

A person is silhouetted against a bright sky, sitting on the very edge of a dark, overhanging rock ledge. Below them, a vast valley unfolds, featuring a calm lake that reflects the surrounding landscape. The valley is framed by dark, rugged mountains, and the background shows layers of distant, hazy mountain ranges under a clear, light sky. The overall mood is one of solitude and contemplation.

*A comfort zone is a beautiful place,
but nothing ever grows there.*

Important Issues of the Day

- **Rat-Hole Mining – Page No. 1, GS 3**
- **Intent and outcome – Page No. 8, GS 3**
- **Environmental protection – Page No. 8, GS 3**
- **Health-care – Page No. 8, GS 2**
- **More money for defence – Page No. 8, GS 3**
- **Defence Acquisition Council (DAC) – Page No. 12, Prelims**
- **Gulf Cooperation Council – Page No. 15, Prelims**

18 killed in blast at illegal coal mine in Meghalaya

The explosion, likely caused by dynamite, had trapped several persons at an unspecified depth, say police; CM promises action after one of the worst mining tragedies in the State since 2012

Rahul Karmakar
GUWAHATI

An explosion in an illegally operated rat-hole coal mine in Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills district killed 18 miners on Thursday, officials said.

This is one of the biggest mining-related tragedies since July 2012, when 15 miners died in a flooded mine in the State's South Garo Hills district. Two years later, in 2014, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banned the hazardous mining method.

Vikash Kumar, East Jaintia Hills district's Superintendent of Police, said the police received information about an explosion at an illegal coal mine at Mynsyngat in the Thangsko area around 11 a.m. A team rushed to the spot and confirmed that an explosion, suspected to have been caused by dynamite, had trapped several persons at an unspecified depth. "We



Deep death traps

Many workers have died in Meghalaya's rat-hole coal mines before and after the NGT banned the practice in April in 2014. Some of the major mishaps:

■ **July 2012:** Underground stream flooded a mine in South Garo Hills district, killing at least 15 miners

■ **Dec. 2013:** Five fell to death after a cable of a carriage mechanism breaks in East Jaintia Hills district

■ **Dec. 13, 2018:** At least 15 drowned in a flooded 370-foot-deep mine in East Jaintia Hills

■ **Jan. 21, 2021:** Six killed

after a crane snaps in East Jaintia Hills district

■ **May 30, 2021:** Five miners died after a dynamite blast caused flooding of a mine in East Jaintia Hills district

■ **Jan. 7, 2025:** At least three killed on Assam-Meghalaya border as a mine wall collapsed

■ **Feb. 5, 2026:** At least 16 died after a suspected dynamite blast trapped them

recovered 18 bodies. An injured person, initially rushed to a community health centre, was referred to a higher medical centre for treatment," he said.

District officials said teams from the National Disaster Response Force and the State Disaster Response Force have been engaged at the site to continue with the rescue and recovery efforts. Officials

said they were trying to identify the victims, although locals said most of the deceased were from Assam.

Inquiry ordered

Expressing sympathies to the families of those killed, Meghalaya Chief Minister Conrad K. Sangma said the government has ordered an inquiry. "Accountability will be fixed, and those res-

possible will face strict legal action," he said. The Chief Minister also announced an ex gratia of ₹3 lakh for the next of kin of each deceased worker.

"We have started an investigation," Mr. Kumar said, adding the police were gathering information about the mine owner.

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- **This is one of the biggest mining-related tragedies since July 2012, when 15 miners died in a flooded mine in the State's South Garo Hills district. Two years later, in 2014, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banned the hazardous mining method.**
- **Rat-hole mining is a primitive, crude, labor-intensive and hazardous method of coal mining.**
- **It involves digging of very small tunnels, usually only 3-4 feet deep and 2 to 3 feet wide into the ground, in which workers, more often children, enter and extract coal.**
- **It is typically practiced in northeastern India, particularly in Meghalaya and Assam.**

Reasons for Rat-Hole Mining:

- **Poverty:** Due to limited livelihood options, local tribal communities often turn to rat-hole mining as a means of survival.
- **The immediate financial gain from selling extracted coal, despite the high risks, is a significant pull for those struggling economically.**
- **Land Ownership Issues:** Ambiguities in land titles and lack of proper regulation create opportunities for illegal mining operations to exploit gaps in governance and persist without accountability.
- **Coal Demand:** Continuous demand for coal, both legal and illegal, sustains the practice.
- **Middlemen and illegal traders further perpetuate this cycle by creating a market for unlawfully mined coal.**

- **Safety Hazards:** The narrow tunnels are prone to collapses, often trapping miners, while poor ventilation leads to suffocation. The lack of safety measures results in frequent accidents, injuries, and life-threatening diseases.
- **Environmental Impact:** Rat-hole mining contributes to deforestation, soil erosion, and water contamination.
- **Social Issues:** It causes exploitation of child labor and poorly paid workers. Also, leads to displacement of local communities.
- **Rat hole mining is illegal and falls under the jurisdiction of the State/District administration to address as a law and order issue.**

