

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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The Union Government has formally notified all four Labour Codes—Code on Wages (2019), Industrial Relations Code (2020), Social Security Code (2020), and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSHC) Code (2020)—bringing major reforms that replace 29 fragmented labour laws built over decades.

- While the Centre projects the move as a progressive step toward universal social security, gender parity, and simplified compliance, trade unions have criticised the Codes as pro-employer and anti-worker, reigniting the debate on balancing labour welfare with economic competitiveness.

Centre notifies four new Labour Codes

They replace 29 fragmented laws, some dating back to 1930s, and promise gender pay parity

PM hails Codes as 'comprehensive', while trade unions call them 'pro-employer' and 'anti-worker'

Contract workers to receive benefits; gig work, platform work, and aggregators are defined

A. M. Jigeeesh
Sobhana K. Nair
NEW DELHI

The Centre on Friday notified all four Labour Codes, ushering in major reforms, including extending universal social security coverage for gig workers, promising gender pay parity, expanded rights and safety for women workers, giving statutory backing for minimum wages, and introducing fixed-term employment.

The Code on Wages (2019), Industrial Relations Code (2020), Code on Social Security (2020), and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions (OSHC) Code (2020) had been held back due to protests from trade unions, which continue. In a joint statement, 10 Central Trade Unions called the Codes an "anti-worker and pro-employer" re-

form. The laws, which came into effect on Friday, replace 29 fragmented laws, many of which date back to pre-Independence and early post-Independence eras (1930s-1950s).

Prime Minister Narendra Modi described these as "one of the most comprehensive and progressive labour-oriented reforms since Independence". He said these laws will serve as a strong foundation for universal social security, minimum and timely payment of wages, safe workplaces, and remunerative opportunities.

"It greatly empowers our workers. It also significantly simplifies compliance and promotes 'Ease of Doing Business'," he said in a post on X.

Union Labour Minister Mansukh Mandaviya said the Codes will formalise employment, strengthen

worker protections, and make the labour ecosystem simpler, safer and globally aligned.

He had been in regular touch with State governments, trade unions and employer bodies for the past three years. The Ministry had said that almost all States had published draft rules for the Codes, and the Centre is handholding those States and Union Territories that were yet to frame the rules.

The reforms include expanded rights and safety for women, including night-shift work, free annual health check-ups for workers aged over 40 years, pan-India ESIC coverage including hazardous process units, and a single registration, licence and return system. Additional systemic reforms include a national floor wage, gender-neutral work policy, inspector-cum-facilitator

Consolidated Codes

An overview of the four Codes notified by the Centre and their scope

■ **Code on Wages (2019)** unifies four labour laws related to wages and bonuses

■ **Industrial Relations Code (2020)** consolidates laws governing trade unions, conditions of employment in industrial establishments, and the settlement of industrial disputes

■ **Code on Social Security (2020)** extends social security benefits to all employees and workers, covering both the organised and unorganised sectors

■ **Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020)** consolidates and modernises 13 existing central labour laws related to workplace safety, health, and working conditions



model for supportive compliance, faster dispute resolution through two-member tribunals, and a National Occupational Safety, Health (OSH) Board to harmonise safety standards.

The reforms are aimed at streamlining contractual workers with the provision of "fixed term employees"

which entails all benefits equal to those of permanent workers, including leave, medical, and social security. The Codes have defined gig work, platform work, and aggregators for the first time.

Aadhaar-linked Universal Account Number will make welfare benefits easy to access, fully portable,

and available across States, regardless of migration. Plantation workers will be brought under the OSHWC Code and the Social Security Code. The government will now initiate consultations to frame detailed rules and schemes.

'Back to exploitation'

On Thursday, the CTUs met Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and urged her not to implement the Codes.

On Friday, 10 unions sent a message that the notification of these codes, amidst deepening unemployment crisis and rising inflation is nothing short of "declaration of war" on the working masses.

"The Union government in cahoots with its capitalist cronies is attempting to take the country back to the exploitative era of master-servant relationship," they said, adding that a se-

ries of protests will be launched on November 26 against the Codes. The CTUs had observed a one-day general strike on July 9.

The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), which welcomed the implementation of the Codes, had been asking the government to remove 'anti-worker' provisions from the Occupational Safety Code and Industrial Relations Code through compulsory consultation with trade unions. The BMS was in support of the Code on Wages (2019) and the Code on Social Security (2020).

CII Director General Chandrajit Banerjee hailed the reforms as a "historic milestone" for India's labour landscape. "The implementation of four Labour Codes marks a transformative leap towards a modern and simplified and future ready labour ecosystem," he said.

Key Analysis

1. Key Provisions and Intent of the Codes

- Universal Social Security:** Gig and platform workers—an increasingly large, unregulated workforce—are integrated into the social security net for the first time.
- Gender Parity & Women's Safety:** Statutory assurance of equal pay, permission for women to work night shifts with safeguards, and gender-neutral work policy.
- Simplifying Compliance:** A single registration, licence and return system, inspector-cum-facilitator model, and pan-India ESIC coverage aim to improve ease of doing business.
- Fixed-Term Employment:** Contractual workers receive benefits equivalent to permanent workers—leave, medical care, social security—potentially reducing informalisation.
- National Floor Wage:** Provides a uniform wage benchmark across India, enabling States to set higher but not lower minimum wages.

Daily News Analysis

- **Occupational Safety Enhancements:** National OSH Board to harmonise safety norms; free annual health check-ups for workers over 40; inclusion of plantation workers under OSHWC.

Overall, the reforms attempt to modernise India's labour ecosystem, increase formalisation, and align labour norms with global practices.

2. Government's Rationale

- **Boosting Investment & Growth:** PM Modi hailed the Codes as "historic" and essential for a modern labour environment supporting Make in India, global competitiveness, and employment generation.
- **Simplifying Outdated Laws:** Replacing laws dating back to the 1930s–50s removes fragmentation and legal ambiguity.
- **Labour Minister Mandaviya:** Codes will foster a simpler, safer, formal and globally aligned labour market.

3. Criticism and Concerns

Trade Unions' Opposition

- 10 Central Trade Unions (CTUs) termed the Codes a "declaration of war" on workers, fearing:
 - increased employer flexibility may dilute job security;
 - excessive centralisation in labour regulation;
 - easier hiring and firing provisions under the Industrial Relations Code;
 - weakening of collective bargaining.
- CTUs claim the Codes take India "back to the era of master-servant relationship."
- Demand to halt implementation amid unemployment and inflation, with nationwide protests planned.

BMS Position

- The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh is supportive but has demanded removal of certain "anti-worker" provisions in the IR and OSH Codes.

4. Employer and Industry Perspective

- Industry bodies like CII have welcomed the step as a "historic milestone", arguing it creates a future-ready labour ecosystem, reduces compliance burden, and encourages investment.

