Definition:** The *H-1B visa* is a **non-immigrant U.S. work visa** that allows U.S. companies to employ foreign professionals in specialty occupations requiring technical or theoretical expertise, particularly in IT, engineering, and research.

- **Recent Policy Update (September 2025):** U.S. President Donald Trump signed a **proclamation imposing a $100,000 one-time fee** on *new* H-1B visa applications effective from **September 21, 2025**.

- **Clarification by USCIS (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services):** The fee **will not apply** to:

    o Existing visa holders seeking **change of status**, **amendment**, or **extension of stay** within the U.S.

    o Any petitions **filed before 12:01 a.m. (EDT), September 21, 2025.**

- **Purpose:** The measure was justified as part of "immigration cost recovery," though it has sparked widespread debate for potentially deterring skilled foreign professionals.



Relief for students

Typically, 33–47% of new H-1B beneficiaries were previously U.S. students on F-1 visas, a large share of them Indians. The new guidelines have brought relief to this group, as the revised fee does not apply to them

Share of initial (new) H-1B beneficiaries previously holding F-1 student status

2024 — 37.1
2023 — 33.7
2022 — 43.8
2020 — 47.2

## 2. Key Highlights of the USCIS Guidelines

- **Fee Applicability:**

    o Only applicable to *new* H-1B visa petitions filed *after* the cutoff date.

    o Does **not apply** to previously issued visas or ongoing valid H-1B statuses.

- **Travel Freedom:** Current H-1B visa holders can **travel freely** to and from the U.S. without losing their visa status or facing new fee requirements.

- **Legal Boundaries:**

    o The proclamation cannot override existing immigration statutes, particularly the **Immigration and Nationality Act (INA)**.

    o Hence, the policy does not retroactively alter rights of existing H-1B holders.

- **U.S. Chamber of Commerce Lawsuit:** Filed to challenge the legality of the $100,000 fee, arguing it violates the procedural norms of U.S. federal law and bypasses Congressional authority.

## 3. Implications for India and Global Workforce Mobility

- **Indian Impact:** India remains the **largest beneficiary** of the H-1B programme, with **around 70% of all visa holders being Indian citizens** (approx. **5.1 lakh** out of **7.3 lakh** as of January 2025).

- **Major Indian IT Beneficiaries (2025):**

    o *Tata Consultancy Services (TCS):* 5,505 H-1B approvals.

    o *Infosys, Wipro, HCL,* and *Tech Mahindra* also major users of the visa route.

- **Sectoral Significance:** H-1B visas underpin the *India–U.S. technology partnership*, contributing to U.S. innovation and India's services exports (over $150 billion annually).

- **Brain Circulation:** Rather than "brain drain," Indian professionals increasingly serve as global talent connectors, transferring knowledge and capital back to India.

## 4. Legal and Constitutional Perspectives (U.S. and India)

- **Under U.S. Law:**

    o The **Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), 1952**, regulates visa issuance, employment authorisation, and fee structures.

    o Any executive proclamation cannot *supersede Congressional law*, maintaining the principle of **separation of powers**.

- **Under Indian Law:**

    o The **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)** and **Ministry of Commerce and Industry** monitor visa policy developments under India's *Overseas Employment Policy Framework.*

    o The Indian Constitution under **Article 51(c)** encourages respect for international law and treaty obligations, including fair treatment of Indian professionals abroad.

- **International Linkages:** India-U.S. cooperation on skilled mobility falls under frameworks such as the **India–U.S. Migration and Mobility Partnership Agreement (2023)** and **Trade Policy Forum** engagements.

## 5. Economic and Strategic Implications

- **For India:**

    o Potentially mitigates immediate financial burden on Indian tech firms and professionals working in the U.S.

    o Reflects the strong lobbying capacity of Indian and global IT industries in U.S. policy reforms.

    o Reinforces the role of **high-skilled migration** in India's service-led economy.

- **For the U.S.:**

    o Addresses concerns over labor market protectionism without discouraging skilled talent inflow.

    o Ensures continued inflow of specialized professionals vital for U.S. tech, research, and healthcare sectors.

- **Global Mobility Context:** Aligns with post-pandemic trends toward *targeted immigration policies* balancing domestic employment concerns with innovation imperatives.

## 6. Way Forward and Policy Outlook

- **Short-Term Relief:** The exemption for existing visa holders ensures continuity of employment, travel, and family security for thousands of Indian professionals.

- **Medium-Term Outlook:** Legal challenges and global lobbying may lead to a re-evaluation of the $100,000 fee or its scaling down under future administrations.

- **Long-Term Vision:** Strengthening *India–U.S. skilled workforce agreements* and creating *reciprocal visa opportunities* can enhance bilateral innovation cooperation.

- **Diplomatic Coordination:** The Government of India is likely to pursue sustained engagement through diplomatic channels and the Indian diaspora networks to ensure equitable treatment of its citizens abroad.

**Conclusion:**

The U.S. government's clarification on the new H-1B visa fee marks a crucial reprieve for existing Indian professionals and IT firms, preventing disruption in ongoing projects and cross-border employment. While the $100,000 fee remains applicable to *new applicants*, its non-retroactive nature safeguards economic and strategic linkages between India and the United States. The episode reflects the delicate balance between *immigration sovereignty* and *global talent mobility*, reinforcing the need for cooperative visa frameworks in the knowledge-driven global economy.

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 2:**

  o India–U.S. bilateral relations and global mobility of skilled professionals.

  o Government policies and interventions affecting Indian diaspora.

  o International institutions and agreements (Immigration and Nationality Act, 1952).

- **GS Paper 3:**

  o Impact of migration on India's IT exports, foreign exchange earnings, and human capital.

## 2. NET FDI DECLINE IN AUGUST 2025 – RBI DATA AND ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

**1. Overview and Definition of FDI**

- **Definition:** *Foreign Direct Investment (FDI)* refers to the investment made by a foreign entity in the productive capacity or ownership of an enterprise located in another country. Unlike portfolio investment, it represents *long-term capital inflow* and managerial involvement.

- **Current Context (August 2025):** According to *Reserve Bank of India (RBI)* data, **net FDI fell by 159%**, indicating that *capital outflows exceeded inflows* — marking the second such instance in FY 2025–26.

- **Key Data:**

  o **Gross FDI inflows:** USD **6.05 billion** in August 2025 (a 30.6% drop from August 2024 and 45.5% lower than July 2025).



  o **Net FDI (inflows minus outflows):** Turned negative due to higher *repatriation, disinvestment,* and *overseas investments by Indian companies.*

- **Long-term Trend:** Despite the monthly fall, cumulative net FDI for April–August 2025 grew **121% year-on-year**, indicating resilience in overall investor confidence.

## 2. Reasons for the Decline in August 2025

- **Global Economic Factors:**

  - Tightened *monetary policies* by major central banks, especially the U.S. Federal Reserve.

  - Global geopolitical uncertainties (Russia–Ukraine conflict, West Asia tensions).

  - Risk aversion and cautious investment sentiment in emerging markets.

- **Domestic Causes:**

  - *Profit repatriation* by foreign firms due to better returns abroad.

  - *High corporate taxation* and procedural delays in approvals.

  - *Regulatory uncertainties* in certain sectors (e.g., data localisation, e-commerce, and digital payments).

- **Sectoral Shifts:** Decline in inflows into *manufacturing, energy, and fintech sectors*, partly offset by growth in *renewable energy and services.*

- **Concurrent Indicator:** Slowing of *core sector growth* to **3% in September 2025** (lowest in three months) reflects underlying demand moderation and investor caution.

