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India's Unfinished Journey in Labour Rights

Over a century after the first May Day rally in India, the protection of the labour force remains an unfinished project. Beginning with early efforts by leaders like B. P. Wadia, trade unions initially lacked legal safeguards until the Trade Unions Act, 1926 granted recognition and limited immunity.

Post-independence, constitutional backing under Article 19(1) (c) strengthened the right to organise, but later developments—particularly after economic liberalisation and the introduction of the Industrial Relations Code, 2020—have imposed new constraints on collective action. Today, a clear gap persists between the promise of labour laws and their real-world implementation, especially with the rise of informal and gig work, underscoring that the vision of equitable labour rights remains only partially fulfilled.

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Gulf within

Differences with Saudi Arabia and Iran's attacks led to the UAE's exit from OPEC



Plan for early summer, extreme heat



The real turnout

Record polling percentages reflect lower voter base

Lift abortion time limit for minor rape survivors: SC

The Supreme Court, in a landmark observation on 30 April 2026, urged the Centre to amend the Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, 1971 (as amended in 2021), to eliminate gestation limits for abortions in cases of minor rape survivors. This arose while dismissing the government's curative petition against a prior ruling permitting a 15-year-old rape victim to terminate her 30-week pregnancy. The bench, comprising CJI Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi, prioritized survivor autonomy over state or medical intervention.

We are only protecting the child whose face is staring back at us. If she questions us, what answer would we give? What answer would the society have? The law has to see the whole life ahead for the victim. If law is required to be ruthless, it has to be that.

- **CJI SURYA KANT**

MTP Act and 2021 Amendment

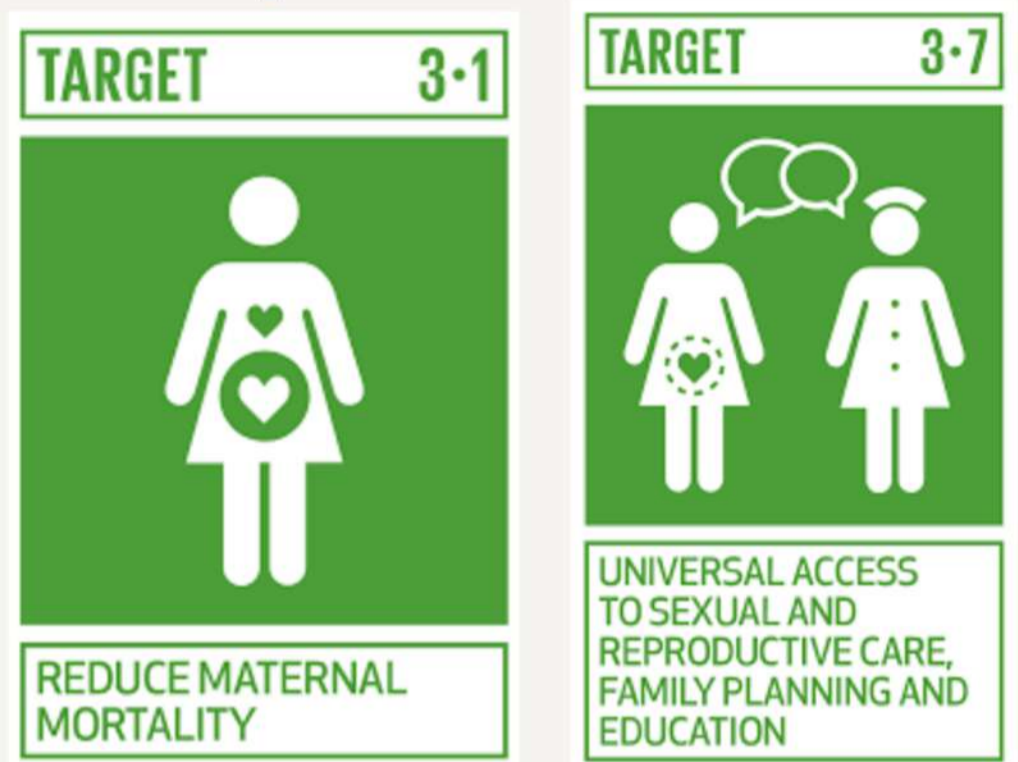
The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (Amendment) Act, 2021 modernised India's abortion law by :

- extending the upper gestational limit from 20 to 24 weeks for certain vulnerable categories, including rape survivors, minors, and women with disabilities.
- It also reduced procedural burden by requiring one doctor's opinion up to 20 weeks and two opinions from 20 to 24 weeks.
- It also allowed termination beyond 24 weeks in cases of substantial foetal abnormalities subject to a Medical Board.
- It further strengthened privacy protection and expanded access under the contraceptive-failure clause to include unmarried women in practice.

