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IMPORTANT INSIGHTS

Dedicated Freight Corridors: Completion of Western Corridor Strengthens India's Freight, Logistics and Multimodal Connectivity

Recent Developments:

- **Western Dedicated Freight Corridor (WDFC)** has reached full operationalisation after the commissioning of its final three sections covering **326 route kilometres**, developed at a cost exceeding **₹20,700 crore**.
- The commissioned sections are **Sanand (North)–Makarpura**, **New Umbergaon–New Saphale**, and **New Saphale–JNPT**, providing direct connectivity with **Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA)**.
- With the completion of WDFC, the two operational DFCs together form a **2,843-km dedicated freight network**, comprising **1,506 km of WDFC** and **1,337 km of Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor (EDFC)**.
- The DFC network is now carrying **more than 443 freight trains per day on average**, while its diversion of freight from conventional routes has created additional capacity for both goods and passenger services.
- The **Union Budget 2026** also announced a new **2,052-km Dankuni–Surat Dedicated Freight Corridor**, for which preparation and updating of the Detailed Project Report is underway.

What are Dedicated Freight Corridors?

Concept and Objectives:

- **Dedicated Freight Corridors (DFCs)** are specialised railway routes designed primarily for **freight movement**, thereby separating goods traffic from heavily congested passenger railway routes.
- The project seeks to increase **freight capacity, average speed, axle-load capability and operational reliability**, while reducing transit time and logistics costs.
- DFCs also facilitate **double-stack container trains, higher axle-load freight trains, multimodal logistics and direct port connectivity**.
- The initiative addresses congestion on India's major railway trunk routes, where freight trains historically faced significant delays because passenger services received operational priority.

Institutional and Historical Background:

DFCCIL and Project Evolution:

- The **Dedicated Freight Corridor Corporation of India Limited (DFCCIL)** was incorporated in **October 2006** as a Special Purpose Vehicle under the Ministry of Railways for planning, construction, operation and maintenance of DFCs.
- The project initially experienced delays because of **alignment changes, land acquisition difficulties, financing arrangements and other preparatory requirements**.
- Implementation accelerated substantially after 2014, with large-scale progress in **civil construction, track laying, electrification, signalling and commissioning**.
- By March 2025, **2,741 route kilometres**, or about **96.4% of the original 2,843-km network**, had already been commissioned, with the remaining WDFC section subsequently completed.

Financing Structure:

- The original financing model relied on **multilateral and bilateral development assistance**, supplemented by Government budgetary support.
- The **World Bank** committed **US\$2.725 billion** for major sections of the Eastern DFC, while the **Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA)** financed the Western DFC through substantial yen-denominated loans.
- The financing structure illustrates the importance of **multilateral development finance and international technical cooperation** in large-scale transport infrastructure.

Major Dedicated Freight Corridors:

Western Dedicated Freight Corridor:

- **Length: 1,506 km**, connecting **JNPT in Maharashtra** with **Dadri in Uttar Pradesh** through Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan and Haryana.
- The corridor is particularly important for **containerised EXIM cargo** originating from western ports such as JNPT and major Gujarat ports.
- Major freight categories include **containers, fertilisers, foodgrains, salt, coal, iron, steel and cement**, linking ports with northern consumption and production centres.
- Its direct connection with JNPT is expected to **accelerate EXIM cargo movement, reduce dependence on road transport and decongest Mumbai's conventional railway network**.
- WDFC also supports **double-stack container operations**, improving freight-carrying efficiency and reducing the unit cost of transportation.

Eastern Dedicated Freight Corridor:

- **Length: 1,337 km**, connecting **Ludhiana in Punjab** with **Sonnagar in Bihar**.
- The corridor primarily supports the movement of **coal, minerals and other bulk commodities**, connecting eastern resource-producing regions with northern industrial and consumption centres.
- The **EDFC was fully commissioned in 2023**, making it the first of the two major DFCs to achieve complete operationalisation.
- Its alignment was designed to improve freight movement while reducing interaction with congested passenger-oriented railway sections.

