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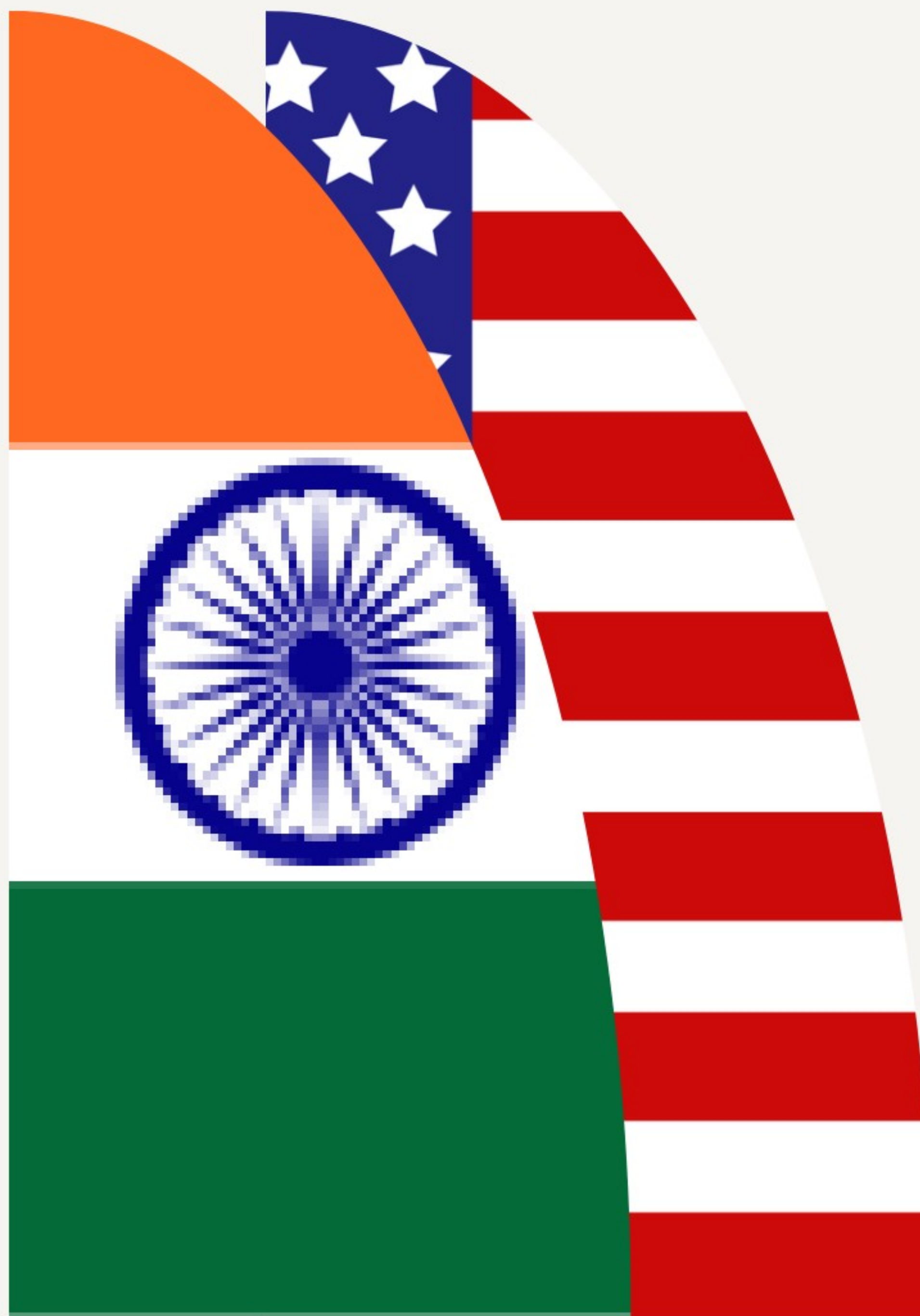
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UPSC Spotlight - focus page for prelims 2026

The Pala Civil Times special feature



INDIA TO SIGN U.S. DEAL ONLY AFTER CLARITY ON RATES

India has decided to defer signing its proposed trade agreement with the United States until there is clarity on the evolving U.S. tariff structure and country-wise rates, making this a key recent development in bilateral trade relations. The decision follows uncertainty created by changes in U.S. trade policy, where the final tariff India would face is now contingent on how the U.S. sets rates for other competing countries. While both sides remain engaged, India has indicated that any agreement must ensure a clear comparative advantage in the U.S. market before being finalised.

