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THE HINDU
INDIA'S NATIONAL NEWSPAPER SINCE 1878

Daily News Analysis

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

Saturday, 03 Jan, 2025

Edition : International Table of Contents

Page 02 : GS I : Indian Society

The 1961 Silchar language agitation in Assam represents one of the most violent episodes linked to linguistic politics in post-Independence India. A recent academic study published in Contemporary South Asia revisits this episode to argue that the conflict was not an inevitable ethnic clash but the outcome of specific political decisions, colonial legacies, and failures of accommodative governance. The firing on protestors in Silchar on May 19, 1961, which killed 11 civilians, continues to shape linguistic consciousness in southern Assam, particularly the Barak Valley.

How language issue led to one of Assam's most volatile conflicts

Rahul Karmakar
GUWAHATI

Decades after blood was spilt on the streets of southern Assam's Silchar, a new academic study examines how language, power and identity converged to produce one of the State's most volatile conflicts.

The study, published in *Contemporary South Asia*, analyses the 1961 violence to argue that the crisis was not inevitable but the result of political choices, policy failures and deep-seated historical anxieties.

It contends that language in Assam has never been merely a means of communication but has functioned as a marker of belonging and, at times, a trigger for violence.

The authors of the study are Md. Chingiz Khan of the Centre for Comparative Religions and Civilisations at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, Ravi Shankar of the School of Global Affairs at B.R. Ambedkar University, Delhi, and Bharti Shokeen of Sri Karan Narendra Agriculture University, Jobner, Rajasthan.

The study traces the flashpoint to 1961, when the Assam government amended its Official Language Act to recognise Assamese as the sole official language, while allowing limited use of Bengali in parts of the Barak Valley. The decision triggered widespread protests across the region.

Firing by security forces at demonstrators in Silchar left 11 people dead on May 19, 1961, a moment that remains deeply etched in the collective memory of the Barak Valley.

The study argues that reducing the episode to an "Assamese versus Bengali" conflict obscures its deeper complexity. Assam, it notes, has long been a multilingual and multi-ethnic society, home to diverse communities, whose coexistence was disrupted by rigid language policies.

Study revisits 1961 Silchar violence to examine how policy, identity and power shaped linguistic conflict

Colonial policy

"An intersectional approach, considering temporality, ethnicity, region, culture, and politics, offers a more nuanced understanding [of the issue]. Assam's identity has been shaped by centuries of migration, cultural exchange, and layered histories, making rigid categorisations reductive," the study observes.

The study underlines the decisive role of colonial policies in shaping linguistic hierarchies. British administrators classified and ranked languages through censuses and surveys, transforming fluid identities into rigid categories.

The imposition of Bengali as the language of administration in 19th century Assam marginalised Assamese speakers in courts and government employment. When Assamese later regained official status, the balance shifted, fuelling resentment among Bengali speakers, particularly in Bengali-majority regions such as Cachar.

According to the study, language became closely tied to access to power. Official recognition translated into employment opportunities, control over land records and political influence. Communities that felt excluded came to view language policy as an existential threat.

In Cachar, where Bengali speakers formed an overwhelming majority, the enforcement of Assamese was perceived as cultural domination. In the Brahmaputra Valley, concessions to Bengali speakers were seen as undermining Assamese identity.

The study notes that the violence of 1961 reflected both popular anger and institutional failure, with the Centre and the Assam government underestimating the depth of the crisis. Interim measures such as the Shastri Formula failed to address underlying tensions. Political parties were divided, bureaucracies were paralysed, and sections of the media, particularly newspapers published from Calcutta, were accused of aggravating the situation.

The study rejects the notion that the movement was communal in nature. Protesters on all sides included Hindus, Muslims and tribal groups, underscoring that language solidarity often cut across religious lines.

The authors conclude that the fault lines exposed in 1961 continue to shape contemporary debates around citizenship, belonging and indigeneity, particularly in the context of the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act.

Background and Core Issues

Language as Power, Not Just Communication

The Assam Official Language Act (1960–61), declaring Assamese as the sole official language with limited concessions to Bengali in Barak Valley, transformed language into a determinant of political power and economic opportunity.

Official language status directly influenced access to government jobs, administration, land records, and political representation.

Colonial Roots of Linguistic Conflict

British colonial policies imposed Bengali as the administrative language in 19th-century Assam, marginalising Assamese speakers.