- **In 2014, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) banned rat-hole mining due to numerous incidents of fatalities, particularly during the monsoon season.**
- **The Supreme Court of India, in July 2019, upheld the ban on rat hole mining in Meghalaya, originally imposed by the NGT in 2014.**
- **SC ruled that such mining is illegal under the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957.**
- **International Context: There's no specific international law directly addressing rat-hole mining.**
- **However, international regulations promote sustainable mining methods and prioritise worker safety, indirectly influencing member states to adopt similar practices.**

Mains Question

*“Mining activities in North-East India present a paradox of economic opportunity and ecological fragility.” Examine the nature of mining in the region and critically analyse its environmental, social and governance challenges. Suggest a sustainable way forward.
(250 words)*

*“उत्तर-पूर्व भारत में खनन गतिविधियाँ आर्थिक अवसर और पारिस्थितिक संवेदनशीलता के बीच एक विरोधाभास प्रस्तुत करती हैं।” क्षेत्र में खनन की प्रकृति की चर्चा करते हुए इसके पर्यावरणीय, सामाजिक तथा प्रशासनिक चुनौतियों का समालोचनात्मक विश्लेषण कीजिए।
सतत समाधान सुझाइए।
(250 शब्द)*

10.56 lakh names cut on draft rolls in Assam

Special revision held by EC in the State from November 22 to December 20 to ensure 'accurate, transparent' electoral list, says CEO; hearings begin for 32 lakh 'unmapped' electors in Bengal

Shiv Sahay Singh
Moyurie Som
KOLKATA

The names of 10.56 lakh voters have been deleted on the draft electoral rolls of Assam which were published on Saturday after a house-to-house verification of the voter lists during the special revision exercise conducted by the Election Commission in the State from November 22 to December 20.

Of the voters whose names were deleted, almost 4.79 lakh are dead, over 5.23 lakh have shifted, and 53,619 were found to have duplicate entries.

The EC has completed a special intensive revision (SIR) of electoral rolls in Bihar, and the SIR is under way in 12 States and Union Territories. Unlike these, however, Assam is undergoing a "special revision".

In West Bengal, hearings began on Saturday for around 32 lakh "unmapped" electors, as part of the SIR. In all, 3,234 desks were set up across the State where voters with no recorded links to the 2002 voters' list queued up to get their identification recorded and verified. A

Roll in numbers

The draft rolls in Assam have been published after house-to-house verification of electoral rolls under a 'special revision'

Total number of electors in the State: **2,52,02,775**

Number of 'D voters' (whose cases are pending before

Foreigners' Tribunals) **93,021**

Names deleted following death of voters **4,78,992**

Number of voters moved from registered addresses **5,23,680**



A booth-level officer during enumeration for the 'special revision' in Guwahati, Assam. ANI

Demographically similar entities **53,619**

high-ranking official at the Chief Electoral Officer's office told *The Hindu* that over 25,000 out of the expected 32,000 electors attended hearings across the State.

"The Election Commission of India has concluded the House-to-House (H2H) verification phase of the Special Revision (SR) - 2026 in Assam. This exercise aimed to ensure an inclusive, accurate, and transparent electoral roll for the state," said a statement from the Chief Electoral Officer (CEO) of Assam.

Household visits

The total number of electors in Assam, according to the CEO's office, is

2,52,02,775. However, this includes more than 93,000 "D voters", whose cases are pending before Foreigners' Tribunals and who are not permitted to vote in elections until their citizenship is upheld by a court. The 61,03,103 household visits across the State covered the 2,51,09,752 voters excluding the "D voters", the CEO's office said. Claims and objections over the roll can be filed till January 22.

New electors can apply for a claim to be included in the roll by filling Form 6, the CEO's statement said, adding that electors can submit Form 7 to object to the proposed inclusion of a name or apply to delete a

Family members dispersed on Kerala rolls

THIRUVANANTHAPURAM

After cases of names of family members being scattered within a polling station or across multiple stations emerged following the release of the draft electoral rolls in Kerala, the State's Chief Electoral Officer has said that corrective measures will be taken. » [PAGE 3](#)

name on the existing rolls. People who have shifted away from their earlier registered address must use Form 8 to apply for a change of residence in the electoral records.

The final electoral roll will be published on February 10. The State is scheduled to hold Assembly election in 2026. In the draft rolls published after the first phase of the SIR in West Bengal on December 16, the names of 58,20,899 voters were struck off the rolls, reducing the electorate to 7.08 crore.

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TRINAMOOL QUESTIONS EC

» [PAGE 7](#)

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Mains Question

Q. *“Access to safe and clean drinking water is not merely a welfare issue but a foundational requirement for public health, economic productivity, and social equity.”*

In this context, examine the challenges faced by India in ensuring universal access to clean drinking water. Suggest policy and institutional measures to achieve sustainable water security.

