



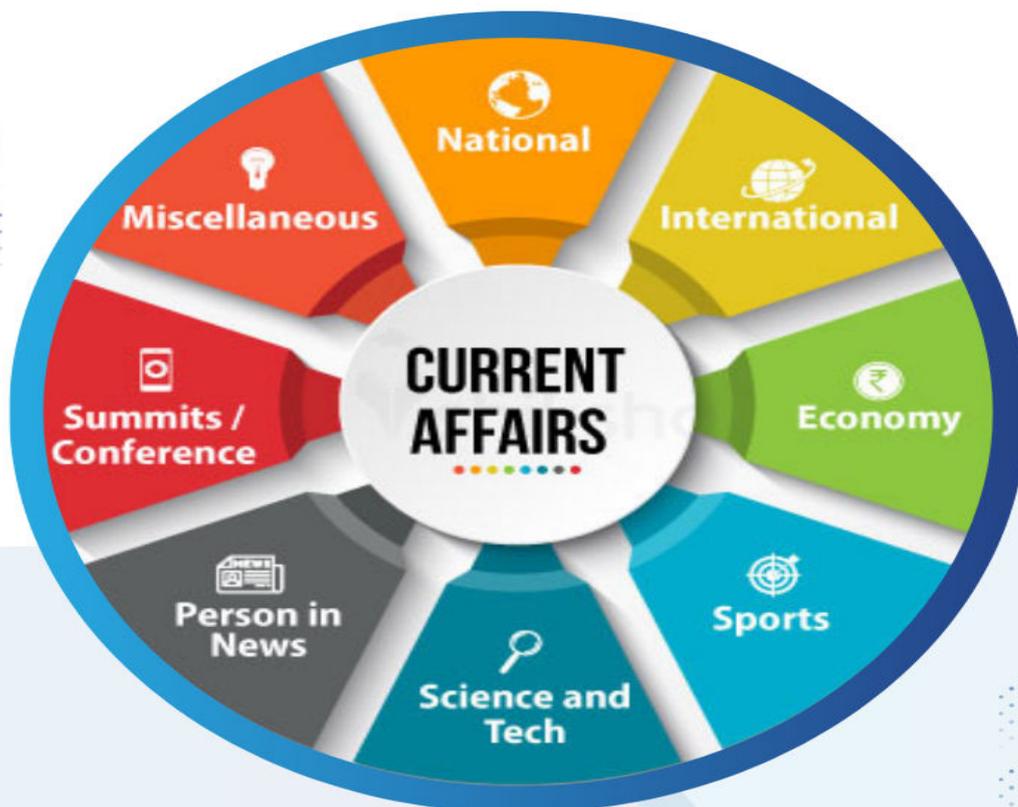
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VIDHVATH IAS KAS ACADEMY & STUDY CENTRE

DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

FOR UPSC CIVIL SERVICE EXAMINATION

DATE: 25/02/2026 (WEDNESDAY)



 **9972258970 & 9740702455**

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



Table of Contents

1. National HPV Vaccination Drive: Curbing Cervical Cancer.....	2
2. Climate Change Vulnerability and Ecological Crisis in Himachal Pradesh.....	3
3. Evolution of India-Israel Relations: From Ideology to Pragmatism	5
4. IDFC First Bank Fraud: Implications for Banking Governance	6
5. EdTech and GenAI Adoption in Lower-Income Households	8
6. GP Outlook: Moderation Amidst Structural Shifts	10
7. Union Cabinet Approvals: Infrastructure, Agriculture, and Federal Reforms	11
8. Interim Leadership Transition at NITI Aayog	13
9. Economic Growth Projections: SBI Analysis of Q3 FY26	15
10. Protection of Khejri: Rajasthan's New Legal Framework	16
11. India's Evolving Global Trade Strategy: The Path to \$2 Trillion	18
12. RTI vs. DPDP Act: The Debate Over Transparency and Privacy.....	20



1. National HPV Vaccination Drive: Curbing Cervical Cancer

The Union Health Ministry is initiating a nationwide Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination campaign to combat cervical cancer, primarily targeting adolescent girls. This move aligns with global health goals to eliminate one of the most common cancers among women in India.

Key Highlights of the Programme

- **Target Demographic:** The drive specifically targets girls aged 14 years to ensure maximum preventive efficacy before potential exposure to the virus.
- **Vaccine Type:** India will utilize **Gardasil**, a quadrivalent vaccine that protects against HPV types 16 and 18 (responsible for most cervical cancers) and types 6 and 11 (linked to genital warts).
- **Single-Dose Efficacy:** Clinical evidence suggests a single dose provides robust, long-term protection for the recommended age group, simplifying logistics and increasing coverage.
- **Universal Access:** The vaccine will be provided **free of cost** and on a voluntary basis, aiming to bridge the socio-economic gap in preventive healthcare.
- **International Partnership:** Procurement is facilitated through a partnership with **Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance**, ensuring a steady supply of WHO-prequalified vaccines that meet stringent cold-chain standards.
- **Implementation Strategy:** The roll-out will be integrated into the existing immunization framework across all States and Union Territories to ensure seamless delivery.



Important Definitions

- **Human Papillomavirus (HPV):** A group of more than 200 related viruses, some of which are transmitted through sexual contact and can lead to various cancers, most notably cervical cancer.
- **Quadrivalent Vaccine:** A vaccine designed to stimulate an immune response against four different antigens, such as the four specific strains of HPV targeted by Gardasil.
- **Cold Chain:** A temperature-controlled supply chain necessary for maintaining the potency of vaccines from the point of manufacture to the point of administration.

Constitutional and Legal Framework

- **Article 21:** The Right to Life includes the right to health and affordable medical treatment, as interpreted by the Supreme Court.
- **Article 47 (DPSP):** Mandates the State to regard the improvement of public health as among its primary duties.
- **Universal Immunization Programme (UIP):** While initially focused on childhood diseases, the expansion to include HPV aligns with the National Health Policy 2017's goal of reducing premature mortality from non-communicable diseases.

Additional Key Insights

- **Disease Burden:** India accounts for nearly one-fifth of the global cervical cancer burden, with approximately 1.25 lakh new cases and over 75,000 deaths reported annually.



- **Indigenization:** While Gardasil is currently being used, India's first indigenous HPV vaccine, CERVAVAC (developed by the Serum Institute of India), is expected to play a critical role in future scale-ups to ensure "Atmanirbharta" in vaccine production.
- **Preventive Economics:** Investing in HPV vaccination significantly reduces the long-term healthcare expenditure associated with cancer treatment and palliative care.