Performance and Economic Significance:

Faster and More Reliable Freight Movement:

- DFCs have substantially improved freight operations by providing **dedicated capacity, higher throughput and more predictable transit times**.
- Recent official assessments report **higher average speeds, faster turnaround and improved reliability**, particularly for container, coal and bulk cargo movement.
- Diversion of freight trains to DFCs creates **additional train paths on the conventional railway network**, allowing Indian Railways to operate more passenger and goods services.

Logistics and Industrial Competitiveness:

- Lower transportation time and improved reliability can reduce **inventory costs, logistics expenditure and supply-chain uncertainty**.

- Better connectivity between **ports, industrial clusters, production centres and inland terminals** strengthens India's multimodal logistics ecosystem.
- DFCs can encourage the development of **Gati Shakti Cargo Terminals, logistics parks and industrial hubs** along freight-intensive routes.
- Improved rail freight competitiveness can support India's objective of becoming a **globally competitive manufacturing and export hub**.

Freight Transport and Modal Shift:

Rail's Strategic Role:

- Freight is a major source of revenue for Indian Railways and contributes significantly to its financial sustainability, including the cross-subsidisation of passenger services.
- Increasing the share of freight carried by rail can reduce dependence on road transport, particularly for **bulk commodities and long-distance container movement**.
- The **National Rail Plan** seeks to increase rail's share in freight transportation through capacity expansion, improved service quality and infrastructure modernisation.

Environmental Benefits:

- Rail transport is generally more **energy-efficient and less carbon-intensive per tonne-kilometre** than road freight.
- Greater freight movement through DFCs can therefore contribute to **lower fuel consumption, reduced road congestion and lower transport-related emissions**.
- The original DFC planning also recognised the potential environmental benefits of shifting freight from roads to rail.

New Dankuni–Surat Freight Corridor:

Strategic Importance:

- The **Dankuni–Surat corridor**, announced in the Union Budget 2026, is planned as a **2,052-km East–West greenfield freight corridor**.
- It is intended to connect **eastern industrial and resource regions with western industrial and port-linked economic centres**, complementing the existing DFC network.
- The corridor can strengthen **East–West industrial linkages, logistics efficiency, multimodal transportation and regional industrial development**.
- Its DPR preparation represents the next stage of India's strategy to expand dedicated freight infrastructure beyond the existing north-oriented network.

Challenges:

Infrastructure and Implementation Issues:

- Large DFC projects require extensive **land acquisition, inter-state coordination, environmental management, financing and construction management**.
- New corridors must ensure adequate **cargo demand, terminal infrastructure and last-mile connectivity** to achieve financial and operational viability.
- Merely constructing dedicated tracks is insufficient without efficient **logistics terminals, warehouses, port connectivity and multimodal integration**.

Policy and Operational Challenges:

- Indian Railways must ensure effective integration between DFCs and the **conventional railway network**.
- Greater rail freight share requires competitive **pricing, reliability, terminal access and service quality**.
- Expansion should remain aligned with **industrial corridors, ports, national highways, waterways and logistics parks** to maximise network effects.

Way Forward:***Building an Integrated Freight Ecosystem:***

- Expand DFCs according to **freight demand, industrial geography and port connectivity**, rather than treating them as isolated railway projects.
- Integrate DFCs with **PM Gati Shakti, National Logistics Policy, industrial corridors, multimodal logistics parks and Gati Shakti Cargo Terminals**.
- Improve last-mile connectivity to **ports, mines, manufacturing clusters, agricultural markets and inland container depots**.
- Encourage greater **modal shift from road to rail** through competitive freight rates, reliable schedules and seamless multimodal transfers.
- Use **digital freight management, real-time tracking, predictive maintenance and data-driven capacity planning** to improve asset utilisation.

Value Addition for UPSC:***Key Facts for Prelims:***

- **DFCCIL:** Dedicated Freight Corridor Corporation of India Limited.
- **WDFC:** 1,506 km, JNPT–Dadri.
- **EDFC:** 1,337 km, Ludhiana–Sonnagar.
- **Combined existing DFC network:** 2,843 km.
- **New proposed corridor:** Dankuni–Surat, 2,052 km.
- **Major financing partners:** World Bank and JICA.
- **Core objectives:** higher freight capacity, faster transit, lower logistics costs, multimodal connectivity and decongestion of conventional railway routes.