Colonial censuses and linguistic classifications hardened previously fluid identities, creating rigid hierarchies.

Post-Independence reversal of this hierarchy, without adequate safeguards for minorities, generated fresh resentment among Bengali-speaking populations, especially in Cachar.

Beyond the 'Assamese vs Bengali' Binary

The study cautions against reducing the conflict to a simple linguistic rivalry. Assam has historically been multilingual and multi-ethnic.

Protest movements cut across religious lines, involving Hindus, Muslims, and tribal communities, highlighting that language-based mobilisation often superseded communal identities.

Institutional and Political Failure

Both the Union and State governments underestimated the emotional and material stakes involved in language policy.

Temporary compromises like the Shastri Formula addressed surface-level demands but failed to resolve structural anxieties.

Political fragmentation, bureaucratic inertia, and media sensationalism further escalated tensions.

Contemporary Relevance

The fault lines exposed in 1961 continue to resonate in present debates over citizenship, indigeneity, and belonging in Assam.

Ongoing controversies surrounding the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) reveal how language, identity, and migration remain deeply intertwined.

The episode underscores the limits of majoritarian approaches within a federal and culturally plural polity.

Conclusion

The Silchar violence of 1961 illustrates that linguistic conflicts are rarely spontaneous; they are shaped by historical legacies, unequal power structures, and policy miscalculations. The study's intersectional approach highlights the need for sensitive, inclusive language policies that recognise diversity as a strength rather than a threat. For India's federal democracy, the lesson is clear: sustainable unity depends not on uniformity, but on accommodation, dialogue, and respect for layered identities.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Discuss how colonial administrative policies contributed to the hardening of linguistic identities in Assam. How did these legacies shape post-Independence conflicts? (150 Words)

Page 06 : GS II : Governance / Prelims Exam

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), launched in 2014, marked a decisive shift in India's approach to sanitation by prioritising universal toilet coverage. With over 12 crore toilets constructed and all villages declared Open Defecation Free (ODF), the programme delivered significant public health and dignity outcomes. However, as India transitions to SBM (Grameen) Phase II, the focus has moved from infrastructure creation to sustainability, particularly the management of faecal sludge. The article highlights how innovative urban–rural partnerships in Maharashtra are addressing this next frontier of sanitation governance.

Recasting sanitation with urban-rural partnerships

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The model in Satara district in Maharashtra is an innovative experiment

When the Swachh Bharat Mission ('Clean India Mission') was launched in 2014, its vision was both simple and transformative; to ensure that every household in India had access to a toilet. In just a decade, this vision has become reality. More than 12 crore household toilets have been built in rural India, and every village has declared itself Open Defecation Free (ODF). This achievement has improved public health, reduced indignities faced by women and vulnerable groups, and marked a turning point in India's development journey.

Focus on waste management

Yet, the success of the sanitation mission has also revealed the next frontier. Toilets are only the starting point. The real challenge lies in managing the resultant faecal waste. In most rural households, septic tanks and pits serve as the primary form of containment. Over time, these fill up and must be desludged at regular intervals. Without safe systems for collection, transport, and treatment, the gains of the ODF movement risk being undermined. It is this challenge that defines the transition to Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen), or SBM-G, Phase II, with its focus on ODF Plus.

ODF Plus goes beyond toilet construction to ensure the sustainability of outcomes through solid and liquid waste management, behavioural change, and safe sanitation service chains. The progress has been encouraging. As of October 2025, more than 5.68 lakh villages, nearly 97% of India's total, have been declared ODF Plus. But faecal sludge management remains one of the most critical gaps in the sanitation chain, especially in peri-urban and rural areas.

Maharashtra has been at the forefront of experimenting with innovative approaches to address this gap. The State has invested in more than 200 faecal sludge treatment plants in urban areas and encouraged co-treatment in 41 sewage treatment plants. These facilities are a backbone of treatment infrastructure to cities, but the challenge lies in extending their benefits to the villages that surround them. It is here that urban-rural partnerships show great promise.

At the gram panchayat level

In Satara district, Maharashtra, such a partnership was put into practice. Satara city's faecal sludge treatment plant, with a capacity of 65 kilo litres a day (KLD), was operating below full capacity. Recognising this, four villages, Jakatwadi, Songaon, Kodoli, and Degaon, have been brought under an arrangement that will allow them to access the city's treatment plant.