Conclusion

The rollout of the free HPV vaccination drive marks a transformative shift in India's public health strategy, moving from curative to preventive oncology. By targeting the high-risk adolescent window and ensuring equitable access, the government is taking a decisive step toward the eventual elimination of cervical cancer, ultimately improving women's health outcomes and life expectancy across the nation.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Social Justice (Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health).
- **GS Paper III:** Science and Technology (Developments and their applications and effects in everyday life; Indigenization of technology).
- **Prelims:** HPV strains, vaccine types (quadrivalent), Gavi, and specific health-related articles of the Constitution.

2. Climate Change Vulnerability and Ecological Crisis in Himachal Pradesh

Himachal Pradesh Chief Minister Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu has highlighted the grave threat posed by climate change to the Himalayan ecosystem, emphasizing the national implications of ecological disturbances in the region. The state is witnessing a surge in extreme weather events, necessitating urgent policy interventions and inter-state cooperation regarding natural resource management.

Key Highlights of the CM's Statement

- **Increasing Extreme Weather:** The state is facing unprecedented occurrences of cloudbursts, flash floods, and landslides, which are direct manifestations of atmospheric instability.
- **Glacial Retreat:** Rapidly shrinking glaciers in the Himalayan range pose a long-term threat to water security for the entire Indo-Gangetic plain.
- **Non-CO2 Emissions Focus:** The release of the report 'Scientific Assessment of Tackling Non-CO2 Emissions: Pathways for Himachal Pradesh' marks a shift toward addressing potent short-lived climate pollutants like methane and black carbon.
- **Inter-State Resource Disputes:** The CM linked future developmental projects to the settlement of long-pending arrears from the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) by neighboring states.
- **National Security Implications:** Any ecological disturbance in the Himalayas is framed not just as a state issue but as a threat to the environmental and economic stability of India.





Important Definitions

- **Non-CO2 Emissions:** These include potent greenhouse gases and pollutants such as Methane (CH_4), Nitrous Oxide (N_2O), and Black Carbon. Although they persist in the atmosphere for shorter periods than CO_2 , their global warming potential is significantly higher.
- **Cloudburst:** A sudden, aggressive rainstorm falling for a short period over a small geographical area, often leading to flash floods in hilly terrains.
- **Black Carbon:** A component of fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) formed by the incomplete combustion of fossil fuels and biomass; it absorbs solar energy and accelerates glacial melting when deposited on snow.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 48A (DPSP):** Mandates that the State shall endeavor to protect and improve the environment and safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country.
- **Article 51A(g):** Establishes a Fundamental Duty for citizens to protect and improve the natural environment, including forests, lakes, rivers, and wildlife.
- **The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986:** Provides the framework for the Central and State governments to take measures for protecting and improving the quality of the environment.
- **Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956:** Relevant to the CM's mention of the Bhakra Beas Management Board (BBMB) and claims over water resource shares and arrears.

Additional Key Insights

- **The "Third Pole" Crisis:** The Himalayas are often called the "Third Pole"; their degradation affects the monsoon patterns and perennial river systems of South Asia.
- **Short-Lived Climate Pollutants (SLCPs):** Reducing non-CO₂ emissions is considered the "fastest" way to slow down Himalayan warming in the short term.
- **Himalayan State-Specific Vulnerability:** High-altitude regions warm at a faster rate than the global average, a phenomenon known as elevation-dependent warming.

Conclusion

The ecological fragility of Himachal Pradesh serves as a barometer for the broader climate crisis in India. Addressing these challenges requires a dual approach: localized mitigation of non-CO₂ emissions and a robust federal dialogue to resolve resource-sharing disputes. Protecting the "Water Tower of Asia" is indispensable for India's sustainable development and disaster resilience.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper I:** Geographical features and their location-changes in critical geographical features (including ice-caps).
- **GS Paper II:** Federal structure and challenges (Inter-state water and power disputes).
- **GS Paper III:** Environmental pollution and degradation; Disaster Management (Landslides and Flash Floods).
- **Prelims:** Specifics of Non-CO₂ pollutants, BBMB jurisdiction, and Himalayan geography.



3. Evolution of India-Israel Relations: From Ideology to Pragmatism

The recent visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Israel (February 2026) signifies a definitive shift in India's Middle East policy, moving away from historical hesitation toward a "diplomacy of interests." As the regional balance of power shifts following the degradation of the "Axis of Resistance" and the emergence of new US-led peace frameworks, India is positioning itself as a key strategic partner in a transformed Mediterranean-to-Asia landscape.

Core Pillars of the Strategic Shift

- **De-hyphenation and Normalization:** India has successfully moved past the "private engagement, public distance" era, treating relations with Israel and Palestine as independent bilateral tracks based on sovereign national interests.
- **Strategic Autonomy in a Shifting Region:** Despite global criticism of Israeli policies, Delhi's calculus is driven by Israel's increased "room for manoeuvre" and its normalization with several Arab and Muslim states via frameworks like the Board of Peace.
- **Security and Technology Frontier:** The 2026 visit emphasizes a major expansion in high-end strategic collaboration, specifically targeting defense manufacturing, cybersecurity, and advanced technologies like AI and critical minerals.
- **Regional Power Dynamics:** The systematic weakening of revisionist powers in the Middle East has left Israel militarily dominant, prompting new proposals like the "hexagonal alliance" where India is viewed as a stabilizing anchor.
- **Countering Emerging Blocs:** India's strengthening ties with Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia serve as a strategic hedge against potential "Islamic NATO" formations involving Turkey and Pakistan.
- **Economic Integration:** The relationship is increasingly underpinned by tangible economic projects, moving beyond defense buyer-seller dynamics to joint ventures in fintech and energy.



Important Definitions

- **De-hyphenation:** A foreign policy strategy where India deals with two antagonistic nations (e.g., Israel and Palestine) on their own merits without letting one relationship be contingent upon or restricted by the other.
- **Axis of Resistance:** An informal anti-Western and anti-Israeli political and military alliance led by Iran, including groups like Hamas and Hezbollah, which has seen significant degradation recently.
- **Hexagonal Alliance:** A proposed regional coalition aimed at tackling radicalism and stabilizing the swath from the Mediterranean to the Horn of Africa, involving key regional players and India.
- **Board of Peace:** A diplomatic framework (associated with the Trump administration's influence) empowered to manage regional conflicts and administration in areas like Gaza, involving both Israel and various Muslim-majority states.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 51 (DPSP):** Mandates the State to promote international peace and security, maintain just and honorable relations between nations, and foster respect for international law.



- **The Weapons of Mass Destruction and their Delivery Systems (Prohibition of Unlawful Activities) Act, 2005:** Provides the legal basis for India's stringent export controls, facilitating high-tech defense trade with partners like Israel.
- **National Security Council (NSC):** The apex body that orchestrates the strategic dimension of India-Israel ties, particularly in intelligence sharing and counter-terrorism.

