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The Union government has formally notified that the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act shall be replaced with the new Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) from July 1, marking a major shift in India's rural employment architecture. The new framework retains certain core protections such as unemployment compensation, continuation of ongoing works and the statutory employment guarantee, which has now been increased from 100 to 125 days annually. However, it fundamentally alters the character of the earlier scheme by moving away from MGNREGA's demand-driven model. The new system introduces a 60:40 Centre-State funding pattern for most States, raising concerns regarding fiscal capacity and uneven implementation across regions. The government has assured that existing job cards, oral work demands and employment rights will continue during the transition phase, despite significant gaps in e-KYC verification and continued dependence on digital attendance systems in areas with poor connectivity. Overall, the reform signals a transition from a rights-based employment guarantee framework towards a more administratively managed rural livelihood model.

A new start against noise pollution

Noise pollution has emerged as one of the most neglected yet widespread forms of environmental pollution in India. Public celebrations, political rallies, religious events, traffic congestion, construction activities, and the increasing use of loudspeakers have made excessive noise a constant feature of urban and semi-urban life. Recent celebrations following the state elections brought attention to this issue as campaigns turned too loud. According to experts, a single pea whistle can generate sound pressure levels between 104 and 116 decibels, far above the 85-decibel threshold beyond which prolonged exposure can damage hearing. Despite such risks, excessive noise continues to be socially tolerated and politically overlooked across the country.

Scale of the Problem in India

Data from the National Ambient Noise Monitoring Network (NANMN) showed that more than 80% of monitoring stations breached prescribed noise limits during both daytime and nighttime as early as 2019. The problem is likely to be far more severe than official data suggests because India's monitoring infrastructure remains highly inadequate. The NANMN currently has only around **70 monitoring stations** across seven metropolitan cities, and the network has not expanded significantly for over a decade. Large district towns, rapidly urbanising regions, and many cities in the Hindi belt and Northeast remain outside systematic monitoring systems.

Major Factors Driving Noise Pollution

Traffic congestion is one of the largest contributors to ambient noise pollution in Indian cities. Construction activity running through the night, religious processions, political celebrations, election campaigns, weddings, and festivals also generate large-scale noise through loudspeakers and amplified music. In many areas, permissions for loudspeaker use are weakly regulated, while enforcement agencies are often reluctant to intervene due to political and social sensitivities. Urban design and poor building acoustics further aggravate the issue.



Public Health Implications

Noise pollution is not merely an inconvenience; it is a serious public health concern. The World Health Organization attributes **nearly 16% of disabling hearing loss** in adults to occupational noise exposure. India is estimated to have around 6.3 crore people with some level of hearing impairment. Studies among construction and industrial workers show alarming levels of noise-induced hearing loss. Excessive noise also affects mental and cardiovascular health. Constant exposure disrupts sleep, increases stress hormone levels, contributes to hypertension, and impairs concentration and cognitive development among children living near airports, highways, and busy roads. The **European Environment Agency** identifies **noise** as the **second-largest environmental cause** of healthy life years lost after air pollution.

Way Forward

The central challenge is not merely the absence of rules but the absence of consistent enforcement and political will. Noise pollution is deeply embedded in public celebrations, religious practices, and political mobilisation. Authorities often hesitate to act for fear of backlash. Institutional capacity is also limited. Pollution control boards, municipal bodies, and police departments lack sufficient manpower, equipment, and monitoring coverage. Public awareness about the long-term health impacts of noise remains low compared to concerns over air or water pollution. Addressing noise pollution requires a combination of stronger enforcement, technological monitoring, urban planning reforms, and behavioural change.

India-Trinidad pact to help diaspora trace ancestral roots: Jaishankar

Relations between India and Trinidad and Tobago are rooted in a deep historical and cultural connection shaped by the migration of Indian indentured labourers, known as the “**Girmitya**” community, during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These labourers were transported by the British to plantations across the Caribbean, including Trinidad and Tobago. They carried with them Indian traditions, languages, faith, and social customs to these far away places.

During his visit to the historic Nelson Island, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar described the Girmitya legacy as a symbol of resilience and cultural continuity. India has now placed renewed emphasis on preserving this shared heritage through archival cooperation, cultural preservation, and diaspora outreach initiatives.

