Today's Prelims Topics

Six sites added to India's tentative list by UNESCO

Context

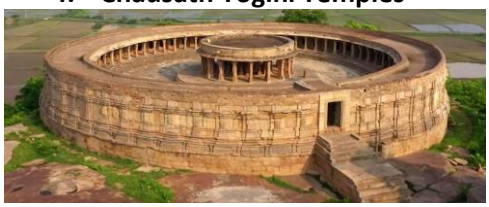
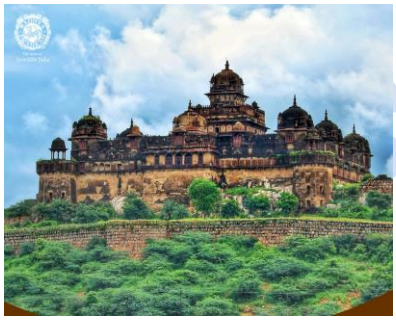
The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has added six new sites from India to its Tentative List.

What is UNESCO's Tentative List?

- The **Tentative List** is an inventory of properties a country **intends to consider** for nomination to the **World Heritage List**.
- Inclusion in the tentative list is **mandatory** before a site is formally nominated.
- It helps UNESCO assess the site's **potential Outstanding Universal Value (OUV)**.
- India now has **62** sites on the Tentative List.

Sites Added

Name of Site	Key Features
1. Kanger Valley National Park 	• **Location:** Bastar District (Chhattisgarh). • It draws its name from **Kanger river. Tirthagarh waterfalls.** • Home to **limestone caves** (Kotumsar, Kailash, Dandak) and rare **blind cave fish**. • **Dense forests** with **Dandakaranaya**, linked to **Ramayana.**
2. Mudumal Megalithic Menhirs 	• They are located near the banks of **Krishna River, Telangana.** • They are estimated to be **3500-4000 years old.** • A menhir is a standing or an upright stone, which is usually tapered at the top. • It is one of **India's largest and best-preserved** megalithic astronomical observatories. • It is the only South Asian site featuring **celestial representations on stone**.
3. Ashokan Edict Sites along the Mauryan Routes. 	• **Edicts of Emperor Ashoka** (**3rd Century BCE**) spread across India. • Inscribed on **rocks, pillars, and caves** in **Prakrit using Brahmi script**. • They depict the moral **and administrative policies of Ashoka** and spread of **Buddhism**.

4. Chausath Yogini Temples 	• **Circular temples** dedicated to **64 Yoginis** (**Tantric goddesses**). • Located in **Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh** and Tamil Nadu. • Built between **8th–12th centuries**, early inspiration for **Parliament House design**.
5. Gupta Temples in North India 	• **Gupta period (4th–6th century CE) temples** showcasing **Nagara-style architecture**. • **E.g.** Dashavatara Temple (Deogarh), Bhitargaon Temple (UP), Eran Temple (MP). • Their architectural design combines elements of both Buddhist and Hindu styles. • Most of the Gupta temples are made of sun-dried bricks and terracotta, with some made in sandstone. • The temples had a basic square plan and flat roof with a circumambulatory path, a low height **shikhara** & doorways were mainly **T-shaped** with decorative bands.
6. Palace-Fortresses of the Bundelas 	• Built by **Bundela Rajputs (16th–19th century)**. • **Six forts:** Garhkundar fort, Raja Mahal, Jahangir Mahal, Datia Palace, Jhansi Fort & Dhubela Palace. • Blend of **Rajput and Mughal architectural styles.**

Source:

- **The Hindu - Six sites added to India's tentative list**

Electronics Components Incentive Policy

Context

The Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY) has finalized an **incentive policy for electronic components manufacturing** with a total outlay of **₹22,919 crore** over **six years**.