(250 Words | 15 Marks)

प्र. *“सुरक्षित एवं स्वच्छ पेयजल तक पहुँच केवल एक कल्याणकारी विषय नहीं, बल्कि सार्वजनिक स्वास्थ्य, आर्थिक उत्पादकता और सामाजिक समानता की आधारशिला है।”*

इस संदर्भ में भारत में सभी के लिए स्वच्छ पेयजल उपलब्ध कराने में आने वाली चुनौतियों का विश्लेषण कीजिए। सतत जल सुरक्षा प्राप्त करने हेतु उपयुक्त नीतिगत एवं संस्थागत उपाय सुझाइए।

(250 शब्द | 15 अंक)

DAC to weigh acquisition of Rafale ahead of Macron visit

Eighteen aircraft are likely to be acquired in flyaway condition to meet immediate needs, with the rest to be manufactured in India, an official says; the source code will remain with the French side

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

Ahead of French President Emmanuel Macron's visit to India for the artificial intelligence Summit, the Defence Acquisition Council (DAC), chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, is scheduled to meet in the second week of February to consider key procurement proposals aimed at enhancing the operational capabilities of the armed forces.

A senior defence official confirmed that the DAC meeting would grant Acceptance of Necessity for several acquisition proposals. During his stay, President Macron is expected to meet Mr. Singh to discuss bilateral defence cooperation between India and France.

Another defence official said that multiple proposals will be tabled at the meeting, including the acquisition of 114 Rafale fighter aircraft from France. Following DAC clearance, the proposal will be placed



The procurement will take the total Rafale fleet in India to 176, with the IAF already operating 36. PTI

before the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS), chaired by the Prime Minister, for final approval.

Under the proposed plan, the bulk of the aircraft will be manufactured in India, with indigenous components accounting for approximately 30% to 40% of the overall content, providing a significant boost to domestic defence manufacturing. The official added that 18 aircraft are likely to be acquired in flyaway condition to meet the Indian Air Force's im-

mediate operational requirements, while the remaining jets will be manufactured in India. The source code, however, will remain with the French side.

Largest acquisitions

Defence experts noted that once cleared by the CCS, the deal will rank among the largest defence acquisitions undertaken by India. The procurement will take the total Rafale fleet in the country to 176 aircraft, with the IAF already oper-

ating 36 Rafale jets and the Indian Navy having placed orders for 26 naval variants last year.

The AI summit is expected to see participation from representatives of several countries, including Brazil, Switzerland, Greece, Serbia, Spain and Finland.

Separately, Indian Air Force chief Air Chief Marshal A.P. Singh, in his interaction with presspersons earlier, had flagged concerns over delays in fighter aircraft deliveries, noting that Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd. has fallen behind schedule, partly due to delays in the supply of the F404-IN20 engines from GE.

The IAF has repeatedly underscored the urgency of strengthening its fighter fleet amid a rapidly evolving regional security environment. "To maintain a comfortable strength, we need two squadrons, around 30 to 40 aircraft, produced every year. Replacement is not a choice; it's a necessity," the Air Chief had said earlier.

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Prelims FACT

- **It is an overarching structure for strategic defence acquisition planning and oversight, ensuring coordinated decision-making across India's defence establishment.**
- **Chairman: Union Minister of Defence.**

Functions

- **Gives approval to Capital acquisitions in the Long Term Perspective Plan.**
- **Monitors the progress of major projects.**
- **Grants acceptance of necessity for acquisition proposals.**

15. With reference to India's defence, consider the following pairs:

Aircraft Type	Description
I. Dornier-228	Maritime patrol aircraft
II. IL-76	Supersonic combat aircraft
III. C-17 Globemaster III	Military transport aircraft

How many of the pairs are correctly matched?

- (a) Only one
- (b) Only two**
- (c) All three
- (d) None

Mains Question

Defence procurement in India has undergone significant reforms in recent years. Critically examine the objectives, key features and limitations of India's defence procurement framework in achieving self-reliance and strategic autonomy.

(250 words)

भारत में रक्षा खरीद प्रणाली में हाल के वर्षों में महत्वपूर्ण सुधार किए गए हैं। आत्मनिर्भरता एवं रणनीतिक स्वायत्तता प्राप्त करने में भारत की रक्षा खरीद रूपरेखा के उद्देश्यों, प्रमुख विशेषताओं तथा सीमाओं की समालोचनात्मक समीक्षा कीजिए।

(250 शब्द)

India, GCC nations sign terms of reference for FTA

Appropriate that we enter a robust trading arrangement for greater free flow of goods and services, and predictability, stability to policy: Goyal

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan
NEW DELHI

Representatives of India and the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on Thursday signed the Terms of Reference for negotiations on a free trade agreement (FTA). The GCC countries are together India's largest merchandise trade partners, with total merchandise trade exceeding that done with even the EU and the U.S.