Additional Key Insights

- **Historical Trajectory:** While the 1992 normalization by the Narasimha Rao government was the turning point, the 2017 and 2026 visits by PM Modi have provided the political "coming out" for a relationship once kept discreet.
- **The "Mistress" Paradox:** Historically, even during periods of radical rhetoric, India maintained a consulate in Mumbai and sought Israeli military assistance during the 1962, 1965, and 1971 wars.
- **The I2U2 Factor:** The "West Asian Quad" (India, Israel, UAE, USA) serves as a functional template for India's multi-aligned approach, focusing on food security and clean energy.
- **Indo-Abrahamic Accord:** The growing synergy between India and the signatories of the Abraham Accords (like the UAE) has allowed India to bypass the traditional "Arab-Israel" binary.

Conclusion

India's current engagement with Israel represents the maturation of its foreign policy, where "slogans" of ideological solidarity have been replaced by a "diplomacy of interests." By integrating Israel into its broader West Asian strategy alongside the UAE and Saudi Arabia, India is not just observing the regional churn but actively participating in the creation of a new security and economic architecture.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests; Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests.
- **GS Paper III:** Security challenges and their management in border areas; Linkages of organized crime with terrorism.
- **Prelims:** Geography of the Middle East (Levant region, Horn of Africa), I2U2, and major defense platforms (Barak-8, Phalcon AWACS).

4. IDFC First Bank Fraud: Implications for Banking Governance

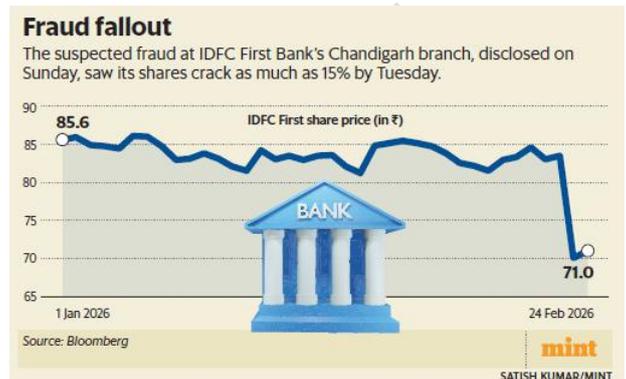
IDFC First Bank recently disclosed a suspected internal fraud involving the misappropriation of approximately ₹590 crore from Haryana government-linked accounts at its Chandigarh branch. While the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has ruled out systemic risks, the incident underscores critical vulnerabilities in branch-level oversight and the security of public sector deposits in private banks.

Key Highlights of the Case

- **Nature of the Fraud:** The discrepancy involves nearly ₹590 crore, allegedly orchestrated by branch employees in connivance with external parties through unauthorized transfers to outside accounts.
- **Financial Impact:** Although the fraud amount is comparable to the bank's quarterly profit (₹503 crore), the management maintains that the impact is manageable given their total deposit base of ₹2.82 trillion.



- **Immediate Regulatory Response:** The RBI has categorized the event as an isolated operational failure rather than a systemic threat, though it continues to monitor the bank's liquidity and capital adequacy.
- **Accountability Measures:** The bank has suspended involved staff, filed police complaints, and appointed KPMG for a forensic audit to trace the fund trail and identify procedural lapses.
- **Institutional Consequences:** The Haryana government has de-empanelled IDFC First Bank for fresh deposits, a move that reflects a potential trust deficit and may trigger similar reviews by other state entities.
- **Liquidity Trends:** Historical data from similar discrepancies at other private lenders suggests that such events often lead to a short-term dip in retail and small-business deposits due to dented depositor confidence.



Important Definitions

- **Systemic Risk:** The possibility that an event at the micro level of an individual bank could trigger instability or collapse across the entire financial system or market.
- **Forensic Audit:** An examination and evaluation of a firm's or individual's financial records to derive evidence that can be used in a court of law or legal proceeding, typically used in cases of fraud or embezzlement.
- **De-empanelment:** The process of removing an organization (in this case, a bank) from an official list of approved service providers or partners by a government or institutional body.
- **Lien-marking:** A legal claim or a "hold" placed on a specific amount in a bank account, preventing the account holder from withdrawing those funds until a debt is settled or an investigation is cleared.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Banking Regulation Act, 1949:** Empowers the RBI to inspect banks, penalize mismanagement, and give directions to banking companies in the interest of the public or banking policy.
- **Prevention of Money Laundering Act (PMLA), 2002:** Relevant in tracking the "proceeds of crime" if the fraudulently transferred funds were moved through multiple layers to hide their origin.
- **Indian Penal Code (IPC) / Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS):** Sections relating to criminal breach of trust by a public servant or banker, forgery, and cheating are typically invoked in such employee-led frauds.
- **RBI's "Fraud Risk Management" Circulars:** These guidelines mandate banks to report frauds above a certain threshold to the RBI within 21 days and conduct internal reviews of systemic loopholes.

Additional Key Insights

- **Operational Risk Management:** This incident highlights the "Human Element" in operational risk, showing that even with robust digital systems, manual overrides or collusion can bypass internal controls.



- **Public vs. Private Banking:** The scam may accelerate the "flight to safety," where government departments prefer parking surplus funds in Public Sector Banks (PSBs) despite potentially lower interest rates compared to private aggressive lenders.
- **Internal Audit Lapses:** The fact that ₹490 crore was identified only through reconciliation suggests a delay in real-time monitoring of high-value government accounts.

Conclusion

The IDFC First Bank fraud is a stark reminder that as Indian banking scales and digitizes, the fundamental requirement of "Internal Checks and Balances" remains paramount. While the bank's balance sheet may absorb the immediate financial shock, the long-term challenge lies in restoring institutional trust. For regulators, this event signals a need for tighter oversight on how private banks manage large-ticket government deposits to prevent localized "rogue" actions from affecting public exchequer funds.

UPSC Relevance

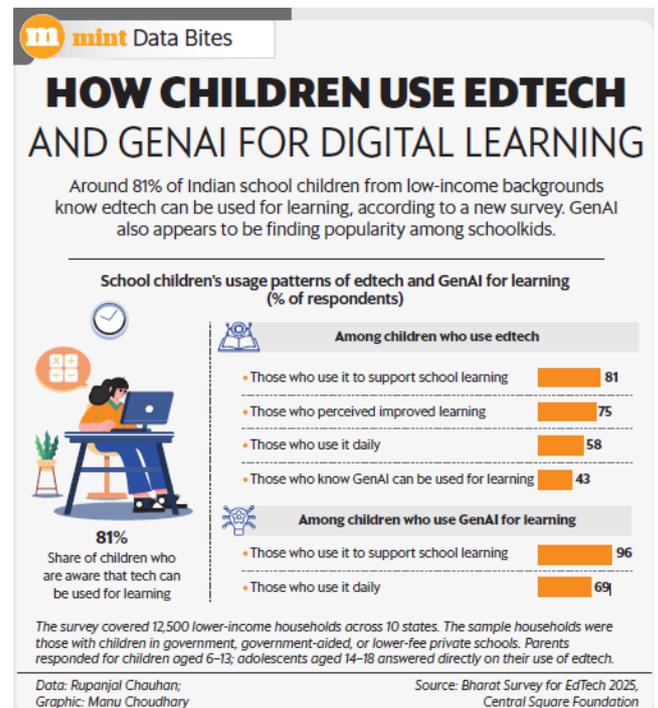
- **GS Paper II:** Governance—Transparency and accountability; Role of regulatory bodies (RBI).
- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy—Banking sector reforms, mobilization of resources, and issues relating to internal security (financial frauds).
- **Prelims:** RBI's regulatory powers under the Banking Regulation Act, definitions of systemic risk, and the functions of forensic audits in the financial sector.