Gestational Limit vs Exceptional Cases

Despite progressive amendments, rigid time limits remain a barrier in extreme cases such as minor rape victims. Delays in detection, reporting, and legal processes often push pregnancies beyond permissible limits, necessitating judicial intervention.

The judgment signals a shift towards a rights-based, survivor-centric approach in reproductive healthcare. It calls for aligning legal frameworks with medical realities and social justice considerations.



Autonomy and Welfare

In the April 2026 case before the Supreme Court of India, the Court prioritised the survivor's autonomy, mental health, and long-term well-being by holding that the decision to terminate the pregnancy must rest with the minor survivor and her guardians, not the State or medical authorities; it emphasised that doctors should guide through informed counselling rather than override individual choice, and recognised that forcing a rape survivor to continue the pregnancy would impose lasting psychological trauma and violate her dignity.

Equity and Fiscal Concerns

The episode raises critical concerns around locus standi, by limiting the State's role in deeply personal reproductive decisions. It underscores the need for targeted legal reforms, including revisiting gestational limits in exceptional cases such as minor rape survivors, while also proposing systemic measures like fast-track trials and enhanced victim compensation mechanisms (including transfer of the accused's property). The case reflects tensions between foetal rights and women's reproductive autonomy. It underscores the importance of safeguarding dignity, especially for vulnerable groups like minors and rape survivors, while ensuring access to safe and timely medical care.

A century after legal recognition, workers still lack real protection

The modern trade union movement in India began with pioneers like **B. P. Wadia**, who founded the **Madras Labour Union in 1918**. However, under colonial law, unions were treated as conspiracies restraining trade. **The 1921 Buckingham and Carnatic Mills case** exposed this gap, where union leaders were penalised for organising workers, highlighting the absence of legal safeguards for collective action.



Demand for Legal Recognition and the 1926 Act

Sustained pressure from labour leaders such as N. M. Joshi and organisations like All India Trade Union Congress led to the enactment of the Trade Unions Act, 1926.

The Act granted legal recognition to unions and protected them from:

- Civil liability (Section 18) for acts during trade disputes
- Criminal conspiracy charges (Section 17) under IPC
- This marked a turning point as trade unions were no longer illegal conspiracies but legitimate institutions.

Colonial Response: Restriction and Repression

Despite legal recognition, the colonial state imposed restrictions through laws like the Trade Disputes Act and actions such as the Meerut Conspiracy Case, charging trade union leaders under sedition. Leaders including Jawaharlal Nehru criticised these measures as suppressing labour rights. The period also saw the convergence of labour movements with nationalist struggles, exemplified by protests led by Lala Lajpat Rai and revolutionary actions by Bhagat Singh.

Post-Independence Phase: Constitutional Backing

After independence, trade union rights were constitutionally recognised under Article 19(1)(c), guaranteeing the right to form associations. Trade unions expanded rapidly (625% growth between 1951–1979), and their focus gradually shifted from ideological mobilisation to wage bargaining.

Liberalisation Era and Changing Labour Dynamics

The 1991 economic reforms introduced a new policy orientation emphasising **labour flexibility for growth**. This weakened traditional union bargaining power, especially in an increasingly informal and contract-based labour market.

Labour Codes and the Industrial Relations Code, 2020

The Industrial Relations Code, 2020 consolidated labour laws, including the 1926 Act. While it retains legal immunities for unions, it introduces new constraints:

- Requirement of 51% worker support for recognition
- Mandatory 60-day notice before strikes
- Restrictions during conciliation and tribunal proceedings

These procedural requirements make collective action more difficult, especially in sectors with informal or high-turnover employment.

Emerging Challenges

The evolution of trade unions in India reflects a continuous tension between legal recognition and practical limitations. A major limitation in the present is the exclusion of gig and platform workers from formal labour protections. Despite millions working in this sector, they are classified as independent contractors, denying them collective bargaining rights. Bridging this gap—especially for informal and gig workers—remains central to ensuring equitable and inclusive labour governance.