## 3. Legal, Constitutional, and Policy Framework

- **Legal Provisions:**

  - FDI in India is governed under the **Foreign Exchange Management Act (FEMA), 1999** and the **Consolidated FDI Policy (2020)** issued by the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT).

  - Approvals follow either the **Automatic Route** or **Government Route**, depending on the sector.

  - Regulated by the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** and *Department of Economic Affairs (DEA)* under the *Ministry of Finance.*

- **Constitutional Relevance:**

  - Economic liberalisation aligns with **Article 19(1)(g)** (freedom to practice trade/business) and **Article 301** (freedom of trade, commerce, and intercourse throughout India).

  - Directive Principle under **Article 38** promotes equitable growth, while **Article 39(b)** ensures distribution of material resources for public welfare.

- **Government Policy Context:**

  - *Make in India*, *Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan*, and *PLI (Production-Linked Incentive)* schemes aim to boost foreign and domestic manufacturing investment.

## 4. India's Broader FDI Trend and Global Position

- **Cumulative FDI (April–August 2025):** Up by **121%** over the previous year, reflecting strong multi-sector recovery post-COVID.

- **Top FDI Contributing Countries:** Singapore, Mauritius, the United States, and the Netherlands continue to be top sources.

- **Leading Sectors Attracting FDI:** Services (IT, fintech), renewable energy, electronics, and pharmaceuticals.

- **Challenges in Sustaining FDI:**

  o Policy unpredictability and retrospective taxation concerns.

  o Land acquisition bottlenecks.

  o Inadequate logistics and infrastructure in Tier-II regions.

- **Reform Directions:**

  o Simplification of compliance norms via *National Single Window System (NSWS).*

  o Liberalisation of FDI caps in defence (74%), insurance intermediaries (100%), and space-tech startups (recent reform).

## 5. Economic Implications of Negative Net FDI

- **Macroeconomic Impact:**

  o *Capital Outflows* put pressure on the current account balance.

  o *Rupee Depreciation Risk* due to reduced foreign capital inflow.

  o Potential tightening of liquidity for long-term infrastructure projects.

- **Investor Confidence:** A temporary dip in monthly FDI may not indicate systemic weakness but signals the need for continued policy consistency.

- **Strategic Implications:**

  o India must maintain competitiveness amid rising FDI competition from countries like Vietnam, Indonesia, and Mexico.

  o Focus on *ease of doing business* and *bilateral investment treaties (BITs)* to secure long-term investor trust.

## 6. Way Forward and Policy Recommendations

- **Short-Term Measures:**

  o Ensure macroeconomic stability and currency predictability.

  o Fast-track *land, tax,* and *infrastructure* reforms to retain investor confidence.

- **Medium-Term Focus:**

  o Strengthen *investment protection* frameworks and dispute resolution mechanisms.

  o Deepen *financial sector reforms* to attract institutional investors.

  o Promote *greenfield investments* in emerging sectors like semiconductors, EVs, and biotechnology.

- **Long-Term Vision:**

  o Institutionalise *FDI tracking* and *state-level investment facilitation councils*.

  o Enhance policy coherence between *DPIIT, Finance Ministry,* and *state governments*.

**Conclusion:**

The 159% fall in net FDI in August 2025 reflects a temporary correction within a generally positive medium-term trend. India's attractiveness as a global investment hub remains intact, supported by a large domestic market, policy reforms, and stable macroeconomic indicators. Sustaining investor confidence will require *policy predictability, transparent governance,* and *sectoral diversification*—aligning foreign capital inflows with India's long-term goal of self-reliant, inclusive growth.

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 2:** Economic policies, foreign investment regulations, and India's engagement with global economic institutions.

- **GS Paper 3:** Foreign capital inflows, balance of payments, current account management, and macroeconomic stability.

## 3. DEEPAVALI FIREWORKS AND DELHI'S AIR QUALITY CRISIS – 2025 ANALYSIS

**1. Context and Air Quality Situation**

- **Definition:** *Air Quality Index (AQI)* is a standardized indicator that measures the concentration of key pollutants such as PM2.5, PM10, NO2, SO2, and O3 in the atmosphere; values above 300 are classified as *"Very Poor"* to *"Severe."*

- **Current Data:** Following Deepavali 2025, Delhi's air quality plunged to a **five-year low**, with *PM2.5 concentrations crossing 400 µg/m³* — levels not seen since 2021.

- **National Overview:**

    o On Deepavali day, **9 cities** had AQI above 300.

    o The day after Deepavali, this rose to **16 cities**, predominantly across *North India and the Indo-Gangetic Plains.*

    o **Dharuhera (Haryana)** recorded the worst AQI at **462**, indicating *"Severe"* pollution levels.



Pollution spike — The graph depicts PM₂.₅ concentration trends in Delhi before, during, and after Deepavali day. Pre-Deepavali, Deepavali, Post Deepavali. 2021: 163.1, 324.9, 454.5; 2022: 129.3, 180.7, 168; 2033: 92.5, 145.5, 319.7; 2024: 204, 227.7, 220; 2025: 156.6, 233.5, 488*. *Data updated till 10 a.m. and is subject to change. SOURCE: CPCB, CLIMATE TRENDS. SHASHI SHEKHAR KASHYAP

- **Institutional Data Source:** Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) monitors AQI across 293 cities; independent verification was done by *Climate Trends,* a weather and climate research agency.
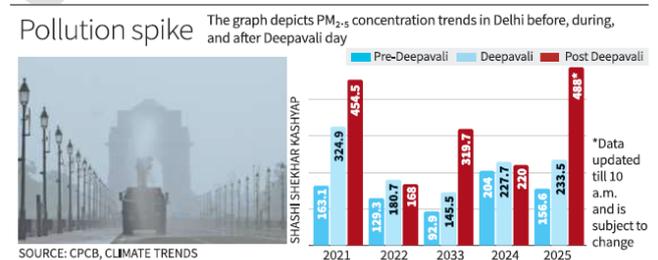
**2. Factors Behind the Pollution Spike**

- **Firecracker Emissions:**

    o PM2.5 levels in Delhi spiked from *150 µg/m³ at 4 p.m.* to *650 µg/m³ by 11 p.m.* — coinciding with the legally permitted cracker-bursting window (8–10 p.m.) as per the Supreme Court's reprieve.

    o Despite the order allowing only *CSIR-approved "green crackers"* (which emit 30% less smoke), widespread non-compliance and use of traditional crackers were observed.

- **Meteorological Factors:**

    o **Low wind speeds** and **temperature inversion** (23–25°C) trapped pollutants near the surface.

o The warmer Deepavali night of 2025 failed to disperse smoke due to stagnant air and limited vertical mixing, worsening haze formation over the Delhi-NCR airshed.

- **Pattern Observed:** The combination of *high emissions* and *poor atmospheric dispersion* consistently elevates post-festival PM2.5 levels across years, as highlighted by *Climate Trends'* report.

## 3. Legal and Judicial Framework on Firecrackers and Pollution Control

- **Supreme Court Orders:**

  o The SC, in various judgments (2018, 2021, and reaffirmed in 2025), permitted only *"green crackers"* certified by the *Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)* and restricted their use to fixed hours (8–10 p.m.).

  o Violation of this order invites action under *Section 188 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC)* for disobedience to a public order.

- **Constitutional Provisions:**

  o **Article 21:** Right to life includes the *right to clean air and a healthy environment* (as interpreted in *Subhash Kumar vs. State of Bihar, 1991*).

  o **Article 48A:** Directs the State to protect and improve the environment.

  o **Article 51A(g):** Fundamental duty of citizens to protect the natural environment.