Key Features of the Scheme

- **Targeted Electronic Components:** The scheme will focus on encouraging the production of key components that are currently imported, including:
  - Display modules, Sub-assembly camera modules, Printed circuit board assemblies (PCBAs), Lithium cell enclosures, Resistors, capacitors etc.
- **Employment Creation:**
  - **Total Direct Jobs Target**: **91,600 direct jobs** over six years
- **Increasing local value addition:**
  - The **Production-Linked Incentive (PLI) scheme** for **smartphone manufacturing** has been successful in attracting major companies like **Apple and Samsung**.
  - However, despite the rise in domestic assembly, local value addition remains at **15-20%**, and the government aims to **increase it to at least 30-40%**.
- **Structure of Incentives:** The scheme will offer **three types of incentives**:
  - **Operational Incentives** – Based on **net incremental sales**, similar to the PLI model.
  - **Capital Expenditure (Capex) Incentives** – Based on **eligible capital investments**.
  - **Hybrid Model** – A combination of **operational and capex incentives**.
- **Eligibility Criteria:**
  - **Both Greenfield and Brownfield investments** are eligible.
  - **Foreign companies** can participate by:
    - **Transferring technology** to an Indian company, OR
    - **Forming a joint venture** with a domestic firm.

Key challenges faced in electronic components manufacturing are:

- **Lack of Domestic Scale** – India's current capacity is only **10%** of total electronics production.
- **High Investment-to-Turnover Ratio** –
  - In **smartphone production**, every ₹1 invested generates ₹20 in revenue.
  - In **electronic components**, every ₹1 invested generates **only ₹2-4**.
- **Heavy Import Dependency** –
  - Electronics imports are **India's second-largest import category after oil**.
  - **75%** of India's electronics production relies on imported components.
- The demand-supply gap in the electronic components sector is **huge**:
  - **Current domestic production** (2022-23): **$10.75 billion.**
  - **Domestic consumption gap:** $100 billion.
  - **Potential export demand:** $140 billion.

Source:

- **Indian Express - Electronics incentive policy**

Scientists Turn Light into a Supersolid

Context

For the **first time**, scientists have successfully **turned light into a supersolid.**

What is a Supersolid?

- A **supersolid** is a **state of matter** where particles arrange in a **crystalline solid structure** but can also flow **without viscosity**, similar to a liquid.
    - **Viscosity** refers to a fluid's internal resistance to movement.
    - In a **normal solid**, particles remain fixed in place.
    - In a **normal liquid**, particles move freely but experience some friction.
    - **Supersolids** are unique because they **flow like a liquid while maintaining a structured, solid-like arrangement**.
- **Key Features of Supersolids:**
    - **Solid-like structure** – Particles arrange in an **orderly lattice**.
    - **Liquid-like motion** – Particles can flow without friction (zero viscosity).
    - **Quantum behavior** – Exists only under extreme conditions due to quantum effects.
- To form a supersolid, materials must be cooled **close to absolute zero**:
    - **Absolute zero** = **-459.67°F (-273.15°C)**.
    - At this temperature, **heat energy is almost entirely removed**, allowing **quantum effects** to dominate.
- Most liquids, like water or honey, **have friction** when they move. But **some special materials, like supersolids, move without friction**.
    - **E.g. Superfluid Helium:** When helium is cooled to near absolute zero, it **stops acting like a normal liquid**. It can **flow without resistance** and even climb up the walls of a container.

How Did Scientists Turn Light into a Supersolid?

- While **supersolids have been made from atomic gases before**, this research represents the **first successful attempt** to create a supersolid **from light**.
- Scientists used a type of **"quasiparticle"** called a **polariton**, which is formed when:
    - **Light (photons) and matter (excitons) interact strongly with each other.**
    - This creates a **hybrid particle** that behaves like both.
- **Procedure:**
    - **Scientists trapped light inside a special material** and made it interact with matter.
    - **This created polaritons**, which act like a mixture of light and matter.
    - **Polaritons can behave like atoms**—and when cooled down, they **formed a supersolid state**.

Why Are Supersolids Important?

- **Fundamental Physics Insights:**
    - Supersolids allow scientists to **study quantum mechanics in action**.
    - They reveal **how particles interact** at an atomic level **without temperature interference**.
- **Potential Technological Applications:**
    - **Quantum Computing** – Could enable **ultra-fast, frictionless data transfer**.
    - **Superconductors** – **Zero-resistance electrical systems**.
    - **Frictionless Lubricants** – Could reduce **energy loss in machines**.