Their septic tanks, often never desludged or emptied only at exorbitant rates by informal operators, will be serviced at regular intervals and in a safe way. A private service provider is to be engaged by the gram panchayats, under a contract, to provide scheduled desludging services every five years.

The costs will be recovered through a modest sanitation tax levied by the gram panchayats, ensuring affordability and accountability. A formal agreement between the Satara Panchayat Samiti and the Satara Municipal Council will allow authorised desludging vehicles from the gram panchayats to access the faecal sludge treatment plant and treat the sludge at no cost , making the arrangement sustainable and mutually beneficial.

But not every village can be linked to a treatment system of a city. Some will have to treat their waste independently. An example is Mayani, a large village in Khatav taluka. With the high demand for desludging services, the gram panchayat has agreed to introduce scheduled desludging every five to seven years, managed by either a private operator or local self-help groups.

In addition, Mayani has been selected for the development of a cluster-level faecal sludge treatment plant under the SBM-G, designed to serve around 80 surrounding villages. This approach shows that rural clusters can pool resources to develop standalone treatment infrastructure that meets their needs, while remaining financially and technically viable.

The demonstration of urban-rural linkages and the standalone faecal sludge management business model in Satara district will promote the adoption and the institutionalisation of safe, sustainable sanitation services across rural Maharashtra. It also aims to show that sustaining the gains of ODF and effectively integrating faecal sludge management into rural sanitation require strong collaboration between urban and rural governments, private and public actors, and citizens and institutions.

A model that can be scaled up

If scaled up, such models have the potential to transform not only villages in Maharashtra but also rural communities across the country. By doing so, India can ensure that its sanitation gains are not only celebrated today but can be sustained for generations to come. The true measure of Swachh Bharat will not only be the toilets built but also the systems created to manage them – systems that protect peoples' health, preserve the environment, and uphold the dignity that this mission set out to achieve.

Key Issues and Analysis

From Access to Sustainability

Toilets are only the first step; without safe collection, transport, and treatment of faecal sludge, sanitation gains risk reversal.

SBM-G Phase II's emphasis on ODF Plus reflects a lifecycle approach to sanitation, integrating solid and liquid waste management with behavioural change.

Faecal Sludge Management (FSM) as the Critical Gap

In rural and peri-urban India, septic tanks and pits dominate, but desludging is irregular, costly, and often unsafe.

Informal operators and lack of treatment facilities pose environmental and health risks, contaminating soil and groundwater.

Urban–Rural Partnerships: The Maharashtra Model

Maharashtra's investment in urban faecal sludge treatment plants (FSTPs) and co-treatment in sewage treatment plants has created surplus treatment capacity.

In **Satara**, villages surrounding the city are linked to an underutilised urban FSTP through formal agreements between rural and urban local bodies.

Scheduled desludging, sanitation taxes at the gram panchayat level, and authorised access to urban treatment facilities ensure affordability, accountability, and sustainability.

Decentralised and Cluster-Based Solutions

Not all villages can be linked to cities. The example of Mayani village illustrates a cluster-based approach, where multiple villages pool resources to create standalone FSTPs.

Such decentralisation aligns with principles of cooperative federalism and local self-government under the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments.

Governance and Policy Significance

The model demonstrates effective convergence between rural and urban institutions, public and private actors, and communities.

It also highlights a shift from one-time asset creation to service delivery models, critical for long-term development outcomes.

Conclusion

India's sanitation journey under the Swachh Bharat Mission is entering a more complex but decisive phase. The Maharashtra experience shows that sustaining ODF gains requires institutional innovation, financial viability, and cooperative governance across the rural–urban continuum. By focusing on faecal sludge management through scalable partnerships and decentralised solutions, India can ensure that sanitation reforms are not only symbolic achievements but durable systems that protect public health, the environment, and human dignity for the long term.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Consider the following statements regarding faecal sludge management (FSM) in rural India:

1. Septic tanks and pits are the dominant containment systems in rural households.

2. Lack of safe desludging and treatment can negate the public health gains of toilet construction.

3. FSM is primarily an urban sanitation concern and has limited relevance for rural areas.

Which of the statements given above 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 Exam Practice Question

Ques: Urban–rural partnerships are emerging as a viable governance model in India's sanitation sector. Examine their role in strengthening decentralised service delivery and cooperative federalism. **(150 Words)**

Page 06 : GS III : Indian Economy / Prelims Exam

The December 2025 Goods and Services Tax (GST) collection of ₹1.74 lakh crore underlines the tightening fiscal space confronting the Government of India. Coming in the backdrop of recent GST rate rationalisation and income-tax relief announced in Budget 2025, the data highlight a classic macroeconomic dilemma: how to sustain growth through public investment while adhering to fiscal deficit targets. The article captures this "unenviable choice" at the heart of India's current fiscal policy.