International Workers' Day Special feature

How Ambedkar laid the foundations of India's modern labour legislation

B. R. Ambedkar viewed labour not merely in terms of wages and survival, but as a means for holistic human development—social, cultural, and spiritual. His early political engagement through the Independent Labour Party reflected his commitment to addressing both material and dignity-related concerns of workers.

Colonial Context & Entry into Labour Policy

During the 1940s, industrialisation in colonial India expanded with minimal protection for workers. In 1942, Ambedkar was appointed Labour Member in the Viceroy's Executive Council, where he began institutionalising labour welfare at a time when labour rights were largely neglected in policy frameworks.

Key Legislative and Policy Contributions (1942–46)

Ambedkar introduced several transformative measures:

- Reduction of working hours from 12 to 8 hours
- Introduction of maternity benefits, provident funds, paid leave, and dearness allowance
- Recognition of trade unions and creation of employment exchanges
- Expansion of social security measures like employee insurance and worker housing

These reforms aligned India with emerging global labour standards and improved working conditions significantly.

Institutional Innovation & Tripartite Dialogue

The 1942 Tripartite Labour Conference marked a turning point by bringing government, employers, and workers onto a common platform. Ambedkar ensured equal participation, laying the foundation for structured industrial relations and policy dialogue. He also pushed for a uniform labour code, cautioning against fragmented provincial laws.

Ambedkar's contributions marked a shift from neglect to structured labour governance in India. However, he emphasised that legal reforms alone are insufficient—workers must have political representation to sustain their rights. His legacy continues to shape modern labour laws and debates on worker dignity, equity, and social justice.



Evidence-Based Policymaking and Welfare Measures

Ambedkar established the Labour Investigation Committee (1944), which systematically studied wages, working conditions, and social realities of labour. His policies extended to sector-specific welfare, such as the Mica Mines Labour Welfare Fund (1946), and improvements in mine safety and dignity (e.g., separate bathing facilities).

Focus on Women Workers & Social Security

Ambedkar was a pioneer in advocating maternity rights. Amendments during his tenure expanded maternity leave up to 16 weeks with wage support. His efforts strengthened early frameworks for social insurance, influenced by International Labour Organization, moving India towards comprehensive labour protection.

Constitutional Embedding of Labour Rights

Ambedkar's labour vision is reflected in the Directive Principles:

- Article 39: Equal pay and adequate livelihood
- Article 43: Living wage and decent working conditions
- Emphasis on reducing economic inequality and preventing concentration of wealth

These provisions institutionalised labour welfare within India's constitutional framework.

The Indian EXPRESS

Plan for early summer, extreme heat

Rising temperatures in April across multiple regions of India signals heatwave patterns reaching earlier than June. While advisories issued by the India Meteorological Department and the Centre such as altering work hours, ensuring hydration, and preparing healthcare systems reflect improved preparedness, they remain largely non-binding and reactive. Existing Heat Action Plans suffer from weak implementation due to underfunding, limited institutional capacity, and poor coordination. Crucially, heatwaves are not yet formally recognised as a national disaster under disaster management frameworks, restricting access to central relief funds despite recommendations by the Finance Commission. With over half of India's districts vulnerable to heat stress and urban areas facing intensified risks due to the heat island effect, especially for low-income populations, the challenge extends beyond emergency response. It necessitates structural adaptation through urban greening, climate-resilient infrastructure, labour protection, and integration of climate science with public health and governance systems.

Editorial to Exam - Most probable question from this editorial

Heatwaves in India are increasingly becoming a structural climate and public health challenge rather than a seasonal anomaly. Discuss the limitations of existing Heat Action Plans and suggest measures for building long-term resilience to extreme heat conditions.



Gulf within

The exit of United Arab Emirates from OPEC reflects its desire to escape production quotas dominated by Saudi Arabia and utilise its spare capacity to expand exports and fund economic diversification. While the immediate market response has been muted due to disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz amid the Iran-U.S. conflict, the long-term implications could include increased oil supply and weakened cartel control over prices. The move also signals deeper geopolitical divergences within OPEC, including differences over regional conflicts and relations with Israel, alongside a broader decline in OPEC's global market share and influence. Additionally, shifting alignment towards the United States may offer strategic advantages but carries uncertainty. For energy-importing countries like India, the immediate concern lies not in OPEC's weakening but in supply disruptions and geopolitical instability in West Asia, which continue to threaten energy security and price stability.