The sequence of events began with the U.S. imposing tariff measures on trade partners, including additional duties linked to India's import of Russian oil. Subsequently, India and the U.S. announced a trade deal framework on February 2, followed by a joint statement on February 7, with signing initially expected in March. However, on February 20, 2026, the U.S. Supreme Court invalidated the use of IEEPA for imposing reciprocal tariffs, leading to their withdrawal. In place of this, the U.S. introduced a temporary 10% tariff under Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974 for 150 days from February 24. Further, the U.S. initiated two investigations under Section 301 into trade partners, which could result in additional tariffs. Under the earlier framework, India was to face an 18% tariff, but the final rate now depends on how tariffs are applied to competing countries, prompting India to wait for greater clarity before concluding the agreement.



ASI allows T.N. Archaeology Dept. to conduct excavations at Keeladi, seven other sites

The Archaeological Survey of India has granted permission to the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology to conduct excavations at eight sites, including the 11th phase at Keeladi, after several months of delay. The approval, given under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958 and the 1959 Rules, comes after repeated requests from the State, as excavations are time-sensitive due to the January–July field season. This highlights the procedural requirement that while State departments undertake excavations, they require clearance from the ASI, reflecting the Centre–State coordination in heritage governance.

Keeladi, located on the banks of the Vaigai river in Sivaganga district, is a major archaeological site associated with the Sangam Age (c. 6th century BCE to 3rd century CE). Excavations have revealed evidence of an advanced urban settlement, including Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions, iron tools, spindle whorls indicating weaving activity, ring wells, terracotta figurines, and beads. These findings are significant as they challenge the earlier notion that early urbanisation in India was confined to the Gangetic plains, instead pointing to the existence of an independent and parallel Tamil civilisation.



Economic stagnation, job mismatch behind 'distress migration' from Punjab, say experts

Punjab's Economic Survey 2025–26 highlights rising outward migration driven by a mix of “pull” factors (better opportunities in countries like Canada, the U.S., Australia, and the U.K.) and “push” factors such as unemployment and limited local opportunities. However, experts argue that this trend is better understood as distress migration, where individuals are compelled to leave due to structural issues like stagnation in agriculture, mismatch between skills and jobs, declining investment, and concerns over governance and social conditions. This shifts the narrative from conventional brain drain (movement of skilled individuals for better prospects) to a broader systemic problem where both skilled and unskilled youth migrate due to lack of viable domestic opportunities.

A key concept highlighted is **employment elasticity**, which refers to the ability of economic growth to generate jobs. Punjab's low employment elasticity—due to slow industrial growth and declining capital formation—means that even when the economy grows, it does not create sufficient employment. This leads to rising frustration among youth, especially as agricultural growth has plateaued and job quality in both public and private sectors has deteriorated. The mismatch between aspirations and available jobs further intensifies migration pressures.

From a broader perspective, this trend has implications for India's demographic dividend, which depends on productive utilisation of a young workforce. Persistent distress migration indicates underutilisation of human capital and regional imbalances in development. Furthermore, this case illustrates how structural economic issues, governance challenges, and labour market inefficiencies can transform potential demographic advantages into socio-economic challenges, highlighting the need for job-led growth and regional economic diversification.

Sri Lanka announces four-day work week

Sri Lanka has introduced a temporary four-day workweek, declaring Wednesdays as a holiday for government offices, schools, and universities, in response to potential fuel shortages arising from tensions in West Asia. The measure is aimed at conserving energy and managing limited fuel supplies, while essential services will continue to operate without disruption. The government has also encouraged the private sector to consider similar steps, reflecting how countries may adopt administrative and behavioural measures during energy crises to reduce consumption and maintain economic stability. More broadly, the four-day workweek is part of an evolving global debate on work-life balance, productivity, and labour welfare. Advocates argue that reduced working days can improve employee well-being, increase efficiency, and promote better balance between professional and personal life. The idea gained momentum during the COVID-19 pandemic, when flexible work arrangements became more common and highlighted the benefits of autonomy and reduced burnout. However, its applicability varies across sectors, especially in essential services and developing economies, where operational continuity and resource constraints remain key considerations.