Analytical Conclusion:

- **Dedicated Freight Corridors represent a structural shift from capacity-constrained railway freight to high-capacity, specialised and multimodal logistics infrastructure.** Their long-term success will depend not only on expanding track kilometres but also on integrating **ports, industries, terminals, highways, waterways and digital logistics systems** into a unified national freight network.

Equal Earth Map: UN Push for Area-Accurate World Mapping and Its Geographical, Political and Strategic Significance

Recent Developments:

- The **United Nations General Assembly** has adopted a resolution supporting greater use of the **Equal Earth projection**, encouraging a shift away from the widely used **Mercator projection**, particularly for world maps where accurate comparison of land areas is important.
- The resolution, led by **Togo** and supported by **164 countries**, including India, received six abstentions, while the **United States voted against** it; because UN General Assembly resolutions are generally **non-binding**, the decision does not legally compel governments, schools, mapping companies or international organisations to replace existing projections.
- India supported the resolution while emphasising that any UN-supported map must accurately depict **India's sovereign territory**, including **Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh**, in accordance with India's official position.
- The development has renewed debates over **cartographic accuracy, colonial legacies, geographical representation, Global South visibility and the appropriate use of different map projections**.

Why No Flat Map Can Perfectly Represent Earth:

Three-Dimensional Earth and Two-Dimensional Maps:

- Earth is not a perfect sphere; it is approximately an **oblate spheroid**, with a slight equatorial bulge caused primarily by its rotation, while gravitational forces and the uneven distribution of continents and oceans contribute to its complex physical form.
- A **globe** provides the most intuitive three-dimensional-representation of Earth, but its practical limitations make flat maps indispensable for education, navigation, administration, planning and statistical analysis.
- A **map projection** transforms the curved, three-dimensional surface of Earth into a two-dimensional representation, and this mathematical transformation inevitably introduces some form of distortion.

Four Fundamental Properties of Maps:

- Every flat map involves compromises among **area, shape, distance and direction**, because it is mathematically impossible to preserve all four properties simultaneously over the entire Earth.
- **Area** represents the relative size of geographical regions, **shape** represents the configuration of landforms, **distance** represents spatial separation, while **direction** represents bearings between locations.

Major Types of Map Projections:

Property-Based Classification:

- **Conformal projections** preserve local angles and shapes, making them useful for navigation and detailed local mapping; the **Mercator projection** is the classic example.
- **Equal-area projections** preserve the relative areas of geographical regions, making them particularly valuable for thematic and statistical maps; **Equal Earth** belongs to this category.
- **Equidistant projections** preserve distance accurately from selected points or along selected lines, but cannot preserve distance everywhere simultaneously.
- **Compromise projections** distribute distortion among area, shape, distance and direction to produce visually balanced world maps; **Robinson** and **Winkel Tripel** are prominent examples.

- The appropriate projection therefore depends on the **purpose of the map**, rather than on the assumption that one projection is universally superior.

Mercator Projection: Origins and Purpose:

Development and Characteristics:

- The **Mercator projection** was introduced in **1569** by **Gerardus Mercator**, a Flemish cartographer and geographer whose work became highly influential in European navigation.
- It is a **conformal cylindrical projection**, conceptually produced by projecting Earth onto a cylinder and then unwrapping the cylinder into a flat surface.
- Its major advantage lies in **navigation**, because **rhumb lines**, representing constant compass bearings, appear as straight lines, allowing navigators to maintain a constant bearing along a plotted route.
- The projection became particularly important for maritime navigation because its straight-line representation of constant bearing simplified practical route planning.

Geographical Distortion:

- In the Mercator projection, the spacing between parallels increases progressively towards the poles, while the stretching of the east-west direction is correspondingly adjusted to preserve local angles and shapes.
- This produces substantial **area distortion at higher latitudes**, causing regions near the poles to appear much larger than their actual geographical areas.
- **Greenland**, for example, can appear comparable in size to **Africa** on Mercator maps, although Greenland is actually about **14 times smaller** than Africa.
- The distortion also exaggerates the apparent size of **Europe, North America and polar regions**, while comparatively diminishing the visual prominence of tropical regions such as Africa and South America.