The Terms of Reference (ToR) were signed by India's chief negotiator for the FTA, Additional Secretary Ajay Bhadoo, and his counterpart representing the Secretariat General of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Raja Al Marzouki. The signing of the ToR is a necessary precursor for the start of formal negotiations. The GCC countries



The GCC countries are together India's largest merchandise trade partners.

are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

"It is most appropriate that we now enter into a much stronger and robust trading arrangement, which will enable a greater free flow of goods and services, bring predictability and stability to policy, help encourage greater degree of investments and take our bilateral relations between the six nation GCC

group and India to greater heights," Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal, who presided over the signing, said in his speech.

Bilateral benefit

Mr. Goyal pointed out that the two sides could significantly benefit from each other, with India's workforce both within the GCC countries as well as in India standing to gain from the eventual agreement.

"The GCC countries can help us with further diversification and growth of our energy sources, opportunities for our youth, and massive amounts of investments that different countries have already committed at different points of time, which will further get an impetus with a free trade agreement between India and the GCC nations," he added.

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- **The GCC countries are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.**
- **"The GCC countries can help us with further diversification and growth of our energy sources, opportunities for our youth, and massive amounts of investments that different countries have already committed at different points of time, which will further get an impetus with a free trade agreement between India and the GCC nations," he added.**

- **The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) was established in 1981 by six Arab states with shared heritage.**
- **The member states include Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman in West Asia.**
- **Shared Vision and Objectives: The GCC's objective is to promote unity through political, economic, and cultural alignment among member nations.**
- **This unity is based on common Islamic values, tribal links, and mutual security and development goals.**
- **Institutional Framework: The GCC operates through its Supreme Council, Ministerial Council, and Secretariat headquartered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.**

Q. Which of the following is not a member of 'Gulf Cooperation Council'? (2016)

(a) Iran

(b) Saudi Arabia

(c) Oman

(d) Kuwait

Mains Question

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) occupies a central place in India's extended neighbourhood policy. Examine the strategic, economic and socio-cultural dimensions of India–GCC relations.

(250 words)

खाड़ी सहयोग परिषद (GCC) भारत की विस्तारित पड़ोस नीति में एक केंद्रीय स्थान रखती है। भारत–GCC संबंधों के रणनीतिक, आर्थिक तथा सामाजिक-सांस्कृतिक आयामों की विवेचना कीजिए।

(250 शब्द)

Intent and outcome

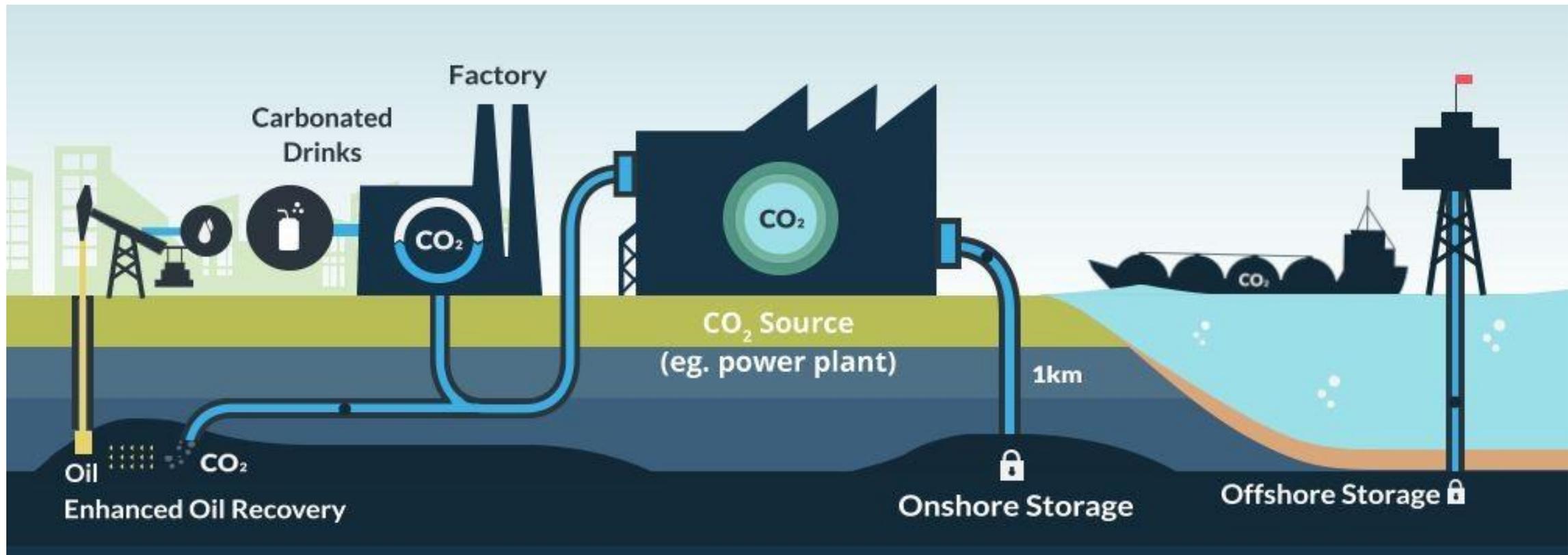
India must match its climate ambitions with higher allocations