- **Legal Instruments:**

  o *Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981* – empowers CPCB and SPCBs to monitor and regulate air pollution.

  o *Environment (Protection) Act, 1986* – provides a framework for environmental standards and penalties for violations.

  o *National Green Tribunal (NGT)* orders have repeatedly banned conventional firecrackers in NCR to curb air pollution.

## 4. Broader Environmental and Public Health Implications

- **Health Impact:**

  o PM2.5 is among the most dangerous pollutants, capable of penetrating deep into the lungs and bloodstream, causing cardiovascular, respiratory, and neurological disorders.

  o Post-Deepavali spikes are correlated with increased emergency room visits for asthma, bronchitis, and COPD cases.

- **Regional Impact:**

  o The *Indo-Gangetic Plains* form a pollution hotspot due to high population density, crop-residue burning, and meteorological trapping.

  o The *Airshed Effect* means pollution in Delhi often extends across Haryana, Punjab, and Uttar Pradesh.

- **Environmental Cost:**

- o Short-term pollution events contribute significantly to annual PM averages, offsetting long-term gains from emission control policies.
- o Contributes to secondary pollutants like *ozone (O3)* through photochemical reactions.

## 5. Governance and Policy Responses

- **Regulatory Mechanisms:**
  - o *Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP)* in Delhi-NCR mandates stage-wise actions (school closures, vehicle curbs, construction bans) during severe pollution episodes.
  - o *National Clean Air Programme (NCAP)* aims to reduce PM2.5 and PM10 concentrations by **40% by 2026** (from 2017 levels).

- **Institutional Role:**
  - o *Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)* and *Delhi Pollution Control Committee (DPCC)* conduct continuous air monitoring.
  - o *Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM)* coordinates inter-state actions on pollution control across NCR states.

- **Public Awareness and Enforcement Challenges:**
  - o Poor enforcement of cracker restrictions and availability of banned products.
  - o Weak local governance in ensuring compliance despite SC and NGT mandates.
  - o Need for stronger citizen participation and local-level accountability.

## 6. Way Forward and Recommendations

- **Policy Reforms:**
  - o Enforce *strict licensing* for green crackers and penalize violators effectively.
  - o Promote *community Diwali* celebrations using eco-friendly light shows, drones, and laser alternatives.
  - o Increase *real-time air quality forecasting* and citizen alert systems.

- **Technology and Innovation:**
  - o Encourage development of *smoke-free or low-emission fireworks* with CSIR and private collaboration.
  - o Deploy *AI-based dispersion modelling* for better urban air management.

- **Citizen Action:**
  - o Promote behavioral change through campaigns emphasizing health costs of pollution.
  - o Integration of environmental education in school curricula to build long-term awareness.

**Conclusion:**

Deepavali 2025 once again exposed Delhi's fragile air quality ecosystem, where cultural festivities clash with environmental sustainability. Despite judicial and scientific interventions, enforcement and behavioral challenges persist. A shift from reactive bans to *preventive environmental governance*, combined with *citizen*

*participation, scientific innovation,* and *strict legal enforcement*, is essential for restoring breathable air in Delhi and across the Indo-Gangetic plains.

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 1:** Urbanization, environmental degradation, and health impacts.

- **GS Paper 2:** Judicial activism, policy frameworks, and Centre–State coordination on pollution control.

- **GS Paper 3:** Environmental pollution, sustainable development, and disaster management.

- **GS Paper 4:** Ethics of environmental responsibility and sustainable lifestyle choices.

# 4. INDIAN MISSION IN KABUL GETS EMBASSY STATUS – DIPLOMATIC SIGNIFICANCE AND STRATEGIC IMPLICATIONS

## 1. Context and Background

- **Recent Development:** India has officially **upgraded its Technical Mission in Kabul to an Embassy**, signaling a calibrated diplomatic re-engagement with Afghanistan under the Taliban administration.

- **Trigger Event:** The move follows the visit of **Amir Khan Muttaqi**, the Taliban's acting Foreign Minister, to India — indicating renewed dialogue between the two sides.

- **Official Statement (MEA):** "This decision underscores India's resolve to deepen its bilateral engagement with the Afghan side in all spheres of mutual interest."

- **Diplomatic Significance:** This upgrade reflects India's attempt to protect its strategic interests, humanitarian initiatives, and regional influence, while maintaining cautious engagement with the Taliban regime.

## 2. India's Evolving Policy Toward Afghanistan

- **Background:** After the Taliban's return to power in **August 2021**, India had shut down its full-fledged embassy and repatriated all personnel, maintaining only a **Technical Mission** (since 2022) to oversee humanitarian and developmental activities.



- **Shift in Policy (2025):** The conversion into an embassy marks **India's first formal diplomatic step** toward normalizing relations since the regime change.

- **Engagement Rationale:**

  o Protection of India-funded projects and assets worth over **USD 3 billion**.

  o Coordination of **humanitarian assistance** (food grains, medical aid, vaccines).

  o Monitoring security threats emanating from terror networks operating from Afghan soil.

- **Strategic Message:** India seeks to reassert its presence in a geopolitically vital region where China, Pakistan, and Russia have increased their diplomatic and economic engagements with the Taliban regime.

## 3. Legal and Constitutional Dimensions

- **Diplomatic Legitimacy:**

  o The recognition of a foreign government does not automatically legitimize it in international law; India's action indicates **functional engagement**, not **formal recognition** of the Taliban government.

  o Consistent with **Article 51 of the Indian Constitution**, which directs the State to promote international peace, justice, and respect for international law.

- **Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations (1961):**

  o Provides the legal framework for establishing embassies, ensuring diplomatic immunity, and facilitating peaceful engagement, even in politically unstable nations.

  o India's embassy re-establishment is compliant with these international norms.

- **Humanitarian and Constitutional Ethos:**

  o Aligns with India's foreign policy doctrine of *"Neighbourhood First"* and its constitutional principles of fostering international cooperation.

## 4. Strategic and Security Implications

- **Counterterrorism Concerns:**

  o India remains vigilant about the presence of **Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT)** and **Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM)** elements within Afghanistan, and the potential revival of cross-border terrorism.

  o Re-establishing an embassy allows closer intelligence coordination and monitoring of regional security developments.

- **Geopolitical Competition:**

  o **China:** Expanding economic projects under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and engaging with the Taliban for mineral access.

  o **Pakistan:** Aims to use the Taliban regime for strategic depth, though tensions persist over border issues.

  o **India:** By reopening its embassy, seeks to balance Chinese and Pakistani influence and maintain its role as a stabilizing actor in South Asia.

- **Regional Stability:** The move could enhance coordination with Central Asian republics and support India's broader **connectivity and counter-radicalization strategy** through regional forums like SCO and SAARC.

## 5. Humanitarian and Developmental Dimensions

- **Development Cooperation:**

  o India has invested heavily in Afghanistan's infrastructure — including the **Zaranj–Delaram Highway, Salma Dam (India–Afghanistan Friendship Dam), Parliament building,** and educational institutions.

- o Embassy status allows India to directly monitor and resume assistance programs, especially in education, healthcare, and women's welfare.

- **Humanitarian Relief:**

  - o India continues to supply food grains, vaccines, and medicines under **UN and bilateral channels**.

  - o Embassy presence ensures accountability and delivery of aid amidst governance gaps.

- **Cultural and People-to-People Ties:**

  - o India remains a major education and medical destination for Afghan citizens; maintaining an embassy ensures continued facilitation of visas and scholarships.

## 6. Way Forward and Diplomatic Outlook

- **Calibrated Engagement:** India is likely to continue a *"contact without recognition"* approach — engaging on humanitarian, developmental, and security fronts while awaiting broader international consensus on the Taliban regime.

- **Policy Priorities:**

  - o Safeguard India's assets and citizens in Afghanistan.