5. EdTech and GenAI Adoption in Lower-Income Households

The "Bharat Survey for EdTech 2025" by the Central Square Foundation provides critical insights into the digital learning landscape among India's socio-economically marginalized sections. The report highlights a significant shift in how students from government and low-fee private schools are leveraging technology, particularly Generative AI (GenAI), to supplement formal classroom education.

Key Highlights of the Survey

- **High Digital Awareness:** Approximately 81% of children from low-income backgrounds are aware that technology serves as a tool for learning, indicating the successful penetration of digital literacy.
- **Support for Formal Schooling:** Among EdTech users, 81% utilize these platforms specifically to support their school curriculum, rather than just for extracurricular activities.
- **Perceived Learning Outcomes:** A substantial 75% of EdTech users reported a perceived improvement in their learning levels, underscoring the potential of digital tools to bridge the quality gap.
- **Rapid GenAI Integration:** Among the subset of students aware of GenAI, a staggering 96% use it to support school-related learning, showing a higher adoption rate for curriculum support than traditional EdTech.





- **Usage Frequency:** While 58% of EdTech users engage with digital tools daily, the daily engagement for GenAI is even higher at 69%, indicating its role as a persistent learning assistant.
- **Demographic Reach:** The survey covers 12,500 households across 10 states, focusing on students aged 6–18 in government and budget-private schools, making it a representative dataset for "Bharat."

Important Definitions

- **EdTech (Educational Technology):** The practice of introducing IT tools into the classroom to create a more engaging, inclusive, and individualized learning experience.
- **GenAI (Generative AI):** A type of Artificial Intelligence capable of generating text, images, or other media in response to prompts, increasingly used by students for doubt-solving and content summarization.
- **Digital Divide:** The gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and communications technology and those that don't or have restricted access.
- **Lower-fee Private Schools (LFPS):** Budget-friendly private educational institutions that cater to low-income families who seek alternatives to government schooling.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 21A:** The Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009, mandates free and compulsory education; the integration of EdTech is now seen as a modern necessity to fulfill the "quality" aspect of this right.
- **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020:** Emphasizes the integration of technology in all levels of education, advocating for a dedicated unit for the development of digital infrastructure and content.
- **PM eVIDYA:** A comprehensive initiative under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan which unifies all efforts related to digital/online/on-air education to enable multi-mode access.
- **National Digital Education Architecture (NDEAR):** A blueprint to achieve a "Digital First" approach in education, supporting teaching and learning activities and educational planning.

Additional Key Insights

- **Transformation of Doubts:** GenAI is shifting the "doubt-solving" mechanism from human-dependent (teachers/tutors) to algorithm-dependent, providing 24/7 assistance to students without access to private coaching.
- **Socio-Economic Mobility:** The high adoption rate in low-income groups suggests that digital tools are being viewed as a "great equalizer" to compete with students from affluent backgrounds.
- **The Fatigue Factor:** Despite high awareness, the fact that only 58% use EdTech daily suggests barriers like device sharing, data costs, or screen fatigue remain relevant.

Conclusion

The data from the Bharat Survey for EdTech 2025 challenges the notion that advanced technology like GenAI is restricted to elite urban populations. The high awareness and usage rates among low-income households signify a "bottom-up" digital revolution. However, for this to result in actual learning gains, the state must ensure that the digital infrastructure is inclusive and that the content is regulated to maintain pedagogical standards.



UPSC Relevance

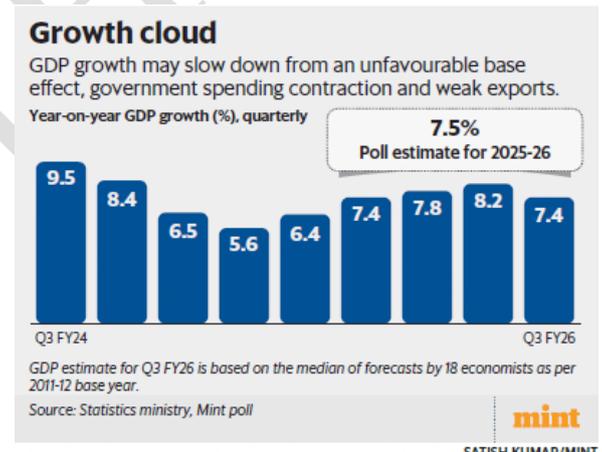
- **GS Paper II:** Social Justice—Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Education and Human Resources.
- **GS Paper III:** Science and Technology—Developments and their applications and effects in everyday life; Awareness in the fields of IT and Computers.
- **Mains Perspective:** The role of technology in achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education) and the challenges of the digital divide in rural India.

6. GP Outlook: Moderation Amidst Structural Shifts

India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth for the third quarter (October-December) of FY26 is projected to moderate to 7.4%, down from 8.2% in the preceding quarter. While festive demand and GST-related benefits provided a cushion, the deceleration highlights the impact of fiscal consolidation and global headwinds on the domestic economy.

Key Highlights of the Economic Outlook

- **Growth Moderation:** The expected growth rate of 7.4% marks a sequential slowdown attributed to an unfavorable base effect and a contraction in government capital expenditure.
- **Fiscal Drag:** A significant reduction in central government capital spending and subdued revenue expenditure by state governments have acted as primary dampeners on domestic demand.
- **External Headwinds:** Weakness in merchandise exports persists as a major challenge, reflecting sluggish global demand and geopolitical disruptions affecting trade routes.
- **Consumption Resilience:** Sustained momentum in festive-season demand and targeted GST rate cuts helped offset some of the structural slowdown in other sectors.
- **Revised Projections:** Economists project a full-year growth of 7.5% for FY26, slightly more optimistic than the Reserve Bank of India's (RBI) estimate of 7.3%.
- **Base Year Transition:** The upcoming data release will transition the GDP base year from 2011-12 to 2022-23, a technical overhaul likely to cause a revision in historical and current growth figures.