5. Implementation Challenges

- State-level readiness remains uneven. While most States have issued draft rules, not all have completed rule framing.
- Digital infrastructure like Aadhaar-linked UAN for portability requires robust rollout.
- Balancing flexibility and security: Ensuring fixed-term employment does not replace permanent jobs while still attracting investors.
- Building trust: Workers' fears must be addressed through consultations and amendments.

Conclusion

Daily News Analysis

The notification of the Four Labour Codes marks a significant structural reform in India's labour regulation, attempting to unify fragmented laws, promote formalisation, and extend social security to new-age workers. However, the strongly divergent reactions—government and industry supporting them, while trade unions reject them as anti-worker—highlight the tension between labour welfare and economic flexibility. The effectiveness of the Codes will ultimately depend on state-level implementation, continuous stakeholder consultation, and the government's ability to balance worker protections with the drive for ease of doing business.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the recently implemented four Labour Codes, consider the following statements:

1. The Codes replace more than 20 Central labour laws.
2. The Social Security Code includes gig workers and platform workers for the first time.
3. The Industrial Relations Code introduces the concept of fixed-term employment.

Which of the above statements are correct?

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

Ans : d)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Evaluate the potential of fixed-term employment provisions under the Labour Codes to reduce informality while attracting global investment. **(150 Words)**

In a major step towards strengthening India's maritime and coastal security architecture, the Union Government has designated the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) as the lead security regulator for over 250 seaports, including private ports handling cargo. The move seeks to establish a uniform, sovereign security framework across ports, many of which currently rely on private agencies or local police, leading to inconsistent security standards.

Govt. plans to unify security regulations for 250 seaports

A 'sovereign entity' will take over security at private ports; CISF will regulate 80 ports that handle export and import of goods overseeing access control, cargo screening and seafront patrolling

Vijaita Singh
NEW DELHI

To plug the gaps in coastal security, the Union Government has designated the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) as the security regulator for over 250 seaports in the country, a senior government official said on Friday. The government intends to deploy a "sovereign entity" at private seaports which handle cargo, the official said bringing them under a uniform security architecture.

To begin with, at least 80 seaports that handle export and import of goods will be regulated by the CISF to manage access control, screening of cargo and patrolling of seafront. The seaports, which handle cargo, will see the presence of a "sovereign" security force.

The CISF currently provides security to all 13 major seaports across India.

No uniform template

Presently, there is no uniform security template for seaports and at many places the security arrange-



Watchful eye: The Central Industrial Security Force currently secures 13 key ports in India. N. RAJESH

ments are being handled by private security agencies and local police.

Coastal security is among the topics that will be discussed at the Director Generals of Police conference organised by the Intelligence Bureau next week in Chhattisgarh. Prime Minister Narendra Modi will sit through the presentations made by police officers from across the country.

In 2023, following deliberations at the National Security Strategy Conference, guidelines were issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs to handle seaport security.

On November 18, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways issued an order designating CISF as the Recognised Security Organisation for seaports under the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code.

"Just like the airports, CISF will be the lead agency for seaports. There are various gaps and with careful study and audit, the problem areas will be addressed. While the core functions at 80 airports that handle cargo will be with the CISF, the other 170 seaports will be secured phase-wise," said the official.

According to CISF's estimate, around 800-1,000 personnel are required to be deployed to secure each seaport. The CISF has requested MHA to sanction 10,000 additional personnel for deployment at 80 seaports.

Long way to go

"There is adequate deployment at land borders of the country but when it comes to coastal security we have a long way to go. The areas are open and security architecture is almost absent. Presently, no sovereign entity is there to secure the private sea ports," the official added.

This is an outcome of a Joint Committee of CISF and Director General Shipping, constituted in 2024, which made a comprehensive study of port security, conducted gap analysis and made recommendations on the remedial measures.

Under a hybrid security model, core security functions at all export-import ports will be carried out by CISF and non-core duties may be undertaken by State Police or Private Security Agencies.

Key Analysis

1. Need for Reform: Gaps in Coastal Security

- India's long coastline (over 7,500 km) has historically been a vulnerable zone.
- Existing port security is fragmented, with private security agencies, port trusts, and local police operating without a standardised protocol.
- Several ports handling significant export-import cargo lacked a "sovereign" presence, creating potential security loopholes.

The 2008 Mumbai attacks, use of small vessels by smugglers, and illegal migration have all underscored the need for robust, uniform maritime security.

2. Key Features of the New Security Framework

a. CISF as the Recognised Security Organisation

- On November 18, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways designated CISF as the recognised security body under the ISPS (International Ship and Port Facility Security) Code.
- CISF already secures 13 major ports and will now cover an additional 80 export-import ports in Phase 1.

b. Creation of a "Sovereign Entity" at Private Ports

- Private ports handling cargo will now have CISF presence instead of relying solely on corporate security or private guards.
- Ensures neutrality, accountability, and uniform application of security norms.

c. Functions Assigned to CISF

- Access control and perimeter security
- Cargo screening and scanning
- Patrolling of the seafront
- Audit of security gaps and vulnerabilities

CISF estimates that 800–1,000 personnel per port are required for adequate security. Hence, CISF has requested 10,000 additional personnel from the Ministry of Home Affairs.

3. Hybrid Security Model

- At export-import ports: Core duties → CISF
 - Non-core duties → State Police + Private Security Agencies

Daily News Analysis

- At remaining ~170 ports: Security will be brought under CISF phase-wise, based on priority and vulnerability.

This model allows sovereign control without overburdening central forces.

4. Institutional Efforts Behind the Reform

- A Joint Committee of CISF and Director General of Shipping (2024) conducted a detailed gap analysis and recommended measures.
- In 2023, the Home Ministry issued seaport security guidelines after deliberations in the National Security Strategy Conference.
- Coastal security will also be a key agenda at the upcoming DGP Conference in Chhattisgarh, attended by the Prime Minister.

5. Strategic Importance for India

- Ports handle 95% of India's trade by volume, making them critical economic assets.
- As India expands its maritime footprint through Sagarmala, Bharatmala, Blue Economy 2.0, and Gati Shakti, port security becomes an economic and national security imperative.
- Uniform security regulation supports India's commitment to the international maritime community under the ISPS Code.

Conclusion

The Government's decision to place over 250 seaports under CISF supervision represents a significant restructuring of India's coastal security framework. By introducing a sovereign, uniform, and professionally trained security force at all major and private ports, the reform aims to eliminate inconsistencies, reduce vulnerabilities, and strengthen India's maritime preparedness. Effective implementation—backed by manpower, coordination with States, and technological upgrades—will be crucial to securing India's expanding maritime trade and national security interests.