  - o Monitor terror financing and extremist linkages.

  - o Support Afghan women's education and rights through indirect channels.

- **Multilateral Cooperation:** Collaboration with the **UN, SCO, and Quad partners** to ensure that engagement does not embolden extremism but contributes to regional stability.

**Conclusion:**

India's decision to upgrade its mission in Kabul to an embassy marks a significant recalibration in its foreign policy — balancing pragmatism with principle. Without granting formal recognition to the Taliban, India aims to protect its national security, developmental investments, and regional influence through limited engagement. This move demonstrates India's strategic adaptability in navigating complex geopolitical realities while upholding its constitutional values of peace and cooperation.

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 2:**

  - o India's foreign policy; bilateral relations with Afghanistan; implications for regional stability.

  - o International law – Vienna Convention, diplomatic immunity, and recognition of regimes.

- **GS Paper 3:**

  - o Internal and external security challenges arising from India's neighbourhood.

  - o Terrorism and regional security architecture.

- **GS Paper 4:**

  - o Ethics in diplomacy and humanitarian engagement with non-recognized regimes.

- **Essay/Interview Topics:**

  - o "India's Diplomatic Balancing in a Changing Afghanistan."

- o "Engagement Without Recognition: India's Realpolitik in South Asia."

- o "Humanitarian Diplomacy and the Limits of Non-Recognition."

# 5. STUBBLE BURNING IN PUNJAB – AGRARIAN PRACTICE, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT, AND POLICY RESPONSE

## 1. Context and Recent Developments

- **Current Situation (October 2025):** Punjab has witnessed a **threefold spike in stubble burning incidents** in just 10 days — from 116 cases (till October 11) to **353 cases by October 20**, according to the Punjab Pollution Control Board (PPCB).

- **District-Wise Data:** *Tarn Taran (125)* and *Amritsar (112)* reported the highest number of incidents, followed by *Ferozepur (27)* and *Patiala (23)*.

- **Legal Action and Penalties:**

  - o Environmental fines worth **₹8 lakh** imposed in **162 cases**, with ₹5.65 lakh already recovered.

  - o **149 FIRs** registered under **Section 223 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)** for disobedience of public orders.

- **Trend Analysis:** Punjab recorded a **70% reduction in stubble fires in 2024** (10,909 cases) compared to 2023 (36,663 cases), but the 2025 resurgence poses renewed environmental and governance challenges.

## 2. Understanding Stubble Burning and Its Causes

- **Definition:** *Stubble burning* refers to the deliberate setting on fire of crop residue (mainly paddy straw) to quickly clear fields for the next sowing season.

- **Agronomic Cause:** The **short window** between paddy harvesting and wheat sowing (approximately 10–15 days) compels farmers to resort to burning instead of mechanical residue management.



- **Economic Constraints:**

  - o High cost of *crop residue management (CRM) machinery* like Happy Seeders and Super-Straw Management Systems.

  - o Low profitability and lack of incentives for alternative straw usage (biofuel, fodder, composting).

- **Policy Disconnect:** Despite awareness campaigns, enforcement challenges and logistical delays in machinery subsidy distribution persist, leading to non-compliance.

## 3. Environmental and Health Impacts

- **Air Pollution:**

  - o Burning releases large volumes of **Particulate Matter (PM2.5 and PM10)**, carbon monoxide (CO), nitrogen oxides (NOx), and volatile organic compounds (VOCs).

- o Major contributor to **Delhi-NCR's post-harvest air pollution** episodes every October-November.

- **Climate Effects:**

  - o Adds to regional *greenhouse gas emissions* ($CO_2$, $CH_4$, $N_2O$).

  - o Degrades soil organic carbon and fertility over time.

- **Public Health:** Exposure leads to respiratory disorders, cardiovascular issues, and decreased visibility causing road accidents.

- **Geographical Impact:** The *Indo-Gangetic Plains* (Punjab–Haryana–UP–Delhi) act as a shared airshed, causing transboundary pollution across states.

## 4. Legal and Constitutional Framework

- **Legal Provisions:**

  - o **Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981:** Empowers authorities to prevent and control air pollution.

  - o **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986:** Enables central regulation and penal action for environmental violations.

  - o **Section 223, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023:** Penalizes disobedience to public orders, replacing Section 188 IPC.

- **Judicial Interventions:**

  - o The **National Green Tribunal (NGT)** and **Supreme Court** have repeatedly directed Punjab, Haryana, and Delhi governments to curb stubble burning and promote alternative residue management.

  - o Orders also mandated monitoring by *District Environment Committees* and the use of *satellite mapping (ISRO, CPCB)* to track fire incidents.

- **Constitutional Provisions:**

  - o **Article 21:** Right to clean air as part of the Right to Life.

  - o **Article 48A:** State duty to protect and improve the environment.

  - o **Article 51A(g):** Fundamental duty of citizens to safeguard the environment.

## 5. Policy Measures and Technological Alternatives

- **Government Initiatives:**

  - o *Crop Residue Management Scheme (MoA&FW, 2018)* – Subsidies for CRM machinery distributed through cooperatives and individual farmers.

  - o *In-situ Management:* Use of Happy Seeders, Rotavators, and Super-Straw Management Systems to mix stubble into the soil.

  - o *Ex-situ Management:* Promotion of biomass-based energy plants, paper and board industries, and cattle fodder applications.

- o *Pusa Decomposer (ICAR):* Microbial solution that decomposes stubble within 20 days without burning.

- **Incentive-Based Approaches:**

  - o *PM-PRANAM Scheme (2023):* Encourages states to adopt eco-friendly farming practices.

  - o *Carbon Credit Mechanisms:* Proposed for farmers adopting low-emission agricultural methods.

- **Awareness Campaigns:** "No-Burn Pledge" and village-level environmental education drives by PPCB and Agriculture Department.

## 6. Challenges and Way Forward

- **Persistent Challenges:**

  - o Economic infeasibility for small and marginal farmers to adopt residue management.

  - o Weak enforcement of penalties at ground level.

  - o Lack of coordination between Centre and States during peak burning periods.

- **Way Forward:**

  - o **Integrated Policy:** Combine financial support, strict enforcement, and technology adoption.

  - o **Sustainable Alternatives:** Develop rural enterprises for *paddy straw-based bioenergy* and *biodegradable packaging industries.*

  - o **Institutional Coordination:** Strengthen the *Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM)* for regional strategy execution.

  - o **Community Engagement:** Empower *Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs)* for shared machinery and awareness.

**Conclusion:**

The threefold rise in stubble burning incidents in Punjab reflects the persistent conflict between agrarian urgency and environmental sustainability. While legal frameworks and technological solutions exist, their success depends on *economic feasibility, farmer awareness,* and *inter-state cooperation.* A long-term strategy integrating **climate-smart agriculture, decentralized residue management,** and **institutional accountability** is vital to resolve this annual environmental crisis.

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 3:** Environmental pollution, agricultural practices, and sustainable development.

- **GS Paper 2:** Governance and inter-state coordination in environmental management.

- **GS Paper 4:** Ethical responsibility toward environment and sustainable livelihoods.

## 6. QUOTA AND AGE RELAXATION FOR AGNIVEERS IN UTTAR PRADESH POLICE – POLICY ANALYSIS AND GOVERNANCE CONTEXT

**1. Context and Policy Announcement**

- **Recent Development:** Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister **Yogi Adityanath** announced a **three-year age relaxation** and **20% horizontal reservation** for *Agniveers* (personnel recruited under the Agnipath Scheme) in the **UP Police** for posts such as constables, mounted constables, and firemen.