Source:

- Live Science - Super Solids

Impact of Rising Temperatures on Wheat Production in India

Context

The Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) has warned that **March 2025 will experience above-normal temperatures** and a higher number of **heatwave days**. This coincides with India's **wheat harvest season**, posing a **serious threat to wheat production**.

Impact of Heat on Wheat Crops

- **Global warming reduces wheat grain yield and quality by affecting:**
  - Photosynthesis and respiration.
  - Nutrient absorption and water regulation.
  - Stress-induced hormones and proteins.
  - Grain number, size, and biomass production.
- **Optimum temperature for wheat during later growth stages should not exceed 30°C**, but rising temperatures are shortening the grain-filling period.
- **Scientific Explanation of Heat Stress on Wheat:**
  - Early flowering & faster ripening → Reduced starch accumulation → Lighter grains & lower wheat output.
  - Higher protein but lower starch content → Poorer milling quality & lower market prices.
  - Desperate farmers overuse fertilizers and pesticides → Inefficient resource use and long-term soil damage.

Wheat Cultivation in India

- **Wheat is India's second-largest crop** (after paddy) in terms of area coverage.
- In **2023-24**, wheat was cultivated on **318.33 lakh hectares**.
- It is a **rabi crop** that requires a cool growing season and bright sunshine at the time of ripening.
- **Soil**: Well-drained loamy soils rich in organic matter are ideal for wheat cultivation.
- **Temperature**: Ideal temperature range between 10°C and 24°C.
  - A **frost-free period** of about **100 days** is required for its cultivation.
- **Top Producers India:** (1) Uttar Pradesh (2) Madhya Pradesh (3) Punjab (4) Haryana (5) Rajasthan.
- **Top Producers Worldwide:** (1) China **(2) India** (3) Russia (4) USA.

The Role of the Indian Ocean in Rising Temperatures

- The Indian Ocean is warming at an alarming rate.
- A study by Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology, Pune has predicted that;
  - By the **end of the century**, the **Indian Ocean will be in a near-permanent heatwave state**.
  - **Marine heatwave days to increase from 20 to 220-250 per year**.
- **Impact on India's Monsoon**:
  - Delayed kharif crop season → Delayed rabi sowing → Rabi wheat harvest coincides with early heatwaves.

Source:

- **The Hindu - How climate change is affecting India's wheat production**

PM Internship Scheme

Context

The Union finance Minister has launched PMIS Mobile application to enhance accessibility to **internship opportunities** for youth & Improve ease of registration and application process.

About PM Internship Scheme (PMIS)

- **Aim:** To provide internship opportunities to one crore youth in the top 500 companies.
- **Benefits:**
  - A monthly stipend of ₹4,500 will be provided to the interns from the central government via DBT (Direct Benefit transfer)
  - Additional ₹500 offset will be provided by the **company's CSR fund.**
- **Internship Period:** 1 Year
- **Eligibility:**
  - Candidates aged between 21 and 24 years who are not engaged in full-time employment are eligible for the one-year internship programme.
  - Internships are available to those who have passed class 10 or higher.
- **Exceptions:**
  - Individuals from families with government jobs are excluded
  - A candidate who graduated from premier institutes such as IIT, IIM or IISER, and those who have CA, or CMA qualification would not be eligible to apply for this internship.
  - Anyone from a household that includes a person who earned an income of ₹8 lakh or more in 2023-24, will not be eligible.

What is CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) ?

- It is a concept whereby companies integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations.
- In India, Companies Act, 2013 has made CSR contribution mandatory.

Source:

- Indian Express - PM Internship Scheme

Ramadevara Betta Vulture Sanctuary

Context

The Ramadevara Betta Vulture Sanctuary has recorded its fourth consecutive year of successful breeding for the endangered long-billed vultures.