Daily News Analysis

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : Consider the following statements:

1. The Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) is the recognised security organisation (RSO) for Indian seaports under the ISPS Code.
2. Currently, CISF provides security to all major and minor ports in India.
3. The ISPS Code is an international maritime security framework under the International Maritime Organization (IMO).

Which of the above statements are correct?

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 1 and 3 only
- C. 2 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : India's coastline remains a vulnerable security frontier. In this context, critically examine the government's recent decision to designate CISF as the lead security regulator for over 250 seaports. **(250 words)**



In compliance with the Supreme Court's direction to frame clearer rules for regulating online content, the Union Government has proposed amendments to the Information Technology Rules, 2021, introducing an explicit and comprehensive definition of "obscenity" applicable to social media platforms, OTT services, and digital news outlets. The move attempts to transplant the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 standards into the digital space — a shift that has triggered a debate on free speech, censorship, and regulatory overreach.

Guidelines defining 'obscenity' in online content proposed

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

The Union government has proposed guidelines defining "obscenity" and other disallowed content online in the Information Technology Rules, 2021, which govern social media companies and OTT streaming platforms, in a note for filing in the Supreme Court seen by *The Hindu*.

The proposal includes language that applies to all digital content — social media platforms, OTT streaming services, and digital news platforms — with broad restrictions incorporated from the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995.

The note was served this week to litigants in an ongoing case by an advocate for the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, after the Supreme Court urged the government earlier this year to frame guidelines on online content.

The IT Rules already contain language requiring social media platforms to

disallow content that "is obscene, pornographic, paedophilic, invasive of another's privacy including bodily privacy, insulting or harassing on the basis of gender, racially or ethnically objectionable, relating or encouraging money laundering or gambling."

Now, the amendment proposed by the Union government — if the Supreme Court approves it — would explicitly define "obscene digital content", and add language to the rules' Code of Ethics that are based on Section 67 of the IT Act, 2000, the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 and its rules, and the Indian Penal Code, the precursor to the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita. Section 67 of the IT Act would also be the "legal basis" for this amendment, the Ministry said.

"This is exactly the Cable TV Programme Code, copied to the digital medium," Mishi Choudhary, founder of the digital rights advocacy Software Freedom Law Centre, India



The proposal may apply to all digital content on social media websites and OTT platforms.

(SFLC), said after reviewing the note. "This is the most sweeping regulatory shift India has ever proposed for digital content, which had wide restraints previously."

A senior official told *The Hindu* that the proposal would only be taken forward after the court comments on it, and following a public consultation.

Cinematograph Act

For OTT streaming platforms at least, the proposal would require content to be compliant with the Cinematograph Act, 1952 and

be fit for "public exhibition". The official said that this particular condition would only be applicable to streaming services and not social media. The proposed amendment does not contain this demarcation.

The Code of Ethics, which is a part of the IT Rules that has been governing news platforms and "curated" content platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, would have an overarching "Obscenity" heading that would tell online platforms to avoid content that offends "good taste or decency", presents "criminality as desirable", shows "indecent, vulgar, suggestive, repulsive or offensive themes", or has "visuals or words which reflect a slandering, ironical and snobbish attitude in the portrayal of certain ethnic, linguistic and regional groups". There are seven-teen such restrictions.

Rules 9(1) and 9(3) of the IT Rules, which seek to enforce the existing code of

ethics for streaming services and news platforms, have been stayed by the Bombay High Court, in a case that is now being heard in the Delhi High Court, along with other challenges to the IT Rules. The note by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry acknowledges that this judicial stay is still active. Ms. Choudhary said the note sought to "revive" the stayed rules.

"The Executive has been irregularly using IT Rules to broaden its powers and establishing a *de facto* system, which, if the courts heard the petitions, would be found unconstitutional," Ms. Choudhary said. "Just because the courts are not swift in their decision-making does not mean this structure is acceptable."

"In order to ascertain whether a content has violated the Code or not, the 'Community Standard Test' prescribed by the Hon'ble Supreme Court in the case of *Aveek Sarkar v. State of West Bengal* may

be used," the proposal says in an explanation, "which states that the content satisfies the test if a person, having contemporary community standards does not believe that the work appeals or pleases to the lustful or voyeuristic interest and this Code shall not be applicable to content which has literary, scientific, artistic or political value in its entirety."

In spite of this explanation, Ms. Choudhary said, the note "expands the definition to include everything under the sun, from Rule 6 of Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act to all that the government disapproves of".

The proposal came in a case that followed the controversy around comedian Samay Raina, whose YouTube channel was the subject of intense backlash after a joke featuring an incestuous hypothetical dilemma in a paywalled part of Mr. Raina's channel, made by the social media influencer Ranveer Allahbadia, went viral.

Key Analysis

1. Background: Why New Guidelines Now?

- The Supreme Court has repeatedly urged the government to define obscenity for the digital environment due to rising complaints and legal ambiguities.
- Controversies such as those involving online comedians and OTT content have intensified demands for clarity.
- The IT Rules, 2021 already prohibit content that is obscene, pornographic, paedophilic, or invasive of privacy — but lack specific definitions.

The government has now submitted a draft amendment to the Supreme Court in an ongoing case.

2. What the Proposed Amendment Contains

a. Explicit Definition of Obscene Digital Content

- Draws on Section 67 of the IT Act, 2000, the Cable TV Act, 1995, and the IPC (now BNS).

- Introduces 17 wide-ranging restrictions, including content that:
 - "offends good taste or decency"
 - portrays "criminality as desirable"
 - depicts "indecent, vulgar, suggestive, repulsive or offensive" themes
 - contains visuals or words reflecting a "snobbish or slandering attitude" toward ethnic or regional groups
 - includes "objectionable sexual content"

Digital rights advocates argue that this wording is vague, broad, and potentially overreaching.

b. Applicability Across the Digital Ecosystem

The proposal covers all digital content, including:

- Social media platforms
- OTT streaming services
- Digital news publications

For OTT platforms specifically:

- Content must comply with the Cinematograph Act, 1952, and be fit for "public exhibition."
- Officials say this only applies to streaming services, but the proposal does not clearly specify this separation, leading to fears of unified — and stricter — censorship norms.

c. Borrowing From Cable TV Programme Code

As noted by digital rights groups:

- The proposal is essentially the Cable TV Programme Code copied to digital platforms, which historically have had fewer restrictions.
- This marks the biggest regulatory shift for India's digital ecosystem, narrowing the space for creative content.

3. Legal Issues and Ongoing Challenges

- Rules 9(1) and 9(3) of the IT Rules (related to Code of Ethics) are currently stayed by the Bombay High Court, and cases are ongoing in Delhi High Court.
- Critics argue that the government is attempting to revive or bypass suspended rules by expanding the Code of Ethics through new amendments.
- The I&B Ministry acknowledges the stay but still pushes forward with the proposal, which may raise issues of executive overreach.