Editorial to Exam - Most probable question from this editorial

The exit of the UAE from OPEC highlights both internal fissures within oil-producing blocs and shifting geopolitical alignments in West Asia. Discuss the implications of this development for global oil markets and India's energy security.

thehindu**businessline.**

TUESDAY - MARCH 31, 2026

The real turnout

The high voter turnout in the 2026 Assembly elections—particularly in West Bengal (92.47%) and Tamil Nadu (85.10%)—appears to signal strong democratic participation, but a closer analysis reveals that these figures are partly driven by a reduced electoral base following the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of voter rolls. In West Bengal, the electorate shrank by over 10%, while the absolute increase in votes cast was modest, indicating that the sharp rise in turnout percentage is amplified by a smaller denominator. Tamil Nadu shows a similar trend, though with a more substantial rise in actual voter participation. Kerala reflects a smaller contraction in electorate with high turnout, while Assam stands out as an exception with both an expanding electorate and record participation. These patterns suggest that while voter engagement has improved, headline turnout figures may overstate the extent of this increase. The SIR exercise, though aimed at improving electoral integrity, may have led to the exclusion of some genuine voters, highlighting the need for careful verification to ensure both accuracy and inclusiveness in the electoral process.

Editorial to Exam - Most probable question from this editorial

Critically examine how revisions in electoral rolls can influence voter turnout statistics. To what extent do high turnout percentages reflect genuine democratic participation in the context of recent Assembly elections in India?

States with revenue deficits may face fiscal stress: Centre

The Ministry of Finance has flagged rising fiscal vulnerability among States in the backdrop of global uncertainties such as the West Asia crisis. This concern becomes more pronounced given that, despite the Union government maintaining relative fiscal prudence, State finances show significant divergence—thereby posing risks to overall macroeconomic stability.

Revenue Deficit: Meaning and Current Trends

A revenue deficit arises when routine expenditures (salaries, pensions, subsidies, interest payments) exceed revenue receipts (taxes and fees). For 2026–27, 9 out of 18 major States are projected to run revenue deficits, including Punjab, Kerala, and Himachal Pradesh. These States face structural imbalances, limiting their fiscal flexibility.

High Debt and Interest Burden

Revenue-deficit States typically carry higher outstanding liabilities and significant debt-servicing burdens. Many spend **over 15%** of revenue receipts on **interest payments**, with Punjab reaching as high as 22.8%. This reduces their ability to allocate resources toward development-oriented expenditure.

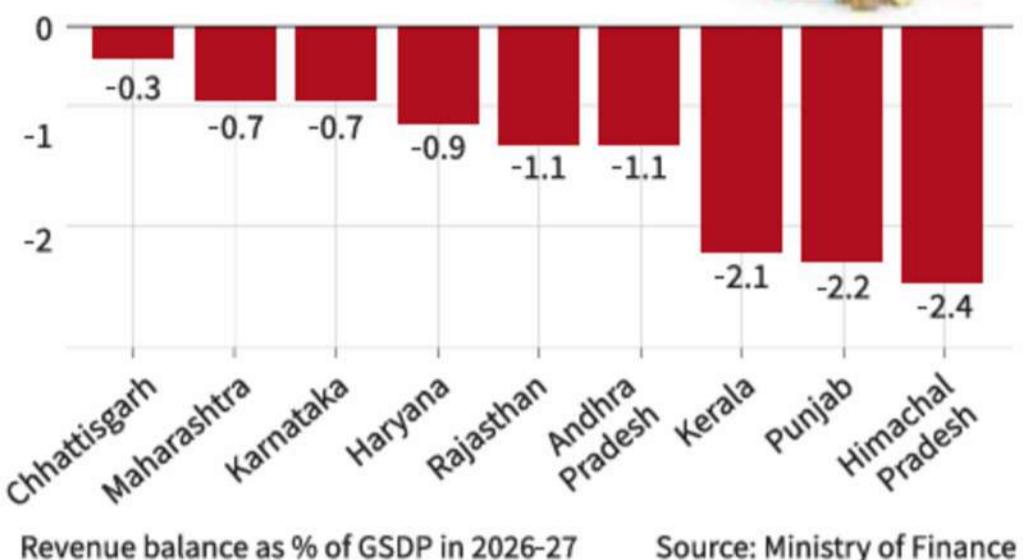
Fiscal Space and “Golden Rule” of Public Finance

The report emphasises adherence to the “golden rule” of fiscal policy—borrowing should finance capital expenditure, not consumption. It also warned that the States failing to maintain zero revenue deficit are likely to face increased fiscal stress, especially during economic shocks, as they lack the flexibility to respond effectively.