Unenviable choice

Growth-generating capital expenditure can affect fiscal targets

The Goods and Services Tax (GST) revenue of ₹1.74 lakh crore in December 2025 confirms just how narrow the government's fiscal policy space is. The December data reflect the economic activity in November, the second month under the new, reduced GST rates. December's revenues were marginally higher than the ₹1.7 lakh crore collected in November. This was expected. Any belief that the rate reductions would lead to an immediate and sustained increase in demand, and hence GST collections, was pure optimism. In reality, people are more likely to use that extra money to pad up savings or pare down debt, with increased consumption a more medium-term outcome. This happened following the income-tax rejig in Budget 2025 too, when the government effectively exempted people earning up to ₹12 lakh a year from income-tax. The GST and income-tax decisions were both welcome relaxations. However, at least for this year, they are going to cause the government more pain than gain. The most recent data on the government's accounts reflect this. Total tax revenue stood at ₹13.9 lakh crore at the end of November 2025, 3.4% lower than in the same period of 2024-25. On the other hand, the Centre's capital expenditure stood at ₹6.58 lakh crore in the April-November 2025 period, 28% higher than in the same period of the previous year. This jump in capital expenditure was balanced out by a much slower growth in revenue expenditure of 2.1%. However, of the two types of spending, the government has much less discretion over revenue expenditure, which comprises expenses such as salaries, pensions and interest on loans. These cannot be kept subdued for long.

The government has valiantly tried to bolster its earnings through the new excise and GST rates on tobacco products, not to mention the health and security cess on the manufacture of pan masala. However, since all these new rates and cesses will come into effect only on February 1, their full benefit will be felt only in the next financial year. Yet, the troubles for the government's finances do not end there. The remarkably low levels of wholesale inflation this year – averaging -0.08% so far – have also meant that the size of the nominal GDP would likely be smaller than initially budgeted. This means that several ratios pegged to it, most pertinently the fiscal deficit and debt-GDP, would automatically come in larger than earlier estimated. The Centre has displayed commendable fiscal discipline over the last few years. However, this year, it has placed before itself the unenviable choice of either pulling back on growth-generating capital expenditure, or risking missing its fiscal targets.

Core Issues and Analysis

Muted Revenue Response to Tax Reliefs

- GST revenues in December were only marginally higher than November, despite reduced rates.
- This reflects the economic reality that tax cuts do not immediately translate into higher consumption; households often prioritise savings or debt reduction, especially in uncertain macroeconomic conditions.
- A similar pattern was observed after the income-tax rejig in Budget 2025, where short-term revenue foregone has not yet been offset by demand-led growth.

Stress on the Revenue Side of the Budget

- Total tax revenue at ₹13.9 lakh crore (April–November 2025) is 3.4% lower year-on-year, indicating revenue buoyancy concerns.
- Additional measures such as higher excise and GST on tobacco and cesses on pan masala will only yield results in the next financial year, offering limited relief in the current one.

Capital Expenditure vs Revenue Expenditure Dynamics

- Capital expenditure (capex) rose sharply by 28% to ₹6.58 lakh crore, reaffirming the government's growth-oriented strategy.
- Revenue expenditure, dominated by committed liabilities like salaries, pensions, and interest payments, grew modestly at 2.1%.
- However, revenue expenditure offers limited flexibility, making capex the easier — though economically costly — target for adjustment if fiscal pressures intensify.

Impact of Low Inflation and Nominal GDP

Persistently low wholesale inflation (average -0.08%) reduces nominal GDP growth.

This mechanically worsens key fiscal ratios such as fiscal deficit-to-GDP and debt-to-GDP, even if real economic activity remains resilient.

Consequently, fiscal consolidation appears weaker on paper, constraining policy manoeuvrability.

The Policy Dilemma

Pulling back on capex risks undermining medium-term growth, private investment crowd-in, and employment generation.

Persisting with high capex, however, raises the likelihood of missing fiscal deficit targets, potentially unsettling markets and rating agencies.