About Ramadevara Betta Vulture Sanctuary

- It is located in **Ramanagara, Karnataka.** It is India's first and only vulture sanctuary.
- It was established in **2012** to protect endangered vulture species.
- The sanctuary is part of the **Ramadevara Betta hill range.** The hill is adorned with ancient temples, ruins and inscriptions.
- **Vulture Species Found in the sanctuary:**
    - **Long-billed Vulture** – Critically Endangered
    - **Egyptian Vulture** – Endangered
    - **White-backed Vulture** – Critically Endangered

Long Billed Vulture

- **Habitat:** Open grasslands, savannas, and forested regions, found in various states including Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and others
- It is distinguished by its long and slender bill, ideal for tearing flesh and accessing the bone marrow.
- **Conservation status:**
    - **IUCN:** Critically Endangered
    - **CITES:** Appendix II
    - **Wildlife Protection Act 1972:** Schedule I
    - **Convention on Migratory Species (CMS):** Appendix I

Source:

- The Hindu - Long Billed Vulture

News in short

Rule 267 of Rajya Sabha

- It allows a member to request the suspension of the day's listed business to discuss a matter of **urgent public importance**.
- A member submits a notice under Rule 267 to the Chairman of the Rajya Sabha. If the Chairman approves **(discretion)**, the normal business is suspended, and the urgent matter is taken up for discussion.
- The last time it was accepted was in November **2016,** when the Upper House invoked Rule 267 to discuss **demonetisation.**
- **Similar Rule in the Lok Sabha**
    - **Rule 184:** Allows for a debate on a matter of urgent public importance, with the provision for voting at the end.
    - **Rule 193:** Also permits discussion on urgent matters, but without a vote.

Source:

- **The Hindu - Opposition walks out of RS**

Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts (IGNCA)

- **IGNCA** is a premier cultural institution in India dedicated to **preserving, promoting and documenting India's rich artistic and cultural heritage**.
- It functions as an **autonomous body under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India**.
- It was established in **1985. (HQ- New Delhi)**
- **Notable Initiatives:**
    - **National Cultural Audiovisual Archives (NCAA)** – A digital repository for India's cultural heritage.
    - **Bharat Vidya Prayojana** – A research program on Indian civilization and knowledge systems.
    - **Adopt a Manuscript Program** – Initiative to preserve and digitize rare manuscripts.

Source:

- **PIB - IGNCA**

How Life Began on Earth – New Study vs. Miller-Urey Hypothesis

- A new study suggests that water sprays from crashing waves and waterfalls, rather than lightning, may have triggered the formation of organic compounds essential for life on Earth.

About Miller-Urey Hypothesis

- The Earth was formed around **4.6 billion years ago**, and for the first few billion years, it contained a rich mix of chemicals but lacked organic molecules with carbon-nitrogen bonds.
- These **carbon-nitrogen bonds** are essential for the formation of **proteins, enzymes, nucleic acids, and chlorophyll**, which are the building blocks of life.
- In **1952**, American scientists **Stanley Miller and Harold Urey** conducted an experiment to demonstrate how organic molecules could form.
- Their experiment involved applying **electricity** (simulating lightning) to a mixture of **water, methane, ammonia, and hydrogen**, leading to the formation of **amino acids** - key building blocks of life.

New Study Challenges the Lightning Hypothesis

- A new study published in Science Advances challenges the Miller-Urey hypothesis by suggesting that life could have emerged from water sprays rather than lightning.
- When water droplets **divide**, they develop **opposing charges**:
    - **Larger droplets** carry **positive charges.**
    - **Smaller droplets** carry **negative charges**
- When these oppositely charged droplets move close together, **tiny sparks (microlightning) leap between them**, imitating how lightning forms in clouds.
- The study suggests that **lightning was not necessarily required** for life to emerge. Instead, tiny electrical charges generated by **crashing waves, waterfalls, or water sprays** might have triggered organic chemistry.

Source:

- **Indian Express - Microlightning**

Exercise Bongosagar

- It is a **Bilateral Naval Exercise between India & Bangladesh.** The first edition of Bongosagar was held in **2019.**
- **Aim:** Strengthening maritime security, tactical planning and operational coordination.
- **Other Bilateral Exercise:** Sampriti.

Source:

- **PIB - BongoSagar**

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees

- It was established in **1949 by the UN general Assembly** to provide aid to about 700,000 Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes during the **1948 Arab-Israeli war.**
- It operates in **Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. (HQ - Gaza)**
- It runs education, health, relief, social services, microfinance and emergency assistance programmes inside and outside refugee camps in these areas.
- In the absence of a solution to the Palestine refugee problem, the General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA's mandate, most recently extending it until 30 June **2026.**

Source:

- **The Hindu - UNRWA**

Editorial Summary

New Delhi's Perilous Recalibration with the Taliban

Context

India is strengthening its ties with the Taliban, with reports suggesting that Prime Minister Narendra Modi may allow the Taliban regime in Afghanistan to appoint a new envoy for its embassy in New Delhi.