4. Supreme Court's Standard: Community Standards Test

The proposal cites the SC judgment in *Aveek Sarkar v. State of West Bengal*, which:

- Uses a contemporary community standards test, not the outdated "Hicklin Test".
- Says content is obscene only if it appeals to lustful or prurient interests, and not if it has artistic, political, scientific, or literary value.

However, activists argue:

- Even with this safeguard, the Code's broad language gives the government wide discretion to restrict content.

5. Criticism From Digital Rights Groups

Experts such as Mishi Choudhary (SFLC) argue:

- The proposal represents an “unprecedented expansion” of state control over digital content.
- It brings subjective morality-based restrictions into the online sphere.
- The government is using IT Rules as a means of broadening its powers without legislative approval, risking constitutional challenges.

They contend that the proposal:

- Could lead to self-censorship by creators
- Undermines India's status as a growing digital creative economy
- Gives the Executive excessive influence over free expression

6. Trigger for the Case

- The proposal emerged in a case related to comedian Samay Raina's YouTube content, where a paywalled joke caused public outrage.
- The government, pressed by the Court and public complaints, used the opportunity to propose a broader regulatory overhaul.

Conclusion

The government's proposal to define “obscenity” in online content under the IT Rules marks a significant turning point in India's digital regulation. While the move responds to judicial demands for clarity and aims to protect users from harmful content, the sweeping scope, moralistic language, and resemblance to Cable TV controls raise concerns about potential censorship and executive overreach. The eventual shape of the guidelines will depend on Supreme Court scrutiny, public consultation, and constitutional safeguards, making this a crucial moment in India's digital rights and content governance landscape.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the proposed amendments to the Information Technology Rules, 2021, consider the following statements:

1. The proposed guidelines seek to define "obscene digital content" using language from the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995.
2. The guidelines will apply only to OTT streaming platforms and not to social media or digital news platforms.
3. Section 67 of the IT Act, 2000 is cited as a legal basis for the proposed changes.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 1 and 3 only
- C. 2 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : Critically analyse the challenges of regulating obscenity and harmful content in the digital ecosystem, with reference to the Supreme Court's "community standards test" and the concerns raised by digital rights groups. **(150 words)**

Page 08 : GS 2 : Indian Polity

In 2008, the Union Government piloted the Multipurpose National Identity Card (MNIC), issuing it to about 12.88 lakh residents aged 18 and above, capturing biometric and demographic details. The MNIC, intended as a proof of identity and a step toward a national register of citizens, was later overshadowed by the Aadhaar card. The pilot highlights persistent debates in India around citizenship verification, identity documentation, and the role of national databases in governance. It also reflects public experiences with government-issued identification and the evolving policy landscape for residency and citizenship verification.

Once there was a red card

Without designated document to establish proof of Indian citizenship, **Vijaya Singh** explores the Multipurpose National Identity Card (MNIC) pilot project in 2008, the card and debate around citizenship and the government's struggle for the special measure version of what has called out in 11 States and 11 Union Territories.

In 2008, March 24, 08, was the first to show an area covered by the Union Government, providing proof of one's identity. It was a red card, the MNIC, issued to about 12.88 lakh residents aged 18 and above, capturing biometric and demographic details. The MNIC, intended as a proof of identity and a step toward a national register of citizens, was later overshadowed by the Aadhaar card. The pilot highlights persistent debates in India around citizenship verification, identity documentation, and the role of national databases in governance. It also reflects public experiences with government-issued identification and the evolving policy landscape for residency and citizenship verification.

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Key Analysis

1. Objectives of the MNIC Pilot

- **Proof of Identity and Citizenship:** The MNIC contained biometric data (fingerprints, iris scans) and demographic details to uniquely identify residents.
- **Potential Benefits:** It was envisaged to facilitate access to civic services such as potable water, and serve as a foundational document for a National Register of Indian Citizens (NRIC/NRC).

Daily News Analysis

- Pilot Reach: Issued to 12.88 lakh individuals, including Mishro Devi of Pooth Khurd village, reflecting the first effort at biometric-based citizen registration in India.

2. MNIC vs Aadhaar

- Transition to Aadhaar: The government eventually prioritized Aadhaar over MNIC. Biometric data from the MNIC pilot was seeded into Aadhaar to avoid duplication.
- Efficacy: Aadhaar is recognized as proof of identity, not citizenship. MNIC's intended use for citizenship verification remained unrealized.
- Public Perception: Many recipients never used the MNIC, and some (like Rajbir Dabas) found limited personal advantages, such as evading toll taxes.

3. Citizenship, NPR, and Electoral Rolls

- Legal Framework: Citizenship in India is governed under the Citizenship Act, 1955, via birth, descent, registration, naturalization, or incorporation of territory. No centralized document currently confirms citizenship.
- National Population Register (NPR): NPR data, collected household-wise, is used to compile the NRC, which aims to distinguish citizens from non-citizens.
- Special Intensive Revision (SIR): Conducted in Bihar and other states, requiring valid documents for voter registration. Initially excluded Aadhaar, later accepted post Supreme Court intervention.
- CAA and NRC Debate: Post-2019 CAA enactment, fears arose that NRC would disproportionately affect Muslims, while non-Muslims could claim citizenship under CAA provisions. Assam remains the only state with a completed NRC, excluding 19 lakh residents.

4. Lessons from the MNIC Experience

- Policy Continuity and Public Trust: The MNIC demonstrates challenges in rolling out identity schemes and the importance of public clarity regarding their purpose and utility.
- Implementation Gaps: Citizens received cards but lacked clear guidance on usage. Over time, MNIC lost relevance in favor of Aadhaar.
- Digital Data Management: Biometric and demographic integration with Aadhaar highlights the potential and risks of centralizing citizen data.

5. Public and Administrative Perspective

- Residents' Experience: Many preserved the MNIC as a souvenir; its intended functions were largely symbolic rather than practical.

Daily News Analysis

- Government's Vision: MNIC was part of a long-term plan to create a unified citizen registration system, aiding governance, security, and service delivery.
- Challenges: Balancing privacy, identity verification, and public acceptance remains crucial in future national ID initiatives.

Conclusion

The MNIC pilot in 2008 was an early experiment in biometric-based citizen registration, aiming to provide a proof of identity and lay the groundwork for a national citizenship register. Though overshadowed by Aadhaar, it reflects India's ongoing challenges in documenting citizenship, managing demographic databases, and ensuring legal clarity. The debates around NPR, NRC, and the SIR of electoral rolls highlight the sensitivity and political complexity of national identity in India, emphasizing the need for transparency, public trust, and robust legal safeguards in implementing large-scale identity initiatives.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: The Multipurpose National Identity Card (MNIC) pilot and the ongoing debates around the National Population Register (NPR) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) highlight the complexities of citizenship documentation in India. Critically examine the challenges in establishing a legal and administrative framework for proving Indian citizenship. Suggest measures to ensure transparency, inclusivity, and public trust in such initiatives. **(250 Words)**



The Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme — launched in 1975 at T. Narsipur, Karnataka — completes 50 years. It is the world's largest community-based early childhood care programme, providing nutrition, early education, health services and socialisation to children under six and to pregnant/lactating mothers. Karnataka, one of the earliest states to expand ICDS, reflects the national picture of success mixed with persistent challenges.