Reconnecting Diaspora Roots

A major development in bilateral ties is the archival cooperation agreement signed between the National Archives of India and Trinidad and Tobago. The agreement aims to help descendants of Indian migrants trace their ancestral roots and reconnect with families in India. India is also working toward establishing a dedicated Girmitya Studies Centre to document and research the history and contributions of the Indian diaspora in the Caribbean. These initiatives reflect India’s broader effort to strengthen people-to-people ties and preserve the historical memory of overseas Indian communities. Another significant step has been India’s decision to extend eligibility for Overseas Citizenship of India (OCI) cards up to the sixth generation of persons of Indian origin in Trinidad and Tobago. This has led to a rise in OCI applications and has been welcomed by the Indo-Trinidadian community as recognition of their enduring civilisational ties with India.

The evolving India-Trinidad and Tobago partnership illustrates how historical ties are being transformed into a modern multidimensional relationship. Cultural diplomacy through the Girmitya legacy, combined with developmental assistance, healthcare cooperation, educational support, and technological engagement, has strengthened bilateral trust. As India expands its outreach to the Caribbean and the wider Global South, Trinidad and Tobago occupies a significant place due to its strong Indian-origin population, democratic values, and growing cooperation across multiple sectors. The partnership increasingly reflects India’s broader vision of “*Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*” — the world as one family — through practical collaboration and shared heritage.



Expanding Development and Economic Cooperation

The bilateral relationship has moved beyond cultural ties into practical development cooperation. During recent engagements, both countries signed eight MoUs covering tourism, healthcare, renewable energy, vector control, infrastructure development, and Ayurveda. India has supported the solarisation of *Trinidad and Tobago’s Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs building* and contributed toward infrastructure upgrades at Nelson Island, where the first Indian immigrants were housed. India also partnered in setting up an Indian Chair on Ayurveda at the University of the West Indies.

Shared Democratic and Global South Values

India and Trinidad and Tobago continue to cooperate closely in regional and multilateral forums, especially on issues concerning the Global South. Their partnership reflects shared commitments to democracy, multiculturalism, inclusive growth, and South-South cooperation. India views Trinidad and Tobago as an important Caribbean partner, while Trinidad and Tobago sees India as a major development and technology partner. The relationship also demonstrates how diaspora diplomacy can evolve into broader strategic cooperation encompassing education, healthcare, technology, culture, and sustainable development.

The Indian EXPRESS

PM frames severity of energy challenge

The Prime Minister's appeal to reduce petroleum consumption and limit foreign travel reflects the seriousness of the ongoing energy supply shock. India is facing a difficult macroeconomic environment marked by elevated crude oil prices and supply disruptions from the Iran conflict. Petroleum imports touched nearly \$173 billion in 2025-26, while gold imports stood at around \$72 billion, significantly increasing pressure on the current account deficit and external stability. The revival of Covid-era measures such as work from home and virtual meetings indicates the scale of concern. The crisis highlights the strategic importance of energy security for India. As a major importer of crude oil, India remains highly vulnerable to geopolitical disruptions in West Asia. Rising energy prices affect inflation, industrial production, fertilizer costs and household consumption. Several countries, including South Korea, Indonesia and Bangladesh, have already imposed fuel restrictions or allowed retail prices to rise in order to moderate demand. In India, however, retail fuel prices have largely remained unchanged, with oil marketing companies and the government absorbing substantial losses. The under-recoveries of public sector oil companies reportedly amount to nearly ₹30,000 crore per month, making prolonged subsidy absorption fiscally unsustainable.

The situation underlines that energy security is no longer merely a supply issue but a broader economic and strategic concern linked to fiscal stability, inflation management, currency strength and geopolitical resilience.