Conclusion

The current fiscal situation illustrates that sound macroeconomic management often involves choosing between competing priorities rather than ideal outcomes. India's recent emphasis on capital expenditure reflects a strategic preference for growth-led consolidation, but subdued revenues and low inflation have narrowed fiscal space. The challenge ahead lies in maintaining credibility in fiscal discipline while protecting productive public investment — a balance that will determine the sustainability of India's growth trajectory in the medium term.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Capital expenditure has a higher multiplier effect on economic growth compared to revenue expenditure.

1. Capital expenditure directly adds to the fiscal deficit but improves debt sustainability in the medium term.

2. Reduction in capital expenditure is usually preferred over reduction in revenue expenditure during fiscal stress.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 1 and 3 only

(c) 2 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans : a)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Recent fiscal trends indicate a trade-off between maintaining growth-oriented capital expenditure and adhering to fiscal deficit targets. Analyse this dilemma in the context of subdued tax revenues and low inflation. **(150 Words)**

In News : Prelims Exam

The Uttarkashi district has recently reported the first-ever sighting of the Sirkeer Malkoha, a species usually associated with the plains of Uttarakhand. This observation is significant from the perspective of biodiversity documentation and species distribution dynamics in the Himalayan region.

About Sirkeer Malkoha

Common Name: Sirkeer Malkoha / Sirkeer Cuckoo

Scientific Name: Taccocua leschenaultii

Family: Cuculidae (Cuckoo family)

Distinctive Biological Trait

Unlike many cuckoo species, the Sirkeer Malkoha does not practice brood parasitism; it builds its own nest and raises its chicks independently. This feature is often highlighted in prelims-based questions to distinguish it from other cuckoos.

Distribution and Habitat

Geographical Range:

Widely distributed across the sub-Himalayan Indian subcontinent

Also found in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and sporadically in Pakistan and Rajasthan

Habitat Preference:

Scrublands and open, thin forests

Favors hilly terrain but generally occurs below 1,500 metres above mean sea level

Significance of Uttarkashi Record:

Indicates possible altitudinal range expansion or micro-habitat adaptation, relevant in the context of climate change and ecological shifts.

Physical Characteristics

Length: 42–44 cm

Plumage:

Upperparts: Rich olive-brown

Underparts: Lighter shade, often with a yellowish tinge

Beak: Distinctively curved red beak with a yellow tip

Legs: Grey

Sexual Dimorphism:

Absent; males and females appear identical

Behaviour:

Extremely quiet and elusive, making sightings relatively rare

Special Adaptations

Zygodactyl Feet:

Two toes forward and two backward

Facilitates strong grip on branches and efficient movement on the ground

A key anatomical feature relevant for prelims MCQs

Diet

Primarily insectivorous, feeding on:

Small lizards

Insects

Occasionally berries and seeds

Conservation Status

IUCN Red List: Least Concern

Despite its stable conservation status, such range-extension records are crucial for avian biodiversity monitoring and regional ecological assessments.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Consider the following statements regarding the Sirkeer Malkoha (Sirkeer Malkoha):

1. It belongs to the cuckoo family but does not practice brood parasitism.

2. It is typically found in dense evergreen forests above 2,000 metres altitude.

3. It has zygodactyl feet, with two toes pointing forward and two backward.

4. It feeds exclusively on fruits and seeds.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(a) 1 and 3 only

(b) 1, 2 and 3 only

(c) 2 and 4 only

(d) 1, 3 and 4 only

Ans: a)

In News : Prelims Exam

The Minister of State (Independent Charge) informed Parliament about the Central Sector Scheme for Promotion of International Cooperation for AYUSH, aimed at enhancing the global footprint of India's traditional systems of medicine.

Central Sector Scheme for Promotion of International Co-operation (IC) in Ayush

About the Scheme

Type: Central Sector Scheme

Nodal Ministry: Ministry of AYUSH

Coverage: Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa-Rigpa and Homoeopathy

Nature of Support: Financial and institutional support to:

- AYUSH drug manufacturers
- AYUSH service providers
- Academic and research institutions

Core Focus: Boosting **exports of AYUSH products and services** and strengthening India's soft power in healthcare.

Objectives

The scheme seeks to:

Promote global awareness and acceptance of AYUSH systems of medicine.

Facilitate international recognition of Ayurveda, Yoga, Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha, Sowa-Rigpa and Homoeopathy.