ICDS programme at 50: Still a lifeline

Since it was launched as a pilot project at T. Narsipur in Mysuru district in 1975, the Integrated Child Development Services programme has expanded in reach and scope across Karnataka; but the crucial scheme for early childhood development faces several challenges, especially of fund crunch, finds **Shilpa Elizabeth**

At an anganwadi near Balappanahalli in Bengaluru, around 30 children, most of whom are between three and six years old, are busy playing, making merry, and having fun. It's hard to get their attention. To Siddharth, I ask, "Why do you come to anganwadis?" "To eat," he says, (screams almost), without an iota of doubt. "What do you like to eat?" "Ice cream!" He doesn't seem to care much about the lunch at his anganwadi. But his friend, Nisha (who likes to be referred to as 'Nashamini' because 'that's what her dad calls her') interjects. "You will fall sick if you eat ice cream. I like anu sambhar (rice and sambhar)," she says. "So, do you come to anganwadi for anu sambhar?" I ask her.

"I come here to study," she surprises me, and goes on to recite the English alphabet. At another nearby anganwadi, 5-year-old Ovi approaches shrewdly with her notebook. True to her name, she seems to have an inclination for art. The book is filled with pencil drawings, most of them outlines of her own girl filled in with drawings of flowers and other figures. A million kids, a million lives, anganwadis, the first step for many Indian children to nutritious meal, education and socialisation, have been operating for 50 years now, catering to all such lives.

When the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) programme was inaugurated 50 years ago by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, T. Narsipur in Mysuru was one of the first places in India where the pilot programme was launched.

The programme has come a long way since and seen remarkable progress in the southern State where anganwadi workers have played key role in shaping generations.

"Think of a seed that would one day grow into a healthy tree, a beautiful ecosystem in itself nourishing everything around it. But if the seed itself goes bad, then what a huge loss that is. Every child is like a seed, and ICDS is the nourishment that would protect it from decaying," says S. Varalakshmi, general secretary of the All India Federation of Anganwadi Workers and Helpers (AIFAWH) and general secretary, CITU.

ICDS is the world's largest community-based programme for early childhood development. As of June 20, 2022, there were 10,08,183 beneficiaries under anganwadi services in India. In FY 2022, the BJP-led Union government restructured the programme into Mission Saksham Anganwadi & Poshan 2.0.

A few often kind programme combining health, education and nutrition, the scope of ICDS, over the years, expanded to offer a range of services covering supplementary nutrition programme, pre-school education, immunisation of mother and child, health checkups, referral services, and health and nutrition education.

Scaling up through decades

Not vastly different from many other parts of the country then, in Karnataka, the programme was launched against the grim backdrop of prevalent infant mortality, malnutrition, and low literacy rates. The State, however, has been credited for taking proactive steps to scale up the programme rapidly.

From one project in T. Narsipur in 1975, the number increased to 24 across 20 districts by 1980, and more than quadrupled in the next decade.

Today, Karnataka has 10,08,183 beneficiaries across 204 projects catering to 40,54,656 beneficiaries. This includes 32,25,035 children between the age of 6 months and 6 years, and 7,29,621 pregnant and lactating mothers.

"Karnataka has some of the best anganwadis in the country. A significant proportion of our total number of anganwadis are in their own building with their own kitchen, separate toilet, electricity connection and fans, and so on," points out Uma Mahadevan Dasgupta, Additional Chief Secretary and Development Commissioner.

Dasgupta, who previously served as Principal Secretary in the Department of Women and Child Development, points out how the anganwadis in Karnataka, which remain open for 6.5 hours on weekdays, act as partial daycares, allowing mothers to work and thereby facilitating a socio-economic cycle of empowerment, she says. Karnataka is also 'one of the better States' as far as working conditions of anganwadi workers is concerned, with 'a lot done over and above the ICDS scheme norms' for the honorarium of anganwadi workers and helpers.

Changing focus

Although ICDS was conceived as a holistic programme, given the high rates of malnutrition in the country, the supplementary nutrition programme (SNP) remained the core of the programme and the most accessed service. Studies have shown enrolment increasing with regular delivery of SNP, and around 98% of the registered children are availing the supplementary nutrition. This doesn't come as a surprise given how, even today, stunting is recorded among 37% of the children in India.

While SNP has been the backbone, the programme has been evolving to suit changing needs.



Boosting learning with fun: Children engage in various learning activities at an anganwadi in Shivajinagar in Bengaluru. **AJITH KUTTAR**

Every child is like a seed, and ICDS is the nourishment that would protect it from decaying

At an anganwadi in Bengaluru, Malvi, who is 'Mali' sister for all the 25 children there, shows me the teaching and learning plan for the kids. The topic is covered every week. Last week, the kids seem to have learned about Children's Day. This week is about 'plants, trees and creepers', and, in the next week, they will learn about 'mountains, forests and rivers'.

With the idea of strengthening the 'pre-primary' education in anganwadis, the government has been taking steps to upgrade the teaching system.

In July 2024, 250 anganwadis in Bengaluru Urban were converted into 'government nurseries'. The pilot project looked at upgrading an anganwadi centre into pre-primary education centres for children providing quality education along with nutrition. The programme includes education in both Kannada and English, with each child provided uniform, bag, and activity books.

Parents are now looking for not only good nutrition, but also good education. So, we are all so changing our focus, giving importance to pre-primary education in anganwadis and linking it with preparation for schools," says Shantia Iybal, Secretary in Department of Women and Child Development.

The programme, according to officials, has been a fit, with the government now looking at expanding the programme to 5,000 centres. Shantia Iybal is quick to add that the focus on nutrition has not diminished. "We are weighing the children on a regular basis. Wherever Severe Acute Malnutrition (SAM) and Moderate Acute Malnutrition (MAM) rates are high, we have launched the Chigara programme in co-ordination with the Health Department, UNICEF and IYD Global."

According to official figures, around 1.3 lakh children in the State continue to be malnourished. The Chigara initiative aims to involve the community and reduce malnutrition through programmes that include community engagement and provision of supplementary nutrition and medical support for severely malnourished children in relevant places, including Ballari, B.

Kadaveragi, Yadgi, Belgundi, Raichur, Chinnur and Vijayanagara.

Unique features

A number of initiatives, such as the Chillaipi curriculum for pre-primary education and the Nuth-rupanna scheme to provide hot meals to pregnant and lactating mothers, introduced to the ICDS programme in Karnataka, are unique to the State, say officials.