High State-level debt (often 35–45% of GSDP) affects the overall general government debt trajectory. Fiscal stress at the sub-national level can undermine macroeconomic stability, crowd out development spending, and weaken the economy’s ability to absorb external shocks. India’s fiscal landscape reflects a widening gap between well-managed and stressed States. Strengthening fiscal discipline, prioritising capital expenditure, and ensuring coordinated Centre–State consolidation will be critical to maintaining macroeconomic stability in an increasingly uncertain global environment.

In the red

Nine of the 18 large States analysed by the Ministry of Finance are in revenue deficit



Divergence Across States: Surplus vs Deficit

Eight States, including Odisha, Gujarat, and Uttar Pradesh, are projected to maintain revenue surpluses. These States demonstrate better fiscal discipline and allocate higher resources toward capital expenditure. For example, Odisha combines a 3% revenue surplus with 6.5% capital outlay (of GSDP), indicating productive investment rather than fiscal stress.

Capital Expenditure vs Fiscal Deficit

In fiscally stronger States, capital outlay exceeds fiscal deficit, implying that borrowings are used for asset creation. In contrast, revenue-deficit States show higher fiscal deficits without corresponding capital investment, indicating inefficient fiscal utilisation and long-term sustainability concerns.

Centre–State Fiscal Dynamics

States with weak fiscal positions may be forced to cut productive expenditure or seek higher transfers from the Centre, even as the Union government is pursuing fiscal consolidation. Additionally, with the beginning of the 16th Finance Commission cycle, changes in devolution and reduced grants may further strain State finances.

A key ocean current is collapsing. This could be devastating for the world and India

Recent studies warn that Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) could weaken by up to 59% by 2100, far exceeding earlier estimates of around 15% decline. This slowdown is linked to climate change-induced melting of Arctic ice, which releases fresh water into the ocean.

What is AMOC? – The Global Ocean Conveyor Belt

The Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC) is a large system of ocean currents in the Atlantic that circulates heat across the planet. Warm surface water moves northward, cools near the Arctic, sinks, and returns south as deep cold currents. This continuous loop regulates global climate, contributing to Europe's mild weather and influencing rainfall patterns across continents, including Asia.

The 'Tipping Point' Risk

AMOC is considered a climate "tipping point," meaning that beyond a certain threshold, its weakening could become irreversible. A collapse would drastically alter global climate systems, potentially causing extreme sea-level rise in some regions and widespread weather disruptions. The uncertainty lies not in whether it will weaken, but how fast and how far.

Interconnection with El Niño

The slowdown of AMOC can disrupt global heat distribution, indirectly affecting El Niño events. A weaker AMOC may lead to more intense and unpredictable El Niño cycles, which already play a major role in global climate variability. This interconnectedness highlights how changes in one ocean system can cascade into others.

WHY AMOC COLLAPSE COULD TRIGGER A GLOBAL CRISIS

- 1. A LOOMING COLLAPSE**
Melting Arctic ice dumps fresh water into the Atlantic, acting as a brake. The system is slowing towards a catastrophic 'tipping point'.
- 2. THE OCEAN'S THERMOSTAT**
AMOC is a massive 'conveyor belt' of currents in the Atlantic, moving heat across the globe and heavily influencing worldwide weather.
- 3. GLOBAL CHAOS**
If AMOC collapses, it disrupts weather globally. Trapped heat makes phenomena like El Niño far more unpredictable and extreme.
- 4. THREAT TO INDIA**
The tropical rain belt pulls southward, causing a destabilized summer monsoon, longer dry spells, and threatened agriculture.

Implications for India

For India, the impact is particularly serious. The Indian monsoon depends on global heat balance, and a weakened AMOC could shift rainfall patterns southward, reducing monsoon intensity. This may result in shorter rainy seasons, prolonged droughts, and erratic rainfall. Since agriculture and water resources heavily rely on the monsoon, this poses a direct threat to food security and livelihoods.