Colonialism, Power and Cartographic Representation:

The Colonial Lens:

- Critics argue that the widespread historical use of Mercator contributed to a **Eurocentric visual representation of the world**, although the projection itself was originally designed primarily for navigation rather than political propaganda.
- The modern debate focuses on how repeated exposure to distorted world maps can influence people's intuitive understanding of the **relative geographical importance and size of different regions**.
- The issue therefore connects cartography with **post-colonial studies, geographical imagination, knowledge production and the politics of representation**.
- However, attributing the Mercator projection solely to colonial ideology would be analytically incomplete, because its enduring importance is also explained by its legitimate mathematical and navigational advantages.

Search for Alternative World Maps:

Gall-Peters, Robinson and Winkel Tripel:

- The **Gall-Peters projection**, first presented by James Gall in 1855 and later popularised by Arno Peters in 1973, preserves area but introduces substantial distortion in the shape and appearance of landmasses.

- The **Robinson projection**, developed by Arthur H. Robinson in 1963, was designed as a **compromise projection** that produces a visually balanced representation of the world rather than preserving a single geographical property exactly.
- The **Winkel Tripel projection**, developed by Oswald Winkel in 1921, seeks to reduce overall distortion in **area, distance and direction** and was adopted by the National Geographic Society for many world maps from 1998.
- These alternatives demonstrate that cartography is fundamentally about **selecting the most appropriate compromise for a particular purpose**.

Equal Earth Projection:

Origin and Mathematical Character:

- The **Equal Earth projection** was introduced in **2018** by cartographers **Bojan Šavrič, Tom Patterson and Bernhard Jenny** as an **equal-area pseudocylindrical projection** for world maps.
- It was inspired visually by the Robinson projection but differs fundamentally because it **preserves the relative areas of geographical regions**.
- Equal Earth uses curved outer meridians and straight parallels to create a visually balanced world map while maintaining mathematical equality of area.

Advantages and Limitations:

- The principal strength of Equal Earth is that countries and continents are represented in their **correct relative areas**, making it useful for comparing population, resources, climate impacts, agricultural land and other spatially distributed variables.
- It does not eliminate all distortion, because **shape, distance and direction cannot simultaneously remain perfectly accurate** on a global flat map.
- The projection is therefore particularly suitable for **thematic maps, statistical maps, environmental studies and educational representations**, rather than replacing every specialised projection used in navigation or surveying.

Equal Earth and Global South Representation:

Geographical and Political Significance:

- Equal Earth gives greater visual prominence to large tropical landmasses such as **Africa and South America** by avoiding the severe area exaggeration characteristic of Mercator.
- The debate is especially significant for the **Global South**, because accurate area representation can influence public understanding of the geographical scale of Africa, South Asia and Latin America.
- The issue also illustrates how apparently technical choices in **cartography can have social, political and cultural consequences**.
- At the same time, a UPSC analysis should distinguish between **mathematical distortion** and claims of political intent, because a projection can have unintended representational effects without having been designed as a political instrument.

Choosing the Appropriate Projection:

Purpose-Based Selection:

- **Navigation:** Conformal projections such as Mercator remain valuable because they preserve local angles and represent constant compass bearings as straight lines.
- **Thematic and statistical mapping:** Equal-area projections such as Equal Earth are preferable when the principal objective is accurate comparison of geographical areas.
- **General world reference:** Compromise projections such as Robinson and Winkel Tripel provide visually balanced representations when no single property must be preserved exactly.
- **Polar and point-centred mapping:** **Azimuthal projections** are useful when the analysis focuses on a particular central point or polar region.
- Modern digital cartography increasingly uses **interactive globes, satellite imagery and dynamic projections**, reducing dependence on a single universal world-map format.

UPSC Significance and Broader Linkages:

Geography and Environment:

- The issue is directly linked with **map projections, geographical information systems, spatial analysis, cartography and thematic mapping**, making it relevant to Physical and Human Geography.
- Equal-area projections are particularly useful for representing **climate change, deforestation, population distribution, biodiversity, natural resources and land-use patterns** without misleading area comparisons.