Important Definitions

- **Gross Domestic Product (GDP):** The total monetary value of all finished goods and services produced within a country's borders in a specific time period.
- **Base Effect:** The distortion in a current period's growth figures caused by an unusually low or high level of the same variable in the corresponding period of the previous year.
- **Capital Expenditure (Capex):** Funds used by a government to acquire, upgrade, and maintain physical assets such as property, plants, or infrastructure; it has a high multiplier effect on the economy.



- **First Advance Estimates (FAE):** The first official estimate of GDP for a financial year, released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) before the fiscal year ends.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 112:** Mandates the presentation of the Annual Financial Statement (Budget), which outlines the government's estimated receipts and expenditure, directly influencing GDP through fiscal policy.
- **FRBM Act, 2003:** The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act sets targets for the government to reduce fiscal deficits; spending cuts mentioned in the poll often stem from attempts to align with these legal mandates.
- **Article 246A:** Grants the power to make laws with respect to Goods and Services Tax (GST); changes in these rates are used as a fiscal tool to stimulate or cool down consumption.
- **Collection of Statistics Act, 2008:** Provides the legal framework for the government to collect socio-economic data, including the census and surveys required for GDP base year revisions.

Additional Key Insights

- **The Multiplier Effect:** While government spending cuts help in fiscal consolidation, they can lead to a short-term reduction in "crowding in" private investment, as seen in the Q3 projections.
- **Base Year Realignment:** Moving the base year to 2022-23 is crucial to capturing the structural changes in the Indian economy post-pandemic, including the rise of the digital economy and new manufacturing hubs.
- **GVA vs. GDP:** While GDP measures the demand side, Gross Value Added (GVA) provides a picture from the supply side; economists often look at both to identify whether growth is led by taxes or actual production increases.

Conclusion

The projected moderation in Q3 GDP growth serves as a reminder of the delicate balance between fiscal prudence and economic stimulus. While private consumption remains a sturdy pillar, the contraction in public spending and export volatility necessitate a more diversified growth strategy. The upcoming base year revision will be a landmark event, providing a more accurate "mirror" to India's evolving economic landscape and potentially altering the narrative on India's growth trajectory.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development, and employment; Government Budgeting.
- **Mains Focus:** Analyzing the impact of fiscal consolidation on economic growth and the significance of updating economic indices like the GDP base year.
- **Prelims Focus:** Components of GDP, the role of MoSPI and CSO, concepts of base effect, and the relationship between Capex and GVA.

7. Union Cabinet Approvals: Infrastructure, Agriculture, and Federal Reforms

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) has sanctioned a comprehensive package worth ₹12,236 crore, focusing on multimodal connectivity, agricultural support, and strategic power sector reforms. These decisions aim to lower logistics costs, support the "Golden Fibre" industry, and address regional aspirations, reflecting a holistic approach to national development.



Key Highlights of the Cabinet Decisions

- **MSP Hike for Raw Jute:** The Minimum Support Price (MSP) for raw jute has been increased to ₹5,925 per quintal for the 2026-27 season, a hike of ₹275. This move supports India's position as the world's largest jute producer (50-70% global share) and offsets rising input costs for farmers in the eastern states.
- **Railway De-congestion:** Three major railway projects spanning 307 km across Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand were approved at a cost of ₹9,072 crore. These projects, including the doubling of the Gondia-Jabalpur line, aim to enhance freight capacity and reduce the carbon footprint of the logistics sector.
- **Power Sector Equity Expansion:** The investment ceiling for Power Grid Corp. of India (PGCIL) has been raised from ₹5,000 crore to ₹7,500 crore. This enables the PSU to participate in high-value transmission bids, crucial for achieving the National Electricity Plan's target of adding 191,000 circuit km by 2032.
- **Aviation and Urban Mobility:** A new Civil Enclave at Srinagar International Airport (₹1,677 crore) was approved to bolster Kashmiri tourism. Additionally, a 3.33 km metro extension in Gujarat will connect GIFT City to Shahpur, strengthening the commercial ecosystem of India's first operational smart city.
- **Renaming of Kerala:** The Union Cabinet has initiated the process to rename the state of Kerala to "Keralam," aligning with the linguistic and cultural identity of the Malayalam-speaking population as requested by the state assembly.



Important Definitions

- **Minimum Support Price (MSP):** A "floor price" set by the Government of India to protect farmers against any sharp fall in agricultural prices, based on the recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP).
- **Circuit Kilometre (ckm):** A unit of measurement for the length of electrical transmission lines; it represents the total length of the conductors regardless of the number of circuits on a single tower.
- **Civil Enclave:** An area at a military or defense airport allotted for the usage of civil aircraft and passenger terminals.
- **Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA):** A high-level committee chaired by the Prime Minister that reviews economic trends and makes decisions on integrated economic policies and investment proposals.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 3:** Grants Parliament the power to form new states and alter the areas, boundaries, or names of existing states. The proposal to rename Kerala to "Keralam" follows this constitutional path, requiring the President to refer the matter to the State Legislature.
- **First Schedule:** The renaming will necessitate an amendment to the First Schedule of the Constitution, which lists the names of all States and Union Territories.



- **State List (Schedule VII):** Agriculture is a state subject, but the Centre intervenes through MSP and price support mechanisms under the "Economic and Social Planning" entry in the Concurrent List.

Additional Key Insights

- **Jute Sector Significance:** Jute is highly labor-intensive and eco-friendly. With global shifts away from single-use plastics, the "Golden Fibre" is strategic for India's "Green Economy" goals.
- **Logistics Efficiency:** The railway projects are part of the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan, focusing on "Last Mile Connectivity" to bring down India's logistics cost from 13-14% of GDP to single digits.
- **Power Grid's Role:** Raising the equity cap is vital as India transitions toward renewable energy, which requires a robust, flexible, and high-capacity national grid to handle intermittent power loads.

Conclusion

The latest CCEA approvals demonstrate a strategic alignment between infrastructure growth and social security. By simultaneously boosting the jute industry, expanding the national power grid, and improving regional connectivity in Gujarat and Jammu & Kashmir, the government is addressing both sectoral bottlenecks and regional aspirations. The procedural nod for renaming Kerala further emphasizes the "Cooperative Federalism" model by respecting state-led cultural identity shifts.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Federalism (Renaming of states, Centre-State relations); Government policies and interventions.
- **GS Paper III:** Infrastructure (Railways, Airports, Energy); Agriculture (MSP and farmer welfare); Economics (PSU investment caps).
- **Prelims:** Article 3 procedures, Jute producing states, CCEA composition, and National Electricity Plan targets.