Union Budgets began reflecting greater climate concerns from 2021, in the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a modest ₹4,500 crore to localise solar photovoltaic production and to reduce India's dependence on Chinese imports. But there has been a cautious, disjointed approach to the scale and allocations. While five broad sectors (cement, steel, aluminium and fertilizers; decentralised solar power; greening irrigation pump sets; green hydrogen; and nuclear energy) received attention in Budget 2026-27, the most prominent announcement was the proposed five-year outlay of ₹20,000 crore for Carbon Capture, Utilisation and Storage (CCUS). This is a modest provision for a suite of costly and complex technologies. The allocation signals that India is entering a pilot and demonstration phase, rather than embarking on immediate industrial deployment. While operational examples exist in Norway, Canada and the U.S., scaling CCUS has proven expensive and uneven. The technology is primarily relevant to sectors where emissions are embedded in the production process. The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will impose carbon costs on imports of high-emission products, so for India, decarbonising industrial production is no longer only a climate imperative. It is now a question of export competitiveness, particularly for steel and aluminium, which form the bulk of India's CBAM-exposed exports to the EU.

The Budget also substantially scales up the PM Surya Ghar Muft Bijli Yojana rooftop solar scheme – ₹22,000 crore in 2026-27 from ₹17,000 crore (RE) for the current year. It is a welcome push towards decentralised energy systems that reduce land pressure, transmission losses and household energy costs. However, implementation challenges remain, including discom cooperation and upfront finance. Similarly, allocations for PM-KUSUM (solar irrigation pumps), have been sustained at ₹5,000 crore. Revised estimates suggest stronger-than-anticipated absorption. For nuclear energy, the government has extended zero basic customs duty on imports of nuclear plant equipment until 2035. While this reduces input costs, nuclear power remains capital intensive, with long construction timelines and financing risks. Recent legal changes permit private participation, but whether private capital will enter a sector entwined with national security, safety and liability concerns remains uncertain. Green hydrogen, despite budgetary support, continues to see modest actual spending, highlighting the persistent gap between policy ambition and execution. Overall, India's climate budget for 2026-27 repeats a pattern: big on intent, cautious on allocations, and uncertain in its ability to mobilise the private capital required to accelerate decarbonisation across vital sectors.

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- **CCUS is a suite of technologies that capture CO₂ emissions from major sources like power plants, refineries, and industries, or remove CO₂ from the atmosphere.**
- **Working of CCUS: CCUS involves three main stages — capture, transport, and storage (or use) of CO₂.**

Capture methods include:

- **Post-combustion: Separates CO₂ from flue gas using solvents after fuel combustion.**
- **Pre-combustion: Converts fuel into a hydrogen–CO₂ mix before burning, then separates CO₂.**
- **Oxy-fuel combustion: Burns fuel in pure oxygen, producing CO₂ and steam for easy capture.**
- **Captured CO₂ is compressed and transported via pipeline, ship, rail, or road and injected into deep geological formations like depleted oil and gas fields or saline aquifers for long-term storage. Alternatively, it may be used in commercial applications.**

In the context of mitigating the impending global warming due to anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide, which of the following can be the potential sites for carbon sequestration?

- 1. Abandoned and uneconomic coal seams**
- 2. Depleted oil and gas reservoirs**
- 3. Subterranean deep saline formations**

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

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

Mains Question

Climate change poses multidimensional challenges to India's developmental trajectory. Examine its impact on agriculture, water resources and livelihoods, and suggest adaptive policy measures.

(250 words)

जलवायु परिवर्तन भारत के विकास पथ के समक्ष बहुआयामी चुनौतियाँ प्रस्तुत करता है। कृषि, जल संसाधनों तथा आजीविका पर इसके प्रभावों की विवेचना करते हुए अनुकूलन संबंधी नीतिगत उपाय सुझाइए।

(250 शब्द)