International Relations and Governance:

- The UN debate connects cartography with **decolonisation, Global South representation, multilateralism and the politics of geographical knowledge**.
- India's position highlights the importance of **territorial integrity and cartographic sovereignty**, particularly regarding the depiction of Jammu and Kashmir and Ladakh.
- The development also demonstrates how seemingly technical international standards can intersect with **national sovereignty and geopolitical sensitivities**.

Challenges and Way Forward:

Need for Projection Literacy:

- Governments and educational institutions should avoid treating any single projection as universally correct and should teach students **why different projections produce different distortions**.
- Schools should introduce projection choice as a component of **geographical literacy**, enabling students to interpret maps critically rather than treating every visual representation as an exact depiction of Earth.
- Mapping agencies should select projections according to **purpose, scale, geography and analytical requirement**, while digital platforms should provide appropriate alternatives where practical.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Prelims Facts:

- **Mercator:** 1569, conformal cylindrical projection, highly useful for navigation.
- **Equal Earth:** 2018, equal-area pseudocylindrical projection, developed by Bojan Šavrič, Tom Patterson and Bernhard Jenny.
- **Robinson:** 1963, compromise projection developed by Arthur H. Robinson.
- **Winkel Tripel:** 1921, compromise projection developed by Oswald Winkel.
- **Gall-Peters:** Equal-area projection associated with James Gall and Arno Peters.

Conclusion:

- The UN's support for Equal Earth represents an important **symbolic and cartographic shift**, but it should not be interpreted as making Mercator obsolete for every application.
- The deeper lesson is that **maps are analytical tools rather than perfect mirrors of reality**, and responsible cartography requires selecting the projection that minimises the distortion most relevant to the intended purpose.

Judicial Appointments in India and South Africa: Balancing Judicial Independence, Transparency, Accountability and Public Confidence

Recent Developments:

- The debate over **judicial appointments and transparency** has gained renewed attention following the Supreme Court's proceedings in **Arvind Malhotra v. High Court of Himachal Pradesh**, in which the Court declined to entertain a plea seeking a direction to the High Court Collegium to consider a particular judicial officer for elevation.
- Arvind Malhotra, a Principal Judge of the Family Court at Dharamshala, had questioned the non-consideration of his candidature while comparatively junior judicial officers were recommended; the Supreme Court indicated that courts cannot issue directions to a Collegium regarding whom it should consider or recommend.
- The case has revived concerns regarding the **opacity of the Collegium system**, particularly regarding the criteria, reasons and comparative assessment underlying recommendations for elevation.
- The **South African Judicial Service Commission model** provides a useful comparative perspective because it combines judicial participation with public nominations, public comments and open interviews while retaining institutional safeguards for judicial independence.
- The Supreme Court continues to publish Collegium resolutions concerning judicial appointments and transfers, reflecting an institutional movement towards greater **procedural transparency** even though deliberations themselves remain confidential.

South Africa's Judicial Appointment Model:

Constitutional Framework and Judicial Service Commission:

- South Africa follows a comparatively **open and participatory appointment framework** centred on the **Judicial Service Commission**, established under the Constitution to select suitable persons for judicial office and investigate complaints concerning judicial officers.
- The Commission includes representatives from the **judiciary, legal profession, academia, executive and legislature**, thereby creating a broader institutional representation than India's judge-dominated Collegium model.
- South Africa's Constitution requires consideration of the need for the judiciary to broadly reflect the country's **racial and gender composition**, thereby giving representational diversity an explicit constitutional dimension.

Selection Procedure:

- The process begins with a public notice regarding judicial vacancies, followed by **nominations, shortlisting and interviews** of eligible candidates.
- Professional bodies and members of the public can submit **comments and representations** concerning candidates before the interviews.
- Candidate interviews are conducted **in public**, while the Commission subsequently deliberates privately and communicates its recommendations to the President.
- The South African model therefore separates **public scrutiny of candidates** from confidential institutional deliberation, demonstrating that transparency does not necessarily require every stage of decision-making to be public.