Govt. departments in Hong Kong told not to install OpenClaw



Hong Kong has advised government departments not to install the AI agent tool "OpenClaw" due to potential security risks. Unlike conventional chatbots, OpenClaw is designed to perform real-world tasks such as sending emails, organising files, and booking tickets by integrating with other AI models. However, authorities have raised concerns that such capabilities require extensive system access, which may lead to risks like excessive permissions, data leaks, and possible breaches of government networks. As a precaution, its use has been restricted on official systems.

The development highlights a broader concern around AI agents, which differ from traditional AI tools by having deeper access to user data and operational control. This increased functionality also raises higher privacy and cybersecurity risks, as these systems may handle sensitive information such as files and account credentials. Regulatory responses like this reflect the growing need for governance frameworks to balance innovation with data protection, especially as AI tools become more autonomous and integrated into everyday digital systems.

Why is the U.S. investigating India?

The United States has initiated two new investigations against India and several other countries to examine whether their trade practices are “unreasonable or discriminatory” and restrict U.S. commerce. These investigations, launched over the past week, are expected to take several months and could potentially lead to the imposition of new tariffs in the future.

Current Tariff Situation

The present tariff scenario has evolved following a February 20, 2026 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court, which invalidated the use of the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) to impose reciprocal tariffs. Prior to this, India faced tariffs of up to 50%, later reduced to 25%. After the ruling, the U.S. introduced a temporary 10% tariff on imports from all countries under Section 122 of the Trade Act, 1974, valid for 150 days. There remains a possibility of tariff increases or alternative measures under other legal provisions.

First Investigation: Excess Capacity and Trade Surplus

On March 11, the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) initiated an investigation under Section 301(b) of the Trade Act, 1974, targeting 16 economies including India. The focus is on whether these countries are using excess manufacturing capacity to export goods in a manner that adversely affects U.S. industries. In India’s case, concerns relate to sectors such as textiles, automobiles, construction goods, and solar modules, along with a significant bilateral trade surplus with the U.S.

Second Investigation: Forced Labour Concerns

A second investigation was launched shortly after, covering around 60 countries including India. This inquiry examines whether countries have taken adequate measures to prevent the import of goods produced using forced labour. It also seeks to assess how such practices may impact U.S. workers and businesses. Like the first, this investigation is also conducted under Section 301(b).

However, industry experts have noted that since the investigations are likely to be prolonged, there may not be any immediate impact, though the long-term implications will depend on the final outcomes.



Significance of Section 301(b)

Section 301 of the Trade Act, 1974 provides the U.S. government with a mechanism to respond to foreign trade practices deemed unfair or restrictive. It allows for measures such as imposing tariffs or other trade restrictions. Experts indicate that the current investigations could serve as a basis for future tariff actions, particularly after the expiry of the ongoing 150-day period of the 10% universal tariff.

Government and International Responses

The Indian government has not issued an official public response so far. In contrast, the European Union has expressed concern and indicated that it would seek clarity from the U.S. while responding appropriately if prior trade commitments are affected. This reflects varying approaches among U.S. trade partners in addressing the developments.

Industry Reactions and Outlook

Indian industry bodies have highlighted increased uncertainty due to these developments, especially in sectors like textiles, steel, and automobiles, which are already subject to existing tariffs. Some sectors continue to face high duties, including a separate 50% tariff on certain goods.

Policy reforms in fertiliser sector are overdue



India's strong foreign exchange reserves provide a cushion against external shocks, but the ongoing conflict in the Gulf region has highlighted critical vulnerabilities in energy and fertiliser supply chains. The situation has renewed focus on the need for structural reforms in the fertiliser sector to safeguard long-term food security.

Disruption of Global Supply Chains

The conflict has raised concerns over disruptions in key maritime routes such as the Strait of Hormuz, through which a large share of global oil and gas trade passes. Any instability in this region directly impacts global commodity markets, particularly energy and fertilisers like urea, leading to price volatility and supply uncertainties.

India's Energy Dependence and Price Impact

India is heavily dependent on imports for its energy needs, sourcing around 88% of its crude oil from abroad, with a significant portion coming from the Middle East. The recent escalation led to a sharp increase in crude oil prices from about \$66 per barrel to nearly \$120 before stabilising. Similarly, India imports a substantial share of LPG and LNG, with price spikes observed in LNG markets as well. These developments have already resulted in increased domestic costs, including a rise in LPG prices.