More, and less

The health-care component of Budget 2026 is a mixed bag

While this year's health-care allocations are aggressive in certain key sectors, it has failed expectations that Budget 2026 would be a milestone for increased health-care spending as a percentage of GDP. The total allocation this year is over ₹1.05 lakh crore, marking an increase of about 10% over the previous year's revised estimates. However, experts have pointed out that the 2026 health budget is approximately 1.9% of the total government expenditure, and about 0.26% of GDP. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman fronted the Biopharma SHAKTI scheme, among the projects with the single highest budgetary allocations this year. This ₹10,000 crore government initiative will transform India into a manufacturing hub for biologics and biosimilars over the next five years, she said. A pan-country clinical state-of-the-art trial infrastructure will also be created, through a network of 1,000 accredited clinical trial sites. No doubt, this will take care of an angle that has long been languishing in India – research and development. Additionally, the government will set up three new National Institutes of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (NIPER) and modernise seven existing units, besides establishing a second NIPER campus in north India and two

lakh allied health professionals over the next five years, while another 1.5 lakh care workers will also be trained to take care of the health needs of the elderly; this is appreciable at a time when India is well on its way towards becoming a grey nation, with fertility levels falling. In the area of making care affordable, the government has exempted 17 cancer medicines and several treatments for rare diseases from customs and import duties, while also reducing the tax collected at source on medical and educational remittances from 5% to 2%. For patients suffering from these conditions, and their families, this will no doubt lead to better affordability for treatments.

Primarily under fire was the Union government's stodgy refusal to increase the allocation for health care to reach 2.5% of GDP by 2025, as committed in the National Health Policy of 2017. Public health activists have lambasted the drop in funding for the National Health Mission, despite the fact that funds have been consistently well utilised here. While fiscal devolution has enabled States to invest more heavily in the health sector, there are concerns, however, that the Centre steadily reducing its share will result in patchy outcomes, not even improvements, in the health-care sector of the country.

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- **Additionally, the government will set up three new National Institutes of Pharmaceutical Education and Research (NIPER) and modernise seven existing units, besides establishing a second NIMHANS campus in north India and two upgraded national mental health institutes.**
- **The government has set itself a target of training one lakh allied health professionals over the next five years, while another 1.5 lakh care workers will also be trained to take care of the health needs of the elderly; this is appreciable at a time when India is well on its way towards becoming a grey nation, with fertility levels falling.**
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Mains Question

Public expenditure on health in India has remained persistently low compared to its developmental needs. Examine the trends, structural constraints and implications of low public health spending in India.

(250 words)

भारत में स्वास्थ्य पर सार्वजनिक व्यय विकासात्मक आवश्यकताओं की तुलना में लगातार कम रहा है। भारत में स्वास्थ्य व्यय की प्रवृत्तियों, संरचनात्मक बाधाओं तथा इसके निहितार्थों की विवेचना कीजिए।

(250 शब्द)

More money for defence, now fix the process

The Finance Minister has been rather generous. The new defence budget is being touted as being the first double digit jump in India's defence expenditure in decades, ever since its steady decline from 2017. At 2% of the Budget, it sends a signal of strategic determination in a more than unusually turbulent world. The funds will have to be used prudently and expeditiously, which demand systemic change, not tinkering, in the Budget process. As 'frenemies' abound and a tenuous 'rules-based order' collapses, there is no time to lose.

The good and the bad

The most talked about aspect is the Budget's 15% hike hitting 2% of GDP (up from 1.9% last year). Second, in a notable shift, capital expenditure has outpaced the revenue budget, up more than 22%, reversing years of neglect. Third, there is a clear thrust toward modernisation. The Indian Air Force gets a hefty 32% rise, while the Indian Army has got a 30% hike for heavy vehicles and weapons.

Oddly, the Indian Navy, with its ambitious commitments in the Indian Ocean, gets 3%. Ironically, this is probably due to its success in indigenisation, and a proven capability to absorb allotted funds.

All this is good. But the rupee has weakened substantially against the dollar, which means that payment for capital goods such as aircraft has become more expensive. It is not all bad news. Defence exports are rising – ₹23,000 crore last year as against ₹1,000 crore in 2014. A chunk of the Indian Army's mobility equipment is made here by the Tatas, Ashok Leyland and others. But this does eat into the 'double digit' increase.

There are also the pension payments which



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A defence budget has to also be seen as a tool that powers growth

rose by 6.56% but it is still at 21.84% when compared to 27.95% for capital expenditure of the Ministry of Defence (MoD)'s allocation. Before FY1987-88, they came under central government pensions and were not clubbed with the defence budget. Despite this, the Budget was still 3.31% of GDP. The size of the economy then was less than half of what it is today, but it still provides a certain perspective.

It might be time to reinvent that wheel.

Bureaucracy and delays

A welcome aspect is that 75% of the capital acquisition budget for procurement has been earmarked for domestic industries, which includes private players. The government's thrust in this direction has been consistent, with defence production recording a 174% surge from 2014-15. But beyond this is the reality of a complex bureaucratic system, one aspect of which is the L-1 (lowest cost) rule which favours large industries rather than innovators who are vital for a tech-intensive industry. They cannot compete, especially when transitioning to manufacturing. This needs not only hand holding but also clarity in forward planning and promised volumes.