8. Interim Leadership Transition at NITI Aayog

The Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC) has appointed Nidhi Chhibber, a 1994-batch IAS officer, as the interim Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of NITI Aayog. This appointment follows the conclusion of B.V.R. Subrahmanyam's tenure and aims to maintain administrative continuity within India's premier policy think tank during a period of critical long-term reforms.

Key Highlights of the Appointment

- **Leadership Transition:** Nidhi Chhibber takes over the additional charge of CEO effective from late February 2026, ensuring no vacuum in the top administrative leadership of the institution.
- **Dual Role:** She currently serves as the Director General of the Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO), the critical evaluation arm within NITI Aayog responsible for outcome-based governance.
- **Professional Pedigree:** A Chhattisgarh cadre officer, her previous experience includes serving as the Chairperson of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and in senior roles within the Ministry of Food Processing Industries.





- **Focus on Evaluation:** Her background in the DMEO suggests a continued emphasis on rigorous third-party evaluations and data-driven monitoring of government flagship schemes.
- **Strategic Continuity:** The interim appointment ensures that ongoing sectoral verticals and reform priorities align seamlessly with national development goals without disruption.
- **Core Mandate:** As CEO, she will oversee the administrative execution of NITI Aayog's mandate to foster cooperative federalism and design strategic policy frameworks.

Important Definitions

- **NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India):** Established on 1 January 2015 via a Cabinet resolution, it replaced the Planning Commission to serve as a policy think tank providing both directional and policy inputs.
- **Appointments Committee of the Cabinet (ACC):** A high-level committee chaired by the Prime Minister that decides on top-level management appointments in the Central Secretariat, Public Sector Undertakings, and financial institutions.
- **Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO):** An attached office of NITI Aayog tasked with monitoring and evaluating government programmes to improve their effectiveness and ensure value for money.
- **Cooperative Federalism:** A concept where the Union and States work together to solve common problems and achieve national goals, facilitated by NITI Aayog through platforms like the Governing Council.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Extra-Constitutional Status:** NITI Aayog is neither a constitutional body (like the Finance Commission) nor a statutory body (created by an Act of Parliament); it is an executive body created by a Cabinet resolution.
- **Article 77:** Provides the basis for the "Conduct of Business of the Government of India," under which the ACC functions to manage senior bureaucratic appointments.
- **Outcome Budgeting:** While not a direct legal provision, NITI Aayog's role in evaluation supports the Finance Ministry's mandate to link budgetary outlays with measurable social and economic outcomes.

Additional Key Insights

- **The CEO's Stature:** The CEO of NITI Aayog is appointed by the Prime Minister for a fixed tenure and holds a rank equivalent to a Secretary to the Government of India.
- **Role in Global Indices:** NITI Aayog is the nodal agency for monitoring India's performance on various global indices, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) India Index.
- **Shift from Centralization:** Unlike the erstwhile Planning Commission, NITI Aayog does not have the power to allocate funds to states; that power now rests solely with the Ministry of Finance.

Conclusion

The appointment of Nidhi Chhibber underscores the government's preference for internal expertise to maintain the momentum of "Maximum Governance, Minimum Government." Her extensive experience in evaluation and education will be pivotal as NITI Aayog continues to refine the Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) frameworks that determine the success of India's long-term developmental vision.



UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Statutory, regulatory and various quasi-judicial bodies; Government policies and interventions for development.
- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, and growth.
- **Mains Perspective:** Assessing the shift from the Planning Commission to NITI Aayog and the importance of data-driven monitoring in governance.
- **Prelims Focus:** Composition of NITI Aayog (Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, CEO, Governing Council), the role of the ACC, and the status of DMEO.

9. Economic Growth Projections: SBI Analysis of Q3 FY26

The State Bank of India (SBI), in its latest Ecowrap report, has projected India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth to be in the range of 8.0-8.1% for the third quarter (October-December) of the current fiscal year. This optimistic forecast reflects the resilience of the Indian economy amidst global volatility, driven by a simultaneous recovery in both rural and urban demand sectors.

Key Highlights of the SBI Report

- **Robust Growth Estimates:** SBI projects a growth rate of 8.0-8.1% for Q3, significantly higher than many conservative estimates, suggesting that India remains the fastest-growing major economy.
- **Consumption Recovery:** A pivotal factor in this growth is the "consistent uptick" in urban consumption coupled with a noticeable strengthening of rural demand, which had previously been lagging.
- **High-Frequency Indicators:** The report bases its optimism on indicators such as GST collections, petroleum consumption, and credit growth, all of which suggest sustained economic activity.
- **Resilience to External Shocks:** Despite persistent global headwinds including geopolitical tensions and supply chain disruptions, the domestic momentum appears largely shielded.
- **Agricultural Outlook:** Improving rural consumption suggests a better-than-expected performance in the primary sector and favorable terms of trade for the rural population.
- **Investment Cycle:** The report hints at a steady private capital expenditure cycle alongside the government's continued push for infrastructure development.



Important Definitions

- **High-Frequency Indicators (HFIs):** A set of proxy data points available on a monthly or weekly basis (like electricity consumption or PMI) used to track the health of the economy before official GDP data is released.
- **Rural Consumption:** The demand for goods and services from rural households, often influenced by monsoon performance, Minimum Support Prices (MSP), and government transfer schemes.
- **GDP (Gross Domestic Product):** The total value of all final goods and services produced within the domestic territory of a country during a specific time period.



- **Global Headwinds:** International economic factors, such as high inflation in developed markets or rising crude oil prices, that exert downward pressure on a country's domestic growth.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 112 (Annual Financial Statement):** The constitutional basis for the Union Budget, which sets the fiscal tone and capital expenditure targets that influence the growth projected by SBI.
- **FRBM Act, 2003:** The Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act, which mandates the government to ensure fiscal stability, thereby creating a conducive environment for stable GDP growth.
- **Collection of Statistics Act, 2008:** The legal framework that allows for the collection of data used by agencies like the NSO and SBI to formulate these economic growth reports.

Additional Key Insights

- **The Rural Shift:** The recovery in rural demand is particularly significant for FMCG (Fast-Moving Consumer Goods) and two-wheeler sectors, which serve as barometers for the health of the informal economy.
- **Sectoral Divergence:** While the service sector remains the dominant growth engine, the SBI report indicates a stabilizing manufacturing sector contributing to the 8%+ projection.
- **Credit Growth:** Sustained credit offtake in personal loans and the MSME sector indicates high business confidence and capacity expansion by mid-sized firms.

Conclusion

The SBI's projection of 8.0-8.1% growth for the December quarter underscores a phase of "decoupled growth" where India's internal demand dynamics are successfully offsetting global slowdowns. If these figures are realized, they will provide the government with greater fiscal headroom to maintain its infrastructure push while sticking to the path of fiscal consolidation.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development, and employment.
- **Mains Focus:** Analyzing the drivers of domestic demand and the effectiveness of government policy in shielding the economy from global headwinds.
- **Prelims Focus:** Definitions of HFIs, the difference between real and nominal GDP, and the role of the RBI and SBI in economic forecasting.