Encourage stakeholder interaction and market development for AYUSH at the international level.

Support international exchange of experts and information for propagation of AYUSH knowledge systems.

Promote academics and research through establishment of **AYUSH Academic Chairs** in foreign universities and institutions.

Key Components of the Scheme

1. International Exchange of Experts

Exchange programmes for AYUSH experts, professionals and government officers.

Knowledge-sharing and institutional collaboration with foreign countries.

2. Incentives for Global Outreach

Financial incentives to:

AYUSH drug manufacturers

Entrepreneurs

AYUSH hospitals and institutions

Purpose: Participation in international exhibitions, trade fairs, road shows and promotional events.

3. International Market Development

Support for activities aimed at:

Market access

Branding of AYUSH systems

Regulatory facilitation abroad.

4. Overseas AYUSH Infrastructure

Establishment of:

AYUSH Information Cells in foreign countries.

AYUSH Health Centres / Institutions abroad.

Strengthening of existing AYUSH centres overseas.

5. International Fellowship and Scholarship Programme

Scholarships/fellowships for **foreign nationals** to pursue AYUSH courses in:

Ayurveda

Yoga

Unani

Siddha

Homoeopathy

Courses undertaken in **premier AYUSH institutions in India**.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques : Under the Scheme for Promotion of International Cooperation for AYUSH, incentives are provided for:

1. Participation in international trade fairs and exhibitions

2. Establishment of AYUSH health centres in foreign countries

3. Domestic insurance coverage for AYUSH treatments

Select the correct answer using the code below:

(a) 1 only

(b) 1 and 2 only

(c) 2 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

Page : 06 : Editorial Analysis

Recasting sanitation with urban-rural partnerships

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The model in Satara district in Maharashtra is an innovative experiment

When the Swachh Bharat Mission ('Clean India Mission') was launched in 2014, its vision was both simple and transformative; to ensure that every household in India had access to a toilet. In just a decade, this vision has become reality. More than 12 crore household toilets have been built in rural India, and every village has declared itself Open Defecation Free (ODF). This achievement has improved public health, reduced indignities faced by women and vulnerable groups, and marked a turning point in India's development journey.

Focus on waste management

Yet, the success of the sanitation mission has also revealed the next frontier. Toilets are only the starting point. The real challenge lies in managing the resultant faecal waste. In most rural households, septic tanks and pits serve as the primary form of containment. Over time, these fill up and must be desludged at regular intervals. Without safe systems for collection, transport, and treatment, the gains of the ODF movement risk being undermined. It is this challenge that defines the transition to Swachh Bharat Mission (Grameen), or SBM-G, Phase II, with its focus on ODF Plus.

ODF Plus goes beyond toilet construction to ensure the sustainability of outcomes through solid and liquid waste management, behavioural change, and safe sanitation service chains. The progress has been encouraging. As of October 2025, more than 5.68 lakh villages, nearly 97% of India's total, have been declared ODF Plus. But faecal sludge management remains one of the most critical gaps in the sanitation chain, especially in peri-urban and rural areas.

Maharashtra has been at the forefront of experimenting with innovative approaches to address this gap. The State has invested in more than 200 faecal sludge treatment plants in urban areas and encouraged co-treatment in 41 sewage treatment plants. These facilities are a backbone of treatment infrastructure to cities, but the challenge lies in extending their benefits to the villages that surround them. It is here that urban-rural partnerships show great promise.

At the gram panchayat level

In Satara district, Maharashtra, such a partnership was put into practice. Satara city's faecal sludge treatment plant, with a capacity of 65 kilo litres a day (KLD), was operating below full capacity. Recognising this, four villages, Jakatwadi, Songaon, Kodoli, and Degaon, have been brought under an arrangement that will allow them to access the city's treatment plant.

Their septic tanks, often never desludged or emptied only at exorbitant rates by informal operators, will be serviced at regular intervals and in a safe way. A private service provider is to be engaged by the gram panchayats, under a contract, to provide scheduled desludging services every five years.

The costs will be recovered through a modest sanitation tax levied by the gram panchayats, ensuring affordability and accountability. A formal agreement between the Satara Panchayat Samiti and the Satara Municipal Council will allow authorised desludging vehicles from the gram panchayats to access the faecal sludge treatment plant and treat the sludge at no cost , making the arrangement sustainable and mutually beneficial.