- **Effective Year:** The policy will be applicable to Agniveers **retiring from 2026 onwards.**

- **Cabinet Approval:** The **Uttar Pradesh Cabinet** approved this measure on **June 3, 2025**, aligning state recruitment policy with national initiatives for Agniveer resettlement.

- **Objective:** To ensure employment continuity, recognize national service, and utilize the discipline and training of Agniveers for state law enforcement.
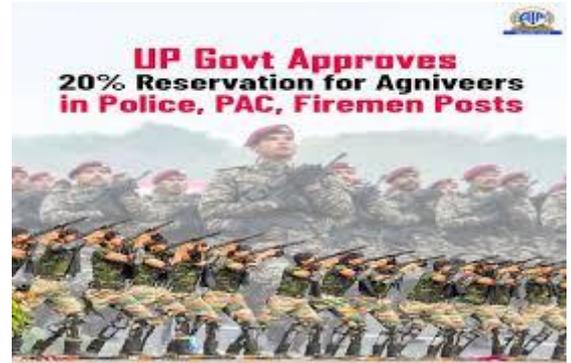
## 2. Understanding Key Concepts – Agniveer and Horizontal Reservation

- **Definition of Agniveer:** Under the **Agnipath Scheme (2022)**, young soldiers are recruited into the Indian Armed Forces for a **four-year tenure**, after which 25% are retained permanently while the rest are demobilized with a financial package and skills certification.

- **Horizontal Reservation (Definition):** Unlike *vertical reservation* (SC/ST/OBC), horizontal reservation cuts across all categories (General, OBC, SC, ST). Thus, **20% of seats within each category** will now be set aside for Agniveers.

- **Example:** If 100 police vacancies exist, and 27% are reserved for OBCs, then within that OBC quota, 20% of those seats will be reserved for eligible Agniveers.

- **Age Relaxation:** The upper age limit for police recruitment will be extended by **three years** for former Agniveers, recognizing their service period in the armed forces.

## 3. Legal and Constitutional Provisions

- **Constitutional Backing for Reservation:**

  o **Article 15(4) & 15(6):** Empower the State to make special provisions for socially and economically disadvantaged sections.

  o **Article 16(4):** Permits reservation in public employment for underrepresented groups.

  o **Article 16(1) and 16(3):** Allow the State to make residence-based or service-based relaxations in public appointments.

- **Horizontal Reservation Legality:** Recognized in **Rajesh Kumar Daria v. Rajasthan Public Service Commission (2007)**, where the Supreme Court upheld horizontal quotas for women and special categories.

- **Administrative Power:** States have the authority under the **Police Act (1861)** and respective **State Service Rules** to decide recruitment norms and reservation policies.

## 4. Policy Rationale and Expected Outcomes

- **Rehabilitation of Agniveers:** Provides a structured post-service employment opportunity, addressing concerns over job security after the 4-year Agnipath tenure.

- **Enhanced Police Efficiency:** Agniveers' military training, discipline, and crisis management skills will strengthen police preparedness and operational efficiency.

- **Socio-Economic Upliftment:** Offers dignified civil employment to youth trained in national service, promoting *inclusive governance* and *employment continuity*.

- **Public Trust and Governance:** The move strengthens the government's commitment toward *"Nation First – Citizen Welfare"* and enhances public trust in both the armed forces and state administration.

- **Welfare Linkages:** Alongside the quota announcement, the CM highlighted welfare efforts for police personnel — including **Provident Fund disbursement** and **₹51.10 lakh scholarships** for meritorious children — reinforcing the welfare-oriented governance model.

## 5. Broader Governance and Administrative Implications

- **Integration of Defence and Civil Services:** Reflects a *whole-of-government approach* toward leveraging military-trained youth for internal security and public order.

- **Replication Potential:** Other states like Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam are likely to adopt similar recruitment relaxations for Agniveers, establishing a pan-India framework for their reintegration.

- **Federal-State Synergy:** The policy aligns with the Union Government's vision of providing *post-service opportunities* for Agniveers in CAPFs (Central Armed Police Forces), PSUs, and private sector enterprises.

- **Administrative Challenges:** Implementation must ensure transparency in selection, avoid overlap with other horizontal quotas (e.g., women, dependents of police martyrs), and maintain merit integrity.

## 6. Way Forward and Policy Recommendations

- **Institutional Coordination:** Create a *State Agniveer Transition Cell* under the Home Department to monitor placements, training, and counselling for retiring Agniveers.

- **Skill Mapping:** Link Agniveer training records with *Skill India Mission* and *Digital Employment Exchanges* for wider job mobility.

- **Performance Evaluation:** Periodically assess the impact of Agniveer recruitment on police efficiency, morale, and diversity.

- **Awareness and Inclusivity:** Ensure awareness among Agniveers regarding eligibility, reservation norms, and timelines for application.

- **Long-Term Reforms:** Integrate Agniveer employment opportunities with *District Disaster Response Forces* and *community policing* initiatives.

**Conclusion:**

Uttar Pradesh's decision to extend **20% horizontal reservation** and **three-year age relaxation** to Agniveers in the police marks a significant step toward *national reintegration of short-term defence personnel*. It reflects a pragmatic approach to linking military service with civil employment, enhancing both social security and institutional efficiency. This policy not only honors Agniveers' contribution but also strengthens the bridge between *national defence and internal security governance.*

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 2:** Government policies, reservation systems, Centre-State relations in public service recruitment, and welfare of armed forces personnel.

- **GS Paper 3:** Internal security, police reforms, and human resource management in governance.

- **GS Paper 4:** Ethics in public service, duty toward veterans, and welfare-driven governance.

# 7. FARMERS' PROTEST IN MARATHWADA OVER DELAYED FLOOD RELIEF PACKAGE – AGRARIAN DISTRESS AND POLICY RESPONSE

## 1. Context and Background

- **Current Situation:** Farmers across the **Marathwada region of Maharashtra** have launched protests against the State government's delay in disbursing the promised **₹32,000 crore flood relief package** announced after widespread damage to crops and farmland due to recent floods.

- **Key Protest:** The **Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana (SSS)** staged a demonstration outside the residence of the **Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar Collector**, symbolically wearing garlands made of damaged crops like maize.

- **Prominent Leaders:**

  - **Raju Shetti**, SSS chief, condemned the government's inaction before the promised Diwali deadline.

  - **Manoj Jarange-Patil**, Maratha leader, threatened mass protests if funds were not credited to farmers' accounts immediately.

- **Damage Extent:** Over **1 crore acres** of farmland affected, primarily in **Marathwada** and parts of **Vidarbha**, with severe soil erosion and topsoil loss, making land temporarily unsuitable for Rabi sowing.

## 2. Nature and Impact of the Crisis

- **Crop Loss:** Floods caused destruction of standing **Kharif crops** (soybean, cotton, maize, pulses), damaging livelihoods of lakhs of farmers.

- **Soil Degradation:** Heavy rains led to **topsoil erosion** and sediment deposition, affecting soil fertility and requiring restoration with silt and organic material before Rabi cultivation.



Maharashtra announces Rs 31,628 cr flood relief

Relief promise masks deeper policy failures, say farmers

- **Economic Hardship:** Farmers are facing financial distress, unable to afford re-sowing or soil treatment, pushing many into debt.

- **Administrative Delays:** Though **panchnamas (damage assessment reports)** were completed, disbursal of compensation remains stalled due to bureaucratic and logistical delays.

- **Government Response:** Collector Deelip Swami claimed administrative handover delays, indicating weak local coordination and governance gaps in relief distribution.

## 3. Legal, Constitutional, and Institutional Framework

- **Disaster Relief and Compensation Framework:**

- Governed under the **Disaster Management Act, 2005**, which mandates States to prepare disaster response and mitigation plans.