More in News

- Accepting a Taliban diplomat in India would mark a significant shift, effectively acknowledging the regime as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.
- China has already taken the lead by accepting a Taliban envoy last year and investing in several infrastructure projects in Afghanistan.
    - It is also thinking about including the Taliban in its Belt and Road Initiative, strengthening its influence over the regime.

Why India Needs to Be Cautious in Engaging with the Taliban

- **Terrorism Threat from the Islamic State (IS):** Afghanistan has become a hub for terrorism under Taliban rule.
    - IS has carried out multiple deadly attacks, including the assassination of Taliban leaders and threats against foreign embassies.
    - The group has also targeted Indian interests, including the Indian consulate in Jalalabad, and seeks to recruit individuals for attacks in India.
- **Taliban's Links with Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP):** The Taliban has been accused of supporting TTP, which has launched numerous attacks in Pakistan.
    - In response, Pakistan conducted airstrikes on Taliban-controlled areas, leading to border clashes.
    - The Taliban's failure to control terror groups raises concerns about the safety of Indian investments and diplomatic engagement.
- **Regional Instability and Spillover Effect:** Terrorism from Afghanistan is not limited to the region. The IS attack on Moscow's Crocus City Hall in March 2024, which killed at least 140 people, shows how Afghan-based terror networks can have global reach.
    - Any engagement with the Taliban could expose India to similar threats.
- **Risk to India's Security Interests:** The Taliban's past support for extremist groups raises security concerns for India.
    - If India engages with the Taliban, it could embolden terror groups with links to Pakistan and Afghanistan, increasing the risk of cross-border attacks.
- **Unstable Political and Security Environment:** Afghanistan remains politically unstable, with the Taliban struggling to control internal security threats.
    - The Taliban's failure to address these issues makes Afghanistan a risky investment for India, both politically and economically.
- **Lessons from China and Pakistan's Experience:** China and Pakistan have both faced setbacks after engaging with the Taliban.
    - China's Belt and Road investments have been threatened by IS attacks, while Pakistan's attempts to influence the Taliban have led to increased cross-border terrorism.
    - India risks facing similar consequences if it deepens ties with the Taliban without clear guarantees on security.

Source: The Hindu: New Delhi's perilous recalibration with the Taliban

The Barriers Faced By Construction Workers

Context

- Larsen and Toubro Chairman and Managing Director, N. Subrahmanyan, stated that construction workers are hesitant to relocate for work because welfare schemes provide them with financial security.
    - However, this view overlooks the deeper structural challenges faced by construction labourers.

Challenges Faced by Construction Workers

- **Fragmented Employment and Job Insecurity:** Frequent relocations and seasonal work create instability.
    - High job insecurity due to lack of long-term contracts.
- **Difficulties in Accessing Welfare Benefits:** Despite ₹70,000 crore collected under the Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) (BOCW) Act, 1996, 75% remains unutilised.
    - Lack of proper documentation (e.g., birth certificates, residence proof) limits access to benefits.
    - Complex registration and verification protocols vary across States.
- **Challenges in Employment Certification:** Requirement for a 90-day employment certificate is difficult to fulfill.
    - Contractors often refuse to provide necessary certificates.
    - Some States allow self-certification or trade union certificates, but employer verification is still required.

Under the **Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996 (BOCW Act)**, workers are required to provide evidence that they have worked for at least **90 days in a year** to register for welfare benefits such as:

- Financial assistance during unemployment
- Health and maternity benefits
- Education assistance for children
- Compensation for injuries or death at work

- **Lack of Inter-State Portability of Benefits:** Migrant workers lose welfare benefits when they relocate to a different State.
    - No interoperable system exists for transferring benefits across States.
- **Seasonal Employment Disruptions:** Loss of income due to construction bans during events like air pollution or heatwaves.
    - Delays and administrative hurdles in securing financial relief.
- **Absence of Digital Public Infrastructure:** No centralised system for tracking worker data and disbursing benefits.
    - Lack of real-time monitoring and automated verification systems.