Link Between Energy and Fertiliser Production

Energy disruptions directly affect fertiliser production, especially urea, which relies on natural gas as a key input. Reduced availability of gas has led to prioritisation for essential sectors, limiting supply for fertiliser production. India consumes around 40 million tonnes of urea annually but produces only about 30 million tonnes domestically, increasing reliance on imports, which are also becoming costlier due to global price increases.

High Import Dependence in Fertiliser Sector

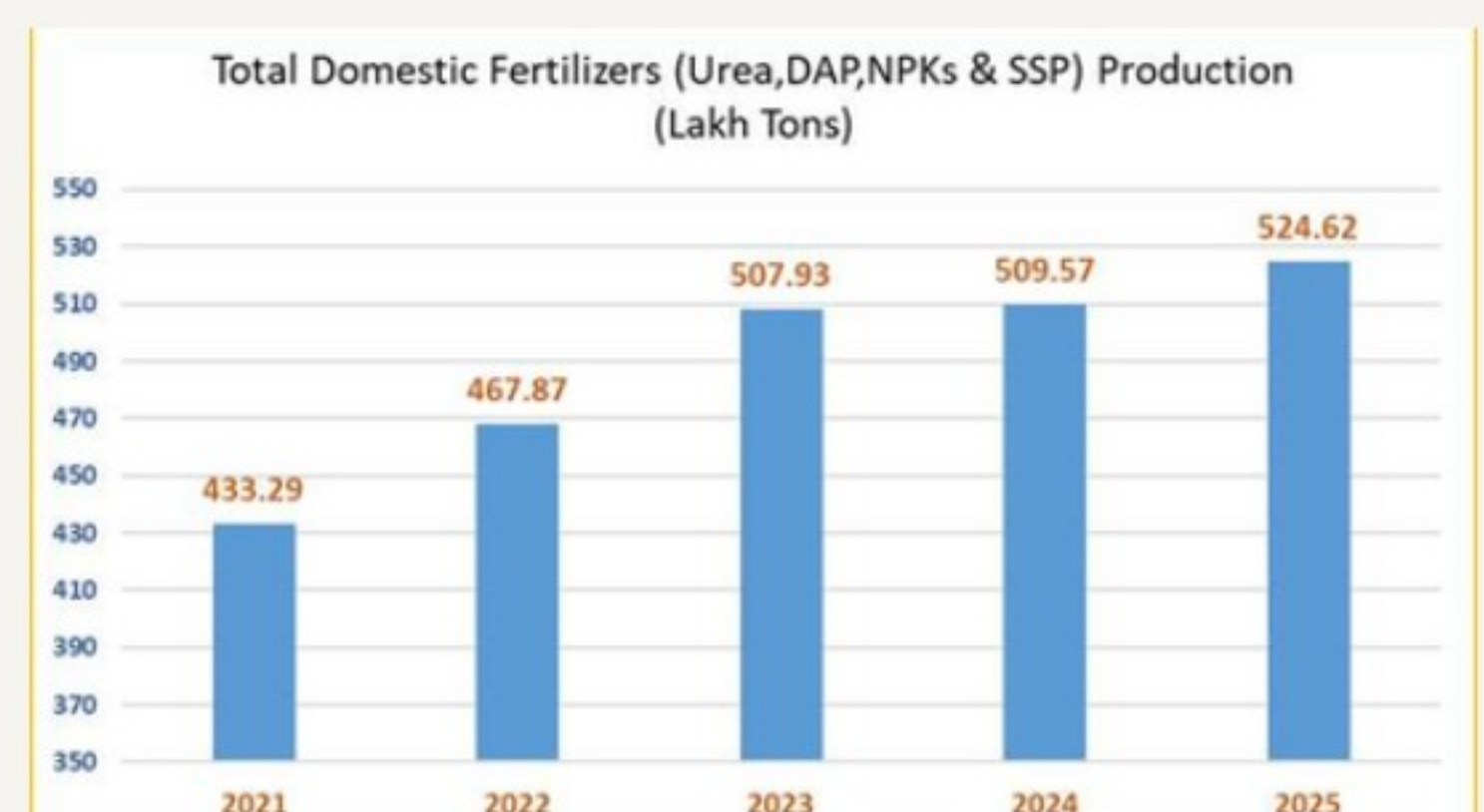
India's dependence extends beyond urea to other fertilisers and raw materials. A large proportion of ammonia, sulphur, phosphates, and potash is imported, much of it from the Gulf region. When both direct imports and input dependencies are considered, India relies on global supply chains for nearly 70% of its fertiliser requirements, making the sector highly sensitive to geopolitical developments.