Judicial Accountability:

- The Judicial Service Commission also has a role in dealing with **complaints against judicial officers**, creating an institutional mechanism for judicial accountability.
- South Africa's constitutional framework permits removal of a judge through prescribed constitutional procedures in cases involving **serious misconduct, incapacity or incompetence**, thereby linking judicial independence with institutional accountability.
- The model demonstrates the principle that judicial independence should protect judges from improper interference without creating an absence of mechanisms for addressing misconduct.

Appointment of Judges in India:

Constitutional Position:

- **Article 124** provides the constitutional framework for the appointment of Supreme Court judges, under which judges are formally appointed by the **President of India**.
- **Article 217** deals with the appointment of judges of High Courts, with the President making appointments after the constitutionally prescribed consultations.
- The Constitution therefore formally vests appointment power in the executive, but judicial interpretation has substantially altered the practical balance between the executive and judiciary.

Evolution of the Collegium System:

- The **Collegium System** is not expressly mentioned in the Constitution; it evolved through a series of Supreme Court judgments known collectively as the **Three Judges Cases**.
- The judicial interpretation emerging from these cases established the **primacy of the judiciary** in recommendations for appointments and transfers of judges.
- At the Supreme Court level, the Collegium comprises the **Chief Justice of India and the four senior-most judges of the Supreme Court**.
- At the High Court level, the Collegium generally comprises the **Chief Justice of the High Court and the two senior-most judges** of that High Court, after which the recommendation proceeds through the prescribed institutional process.
- The present framework was restored after the Supreme Court struck down the **National Judicial Appointments Commission** framework in 2015, holding that judicial independence forms part of the Constitution's **basic structure**.

The Three Judges Cases:

First Judges Case:

- **S. P. Gupta v. Union of India (1981)** initially interpreted the constitutional expression relating to consultation in a manner that gave greater weight to the **executive** in judicial appointments.

Second Judges Case:

- **Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association v. Union of India (1993)** reversed the earlier approach and established the **primacy of the Chief Justice of India and the judiciary** in judicial appointments.
- The judgment laid the foundation for the Collegium mechanism and treated judicial primacy as essential for protecting **judicial independence**.

Third Judges Case:

- **In re Special Reference No. 1 of 1998** clarified and expanded the Collegium mechanism, establishing the present five-member Collegium for appointments to the Supreme Court.
- The decision also strengthened the principle that judicial appointments should be based on **institutional consultation rather than the unilateral preference of an individual office-holder**.

Memorandum of Procedure:

Meaning and Purpose:

- The **Memorandum of Procedure** is the framework governing the process for appointment and transfer of judges of the Supreme Court and High Courts.
- It operates alongside the Constitution and the judicial principles established through the **Three Judges Cases**, providing procedural steps for initiating, evaluating and forwarding recommendations.
- The process involves interaction among the **High Court Collegium, State authorities, Union Government and Supreme Court Collegium**, depending upon the level and nature of the appointment.
- The Supreme Court has also emphasised the importance of transparency-enhancing measures while retaining necessary confidentiality in the appointment process.

Transparency under the Existing System:

- The Supreme Court now publishes a substantial number of **Collegium resolutions**, including recommendations concerning appointments, transfers and reconsideration of judicial candidates.
- This practice improves public access to institutional decisions, although the underlying deliberations, individual assessments and internal discussions generally remain confidential.

India–South Africa Comparison:

Institutional Structure:

- India relies primarily on a **judicially evolved Collegium**, whereas South Africa uses a constitutionally established **Judicial Service Commission** with wider institutional representation.
- India gives greater weight to **judicial independence and judicial primacy**, whereas South Africa attempts to combine judicial participation with broader societal and institutional representation.

Transparency and Public Participation:

- The Indian process traditionally places greater emphasis on **confidential deliberation**, partly to protect candidates from reputational harm and external pressure.
- South Africa permits **public comments and public interviews**, making candidate evaluation substantially more visible to citizens and professional bodies.
- The comparative lesson is not that complete publicity is necessarily superior, but that carefully designed **public scrutiny at appropriate stages** can strengthen institutional legitimacy.