Proposed Solutions

- **Unified National Labour Identification System:** Create a system similar to One Nation One Ration Card for inter-State portability of benefits.
    - Link BOCW registrations to UAN on the e-Shram portal to enable access across States.

UAN stands for **Universal Account Number**, a 12-digit unique identifier **assigned by the Employees' Provident Fund Organisation (EPFO)** to all employees contributing to the EPF.

- **Digital Platforms for Welfare Schemes:** Develop a centralised, open-source digital portal for uniform registration and disbursement.
    - Use Aadhaar seeding and real-time tracking to reduce delays and improve transparency.
- **Simplified Documentation and Verification:** Accept alternative proofs like self-declaration or trade union certificates.
    - Conduct bulk registration through on-site camps to ease the process.
- **Skill Development and Training:** Establish skilling programs tailored to industry demands.
    - Promote medium-term skilling initiatives to improve worker retention and productivity.
- **Improved Working Conditions:** Ensure safe and dignified work environments to improve worker health and efficiency.
    - Encourage construction firms to invest in better workplace standards.
- **Consistent Welfare Delivery Across States:** Enable portability of benefits through integrated worker databases.
    - Ensure that benefits registered in one State are accessible in another.

Source: **The Hindu: The barriers faced by construction workers**

Why are electoral reforms necessary?

Context

The Election Commission (EC) has invited political parties to discuss strengthening the election process.

More in News

- This follows allegations of electoral roll manipulation during the recent assembly elections and concerns over duplicate Electoral Photo Identity Card (EPIC) numbers across different States.

Legal Framework for Elections

- **Article 324 of the Constitution:** Empowers the EC with the superintendence, direction, and control over the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections to Parliament and State legislatures.
- **Governing Laws:** The preparation of electoral rolls is regulated by:
    - **Representation of the People Act, 1950**
    - **Registration of Electors Rules, 1960**
-

Evolution of the Voting Process

- **First Two General Elections (1952, 1957): Separate ballot boxes** for each candidate with their election symbol were used.
    - Voters dropped a blank ballot paper into the box of their chosen candidate.
- **Introduction of Ballot Papers (1962):** From the third general election, **ballot papers with names and symbols** of candidates were introduced.
- **Use of Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) (2004):** EVMs have been used in all constituencies since the 2004 Lok Sabha elections.
- **Introduction of VVPAT (2019):** Since 2019, EVMs have been backed by 100% Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail (VVPAT) slips in all constituencies.

Issues in the Electoral Process

Issues in Voting and Counting Process

- **Demand for Paper Ballots:** A PIL sought a return to paper ballots, which the Supreme Court dismissed in April 2024.
- **VVPAT and EVM Matching:** Demand for 100% matching of VVPAT slips with EVM count (currently done for five machines per assembly segment) was rejected.
    - Supreme Court allowed burnt memory of 5% of EVMs to be checked by EVM manufacturers' engineers if suspected tampering is reported by second or third-placed candidates within seven days of result declaration.
- **Allegations of Electoral Roll Manipulation:** Allegations of bogus voter additions in Maharashtra and Delhi Assembly elections to benefit the ruling party.
- **Duplicate EPIC Numbers:** Identical EPIC numbers found in different States like West Bengal, Gujarat, Haryana, and Punjab.
    - Result of a previously decentralised EPIC number system before shifting to the ERONET platform.
    - EC clarified that voters can only vote in their designated polling station.

Issues in the Campaign Process

- **Misuse of Star Campaigner Status:** Leaders using abusive language, appealing to caste/communal sentiments, and making unsubstantiated allegations.
- **Election Expenditure Violations:**
    - Widespread breach of expenditure limits by candidates.

  - No limit on political party spending during elections.
  - Estimated election expenditure in 2024 Lok Sabha elections: ₹1,00,000 crore.
  - High spending fuels corruption and creates a vicious cycle.
- **Criminalisation of Politics:**
  - 251 (46%) of the 543 elected MPs in 2024 have criminal cases.
  - 170 (31%) MPs face serious charges like rape, murder, and kidnapping.