- Funds are provided through the **State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF)** and **National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF)** as per guidelines by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

- The SDRF norms specify crop damage compensation at ₹6,800 per hectare (rainfed areas) and ₹13,500 per hectare (irrigated areas).

- **Constitutional Provisions:**

   - **Article 38:** Directive for the State to ensure social and economic justice.

   - **Article 39(b):** Ensures equitable distribution of material resources.

   - **Article 48:** Mandates State to organize agriculture and animal husbandry on scientific lines.

   - **Article 243G:** Empowers Panchayats to plan and implement schemes for agriculture, soil conservation, and water management — highlighting decentralization in disaster response.

- **Legal Mechanisms:**

   - Compensation disbursal delays can be contested under **Right to Services Acts** at the state level, ensuring timely government service delivery.

## 4. Agrarian Distress and Governance Challenges

- **Administrative Gaps:**

   - Poor coordination between local officials and State government agencies in relief transfer.

   - Limited capacity in district offices to manage large-scale compensation verification and fund release.

- **Governance Deficit:**

   - Political announcements not backed by swift fiscal execution, leading to farmer distrust.

   - Weak grievance redressal mechanisms for rural citizens.

- **Economic Vulnerability:**

   - Recurring floods and droughts have deepened **agrarian fragility in Marathwada**, a historically drought-prone region.

   - Inadequate crop insurance coverage and delayed PMFBY (Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana) payouts exacerbate farmers' financial instability.

## 5. Policy Implications and Reform Measures

- **Immediate Measures:**

   - Expedite flood relief transfer via **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)** to ensure transparency.

   - Deploy special task forces for ground-level monitoring of disbursal and verification.

- **Medium-Term Reforms:**

   - Strengthen **State Disaster Management Authorities (SDMAs)** and **District Disaster Management Committees (DDMCs)** to ensure timely assessments.

- o Enhance crop insurance coverage under PMFBY with faster claim settlements and localized loss assessment.

- o Promote **climate-resilient agriculture** and **soil restoration programs** under *Mahatma Phule Jal Bhumi Abhiyan.*

- **Long-Term Structural Measures:**

- o Introduce a **Farmer Relief Guarantee Framework**, integrating SDRF, insurance, and market support.

- o Encourage diversification away from water-intensive crops like paddy and sugarcane to mitigate disaster risks.

- o Institutionalize **social audits** of relief packages to prevent corruption and delays.

## 6. Broader Socio-Political Context

- **Regional Agitation Dynamics:** Marathwada and Vidarbha remain politically sensitive due to chronic rural distress, often influencing Maharashtra's political landscape.

- **Civil Society Mobilization:** Organizations like SSS have historically played a major role in **grassroots farmer movements**, bridging gaps between governance and rural voices.

- **Implications for Governance:** The episode reflects systemic inefficiencies in **disaster governance, federal fiscal coordination,** and **rural welfare delivery**, needing urgent institutional reforms.

## Conclusion:

The delay in disbursing Maharashtra's ₹32,000 crore flood relief package has reignited agrarian unrest in Marathwada, highlighting the persistent governance and administrative failures in disaster response. Beyond short-term compensation, the crisis underscores the urgent need for **climate-adaptive agricultural planning**, **institutional accountability**, and **financial inclusion for farmers.** A proactive, transparent, and technology-enabled relief mechanism—anchored in constitutional values of equity and justice—is vital to restore trust among distressed rural populations.

## UPSC Relevance:

- **GS Paper 2:** Governance issues, federal coordination in disaster management, welfare policy implementation.

- **GS Paper 3:** Agriculture, disaster management, climate change adaptation, and rural distress.

- **GS Paper 4:** Ethics in governance and public accountability.

# 8. TAMIL NADU GOVERNMENT PROPOSES AMENDMENT TO ALLOW WOMEN IN 'DANGEROUS' FACTORY JOBS – GENDER EQUALITY AND LABOUR REFORM PERSPECTIVE

## 1. Context and Overview

- **Recent Development:** The **Tamil Nadu Government** has proposed amendments to the **Tamil Nadu Factories Rules, 1950**, under the **Factories Act, 1948**, to allow women to be employed in nearly **20 operations categorized as 'dangerous'**, from which they were previously prohibited.

- **Key Proposal:**

    o Women workers will now be permitted to work in sectors like **electrolytic processes, glass manufacturing, and lead-based compound production**, subject to safety compliance.

    o **Pregnant women** will remain *prohibited* from working in such hazardous operations for health and safety reasons.

    o The government has also proposed to **obtain written consent from women workers** who voluntarily wish to work **night shifts**, ensuring their safety and autonomy.

- **Implementation Status:** A draft notification was issued on **September 9, 2025** by the **Labour Welfare and Skill Development Department**, inviting public objections within **45 days**.

## 2. Legal and Policy Framework

- **Factories Act, 1948:**

    o Governs occupational safety, health, and working conditions in manufacturing establishments.

    o Under **Section 87**, the government identifies specific processes as *"dangerous operations"* and regulates or prohibits employment in such activities to protect worker safety.

- **Tamil Nadu Factories Rules, 1950:** State-level implementation framework under the central Act, which earlier **prohibited women's employment** in certain hazardous operations.

- **Proposed Amendment:** Seeks to partially lift this restriction, in line with modern occupational safety advancements and gender equality goals.

- **Constitutional Backing:**

    o **Article 14:** Guarantees equality before the law.

    o **Article 15(1) & 15(3):** Prohibits discrimination on grounds of sex; allows the State to make special provisions for women.

    o **Article 42 (Directive Principle):** Mandates the State to secure humane working conditions and maternity relief.

    o **Article 39(d):** Ensures equal pay for equal work for both men and women.

- **International Alignment:**

    o Complies with **ILO Convention No. 111** (Discrimination in Employment and Occupation, 1958) and **SDG Goal 5** (Gender Equality).

## 3. Rationale and Policy Significance

- **Promoting Gender Inclusion:** The reform is aimed at increasing **women's participation in industrial and manufacturing sectors**, aligning with the State's **Women Employment and Empowerment Vision 2030**.

- **Changing Nature of Work:** Technological advances and automation have reduced physical risks, enabling safer environments for women in previously hazardous sectors.

- **Economic Empowerment:** Expanding women's access to high-skill industrial jobs will strengthen Tamil Nadu's workforce diversity and contribute to its manufacturing-driven economy.

- **Balancing Safety with Opportunity:** The amendment ensures voluntary participation and protection measures (e.g., written consent, workplace safety audits, medical checks).

- **Night Shift Consent Provision:** Reinforces autonomy while ensuring safeguards such as **safe transport, rest breaks, and adequate lighting**, in line with *Supreme Court's 2020 guidelines* for women's night employment rights.

## 4. Protective and Regulatory Measures

- **Exclusion of Pregnant Women:** Retains protection for maternal health, as exposure to chemicals, high temperatures, or radiation in such industries can cause complications or fetal harm.

- **Mandatory Safety Protocols:** Factories employing women in dangerous operations must implement:

  o Regular medical examinations and health records.

  o Adequate ventilation, protective clothing, and hazard training.

  o Strict adherence to the **Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions (OSHWC) Code, 2020.**

- **Monitoring and Accountability:** Factory inspectors and Labour Commissioners are empowered to ensure compliance, and violations will attract penalties under the Factories Act.

- **Public Consultation Process:** Reflects transparency and participatory governance, allowing stakeholders to express concerns or suggestions before final rule implementation.

## 5. Broader Social and Economic Implications

- **Gender Mainstreaming in Industry:** Reflects a shift from protective exclusion to **empowered inclusion**, emphasizing women's right to equal opportunity.