But not every village can be linked to a treatment system of a city. Some will have to treat their waste independently. An example is Mayani, a large village in Khatav taluka. With the high demand for desludging services, the gram panchayat has agreed to introduce scheduled desludging every five to seven years, managed by either a private operator or local self-help groups.

In addition, Mayani has been selected for the development of a cluster-level faecal sludge treatment plant under the SBM-G, designed to serve around 80 surrounding villages. This approach shows that rural clusters can pool resources to develop standalone treatment infrastructure that meets their needs, while remaining financially and technically viable.

The demonstration of urban-rural linkages and the standalone faecal sludge management business model in Satara district will promote the adoption and the institutionalisation of safe, sustainable sanitation services across rural Maharashtra. It also aims to show that sustaining the gains of ODF and effectively integrating faecal sludge management into rural sanitation require strong collaboration between urban and rural governments, private and public actors, and citizens and institutions.

A model that can be scaled up

If scaled up, such models have the potential to transform not only villages in Maharashtra but also rural communities across the country. By doing so, India can ensure that its sanitation gains are not only celebrated today but can be sustained for generations to come. The true measure of Swachh Bharat will not only be the toilets built but also the systems created to manage them – systems that protect peoples' health, preserve the environment, and uphold the dignity that this mission set out to achieve.

GS Paper III : Environment

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question : Waste-to-energy and bio-methanation projects are often projected as solutions to India's urban waste problem. Critically evaluate their potential and limitations from an environmental and economic perspective. **(150 words)**

Context :

Rapid urbanisation has made waste management one of India's most pressing governance and environmental challenges. The discussion at COP30 (Belem, 2025), which placed waste and circularity at the centre of the climate agenda, reinforces the global recognition that waste is not merely a sanitation issue but a climate, public health, and economic concern. India's own advocacy of Mission LiFE and the experience of the Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) provide a strong policy foundation to reimagine urban waste as a resource rather than a liability.

Core Issues Highlighted

Rising Urban Waste Burden

Urban India is projected to generate 165 million tonnes of waste annually by 2030, increasing to 436 million tonnes by 2050.

This growth directly contributes to methane emissions, air pollution, groundwater contamination, and public health crises.

Limits of Conventional Waste Management

Linear models of "collect–dump–burn" are environmentally unsustainable and fiscally inefficient.

Dumpsites and poor segregation negate gains made under cleanliness drives, despite notable successes in eliminating open defecation.

Plastic and Construction & Demolition (C&D) Waste

Plastic waste poses ecological and health risks and challenges recycling markets due to quality and economic viability issues.

C&D waste, driven by unplanned urban expansion, clogs cities and remains poorly regulated despite existing rules.

Wastewater and Urban Water Security

Inadequate reuse of treated wastewater aggravates urban water stress.

Circular water management is essential to meet future urban and industrial demand.

Circular Economy as the Strategic Solution

The article underscores circularity as the only viable long-term pathway for sustainable urbanisation:

Organic waste can be converted into compost, biogas, and energy through decentralised and large-scale bio-methanation.

Dry waste, including plastics, requires robust segregation, material recovery facilities, and effective Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) frameworks.

C&D waste can be recycled into secondary construction materials, reducing environmental damage and input costs.

Wastewater reuse aligns sanitation goals with water security and climate resilience.

The Garbage Free Cities (GFC) target and initiatives like the Cities Coalition for Circularity (C-3) indicate an emerging governance architecture for urban circularity.

Key Challenges

Weak segregation at source and inconsistent citizen participation

Limited municipal finances and technical capacity

Poor inter-departmental coordination and enforcement of rules

Market, quality, and trust deficits for recycled products

Incomplete integration of circularity with urban planning and building regulations

Governance and Policy Imperatives

Strengthen enforcement of waste management rules, including upcoming C&D waste regulations.

Expand EPR to all categories of dry waste.

Incentivise private sector participation and innovation in recycling technologies.

Invest in monitoring, testing infrastructure, and municipal capacity building.

Foster behavioural change through incentives, not just penalties.

Conclusion

Transforming waste-ridden urban India is not a matter of urban aesthetics but an existential necessity for public health, climate mitigation, and economic sustainability. Circular economy principles offer India a realistic pathway to decouple urban growth from environmental degradation. With strong political will, institutional coordination, citizen partnership, and market support, waste can become a driver of green growth rather than a symbol of urban failure. For India's cities, circularity is no longer optional—it is foundational to their future.