The next factor is this – the interminable delays in vital programmes such as Project 75 for submarines approved in 1997. Expected delivery times are now in the mid 2030s. The Rafale fighter aircraft deal which was envisioned in the 1990s, saw results only 2019-20. It is unsurprising then that the MoD had to return ₹12,500 crore of its capital allocation in FY2024-25.

It is time to re-examine the repeated demand for a Non-Lapsable Defence Modernisation Fund, which was announced in the FY 2004-05 Budget

speech but never implemented. Financial convenience cannot result in the defence industry being held hostage.

R&D lies scattered

A key area is research and development (R&D). Funds for the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and a slew of research organisations have been increased; many have potential benefits for defence production. But research is segmented. Despite often being dual use, it seldom translates into better defence capabilities. India's overall research budget also remains 0.66% of GDP. Compare that to Japan at 3.70%, funded primarily by the private sector. In India, there is a near absence of private sector R&D. Those in the big league must loosen up and unify research and its direction.

A 'pacifist' country such as Japan has now allocated 2.2% for its defence. So has Australia with a far lower threat profile. Europe too is moving to larger allocations. At issue here is the 'guns vs butter' lens through which the defence budget is viewed. Instead, it needs to be melded with the vision of Viksit Bharat's \$30 trillion economy. The Border Roads Organisation, for instance, delivers the connectivity for 'Vibrant Villages' programme which is vital to border development.

In another example, the Prime Minister remarked that indigenous shipbuilding has a 6.5 multiplier effect on employment, with its multiple ancillary industries. This applies almost across the board. The Budget has to be seen as a tool for powering growth, rather than being a 'non development' section. Once this is done, the processes will follow.

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The fading of India's environmental jurisprudence

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From its Aravalli ranges to its mangroves, India is at the same moral crossroads that Amitav Ghosh captures in *The Hungry Tide*, where the tides remember what the law chooses to forget. If environmental justice continues to be diluted in the name of development, the Constitution of India risks becoming a silent witness to ecological loss, where the consequences, like the tide itself, will return with unforgiving force.

On December 18, 2025, for non-coal mining projects, the policy of land acquisition first and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) later was changed. Now, an EIA can be done without details about the location and area. The Supreme Court of India helped in the dilution of environmental justice by recalling the case, *Vanashakti vs Union Of India (2025)* that banned retrospective environmental clearances. Within five months, a Bench led by (then) Chief Justice of India (CJI) B.R. Gavai, recalled the progressive judgment.

From mountains to mangroves

Recent developments indicate a slow, but systematic, dilution of ecological protection. The CJI, Justice Surya Kant, *suo motu*, stayed the controversial order, saving the reputation of the Court. But the debate concerning the Aravallis is not just about a technical argument on definition. It marks a paradigm change in the perception of development, the role of the environment, and the constitutional obligation by the state.

Similarly, the judicial sanctions to the destruction of 158 mangroves for Adani Cementation Limited (2025) in Raigarh, Maharashtra, and the new environmentally unfriendly infrastructure schemes such as the Char Dham highway in the Himalayas, highlight a dangerous trend – that the health of the environment is further being undermined by the government whose proximity with the corporate world is an open secret though it is also true that the private sector has been severely criticised in the annual Economic Survey presented in January 2026.

The Aravallis, traditionally acknowledged as the ecological backbone of north-western India, play a vital role which includes checking desertification, enhancing the recharge of groundwater, controlling micro-climates and maintaining biodiversity. Interestingly, the Court itself has recognised this ecological role. In *M.C. Mehta vs Union of India and Ors.* (2004), a ban was imposed on mining in the Aravalli region.

Later orders that culminated in the year 2010 admitted that unregulated mining in the area had had irreparable effects on the environment. More importantly, in these proceedings, the Court quashed efforts to restrict the Aravallis to a definition based on the landform's height, especially the suggestion that only landforms over 100 metres could be a component of the Aravalli ranges.

The Court realised how such a strict interpretation would ignore huge tracts of ecologically crucial land, thus foiling the objective of environmental conservation. The 100m norm was discarded in 2010 on an ecological basis. The



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The higher judiciary appears to be aiding a watering down of environmental protection

hills and ridges at a low altitude are of significant importance in the preservation of groundwater and soil stability in the semi-arid landscapes. The Aravallis are not just a cluster of isolated peaks but are a geomorphological system. Unfortunately, the latest height-centric definition does not pay attention to crucial factors such as hydrology, biodiversity and ecological interdependence. It was due to the need to circumvent this reductionist strategy that the Court relied on the precautionary principle, in *Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum vs Union of India and Others* (1996), rejecting the idea of any artificial limit.

The strange acceptance by the top court of the 100-metre definition, in *In Re: Issue Relating to Definition of Aravalli Hills and Ranges (2025)*, marked a clear departure from the position taken in 2010. In trying to keep landforms above a predetermined elevation as the sole subject of legal protection, the Court has efficiently deprived the Aravalli ranges of any statutory and judicial protection over large portions. Such a change has serious constitutional implications.