Political Participation and Judicial Independence:

- Wider political participation can improve democratic legitimacy but may also create risks of **executive influence and politicisation of judicial appointments**.
- Excessive judicial control can protect independence but may create concerns regarding **accountability, representativeness and transparency**.
- An effective system must therefore maintain an **institutional equilibrium between independence and accountability**.

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Key Issues in India:

Transparency versus Confidentiality:

- Confidentiality can protect candidates and judges from **external pressure, lobbying and reputational damage**, particularly when allegations concerning suitability are considered.
- Excessive secrecy, however, can generate perceptions of **arbitrariness, favouritism and lack of accountability**.
- The appropriate objective is therefore **structured transparency**, under which reasons, criteria and institutional outcomes are disclosed to the maximum extent compatible with legitimate confidentiality.

Collegium versus Representative Institutions:

- The Collegium provides strong protection against direct executive control, but critics argue that it lacks **democratic representation and formal external accountability**.

- A broader commission could include judges, lawyers, academics and constitutional representatives, potentially improving diversity and public confidence.
- However, political dominance within such a commission could undermine the **independence of the judiciary**, making institutional safeguards essential.

Independence versus Accountability:

- **Judicial independence** is essential for constitutional supremacy, fundamental rights and the rule of law because judges must be able to decide cases without fear or favour.
- Independence cannot mean complete institutional immunity from scrutiny because public confidence also depends upon **integrity, competence, diversity and accountability**.
- The challenge is therefore to create accountability mechanisms that examine conduct and institutional processes without enabling retaliation against judges for judicial decisions.

Way Ahead:

Towards a Balanced Appointment Framework:

- India should strengthen the **objective and transparent criteria** used for judicial appointments, including integrity, competence, constitutional commitment, professional experience and diversity.
- The Collegium should provide greater disclosure of the **institutional reasons for recommendations**, while protecting genuinely sensitive information concerning candidates.
- A permanent and professionally supported **judicial appointments secretariat** could assist with background verification, data collection and objective evaluation without replacing the constitutional role of the Collegium.
- A structured mechanism for receiving **credible complaints and relevant inputs** concerning candidates could improve due diligence while preventing politically motivated allegations from influencing appointments.
- Greater publication of Collegium resolutions should continue because **institutional transparency** can strengthen public confidence without requiring complete disclosure of confidential deliberations.
- Any reform involving executive or political participation should contain strong safeguards against **politicisation, majoritarian influence and retaliation against independent judges**.

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Constitutional and Judicial Keywords:

- **Article 124:** Appointment of judges of the Supreme Court.
- **Article 217:** Appointment of judges of High Courts.
- **Article 50:** Separation of the judiciary from the executive in the public services of the State.
- **Basic Structure Doctrine:** Judicial independence is an essential component of the Constitution's basic structure.
- **Three Judges Cases:** Judicial decisions that established and clarified the Collegium system.
- **Judicial Service Commission:** South African constitutional body involved in judicial appointments and judicial accountability.

Conclusion:

- The South African experience shows that greater **openness in judicial appointments** need not automatically undermine judicial independence when constitutional safeguards, institutional representation and clear procedures are maintained.

- For India, the central challenge is not merely choosing between the **Collegium and a representative commission**, but designing an appointment process that protects judicial independence while making its procedures sufficiently transparent, objective and accountable to command sustained public confidence.

Sea-Level Rise: Global Crisis, India's Coastal Vulnerability, Human Rights and Climate Adaptation

Recent Developments:

- The United Nations Secretary-General's 2026 Special Report, *Challenges related to sea-level rise and ways and approaches to address it*, has highlighted sea-level rise as a rapidly intensifying global crisis affecting **infrastructure, livelihoods, human rights, culture and statehood**. The report was presented on 31 August 2026 and emphasizes that sea-level rise is already affecting communities rather than remaining a distant future threat.
- Global mean sea level rose at an average rate of **4.7 mm per year during 2014–2023**, while the annual increase reached a record **5.9 mm in 2024**, reflecting accelerating climate-related changes in the ocean system.
- Around **770 million people**, nearly one in ten people globally, live in coastal areas less than five metres above the high-tide line and face significant exposure to flooding and other coastal hazards.
- The United Nations warns that sea-level rise and associated climate impacts could contribute to the displacement of **up to 1.2 billion people by 2050** without adequate adaptation.
- In South Asia, **Mumbai, Kolkata and Dhaka** are among the low-lying urban centres facing increasing risks of permanent inundation and displacement, with land subsidence intensifying the consequences in some locations.
- The issue is also gaining importance in **international law**, particularly concerning statehood, maritime zones, baselines, sovereignty and the rights of people affected by permanent territorial loss. The International Law Commission completed its consideration of sea-level rise in relation to international law in 2025.