Economic Implications and Fiscal Pressure

Rising input costs and supply uncertainties have implications for India's agriculture sector and food security. Continued disruptions could significantly increase the fertiliser subsidy burden, potentially exceeding budgeted levels. Additionally, India's agricultural exports to the Middle East may face pressure, though the primary concern remains import dependence on essential commodities.

Policy Responses and Reform Options

To address these challenges, several measures have been suggested. These include diversifying import sources beyond the Gulf, increasing overseas investments in fertiliser assets, and promoting domestic resource exploration. Policy reforms such as direct benefit transfers for fertiliser subsidies, rationalisation of pricing, and inclusion of urea under the Nutrient-Based Subsidy framework are also proposed. These steps aim to reduce dependency, improve efficiency, and enhance long-term resilience in the fertiliser sector.



Prelims 2026 Most Probable High-Yield Topics

International Year of the Woman Farmer (2026)

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), along with IFAD and WFP, has launched the International Year of the Woman Farmer 2026 to recognise the critical yet underappreciated role of women in agrifood systems. Proclaimed by the UN General Assembly (2024), the initiative aims to promote gender equality, drive policy reforms, and strengthen resilient agricultural systems globally.

Role of Women in Indian Agriculture

Women form a substantial part of India's agricultural workforce. They constitute nearly 43% of the agricultural labour force, contribute to ~50% of crop production, and perform over 70% of livestock-related work. Agriculture remains the largest employer for women in rural India, accounting for 55–60% of female employment, highlighting their central role in food security and the rural economy.

Structural Constraints and Gender Gaps

Despite their significant contribution, women face major structural barriers. They own only 13–14% of operational landholdings, have limited access to institutional credit, and face a digital divide—being 15–20% less likely to own smartphones and having lower internet access. These gaps restrict their productivity, decision-making power, and access to modern agricultural inputs and information.



Role of AI in Transforming Agriculture

Artificial Intelligence is emerging as a key tool in addressing agricultural inefficiencies. Technologies such as satellite imaging, machine learning, and AI-driven advisories help detect crop stress, predict weather risks, and optimise input use. These innovations address issues like information asymmetry, inefficient input use, and climate variability—leading to improved productivity and reduced labour burden, especially benefiting women farmers.

Gender Dimension in Agri-Tech and Data Gaps

Current agricultural data systems are biased towards major cereals like wheat and rice, which are relatively male-dominated. Sectors where women are more active—such as millets, pulses, horticulture, and livestock—remain under-digitised. This creates algorithmic bias in AI tools, potentially excluding women-centric agricultural practices. Addressing this requires gender-inclusive datasets, participatory data systems, and involvement of women's groups like Self-Help Groups (SHGs).

Economic and Productivity Implications

Agriculture contributes 15–18% to India's GDP while employing over 40% of the workforce. Even a 5–10% productivity gain through AI can significantly boost rural incomes. In sectors like dairy (valued at over \$150 billion), where women play a dominant role, small productivity improvements can have large income and food security impacts.

Prelims 2026 Most Probable High-Yield Topics

Way Forward: Inclusive and Climate-Resilient Agriculture

With rising climate risks, AI-based early warning systems and adaptive advisories can help reduce yield losses. To ensure inclusive growth, policies must focus on bridging digital gaps, promoting gender-sensitive AI design, improving access to resources, and investing in diversified agriculture. Integrating women into technological advancements can transform India's agricultural sector by enhancing both productivity and equity.

Prelims model questions

Q. Which of the following challenges are faced by women farmers in India?

1. Low ownership of landholdings
2. Limited access to institutional credit
3. Higher digital access compared to men
4. Restricted access to modern agricultural inputs

Select the correct answer:

- (a) 1, 2 and 4 only
- (b) 1 and 3 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

Answer: (a)

With reference to the International Year of the Woman Farmer (2026), consider the following statements:

1. It has been proclaimed by the UN General Assembly.
2. It is jointly led by FAO, IFAD, and WFP.
3. Its objective is limited only to increasing agricultural production.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: (a)

Prelims model questions

Q. Consider the following statements:

1. Agriculture contributes about 15–18% to India's GDP.
2. It employs more than 40% of the workforce.
3. Even small productivity gains can significantly impact rural incomes.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Q. Which of the following measures can help achieve inclusive and climate-resilient agriculture?