Editorial to Exam - Most probable question from this editorial

"India's growing vulnerability to global energy shocks has transformed energy security into a core macroeconomic and strategic concern." Discuss



Belated warning

The Prime Minister's appeal for citizens to reduce fuel consumption, foreign travel, gold purchases and dependence on imported inputs reflects the seriousness of the economic stress emerging from the West Asia conflict. The appeal came after months of political campaigning involving extensive travel and after repeated official assurances that the economy remained insulated from external shocks. This weakens the credibility of the call for austerity and reduces its persuasive impact on citizens. The suggested measures themselves may also produce unintended consequences. Advising farmers to reduce chemical fertilizer usage during a period already threatened by El Niño conditions could lower agricultural output and worsen food inflation. Calls to avoid foreign travel may yield only limited gains because overseas spending had already slowed prior to the announcement. Similarly, urging people to avoid gold purchases may not significantly alter behaviour, as gold remains a preferred hedge against inflation, currency depreciation and geopolitical uncertainty. The larger pressure on the rupee is arising from sustained foreign portfolio outflows and the RBI's interventions to stabilise the currency. It shows that without structural measures, appeals for voluntary restraint are unlikely to substantially reduce imports or restore macroeconomic stability.

Editorial to Exam - Most probable question from this editorial

"Periods of external economic shocks require structural policy responses rather than reliance on voluntary behavioural change alone." Discuss in the context of India's current account pressures arising from the West Asia crisis.

thehindu **businessline.**

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Austere times

India's widening current account deficit amid the Iran-West Asia conflict has prompted calls for economic austerity, particularly through reducing imports of fuel, gold, edible oils, and fertilizers, which together account for nearly 40% of total imports. Rising crude oil prices, weakening capital inflows, and rupee depreciation have increased macroeconomic vulnerabilities. While the Prime Minister's appeal for voluntary restraint in fuel consumption, gold purchases, and fertilizer use reflects urgency, behavioural appeals alone are unlikely to produce meaningful adjustment. Economic signals such as higher fuel prices, import duties, tariff revisions, and changes in subsidy structures are more effective in moderating demand. Artificially suppressing domestic fuel prices may worsen the fiscal deficit, inflation, and external imbalances through currency depreciation. Similarly, gold demand requires policy interventions such as duty rationalisation and plugging FTA loopholes, while fertilizer dependence calls for incentivising less input-intensive crops like millets and pulses. The episode highlights the importance of balancing short-term inflation concerns with long-term macroeconomic stability through credible economic policy measures and fiscal discipline.

Editorial to Exam - Most probable question from this editorial

"During periods of external economic stress, moral suasion alone cannot ensure macroeconomic stability." Discuss in the context of India's widening current account deficit, rising import dependence, and recent calls for austerity measures.

Why PM Modi has asked Indians to reduce spending on gold, petrol, edible oils

Prime Minister Narendra Modi recently appealed to citizens to reduce spending on imported goods such as petroleum products, gold, edible oils, and chemical fertilisers in order to conserve India's foreign exchange reserves. The appeal comes at a time when India is facing rising import costs, global commodity price volatility, and pressure on the rupee. India remains heavily dependent on imports for several essential commodities. As international prices rise, the country requires larger amounts of dollars to pay for these imports, increasing pressure on the current account deficit and weakening the rupee.

Petroleum Imports and Energy Vulnerability

India imports nearly 89% of its crude oil requirements. Oil prices have reportedly increased from nearly \$70 per barrel a year ago to more than \$113 per barrel. This sharp rise directly increases India's dollar outflow. Although retail petrol and diesel prices have remained relatively stable, the burden has largely been absorbed by government-owned oil marketing companies (OMCs), which are facing significant under-recoveries. A future fuel price hike is therefore widely expected. Higher fuel prices have broader economic consequences because diesel powers most freight transportation in India. Increased transport costs quickly raise the prices of food, consumer goods, and other essentials, contributing to inflation across the economy.

Gold Imports and the Forex Drain

India is one of the world's largest consumers of gold. Almost all gold demand is met through imports. India reportedly spent nearly \$72 billion on gold imports last year alone (\$6 billion every month). On one hand, RBI increased its gold reserves for strategic purposes by taking total holdings to around 880 tonnes by March 2026 while household gold purchases increased dollar outflows. The latter creates pressure on India's current account deficit and increases demand for dollars, which weakens the rupee. A weaker rupee then makes imported gold even more expensive, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of rising import costs by March 2026.