While daycare for children below three years has been a missing component, the 4,000 Kooni namma cubs set up in gram panchayats have been helping to fill this gap to an extent. These creches for children of women working in rural areas under MGNREGS schemes were introduced as a collaborative effort involving multiple government departments, including the Health Department and Panchayat Raj (RUPR), Women and Child Development (WCD), and MGNREGS.

Funding cuts

Despite the impact it has had over the last 50 years, the programme is not without flaws, challenges or critics. One of the largest setbacks came in the form of funding cuts from the Centre.

The Central State funding ratio for the scheme was changed from 90:10 to 65:35 by the BJP-led Union government in 2015, soon after it came to power, significantly impacting the components of the programme and leaving State governments to often rely on NGOs, development banks and philanthropies to run programmes.

"There are no funds currently for training programmes," says a senior State government official who reveals how training programmes have been completed in January, but the building blocks have been introduced in several regions due to shortage of funds.

"The Central government used to fund the training. That has not been coming now. We are trying to secure it as early as possible. Now, we are conducting training with the help of NGOs, but these are not the same as the regular training provided by the department," the official added.

Inadequate compensation

Activists and anganwadi workers have long been raising demands to raise the honorarium to minimum wage levels.

"We receive an honorarium of only ₹10,000 per month, which is not even close to the minimum wage. On top of that, many don't even get it regularly. Our jobs need to be made permanent, and we need to be treated as government employees with benefits," demands Sonika Parth, secretary of the District Anganwadi Workers' Union in Yadgi.

While the State's share in the anganwadi worker's compensation is ₹8,300, the Centre's is just ₹2,700. For a better, this corresponding amounts are ₹4,900 and ₹1,350.

"It's been 50 years, and it's high time this scheme becomes a law," says Varalakshmi.

"While the role of ICDS in early childhood care is undeniable and laudable, even after 50 years, it continues to be a welfare scheme. That puts the beneficiaries at the mercy of officials, which shouldn't be the case. Access to nutrition, health, food and pre-primary education should be a right, not welfare," the point out, while noting that there has been no increase in the Centre's share of honorarium in the last seven years.

Better infra needed

An anganwadi near Dombar, managed by Kavitha, seems to be well-maintained and hygienic, but the children could do with more space. She points to a newly constructed two-storey building about 50 m away.

"We were supposed to move to that building. Currently, the anganwadi is located in a rented space, and the new one is a twin building. It has a kitchen on the first floor and enough space for the children on the ground floor. The work was completed in January, but the building lacks electricity connection. Besides, a few electric wires pass too close to the structure."

Activist and founder of Oke Bengaluru, Karthikeyi Chatterjee, notes that despite improvements, infrastructure at several centres continues to be inadequate.

"It is important to upgrade the infrastructure at anganwadis and to also include daycare centres for children below three years. Kooni namma are located at gram panchayats, which may not be close to all. Whereas anganwadis are more in numbers and distributed closely. It is important to have creches within anganwadis and bring all these under the Department of Women and Child Development," she says.

One of the latest points of contention has been the face registration system for beneficiaries. As per reports, the introduction of the system has left out around 2% of the beneficiaries, which comes to around 5,00,000.

An unfinished product

Amid shortage of funds, the State government is planning to hold a grand celebration on November 25 to honour 50 years of ICDS. On the other hand, several anganwadi workers are planning to hold a strike on December 1 outside the residence of Union Ministers from Karnataka.

Meanwhile, according to CNS data, 12.6% of children below five years of age in Karnataka continue to be severely stunted, and 4.6% are severely wasted (extreme malnutrition).

"Children continue to be affected by malnutrition, but not at the levels seen in 1975. Today, we see that in many cases it is happening not due to extreme poverty, but due to lack of awareness among parents. We are continuously engaged parents and working towards solving this," says Usha S., Deputy Director (ICDS), WCD. "There are also reasons such as child marriage and inter-generational poverty in regions that have been in a disadvantaged position for years. It is a vicious cycle. We are working on those too, but these changes will take time." (With inputs from Radhikumar Narasimha)



Anganwadi worker teaching children in a small, tightly packed centre in U.K. Gadagur, near Anantpur's Chikola in U.K. Gadagur in Bengaluru. **AJITH KUTTAR**

Key Analysis

1. Achievements of ICDS (with Karnataka as a case study)

1.1 Massive Expansion & Reach

- From 1 pilot project (1975) → nearly 70,000 anganwadis in Karnataka; nationwide beneficiaries: 9+ crore children and mothers (2021).
- Provides nutrition, immunisation, health check-ups, referral services, pre-school education, and parental awareness programmes.

1.2 Contribution to Education & Socialisation

- Anganwadis act as first learning spaces for millions of children.
- Karnataka converts 250 centres into Government Montessories (2024) → bilingual education, activity books, uniforms, school readiness.
- Weekly structured Teaching–Learning plans (TLM) implemented.

1.3 Nutrition & Health Gains

- Supplementary Nutrition Programme (SNP) remains backbone.
- ~95% registered children access SNP.
- Chiguru Programme (Karnataka) to counter SAM/MAM in vulnerable districts like Yadgir, Raichur, Kalaburagi etc.
- Special schemes like Mathrupoorna (hot cooked meals for pregnant/lactating mothers).

1.4 Women Empowerment & Social Impact

- Anganwadis open 6.5 hours, functioning as partial day-care → enables women's labour force participation.
- Worker honourarium, training (where available), and local recruitment empower rural women.

2. Unique Innovations in Karnataka's ICDS Model

- Chilipili curriculum for pre-primary education.
- Koosinamane creches (4,000 centres) for children under 3 years, linked with MGNREGA workers.
- Better-than-average infrastructure (kitchen, toilets, electricity) in many AWCs.

3. Challenges Confronting ICDS

3.1 Funding Cuts

- Centre-State ratio reduced from 90:10 → 60:40 (2015).
- Training programmes suffer due to lack of central funds.
- State often relies on NGOs for capacity-building.

3.2 Inadequate Worker Compensation

- Workers receive ₹11,000/month, helpers even less.
- Payments irregular; demand for permanent status and minimum wages.
- Centre's contribution stagnant for 7 years.

3.3 Infrastructure Gaps

- Many centres lack space, electricity, safe buildings.
- Example: newly constructed AWC in Domlur unused due to lack of power connection and unsafe wiring.
- Need for integrated creches for children <3 years within anganwadis.

3.4 Exclusion due to Technology

- Face-recognition based beneficiary verification excludes ~2% beneficiaries (≈ 5 lakh people).

3.5 Persistent Malnutrition

- **In Karnataka:**
 - 12.4% children severely stunted
 - 4.6% severely wasted
- **Malnutrition today driven not just by poverty but:**
 - parental lack of awareness,
 - early marriage,
 - inter-generational poverty in backward regions.