- **Boost to Industrial Growth:** Tamil Nadu's strong industrial base (automobile, glass, chemicals) will benefit from an expanded, skilled female workforce.

- **Labour Market Modernization:** Aligns state regulations with evolving national and global labour standards, fostering a gender-sensitive industrial ecosystem.

- **Potential Challenges:**

  o Implementation must ensure real safety compliance, not mere procedural consent.

  o Social and infrastructural barriers (transport, workplace culture) must be addressed to ensure genuine inclusion.

## 6. Way Forward and Policy Recommendations

- **Institutional Safeguards:** Establish a *Women's Workplace Safety Monitoring Cell* under the Labour Department to periodically review compliance.

- **Awareness and Training:** Conduct gender-sensitivity workshops for employers and safety officers.

- **Infrastructure Support:** Mandate secure transport, restrooms, and crèche facilities in all factories employing women in such operations.

- **Medical and Legal Redressal Mechanisms:** Strengthen grievance redressal under **POSH Act, 2013**, ensuring psychological and physical safety of women workers.

- **Data Transparency:** Annual public disclosure of the number of women employed in hazardous operations and workplace safety audits.

**Conclusion:**

Tamil Nadu's proposed amendment to allow women in hazardous factory operations marks a progressive step toward **gender-inclusive industrial growth** while upholding occupational safety and legal safeguards. It balances women's right to equal opportunity with the State's duty of care under the Constitution and international labour conventions. Successful implementation will depend on robust monitoring, employer accountability, and infrastructural support to create safe, dignified, and empowering workplaces for women in the manufacturing sector.

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 2:** Government policies, women empowerment, labour laws, and constitutional provisions for equality.

- **GS Paper 3:** Industrial growth, labour reforms, and employment generation.

- **GS Paper 4:** Ethics in labour management, gender justice, and workplace equality.

# 9. ADAPTING INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY TO NEW GLOBAL REALITIES – STRATEGIC CHALLENGES AND DIPLOMATIC REORIENTATION

**1. Context and Emerging Global Realities**

- **Current Situation:** India faces a rapidly changing global order marked by **declining U.S. multilateralism**, **China's assertive rise**, and **fragmented regional alliances**, requiring urgent recalibration of its foreign policy.

- **Problem Statement:** India's foreign policy establishment, rooted in the **non-aligned, moralist, and idealist frameworks** of the 1930s–1950s, struggles to adapt to **21st-century geopolitical pragmatism**.

- **Consequences:** India's perceived **"trust deficit"** and growing diplomatic isolation, both regionally and globally, indicate diminishing strategic influence despite being a **top-five global economy.**



- **Key Trigger:** The post-Trump global order has weakened multilateralism and increased transactional diplomacy, demanding **flexibility, agility, and strategic hedging** from Indian foreign policy.

**2. India's Declining Geopolitical Relevance and Diplomatic Challenges**

- **West Asia Exclusion:**

- o India's **absence from the Gaza peace process**—orchestrated by the U.S., Türkiye, Qatar, and Egypt—revealed its declining influence in **West Asian diplomacy**, historically a zone of strong Indian engagement.

- o India's **low-level representation** at the post-Gaza reconciliation summit further highlighted its diplomatic underperformance.

- **Neighbourhood Inaction:**

  - o India's muted response during the **Gen-Z revolution in Nepal** exposed its lack of strategic depth even within South Asia.

  - o This vacuum is being exploited by regional actors like **China and Türkiye**, altering the regional balance unfavourably.

- **Strategic Displacement:**

  - o Nations like **Saudi Arabia and Pakistan** have signed mutual defence agreements, **bypassing India's security concerns**.

  - o Türkiye's rising activism in South Asia and its alignment with Pakistan during crises underscores India's diminishing regional leverage.

- **Inference:** India risks being viewed as an *"outlier power"*—economically significant but geopolitically peripheral—if it fails to project influence effectively.

## 3. Regional Instability and Neighbourhood Diplomacy

- **Afghanistan-Pakistan Turbulence:**

  - o The escalating **Afghan Taliban–Pakistan conflict** poses threats to India's western front.

  - o Though India may see Pakistan's instability as advantageous, this complacency ignores the long-term risks of a **radicalized regional environment.**

- **Bangladesh and Nepal Relations:**

  - o Growing perceptions of **anti-India sentiment** in Dhaka and Kathmandu signal weakening neighbourhood diplomacy.

  - o India's challenge lies in recalibrating engagement through economic and cultural diplomacy rather than dependence on political elites.

- **China Factor:**

  - o Relations with China are characterized by **strategic ambiguity and trust deficit** since the **Galwan clash (2020)**.

  - o Despite dialogue since Tianjin (2025), real border de-escalation remains minimal. India's attempt to "normalize" ties without resolution could be strategically counterproductive.

## 4. China's Expanding Influence and Strategic Caution for India

- **China's Regional Strategy:**

  - o China is systematically expanding its **economic, educational, and digital footprint** across East and Southeast Asia, eroding India's influence.

- o Through the **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, cyber networks, and Confucius Institutes, China's *soft power diplomacy* challenges India's cultural and civilizational presence.

- **Strategic Warning:**

  - o India must recognize that **Xi Jinping's China** is more expansionist than its predecessors (Deng Xiaoping, Hu Jintao).

  - o Unlike the **1988 Rajiv Gandhi era rapprochement**, present relations lack trust, candour, and mutual respect.

- **U.S.–China Dynamics:**

  - o The ongoing **U.S.–China tariff war** and trade realignments underscore the decline of American hegemony and rise of a **China-centric Asian order.**

  - o India must avoid choosing sides blindly; instead, it should strengthen **strategic autonomy** through diversified partnerships (QUAD, I2U2, Global South alliances).

## 5. Legal, Constitutional, and Institutional Dimensions of India's Foreign Policy

- **Constitutional Provisions:**

  - o **Article 51(c):** Directs the State to promote international peace and respect for international law.

  - o **Article 73:** Extends the executive power of the Union to external affairs, guided by parliamentary oversight.

- **Institutional Framework:**

  - o The **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)**, **National Security Council (NSC)**, and **Prime Minister's Office (PMO)** coordinate strategic, security, and diplomatic policies.

  - o **Foreign Service Reforms:** Needed to enhance diplomatic capacity, regional expertise, and economic statecraft within the Indian Foreign Service (IFS).

- **Strategic Autonomy:**

  - o Core pillar of Indian diplomacy since the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM); must now evolve into **"multi-alignment"**—balancing relations across competing blocs without compromising sovereignty.

## 6. Way Forward: Recalibrating Indian Diplomacy

- **Reform-Oriented Foreign Policy:**

  - o Shift from legacy idealism to **pragmatic realism**—prioritize national interest over moral posturing.

  - o Institutionalize *Track 1.5 and 2 Diplomacy* involving academia, industry, and civil society for dynamic policy inputs.

- **Neighbourhood First, Reimagined:**

  - o Reinforce *Neighbourhood First Policy* with people-centric engagement, cross-border economic corridors, and climate cooperation.

- **West Asia Re-engagement:**

- o Proactive diplomacy with Gulf nations leveraging **energy security, diaspora, and digital trade ties.**

- o Avoid policy inertia; position India as a peace mediator and development partner in regional crises.

- **China Strategy:**

  - o Pursue *deterrence diplomacy* through military readiness and strategic alliances (QUAD, Indo-Pacific).

  - o Expand influence in **Southeast Asia, Africa, and Latin America** through trade, technology, and cultural diplomacy.

- **Global South Leadership:**

  - o Reassert India's role as a **voice of the Global South** in climate negotiations, digital equity, and development finance.