Edible Oil Dependence

Edible oils represent another major source of import dependence for India. The country imports large quantities of palm oil from Indonesia and Malaysia, along with sunflower oil from Russia and Ukraine. Unlike gold purchases, edible oil consumption cannot easily be postponed because it is a daily household necessity. Rising import costs therefore directly affect food inflation and household expenditure. Although domestic alternatives such as mustard oil exist, production cannot be expanded rapidly enough to fully replace imports.

Fertiliser chokepoints

Chemical fertilisers form another critical pressure point for India's import bill. India remains heavily dependent on imports of urea, DAP (di-ammonium phosphate), and LNG-based feedstock required for domestic fertiliser production. Imported urea prices reportedly rose from about \$508 per tonne to \$935 per tonne, while DAP prices increased from around \$680 to nearly \$925 per tonne. India's fertiliser vulnerability is also linked to energy security. Over 60% of LNG used by domestic urea plants is imported from Gulf countries through the Strait of Hormuz. This becomes especially concerning during the kharif agricultural season, when fertiliser demand rises sharply. Lower fertiliser availability or higher prices can increase farming costs, eventually leading to higher food prices and inflationary pressures.

On the whole, the situation highlights the importance of reducing long-term import dependence through structural reforms such as expanding renewable energy adoption, strengthening domestic edible oil production, increasing fertiliser self-sufficiency, and encouraging productive savings over gold consumption.

Mythos wake-up call: Questions India must answer

The rapid advancement of frontier Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems has made AI capability a matter of strategic importance for nations. **Frontier AI models are the world's most advanced general-purpose AI systems, capable of complex reasoning, cybersecurity analysis, content generation, and autonomous decision-making.** Introduction of these models are increasingly influencing economic competitiveness, national security, digital infrastructure, and technological leadership. In this context, the release of **Claude Mythos Preview** in 2026 highlighted why India must urgently strengthen its AI infrastructure and move towards greater digital infrastructure sovereignty.

The Mythos Incident as a Strategic Wake-Up Call

The cybersecurity community reacted strongly when Anthropic released Claude Mythos Preview, a frontier AI model reportedly **capable of identifying thousands of previously unknown software vulnerabilities (zero-day flaws).** The model could even generate functional cyber exploits with minimal human guidance. This demonstrated that frontier AI is no longer limited to productivity or automation tools alone. The incident exposed how countries lacking access to advanced AI systems may struggle during future technology or cyber crises.

India's Challenge

India is one of the world's largest markets for advanced AI services. However, when Anthropic launched Project Glasswing — **a restricted initiative for defensive cybersecurity collaboration** — no Indian organisation was included among the initial trusted partners. Instead, access was given mainly to major American technology companies and infrastructure providers. This showed that in frontier technologies, access is determined by strategic trust, institutional partnerships, infrastructure strength, and geopolitical alignment. The lesson for India is clear: being a large consumer of AI technology does not automatically provide influence over how these systems are governed, deployed, or accessed.



Building India's digital infrastructure sovereignty

At present, India is heavily dependent on imported and largely “black-box” AI technologies, limiting India's visibility into how the models function and how risks are managed. In situations involving cyber threats, infrastructure vulnerabilities, or national emergencies, overdependence on external AI systems may weaken India's ability to respond independently and effectively.

Therefore, India needs a long-term “AI Sovereignty” strategy that focuses on building meaningful domestic capability across critical layers of the technology stack, including computing power, semiconductors, cloud systems, data infrastructure, AI models, cybersecurity frameworks, and evaluation systems. Existing initiatives such as the IndiaAI Mission, CERT-In, and emerging efforts towards an AI Safety Institute forms a good foundation in this regard. However, these efforts require sustained investment, coordination, and long-term planning involving government, industry, academia, startups, and research institutions.

Modern AI systems require massive infrastructure support, including high-performance computing, data centres, cloud systems, secure testing environments, and specialised talent. Countries that possess strong AI infrastructure are better positioned to train, test, evaluate, and deploy advanced AI systems safely. For India, strengthening AI infrastructure is therefore not only an economic necessity but also a strategic and national security priority.

PRELIMS CORNER :

1) Consider the following statements (2025):

I. The Constitution of India explicitly mentions that in certain spheres the Governor of a State acts in his/her own discretion.