The right to a clean and healthy environment, which has been broadly understood in the application of Article 21, is directly involved. Article 48A, which requires the state to ensure the conservation and the enhancement of the environment, is now a hollow proclamation in instances where the interpretation of the law by the judiciary can promote rather than safeguard ecological exclusion. In fact, India's courts have been more enthusiastic about cow slaughter (Article 48) and uniform civil code (Article 44).

The discriminatory protection or preservation of some landforms in relation to their height creates an absurd classification that has no rational nexus to ecological goals. An interpretation of a law that safeguards outstanding hills and exposes the surrounding ecosystems to exploitation contravenes the principle of non-arbitrariness that forms the core of Article 14.

A leniency

This watering down of environmental protection is seen not only in the case of the Aravallis. This has been the case over years with courts and regulatory bodies supporting development projects based on the assurance of mitigation instead of their enforcing environmental norms to the letter. This is evident in the undermining of the EIA process and the legalisation of post-facto and conditional clearances, even after the judicial warnings. In *Common Cause vs Union of India* (2017), the Court had made it clear that the legalisation of illegal mining and environmental offences could not be done after the fact, and that the environmental law is to serve as a deterrent. But judicial leniency later in regard to lapses in procedure corresponds to a slow weakening of this principle.

The results of this kind of dilution are seen in cases of coastal urban ecology, especially the mangroves of Mumbai. Mangroves are multi-layered ecosystems which act as natural flood control systems, sinks of carbon and reservoirs of biodiversity. They protect against

storm surges and tidal flooding. Continued judicial authorisations to fell (and transplant) about 34,000 mangrove trees to build infrastructure are a setback. Allowing mangrove destruction on a large scale on the 'promise of compensatory afforestation' marks the destruction of ecological science and constitutional responsibility. It requires decades to develop mature mangrove ecosystems, which cannot be compensated by having a plantation drive in some other place.

Another example is the Char Dham highway project in Uttarakhand. A June 2025 study identified 811 landslide zones along the Char Dham project. The Himalayan ecosystem is one of the most delicate in the world, and the road widening project on such a large scale has grave dangers – triggering landslides and disturbing rivers.

In *Citizens for Green Doon vs Union of India* (2021), the Court recognised the ecological importance of the area, but still allowed wider roads on the grounds of strategic defence needs. The flash floods and ecological disturbances that affected Uttarakhand raise questions about this 'balancing act'. The ill-effects of the current infrastructural rush affect future generations, especially when the constitutional obligations on the government and the citizen, under Article 48A and Article 51A(g), make it clear that it is the responsibility of citizens to safeguard the environment.

Strong players and the issue of fairness

Environmental clearances of corporations and large-scale infrastructure projects, especially those supported by serious capital in mining, highways or urban redevelopment, can pass through regulatory barriers rather easily. If there is a hearing, it is cut short, objections raised are considered obstructionist, and environmental compliance becomes a mere checklist. This casts grave doubts on procedural fairness and transparency which are contained in Article 14. When it disproportionately gives more privileges to economically strong players, environmental governance can destroy the trust of the populace and constitutional equality.

The changing stance of the judiciary in this dismal picture is crucial. Traditionally, courts have been the custodians of environmental rights as they have broadened the constitutional interpretation on issues of environmental damage. Judgments such as *M.C. Mehta vs Kamal Nath and Ors.* (1996) held that the public trust doctrine was deeply rooted in the belief that natural resources belonged to the state, were held in the trust of the people and could not be sold to be exploited privately. When such definitions or clearances are approved by the courts to promote the degradation of the environment, they basically go against the court's own jurisprudence. The Green Bench of the Supreme Court must sit regularly. Similar Benches must be set up in all the High Courts. Ease of business should not make destruction of the environment easy.

The views expressed are personal

- **On December 18, 2025, for non-coal mining projects, the policy of land acquisition first and Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) later was changed. Now, an EIA can be done without details about the location and area.**
- **The Supreme Court of India helped in the dilution of environmental justice by recalling the case, Vanashakti vs Union Of India (2025) that banned retrospective environmental clearances.**
- **Within five months, a Bench led by (then) Chief Justice of India (CJI) B.R. Gavai, recalled the progressive judgment.**
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- **Similarly, the judicial sanctions to the destruction of 158 mangroves for Adani Cementation Limited (2025) in Raigarh, Maharashtra, and the new environmentally unfriendly infrastructure schemes such as the Char Dham highway in the Himalayas, highlight a dangerous trend — that the health of the environment is further being undermined by the government whose proximity with the corporate world is an open secret though it is also true that the private sector has been severely criticised in the annual Economic Survey presented in January 2026.**
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- **The ill-effects of the current infrastructural rush affect future generations, especially when the constitutional obligations on the government and the citizen, under Article 48A and Article 51A(g), make it clear that it is the responsibility of citizens to safeguard the environment.**

Thank You!