1. Bridging the digital divide among farmers
2. Promoting gender-sensitive AI design
3. Expanding monoculture farming practices
4. Strengthening participatory data systems

Select the correct answer:

- (a) 1, 2 and 4 only
- (b) 1 and 3 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2, 3 and 4

Answer: (a)

Q. According to the FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment 2025, India currently ranks:

- A. 5th in total forest area globally
- B. 7th in total forest area globally
- C. 9th in total forest area globally
- D. 12th in total forest area globally

Answer: C

PRELIMS CORNER :

1) Which one of the following best defines the term 'State'? (2021)

(a) A community of persons permanently occupying a definite territory independent of external control and possessing an organized government

(b) A politically organized people of a definite territory and possessing an authority to govern them, maintain law and order, protect their natural rights and safeguard their means of sustenance

(c) A number of persons who have been living in a definite territory for a very long time with their own culture, tradition and government

(d) A society permanently living in a definite territory with a central authority, an executive responsible to the central authority and an independent judiciary

2) With reference to India, consider the following statements: (2021)

1. There is only one citizenship and one domicile.

2. A citizen by birth only can become the Head of State. 3. A foreigner once granted citizenship cannot be deprived of it under any circumstances. Which of the statements given above is / are correct?

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 only

(c) 1 and 3

(d) 2 and 3

Environment: yet another casualty of the West Asia war



Modern conflicts impose significant but often overlooked environmental and climate costs that extend far beyond immediate destruction. Military operations—such as sustained aerial sorties, naval deployments, and logistical support systems—consume vast amounts of fossil fuels, generating large-scale greenhouse gas emissions. Even though some assets like nuclear-powered carriers reduce emissions, the overall footprint remains substantial when accounting for the full lifecycle of war, including weapons production and post-conflict reconstruction. Past conflicts illustrate this scale, with emissions from wars in regions like Gaza and Ukraine reaching levels comparable to those of entire countries.

The ongoing conflict in West Asia adds another layer of environmental risk due to its proximity to critical energy infrastructure, particularly around the Strait of Hormuz. Attacks on oil refineries, storage facilities, and fuel shipments release toxic pollutants into the air and water, causing immediate ecological damage and long-term health hazards. These disruptions also trigger spikes in global energy prices, creating economic pressures that may delay climate action as countries prioritise energy security and affordability.

However, rising fossil fuel costs can also accelerate the shift toward cleaner energy alternatives by making renewable and electrification solutions more economically viable. Overall, the hidden environmental costs of war—ranging from emissions to ecosystem damage—have lasting global implications, reinforcing the link between geopolitical instability and climate change.

Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) Answer is option a

The correct answer is (a). A State is best defined as a community of people permanently occupying a definite territory, independent of external control, and possessing an organized government. This definition captures the four essential elements of a State in political science: population, territory, government, and sovereignty.

Population refers to a group of people who form the basis of the State. Territory implies a defined geographical area over which the State exercises authority. Government is the political organization through which the will of the State is expressed and enforced. Most importantly, sovereignty denotes the supreme authority of the State, both internally over its people and externally free from control of other States.

Option (a) clearly includes all these elements, especially emphasizing independence from external control, which is crucial for sovereignty. In contrast, the other options either omit sovereignty or include additional features that are not essential. For example, option (b) focuses on functions like protection of rights, which may vary across States. Option (c) emphasizes culture and tradition, which relate more to the concept of a nation rather than a State. Option (d) describes a specific form of government, not the general concept of a State.

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2) Answer is option a

Statement 1 is correct. India follows the principle of single citizenship, unlike federal countries such as the United States, where dual citizenship (state and federal) exists. In India, all citizens are citizens of the country as a whole. Similarly, there is only one domicile in the legal sense at the national level, although states may prescribe residence requirements for certain benefits. Statement 2 is incorrect. The Head of State in India is the President, and there is no requirement that the person must be a citizen by birth. Under the Constitution, any person who is a citizen of India, meets the age requirement (35 years), and fulfills other eligibility conditions can become the President. Thus, even a naturalized citizen can hold this office.

Statement 3 is also incorrect. Citizenship in India can be terminated, renounced, or deprived under the provisions of the Citizenship Act, 1955. A foreigner who has acquired Indian citizenship can be deprived of it under certain conditions, such as fraud, disloyalty to the Constitution, or unlawful trade with an enemy country.



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