4. ICDS at 50 — Major Themes Emerging

4.1 Shift from Nutrition-only to Holistic ECD

Parents now want both:

- Good nutrition, and

- Good early education

Hence, anganwadis moving towards holistic early childhood development (ECD) rather than just food distribution.

4.2 Integration with NEP 2020

- NEP emphasises Foundational Stage (0–6 years) → anganwadis must be upgraded to quality pre-primary schools.

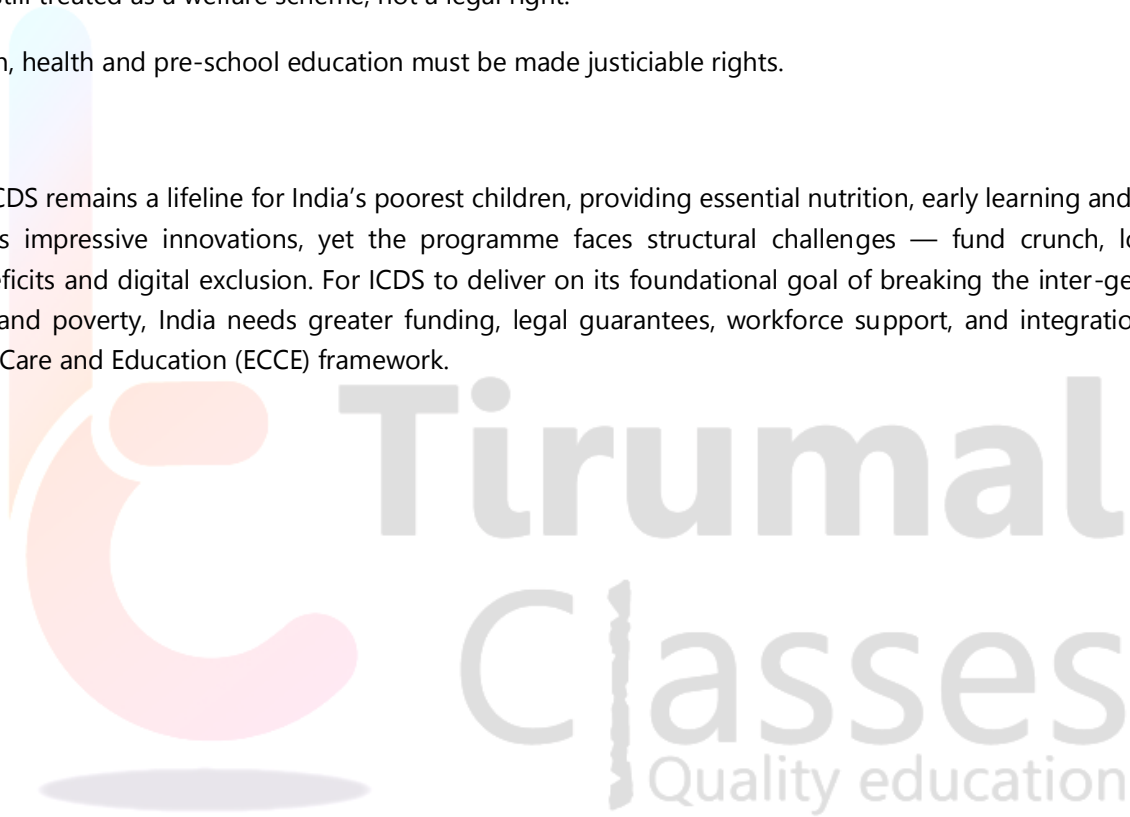
4.3 Welfare vs Rights Debate

Activists argue that:

- ICDS is still treated as a welfare scheme, not a legal right.
- Nutrition, health and pre-school education must be made justiciable rights.

Conclusion

After 50 years, ICDS remains a lifeline for India's poorest children, providing essential nutrition, early learning and health services. Karnataka shows impressive innovations, yet the programme faces structural challenges — fund crunch, low honorarium, infrastructure deficits and digital exclusion. For ICDS to deliver on its foundational goal of breaking the inter-generational cycle of malnutrition and poverty, India needs greater funding, legal guarantees, workforce support, and integration with the new Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) framework.



UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Consider the following statements about ICDS:

1. ICDS was launched in 1975 as a pilot project in T. Narsipur, Karnataka.
2. ICDS is the world's largest community-based programme for early childhood development.
3. Under Mission Saksham Anganwadi & Poshan 2.0, ICDS has been merged with mid-day meal scheme.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 2 and 3 only
- C. 1 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Ans : a)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Even after 50 years, ICDS continues to be a welfare scheme rather than a rights-based entitlement. Critically examine in the context of ongoing challenges such as funding cuts, infrastructure gaps, and worker compensation issues. **(150 Words)**



Page : 06 Editorial Analysis

The new direction for India should be toward Asia

The photograph of Russian President Vladimir Putin, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Chinese President Xi Jinping in an animated conversation at the 2025 Tianjin Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in early September this year exhibited elements unifying them, which has been the hallmark of meetings of the G-7. Just a month later, at the Busan Summit 2025, the photograph of U.S. President Donald Trump, who looked uneasy, and Mr. Xi, who looked calm, at the "G2" summit, acknowledges the power shift to Asia.

The U.S. Secretary of State told the Senate that the story of the 21st century will be written in Asia. The global trend was then obscured by now U.S. Ambassador to India Sergio Gora laying out the U.S.'s priorities: 'pull India' to its side away from China and get India to stop buying cheap Russian oil. Mr. Modi later made clear that India's future cannot be dictated by others.

A critical moment for foreign policy

India's foreign policy is at an inflexion point as it is on the cusp of becoming one of the largest economies, and the U.S. is upending multilateralism and reducing India's strategic policy space in several key domains as India's relations with China improve and those with Russia strengthen. Is the U.S. thwarting India's rise to prevent another China? With China, it should be a case of 'trust but verify' as negotiations for an international border in Ladakh advance with it having the potential to settle the Kashmir issue and investment that may follow. Russia is a 75-year-old tested partner and its S-400 was the game-changer in 'Operation Sindoor'.

For India, the choice is not binary, as western analysts argue, tilting towards the U.S. or China. The new direction for India should be toward Asia, whose market will be larger than the U.S.

Asia is coming together in a form very different to the way the West came together, not based on colonialism or global rules but shared value chain interests. Countries in the region want



Mukul Sanwal
is a former United Nations diplomat

Asia is at the centre of the world and India should focus on self-sustaining growth

partnership with India, as it has the technological capacity and economic heft to balance China.