  - o Use G20 and BRICS platforms to shape equitable multilateral norms.

**Conclusion:**

India's foreign policy stands at a critical inflection point. While economic strength and democratic legitimacy bolster its global standing, inertia in strategic adaptation undermines its influence. To remain relevant in a multipolar world dominated by transactional alignments and regional realignments, India must adopt a **flexible, interest-driven, and pragmatic foreign policy.** Eternal vigilance, strategic foresight, and a dynamic diplomatic corps are essential to safeguard India's civilizational values and national security in an uncertain global order.

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 2:** India's foreign policy, international relations, global governance, and neighbourhood diplomacy.

- **GS Paper 3:** National security, strategic partnerships, and border management.

- **GS Paper 4:** Ethics in diplomacy—balancing moral ideals and realpolitik.

# 10. UNRELIABLE ENVIRONMENTAL DATA AND GOVERNANCE IN INDIA – THE CHALLENGE OF POLICY CREDIBILITY

## 1. Context and Key Issue

- **Central Argument:** The effectiveness of environmental policy is directly linked to the **credibility of the data** on which it is based. Recent failures in India's **air and noise pollution monitoring systems**—specifically Delhi's *Real-Time Air Pollution Network* and Lucknow's *National Ambient Noise Monitoring Network*—highlight deep governance flaws.

- **Core Problem:** Faulty data collection, misplacement of sensors, and lack of scientific rigour have led to **misrepresentation of pollution levels**, undermining public trust and weakening India's domestic and international environmental commitments.

- **Implication:** Misleading data not only distort policy direction but also delay **judicial intervention** and compromise citizens' **constitutional right to life and health** under Article 21.

## 2. Failures in Environmental Monitoring Systems

- **Delhi's Air Quality Network:**

  o The **Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG)** audit revealed that several sensors were incorrectly installed—under trees, behind walls, or in low-emission areas—leading to artificially "moderate" readings.

  o Despite severe pollution episodes, official indices often underreport toxicity, violating the **scientific and ethical standards** of public data reporting.

  o This weakens the foundation of action plans on **stubble burning, vehicular emissions, and industrial pollution control.**
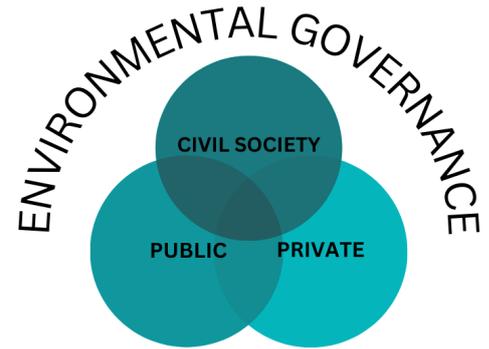
- **Lucknow's Noise Monitoring Network:**

  o Established under the **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)**, the system fails to capture accurate decibel levels, misrepresenting actual noise pollution.

  o India still relies on outdated **Noise Pollution (Regulation and Control) Rules, 2000**, which are misaligned with **WHO guidelines** and lack effective enforcement or deterrent penalties.

- **Common Pattern:** High-cost technology deployment without **scientific calibration, auditing, or independent verification** creates a façade of progress while perpetuating *data opacity*.

## 3. Constitutional, Legal, and Institutional Framework

- **Constitutional Provisions:**

  o **Article 21:** Guarantees the *Right to Life*, which the Supreme Court has interpreted to include the *Right to a Clean and Healthy Environment.*

  o **Article 48A (Directive Principle):** Directs the State to protect and improve the environment.

  o **Article 51A(g) (Fundamental Duty):** Enjoins citizens to protect and preserve the natural environment.

- **Key Legislation:**

  o **Environment (Protection) Act, 1986:** Empowers the central government to set standards for environmental quality and monitoring.

  o **Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981** and **Noise Rules, 2000:** Establish regulatory frameworks for emission and noise control but lack real-time scientific enforcement.

- **Institutional Responsibility:**

  o **Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB)** and **State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs)** are mandated to operate monitoring networks under the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)**.

  o However, lack of **third-party audits**, **independent expert review panels**, and **citizen oversight mechanisms** weakens accountability.

## 4. Governance, Policy, and Public Health Implications

- **Governance Deficit:**

  - Political interference, weak enforcement, and bureaucratic opacity have led to **data manipulation** that conceals the true scale of environmental degradation.

  - Environmental monitoring has become **"technology as spectacle"**—with focus on hardware rather than scientific reliability.

- **Public Health Impact:**

  - The **Air Quality Life Index (Energy Policy Institute)** estimates that meeting **WHO Air Quality Standards** could increase life expectancy in Delhi by **8.2 years** and nationwide by **five years.**

  - Misreported air and noise data mislead citizens, leaving **asthmatic children, infants, and the elderly** exposed to preventable health hazards.

  - Noise pollution's link to cardiovascular and psychological disorders makes accurate monitoring a **constitutional health imperative.**

- **Judicial Concern:**

  - The **Supreme Court of India** recently transferred noise pollution cases from around Delhi Airport to the **National Green Tribunal (NGT)**, acknowledging that environmental health issues require **specialized adjudication** and scientific evidence.

## 5. The Way Forward – Rebuilding Credibility in Environmental Data

- **Scientific Rigour and Standardization:**

  - Ensure sensor placement follows **CPCB and WHO guidelines**, with proper calibration and environmental representativeness.

  - Incorporate **independent expert audits** and routine performance checks for monitoring stations.

- **Transparency and Public Oversight:**

  - Mandate **open access to raw environmental data** for public and academic scrutiny.

  - Establish **Citizen Oversight Committees** to enhance participatory environmental governance.

- **Institutional Reforms:**

  - Create an **Independent Environmental Data Authority (IEDA)** to oversee monitoring, verification, and publication of environmental statistics.

  - Link performance of state and local authorities to environmental data integrity metrics.

- **Updating Legal Frameworks:**

  - Amend the **Noise Pollution Rules (2000)** and **Air Quality Standards** to align with **WHO 2021 Guidelines.**

  - Introduce legal provisions for **criminal liability** in cases of deliberate data falsification affecting public health.

- **Integration with Global Commitments:**

  o Strengthen data reporting under the **Paris Agreement**, **UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 3, 11, and 13)**, and **WHO Air Quality Charter**, ensuring India's international credibility.

## 6. Broader Significance and Ethical Perspective

- **Environmental Justice:** Accurate data is not a technical issue but a **democratic and ethical responsibility**. Misleading the public on health parameters erodes the essence of **transparency and accountability in governance.**

- **Trust in Institutions:** Reliable environmental monitoring builds **public trust, policy legitimacy,** and **international reputation**, vital for India's climate diplomacy.

- **Ethical Governance:** The manipulation or concealment of environmental data violates **Article 19 (Freedom of Information)** and undermines **citizens' participatory rights** in environmental decision-making.

**Conclusion:**

India's environmental policy cannot succeed without scientific credibility. The failures in Delhi's air quality monitoring and Lucknow's noise network expose deeper structural issues of governance, transparency, and accountability. Strengthening environmental data systems through **independent audits, open data policies, and scientific discipline** is essential to ensure public health protection, uphold constitutional rights, and maintain India's global standing. Environmental monitoring must evolve from bureaucratic ritual to **evidence-based, citizen-centered governance.**

**UPSC Relevance:**

- **GS Paper 2:** Governance, transparency, accountability, and environmental policy frameworks.

- **GS Paper 3:** Environmental degradation, pollution control, sustainable development, and climate change commitments.

- **GS Paper 4:** Ethics in public administration—truth in governance, responsibility toward public welfare.