Broader Global Consequences

Beyond India, AMOC slowdown could affect ecosystems, fisheries, and weather systems worldwide. Millions dependent on stable climate conditions—especially in developing regions—face heightened vulnerability. The combination of disrupted rainfall and extreme weather events could intensify global inequality and climate risks.

What lies ahead

The potential weakening of AMOC underscores the fragile balance of Earth's climate system. It illustrates how human-induced changes can trigger large-scale, interconnected disruptions. Addressing climate change through emission reductions and global cooperation is essential to prevent crossing such irreversible tipping points and to safeguard ecological and human systems worldwide.

PRELIMS CORNER :

1) Consider the following statements about Raja Ram Mohan Roy :

- I. He possessed great love and respect for the traditional philosophical systems of the East.
- II. He desired his countrymen to accept the rational and scientific approach and the principle of human dignity and social equality of all men and women.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) I only
- (b) II only
- (c) Both I and II
- (d) Neither I nor II



2) "Sedition has become my religion" was the famous statement given by Gandhiji at the time of

- (a) the Champaran Satyagraha
- (b) publicly violating Salt Law at Dandi
- (c) attending the Second Round Table Conference in London
- (d) the launch of the Quit India Movement



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Borra Caves

The Borra Caves, located about 88 km from Visakhapatnam in the scenic Araku Valley, are among India's largest and most fascinating limestone caves. Nestled in the Ananthagiri Hills at an elevation of around 705 metres, these caves stretch across nearly two square kilometres and reach depths of up to 80 metres. Inside, visitors encounter a stunning world of speleothems—natural mineral formations such as stalactites hanging from the ceiling and stalagmites rising from the ground—formed over thousands of years.

Scientifically, the caves were documented in 1807 by William King George, though they have long been known locally as Borrā Guhalu in Telugu. Their formation is an ongoing natural process: water flowing through limestone dissolves minerals and gradually reshapes the cave. As mineral-rich water drips from the roof, it creates unique formations resembling figures like Shiva-Parvati, a mother and child, or even animals, sparking visitors' imagination. Archaeological findings, including stone tools dating back 30,000–50,000 years, highlight the caves' ancient human connection.



Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) The correct answer is (c)

Both statements correctly capture the core intellectual and reformist philosophy of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who is widely regarded as a pioneer of modern Indian thought.

“Rammohun Roy possessed great love and respect for the traditional philosophic systems of the East; but, at the same time, he believed that modern culture alone would help regenerate Indian society. In particular, he wanted his countrymen to accept the rational and scientific approach and the principle of human dignity and social equality of all men and women.”

-Chapter 5 : Social and Cultural Awakening in the first half of the 19th century, Modern India - A History Textbook for Class XII by Bipin Chandra

Statement I is correct: Rammohan Roy had deep respect for the traditional philosophical systems of the East, particularly the Vedanta. He studied classical Indian texts like the Vedas and Upanishads and believed that they originally promoted monotheism and rationality. However, his respect was not blind—he critically examined traditions and opposed practices like idolatry and ritualism when they deviated from reason and ethical values.

Statement II is also correct: He strongly advocated the adoption of a rational and scientific outlook. Influenced by both Indian philosophy and Western Enlightenment ideas, he emphasised human dignity, equality, and social justice. His reform efforts targeted practices such as sati, caste rigidity, and gender inequality. He also supported modern education, women’s rights (including property rights), and the spread of scientific knowledge.

Rammohan Roy represents a synthesis of East and West—he did not reject tradition outright, nor did he advocate blind imitation of Western ideas. Instead, he promoted a critical, reason-based reform of Indian society, combining the ethical core of Indian philosophy with modern values of equality and rationality.

2) Answer is option b

The Civil Disobedience Movement was started by Gandhi on 12 March 1930 with his famous Dandi March. Together with 78 chosen followers, Gandhi walked nearly 375 km from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, a village on the Gujarat sea-coast. On 6 April, Gandhiji reached Dandi, picked up a handful of salt and broke the salt law as a symbol of the Indian people's refusal to live under British-made laws and therefore under British rule. Gandhiji declared:

“The British rule in India has brought about moral, material, cultural, and spiritual ruination of this great country. I regard this rule as a curse. I am out to destroy this system of Government. Sedition has become my religion. Ours is a non-violent battle. We are not to kill anybody but it is our dharma to see that the curse of this Government is blotted out.”

-Chapter 13, Struggle for Swaraj -II, Modern India - A History textbook for Class XII by Bipin Chandra