10. Protection of Khejri: Rajasthan's New Legal Framework

The Government of Rajasthan has recently enforced a statewide ban on the felling of **Khejri** trees (*Prosopis cineraria*), following an intense 11-day agitation led by the **Bishnoi community** and environmental activists. The protests, primarily centered in Bikaner, were triggered by the widespread removal of these trees to accommodate large-scale solar power projects. To provide a permanent solution, the state government has announced the introduction of a comprehensive **Tree Protection Bill** during the 2026 Budget Session.



Key Highlights of the Movement

- **Statewide Prohibition:** A circular issued by the Revenue Department has halted all Khejri felling across Rajasthan, overriding previous partial bans that were limited only to the Jodhpur and Bikaner divisions.
- **Conflict with Green Energy:** The "Khejri Bachao Andolan" highlighted the irony of environmental degradation (tree felling) in the pursuit of renewable energy (solar plants), sparking a national debate on sustainable development.
- **Bishnoi Community Leadership:** The protest was spearheaded by the Bishnoi community, which has a 500-year-old history of ecological conservation, most famously known for the **1730 Khejarli Massacre**.
- **Political Consensus:** The movement saw rare cross-party support, with former Chief Ministers from both the BJP and Congress backing the demand for a dedicated protection law.
- **Legislative Commitment:** The proposed "Khejri Protection Act" aims to bridge regulatory gaps in existing land revenue and tenancy laws that previously allowed for "unavoidable" felling with minimal penalties.
- **Stricter Penalties:** Proposed amendments include a **ten-fold increase in fines** for illegal felling and a mandatory requirement for industrial units to plant ten trees for every one tree removed.



Important Definitions

- **Khejri (*Prosopis cineraria*):** Known as the "Kalpavriksha" or "Tree of Life" of the Thar Desert, it is the official State Tree of Rajasthan, vital for fixing nitrogen and providing fodder during droughts.
- **Bishnoism:** A religious sect founded by Guru Jambheshwar in the 15th century, following 29 principles, two of which strictly prohibit the killing of animals and the cutting of green trees.
- **Civil Enclave/Circular Ban:** A temporary administrative order (circular) used here to provide immediate protection until a formal legislative Act is passed by the Assembly.
- **Desertification Control:** The process of preventing fertile land from becoming desert; Khejri plays a central role in this through its deep taproot system and soil-binding properties.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 48A (DPSP):** Mandates the State to protect and improve the environment and safeguard the forests and wildlife of the country.
- **Article 51A (g):** Establishes a Fundamental Duty for citizens to protect and improve the natural environment, including forests, lakes, rivers, and wildlife.
- **Rajasthan Tenancy Act, 1955:** Contains existing provisions (Sections 79-86) regarding trees on agricultural land, which are now slated for stringent amendment to increase protection.
- **Rajasthan Land Revenue Act, 1956:** Governs the management of non-forest lands where Khejri is often found; new amendments will mandate prior government approval for any uprooting.



Additional Key Insights

- **The 1730 Legacy:** The current agitation is a modern echo of **Amrita Devi Bishnoi's** sacrifice, where 363 people hugged Khejri trees to save them from the Maharaja of Jodhpur's soldiers. This event inspired the 1970s **Chipko Movement**.
- **Ecological Services:** Khejri trees provide **Sangri** (a high-value desert bean), support micro-flora, and are one of the few species that remain green during the peak of the Thar summer.
- **Solar vs. Ecology:** Rajasthan aims for 90,000 MW of solar capacity by 2030. The new law will likely mandate "Environmental Impact Assessments" specifically for desert flora to resolve the clash between energy targets and biodiversity.

Conclusion

The Rajasthan government's decision to ban Khejri felling and legislate its protection marks a significant victory for community-led conservation. It demonstrates that while India's transition to renewable energy is essential, it cannot come at the cost of indigenous ecosystems. The upcoming Bill will be a landmark piece of sub-national environmental legislation, balancing industrial growth with traditional ecological knowledge.

UPSC Relevance

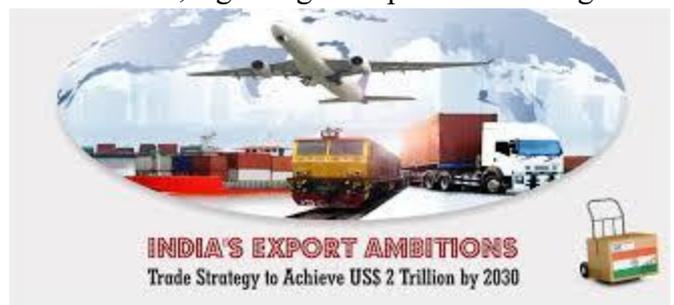
- **GS Paper I:** Geography of India (Thar Desert ecosystem); Art & Culture (Bishnoi traditions and historical environmental movements).
- **GS Paper II:** Governance (Pressure groups and their role in policy-making); Centre-State relations (Environment as a concurrent subject).
- **GS Paper III:** Environment & Biodiversity (Conservation vs. Development, Solar Energy challenges, and Legislative measures for forest protection).
- **Ethics (GS IV):** Environmental ethics and the sacrifice of the Bishnoi community as a case study in value-based conservation.

11. India's Evolving Global Trade Strategy: The Path to \$2 Trillion

India has transitioned from a cautious, regional trade participant to a proactive global player, pursuing "ambitious" and "comprehensive" Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with developed economies. This shift is anchored by the Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) 2023, which targets \$2 trillion in total exports by 2030, and is supported by a significant increase in FTA coverage of India's export basket from 22% in 2019 to a projected 71% by 2026.

Key Highlights of the New Trade Paradigm

- **Strategic Shift to Advanced Economies:** India has moved beyond similar-structure economies to conclude landmark deals with the EU, UK, UAE, and Australia, signaling a deep desire to integrate into high-value global value chains (GVCs).
- **The "Mother of All Deals" (India-EU FTA):** Signed on January 27, 2026, this historic pact creates a free trade zone for two billion people, eliminating tariffs on over 90% of goods and significantly benefiting labor-intensive sectors like textiles, leather, and pharma.





- **U.S.-India Interim Agreement:** A February 2026 framework focuses on reciprocal trade and strategic sectors like semiconductors and rare earths, positioning India as a reliable high-tech manufacturing hub and reducing market overdependence.
- **Global Value Chain (GVC) Integration:** By reducing barriers on intermediate goods, these FTAs allow Indian MSMEs to import high-tech inputs (like European machinery) more cheaply, enhancing their export competitiveness.
- **Diplomatic and Economic Leverage:** Trade pacts are now used as instruments of "strategic autonomy," establishing economic interdependence with major powers to strengthen India's voice in global economic governance.
- **Record Export Growth:** Reflecting the success of this strategy, India's total exports reached \$825.25 billion in 2025, marking a 6.05% annual increase despite global volatility.