II. The President of India can, of his/her own, reserve a bill passed by a State Legislature for his/her consideration without it being forwarded by the Governor of the State concerned.

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) With reference to the Indian polity, consider the following statements :

I. The Governor of a State is not answerable to any court for the exercise and performance of the powers and duties of his/her office.

II. No criminal proceedings shall be instituted or continued against the Governor during his/her term of office.

III. Members of a State Legislature are not liable to any proceedings in any court in respect of anything said within the House.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

- (a) I and II only
- (b) II and III only
- (c) I and III only
- (d) I, II and III

WONDERS OF INDIA

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**Amar Mahal Palace (Jammu)**

The Amar Mahal Palace Museum is an important symbol of the royal and cultural heritage of the Dogra dynasty. Located on a hill overlooking the Tawi River, the palace was originally built in the late 19th century as the residence of Raja Amar Singh of the Dogra royal family. Designed by a French architect in a distinctive French château style, the red sandstone structure stands apart from other royal buildings in Jammu, reflecting a blend of European architectural influence and princely Indian grandeur.

The palace later became the final residence of the Dogra rulers, including Maharani Tara Devi. After her death, the palace was converted into a museum in 1975 under the Hari Tara Charitable Trust by Karan Singh to preserve the region's artistic and literary heritage. Today, several rooms of the palace function as galleries displaying royal portraits, historical artefacts, and important works of Indian art.

Among its most famous exhibits is the 120-kilogram golden throne of Jammu. The museum also houses valuable collections of Pahari Paintings depicting themes from the Mahabharata and the story of Nal-Damyanti. Paintings by renowned modern Indian artists such as M. F. Husain are also displayed. Combining royal history, art, and architecture, Amar Mahal Palace Museum remains an important cultural landmark of Jammu and Kashmir.



Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) The correct answer is (a)

Statement I : The Constitution of India explicitly mentions that in certain spheres the Governor of a State acts in his/her own discretion.

According to 163. (1) of the Indian Constitution - ***There shall be a Council of Ministers with the Chief Minister at the head to aid and advise the Governor in the exercise of his functions, except in so far as he is by or under this Constitution required to exercise his functions or any of them in his discretion.***

Article 163 (2) states that - ***If any question arises whether any matter is or is not a matter as respects which the Governor is by or under this Constitution required to act in his discretion, the decision of the Governor in his discretion shall be final, and the validity of anything done by the Governor shall not be called in question on the ground that he ought or ought not to have acted in his discretion.***

Article 163(3) - ***The question whether any, and if so what, advice was tendered by Ministers to the Governor shall not be inquired into in any court.***

Therefore, Statement I is correct.

Statement II : The President of India can, of his/her own, reserve a bill passed by a State Legislature for his/her consideration without it being forwarded by the Governor of the State concerned.

According to Article 200 of the constitution - ***When a Bill has been passed by the Legislative Assembly of a State, it shall be presented to the Governor and the Governor shall declare either that he assents to the Bill or withholds assent or reserves the Bill for the consideration of the President.***

However, the Constitution does not empower the President to independently take up a State bill unless it has first been reserved and forwarded by the Governor.

Therefore, Statement II is incorrect.

2) The correct answer is (d)

According to Article 361. (1) of the Indian Constitution - ***The President, or the Governor of a State, shall not be answerable to any court for the exercise and performance of the powers and duties of his office.***

So statement I is correct.

Article 361 (2) states that ***No criminal proceedings whatsoever shall be instituted or continued against the President, or the Governor of a State, in any court during his term of office.***

Article 361 (3) provides that ***No process for the arrest or imprisonment of the President, or the Governor of a State, shall issue from any court during his term of office.***

So statement II is correct.

However, Article 361(4) states that ***Any civil proceedings against the President, or the Governor of a State shall be instituted during his term of office after the expiration of two months after notice in writing.***

Article 194(2) states that ***No member of the Legislature of a State shall be liable to any proceedings in any court in respect of anything said or any vote given by him in the Legislature or any committee thereof, and no person shall be so liable in respect of the publication by or under the authority of a House of such a Legislature of any report, paper, votes or proceedings.***

So statement III is correct.