Asia, with two-thirds of the global population and wealth, is again at the centre of the world. BRICS, with overlapping membership and policies, the SCO, with its stress on geo-security-economics, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, a political-trade grouping, are going to be intertwined. The door to re-entry into the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership is still open. This is where trade concessions should be made, which will be outside World Trade Organization rules, including *modus vivendi* on trade with China, as an alternative market to the U.S.

Hard decisions

India has moved away from the hesitations of a developing country, ring-fencing its growth, to an emerging power, confidently engaging others as a peer. U.S. pressure has led to a new national consensus on acceptability of hard decisions.

First, operationalisation of 'strategic autonomy' should be based on India's uniqueness having two global agendas. It has the highest growth rate, huge potential till 2100, the largest labour pool and the highest number of the poor. Within the United Nations, India's foundational sustainable development interests are closer to the Global South. India will need to clarify its understanding of 'partnership' linking value chains and adjusting priorities without diluting them to avoid accepting the agendas and frameworks of others.

Second, the new rules will be very different to the old ones. Asia had no answer to Europe's gunboats and later leverage, and interdependence gave immense advantage to the West. Interconnectedness of the digital economy is reflected in technological capacity, not diplomacy, leading to military capability. Assumptions of foreign, technology and security policies are being questioned as innovation interconnections determine economic growth, political influence and military strength. For

India, there can be no compromise on national data, endogenous technology innovation, local defence production and inclusive growth.

Third, cyber warfare should be the central pillar of national security, based on India's comparative advantage, and not theatre commands as land-based threats have changed. China has stepped back from the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which Pakistan has substituted with expensive Asian Development Bank loans. It has strategic support from the U.S., a mutual defence pact with Saudi Arabia and increased influence, along with the U.S., in Bangladesh. The U.S. is seeking the Bagram base in Afghanistan. India has also secured a six-month waiver from U.S. sanctions on Chabahar Port which gave India an opening into Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Russia.

The evolving neighbourhood landscape suggests the need for a national debate on reorienting defence allocations – halving the size of the Army and reducing numbers of large (imported) platforms for endogenous Artificial Intelligence (AI), air defence, space, missiles and drones where India has world-class capability – to factor in the need for continuing innovation, with spin-offs for growth.

An AI future

Lastly, shaping the global AI future is necessary for double-digit inclusive growth. Bernstein, a wealth management firm, in a report has asked questions about India's ₹10,372-crore AI mission, warning that it could become inconsequential on the global stage. It also said that U.S. companies could dominate AI. A Parliamentary Standing Committee has emphasised the need for indigenous research in foundational AI models to ensure sovereign capability. Funding should increase at least 20-fold to support national strategic collaboration, high-end computational resources, proprietary models and talent development driven by the Prime Minister's Office. AI sovereignty is now the key requirement to be a global power by 2047.

GS. Paper 2 International Relations

UPSC Mains Practice Question : Evaluate the role of regional platforms such as SCO, BRICS, and ASEAN in India's foreign policy and economic strategy. (250 words)

Context :

India stands at a pivotal moment in its foreign policy and global positioning. As the 21st century shifts toward Asia, India's strategic choices—between the U.S., China, and regional partnerships—will define its economic, technological, and security trajectory. Recent diplomatic interactions, including the SCO summit in Tianjin and the "G2" meeting in Busan, underscore a geopolitical power shift toward Asia. Amid U.S. pressures on issues like Russian oil imports and multilateralism, India is asserting its strategic autonomy, balancing relationships with China, Russia, and Western powers while focusing on Asia-centric growth, innovation, and security imperatives.

Key Analysis

1. Geopolitical Context

- Photographic evidence from SCO and G2 summits reflects Asia's rising influence and the relative discomfort of the U.S. in engaging with a confident, multipolar Asia.
- India's foreign policy is at a critical inflection point, coinciding with its emergence as a potential global economic powerhouse.
- U.S. efforts to draw India away from China and restrict trade with Russia indicate a narrowing of strategic policy space, challenging India to adopt an independent and balanced approach.

2. Strategic Autonomy and Asian Engagement

- India's approach should not be binary (U.S. vs China); the focus must shift toward Asia as a regional and economic priority.
- Asia's Advantages:
 - Two-thirds of global population and wealth reside in Asia.
 - Regional cooperation platforms such as BRICS, SCO, ASEAN, and the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) offer avenues for trade, investment, and geo-economic leverage.
 - Shared value chains, rather than colonial or rule-based integration, drive regional cooperation.
- India can leverage its technological capacity, economic heft, and demographic dividend to balance China and play a pivotal role in Asian economic and strategic affairs.

3. Economic and Technological Imperatives

- **Strategic Autonomy in Growth:**
 - India's growth trajectory demands focusing on domestic capabilities, technology innovation, and inclusive growth, avoiding over-dependence on external frameworks.
 - Linking value chains with regional partners should be aligned with India's national priorities, not dictated by foreign agendas.
- **AI and Digital Economy:**
 - India's AI mission (₹10,372 crore) is crucial for ensuring sovereign technological capabilities.

Daily News Analysis

- Investments in foundational AI, computational infrastructure, and talent development are essential to secure future economic, military, and diplomatic influence.
- Indigenous AI development ensures India retains sovereignty and competitive edge in the global technological race.

4. Defence and Security Realignments

- **Cybersecurity Focus:**

- Land-based military threats are evolving; cyber warfare, AI-enabled platforms, and space capabilities are emerging as central pillars of national security.

- **Defence Modernisation:**

- Strategic reorientation calls for reducing traditional Army size and large imported platforms, reallocating resources toward endogenous AI, drones, missile systems, and space technologies.
- Endogenous innovation strengthens India's self-reliance, deterrence, and long-term growth, with potential commercial and civilian spin-offs.

- **Neighbourhood Dynamics:**

- Regional developments (China stepping back from CPEC, U.S.-Pakistan defense pacts, India's access to Chabahar Port) highlight the need for flexible, forward-looking strategic planning.

5. Foreign Policy Considerations

- India's foreign policy must reconcile growth, security, and strategic autonomy with regional integration:
 - Continued engagement with China, with "trust but verify" diplomacy on border issues and potential Kashmir settlements.
 - Strengthening ties with Russia, a longstanding strategic partner, particularly in defence and energy sectors.
 - Pragmatic interactions with the U.S., ensuring national interests are not subordinated to external agendas.
- The overarching principle is a peer-to-peer approach, asserting India's position as an emerging Asian power rather than a junior partner in global power struggles.

Conclusion

India's global strategy must pivot decisively toward Asia, leveraging its demographic advantage, economic potential, and technological capabilities to assert strategic autonomy. Balancing relations with China, Russia, and the U.S., investing in endogenous innovation, AI, and cyber capabilities, and aligning defence and economic policies with national priorities are critical. By embracing an Asia-centric approach, India can secure a central role in the 21st-century global order, achieve inclusive growth, and enhance its sovereign strategic capabilities, while avoiding overdependence on external powers.