Important Definitions

- **Free Trade Agreement (FTA):** A pact between two or more nations to reduce barriers to imports and exports among them, often by eliminating tariffs, quotas, and preferences on most goods and services.
- **Strategic Autonomy:** A foreign policy framework where a nation makes sovereign decisions based on national interest without being forced into alliances or overdependence on any single power.
- **Global Value Chains (GVCs):** The full range of activities (design, production, marketing, distribution) that are divided among multiple firms and geographic locations to bring a product from conception to end use.
- **Viksit Bharat:** The government's vision to transform India into a developed nation by 2047, the centenary of its independence.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 253:** Empowers Parliament to make any law for the whole or any part of the territory of India for implementing any treaty, agreement, or convention with any other country.
- **Entry 41 (Union List):** "Trade and commerce with foreign countries; import and export across customs frontiers" falls exclusively under the legislative domain of the Union Government.
- **Foreign Trade (Development and Regulation) Act, 1992:** The primary legal framework providing for the development and regulation of foreign trade by augmenting exports from India.
- **Foreign Trade Policy (FTP) 2023:** A policy document that replaces the traditional 5-year cycle with a dynamic, responsive framework focused on "Emerging Areas" like e-commerce and green energy exports.

Additional Key Insights

- **De-risking and Diversification:** By signing deals across different continents (Europe, North America, Middle East, Oceania), India is insulating its economy from regional shocks.
- **PLI Linkage:** The trade strategy is coupled with domestic Production Linked Incentive (PLI) schemes, ensuring that as market access opens up, Indian manufacturing capacity is ready to meet the demand.



- **Regulatory Cooperation:** Recent FTAs go beyond tariffs to include "regulatory coherence," ensuring Indian standards in pharmaceuticals and electronics are recognized globally, reducing non-tariff barriers.

Conclusion

India's recent trade diplomacy represents a decisive break from its protectionist past. By securing "lucrative and high-demand" market access through the India-EU and India-US agreements, New Delhi is not just seeking buyers but is actively re-engineering its domestic industrial base to become a central node in the global supply chain. This calibrated approach—balancing domestic manufacturing with aggressive global integration—is the cornerstone of India's ambition to become a global economic superpower.

UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.
- **GS Paper III:** Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment; Effects of liberalization on the economy.
- **Mains Perspective:** Analyze the shift from "Look East" to a more "Global Proactive" trade strategy and its impact on India's strategic autonomy.
- **Prelims Focus:** FTP 2030 targets, major FTA partner countries, and the difference between PTA, FTA, and Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPA).

12. RTI vs. DPDP Act: The Debate Over Transparency and Privacy

The Supreme Court of India has referred petitions challenging the amendment of the Right to Information (RTI) Act to a Constitution Bench. The controversy stems from the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023, which alters the balance between a citizen's right to know and an individual's right to privacy, sparking concerns over the dilution of public accountability.

Key Highlights of the Legal Conflict

- **Amended Exemption:** Section 44(3) of the DPDP Act amends Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act to provide a "blanket exemption" for all personal information, removing the earlier "public interest" exception.
- **Judicial Origin:** The DPDP Act was formulated following the landmark *Puttaswamy (2017)* judgment, which recognized privacy as a Fundamental Right under Article 21, necessitating a data protection regime.
- **Erosion of Oversight:** Critics argue the amendment prevents the disclosure of assets, liabilities, and educational qualifications of public officials—data previously accessible if it served a larger public interest.
- **Accountability Concerns:** The blanket ban could potentially be misused to deny access to procurement records, audit reports, or public spending data by labeling them as "personal information."





- **Constitutional Sensitivity:** The referral to a Constitution Bench indicates that the matter involves substantial questions of law regarding the intersection of Article 19(1)(a) (Freedom of Speech) and Article 21 (Privacy).
- **Proposed Judicial Guidelines:** The Supreme Court has expressed an intent to clearly define the scope of "personal information" to prevent arbitrary denials by Public Information Officers (PIOs).

Important Definitions

- **Data Principal:** The individual to whom the personal data relates (the citizen).
- **Data Fiduciary:** Any person or entity (including the State) that determines the purpose and means of processing personal data.
- **Ultra Vires:** A Latin phrase meaning "beyond the powers"; used here to suggest that the amendment exceeds the constitutional authority of Parliament by infringing on fundamental rights.
- **Public Activity or Interest:** A legal standard used in the original RTI Act to decide if personal information could be disclosed to ensure transparency in governance.

Constitutional and Legal Provisions

- **Article 19(1)(a):** Guarantees freedom of speech and expression, which the judiciary has interpreted to include the "Right to Know" or Right to Information.
- **Article 21:** The Right to Life and Liberty, which encompasses the Right to Privacy as per the *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* ruling.
- **Section 8(1)(j) of RTI Act (Original):** Allowed withholding personal info unless "larger public interest justifies the disclosure."
- **Section 44(3) of DPDP Act:** The specific provision that deleted the public interest caveat from the RTI Act, leading to the current legal challenge.

Additional Key Insights

- **The "Public Interest" Test:** Under the old regime, the burden of proof was on the applicant to show public interest; under the new regime, the door is effectively closed regardless of the reason.
- **Justice B.N. Srikrishna Committee:** While this committee laid the groundwork for data protection, the final DPDP Act passed in 2023 diverged significantly from the original draft regarding RTI exemptions.
- **Global Standards:** Most international data protection laws (like GDPR) provide mechanisms to balance privacy with the right to information, whereas the Indian amendment is viewed as uniquely restrictive.

Conclusion

The conflict between the RTI Act and the DPDP Act represents a classic "Rights in Conflict" scenario. While protecting personal data is a constitutional necessity, a blanket exemption for public officials risks shielding corruption and reducing transparency. The Constitution Bench's decision will be a watershed moment in determining whether the "Right to Privacy" can be used as a veil to diminish the "Right to Information," which is the bedrock of a functioning democracy.



UPSC Relevance

- **GS Paper II:** Important aspects of governance, transparency and accountability; RTI and its applications; Supreme Court judgments and their impact; Fundamental Rights.
 - **GS Paper IV:** Ethics in Public Administration; Information sharing and transparency in government.
 - **Mains Focus:** Analyzing the "Proportionality Test" in the context of privacy vs. transparency and the role of the judiciary in balancing competing fundamental rights.
 - **Prelims Focus:** Provisions of DPDP Act 2023, Sections of RTI Act, and landmark judgments like *Puttaswamy* and *Raj Narain*.
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