Required Reforms

Reforms in Voting and Counting Process

- **Scientific Sampling of VVPAT Verification:** Sample size for EVM and VVPAT matching should be scientifically determined.
  - Full VVPAT counting should be done if a single error is detected.
- **Introduction of Totaliser Machines:** Aggregates votes in 14 EVMs before revealing the candidate-wise count.
  - Recommended by EC in 2016 to protect voter secrecy at the booth level.
- **Verification of 5% of EVMs:** Second and third-placed candidates should request verification of 5% of EVMs in case of tampering suspicions.
- **Unique EPIC Numbers and Aadhaar Linking:** EC should remove duplicate EPIC numbers across States.
  - Aadhaar linking with EPIC may be considered after addressing privacy concerns.

Reforms in Campaign Process

- **Strict Action Against Star Campaigner Misconduct:** EC should revoke **'Star Campaigner' status** for serious MCC violations.
  - EC can **suspend or withdraw party recognition** for violating MCC which is under Paragraph 16A of the Symbols Order.
- **Election Expenditure Regulation:** Election expenditure by political parties should have a ceiling.
  - Financial assistance by parties to candidates should be counted within the expenditure limit.
- **Disclosure of Criminal Antecedents:** Candidates and parties must disclose criminal records three times before the election.
  - Must be published in a widely circulated local newspaper and electronic media.

Institutional Reforms

- **Constructive Dialogue:** EC and political parties should engage in meaningful discussions to improve electoral and campaign processes.
  - The objective is to build public confidence in free and fair elections.

Source: **The Hindu: Why are electoral reforms necessary?**

Detailed Coverage

India and New Zealand Relation

Context

Prime Minister of New Zealand, Rt Hon Christopher Luxon, is on an official visit to India.

Areas of Cooperation

Historical Relation

- **Early Indian Migration**: Indians began arriving in New Zealand in the **late 18th century** on British East India Company ships.
    - Early migrants were primarily from **Gujarat** and later from **Punjab**.
    - Formation of the **Auckland Indian Association** in **1920** (centenary celebrated in 2020).
- **Diplomatic Relations**: Both countries became independent in **1947**.
    - India established diplomatic representation in **1950** with a **Trade Commission**, later upgraded to a **High Commission**.
- **Shared Similarities**:
    - Commonwealth membership.
    - Common law practices.
    - Democratic governance focused on diverse communities.

Political, Defence, and Security Cooperation

- **Parliamentary Engagement**: Regular parliamentary delegation visits.
- **Defence Collaboration**: Increased participation in **military exercises** and **staff college exchanges**.
    - Regular **port calls** by naval ships (e.g., ***Tarini*** at Lyttelton and ***HMNZS Te Kaha*** at Mumbai).
    - Signing of **India-New Zealand MoU for Defence Cooperation** to establish regular bilateral defence engagement.
- **Maritime Security**: India's participation in **Combined Maritime Forces** and cooperation under **Command Task Force 150**.
    - New Zealand's interest in joining the **Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI)**.
    - Discussions on maritime cooperation at the **National Maritime Heritage Complex (NMHC)** at Lothal.
- **Capacity Building**: Regular officer training exchanges at Defence Colleges.

Trade, Investment, and Financial Cooperation

- **Trade:** Current bilateral trade at US$2.83 billion indicates significant untapped potential.
- **FTA Negotiations**: Agreement to launch negotiations for a balanced, comprehensive trade agreement.
- **Digital Payments**: Discussions on early cooperation in the digital payments sector.
- **Customs Cooperation**: Signing of the **Authorized Economic Operators Mutual Recognition Arrangement (AEO-MRA)** under the **Customs Cooperation Arrangement (CCA)** (2024).
    - AEO-MRA to facilitate smoother trade by easing movement of goods between trusted traders.
- **Sectoral Cooperation in Horticulture and Forestry: Memorandum of Cooperation on Horticulture** to promote knowledge sharing and research exchanges.
    - Development of **post-harvest and marketing infrastructure**.
    - **Letter of Intent on Forestry Cooperation** for policy dialogues and technical exchanges.
- **Tourism and Air Connectivity:** Recognition of tourism's role in enhancing economic ties and mutual understanding.

- Update to the **India-New Zealand Air Services Agreement** to support direct flights.
- Encouragement for airlines to commence **non-stop flights** between India and New Zealand.

Science, Technology, and Disaster Management

- **Technology Partnerships**: Strengthening collaboration in **research, innovation, and commercialization** of technologies.
- **Climate Change Cooperation**: New Zealand's membership in the **International Solar Alliance (ISA)** (since 2024).
  - New Zealand's membership in the **Coalition for Disaster Resilient Infrastructure (CDRI)**.
- **Earthquake Mitigation**: Work towards a **MoU on Earthquake Mitigation** to enhance preparedness and response capacity.

Education, Mobility, and People-to-People Ties

- **Education**: Signing of a **refreshed Education Cooperation Arrangement**.
  - Expansion of Indian student access to New Zealand education institutions.
- **Skilled Migration**: Agreement to negotiate skilled worker mobility under trade agreement.
  - Addressing irregular migration issues.
- **Sports**: MoU on Sports Cooperation in cricket, hockey, and Olympic sports.
  - **Sporting Unity events** in 2026 to celebrate 100 years of sporting ties.
- **Traditional Medicine**: Expert discussions on knowledge exchange and collaboration.
- **Cultural Ties**: Growing New Zealand interest in **yoga**, Indian **music**, **dance**, and **festivals**.
  - Promotion of bilateral cultural exchange.

What are the Challenges?

- **Trade Negotiation Barriers:** FTA negotiations, initiated in **2009**, face delays due to India's **protectionist policies**.
  - High tariffs on **agriculture** and **dairy products** remain a sticking point.
  - India's focus on **domestic food security** complicates trade liberalization.
  - **E.g.**, New Zealand, a major exporter of dairy products, has been keen to access the Indian market for selling milk powder and dairy products.
    - However, India has opposed this due to concerns within its domestic dairy industry.
- **China's Growing Influence:** China's strategic agreements in the Pacific (e.g., with the **Cook Islands**) create pressure on New Zealand.
  - New Zealand's economic reliance on China complicates its foreign policy balancing act.
- **Geopolitical Differences:** Historical differences over India's **nuclear policies** have strained ties in the past (e.g., New Zealand's opposition to India's nuclear tests (1998)).
  - New Zealand's traditionally cautious approach to security alliances creates hesitation in deeper strategic engagement.
- **Political Sensitivities:** Concerns over India's domestic political and human rights issues could limit diplomatic engagement.
  - Differences in political systems and governance styles create friction in policy alignment.
- **Regulatory and Logistical Barriers:** Differences in **regulatory standards** and **customs procedures** hinder smooth trade.
  - Complex visa processes and work permits limit mobility for professionals and students.
- **Economic Asymmetry:** India's large and diverse economy contrasts with New Zealand's smaller, export-dependent market.
  - Finding mutually beneficial trade terms is challenging due to this economic imbalance.

Way Forward

- **Revive and Conclude FTA Negotiations:** Address India's protectionist concerns through phased tariff reduction on sensitive products.
    - Explore sector-specific trade agreements in non-sensitive areas like technology and services.
- **Enhance Strategic Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific:** Develop joint maritime security initiatives to counter China's assertiveness.
    - Align with regional frameworks like the Quad and the Pacific Island Forum for greater security cooperation.
- **Expand Economic and Trade Ties:** Diversify trade beyond agriculture and dairy, focusing on technology, pharmaceuticals, and renewable energy.
    - Encourage business-to-business partnerships and investment forums.
- **Boost Educational and Cultural Exchange:** Establish joint research programs in climate change, clean energy, and the blue economy.
    - Simplify visa procedures to enhance student and professional mobility.
- **Strengthen Collaboration on Climate Change and Sustainability:** Partner on clean energy initiatives and sustainable development projects in the Pacific.
    - Support climate resilience and disaster management efforts in small island nations.
- **Leverage Diaspora and Soft Power:** Engage the Indian diaspora in New Zealand as a bridge for stronger economic and cultural ties.
    - Promote Indian cultural festivals and New Zealand's indigenous Maori heritage for mutual understanding.

Sources:

- **PIB: India - New Zealand Joint Statement**
- **The Diplomat: With Luxon Visit, India-New Zealand Ties Scale New Heights**