Scale and Drivers of the Crisis:

Scientific Basis of Sea-Level Rise:

- Global sea-level rise is primarily driven by **ocean warming and the melting of glaciers and ice sheets**.
 - Warming seawater expands through **thermal expansion**, while melting land-based ice adds additional water to the oceans.
 - The acceleration of sea-level rise is closely associated with **anthropogenic climate change**, particularly increasing greenhouse-gas concentrations and rising global temperatures.

Human and Economic Exposure:

- Around **770 million people** already live in very low-lying coastal areas, making coastal population density a major determinant of future climate vulnerability.
- Coastal infrastructure damage is already estimated at **more than \$1.8 trillion**, while annual global economic losses could reach **\$1.2–4 trillion by the end of the century** without adequate adaptation.
- Sea-level rise therefore creates a compound risk involving **flooding, erosion, storm surges, saltwater intrusion, infrastructure damage and displacement**, rather than acting as an isolated environmental hazard.

Unequal Regional and Social Impacts:

Coastal Cities and Deltas:

- Major coastal cities such as **Mumbai, New York and Guangzhou** face substantial exposure because large populations, infrastructure, ports, industries and high-value assets are concentrated close to sea level.
- Low-lying **South Asian deltas** are particularly vulnerable because population density, agricultural dependence and limited elevation combine with rising seas and land subsidence.
- In the Indian subcontinent, Mumbai and Kolkata face increasing risks from permanent inundation, coastal flooding and displacement, while Dhaka faces similar pressures across the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta system.

Human Rights and Cultural Identity:

- Sea-level rise threatens fundamental rights related to **adequate housing, safe drinking water, sanitation, food, healthcare and education**.
 - Flooding and coastal erosion can damage homes, schools, hospitals, transport networks and agricultural land, thereby disrupting essential services and livelihoods.
 - **Saltwater intrusion** can contaminate freshwater resources and agricultural soils, while damaged sanitation systems can increase exposure to water-borne diseases.
- **Small Island Developing States, Indigenous Peoples and low-lying coastal communities** face particularly severe risks because their adaptive capacity, land availability and freshwater resources may be limited.
 - For Indigenous Peoples, permanent loss of ancestral land can weaken **cultural identity, spiritual connections and intergenerational transmission of traditional knowledge**.
- Climate-induced displacement is therefore not merely an economic problem but also a **human-rights, cultural-identity and human-dignity challenge**.

Economic and Legal Challenges:

Adaptation and Losses:

- The growing economic burden demonstrates that adaptation must be treated as an essential component of development planning rather than as a separate environmental expenditure.
- Developing countries require an estimated **\$310–365 billion annually by 2035** for climate adaptation, whereas international public adaptation finance was only around **\$26 billion in 2023**, creating a substantial financing gap.

Statehood and Maritime Law:

- Permanent territorial loss creates unprecedented questions concerning **statehood, sovereignty, nationality, maritime boundaries and maritime entitlements**.
- The International Law Commission has examined the legal implications of sea-level rise for **baselines, maritime zones, maritime delimitation, island status and statehood**, reflecting the emerging importance of climate-related international law.
- The issue is particularly significant for small island states whose physical territory may become partially or completely uninhabitable even though their populations, governments and national identities continue to exist.

Sea-Level Rise in India:

Current Trend and Causes:

- India's coastal regions are experiencing **gradual sea-level rise** driven mainly by **ocean warming, thermal expansion and melting glaciers and ice sheets**.
- Long-term observations indicate an average rise along the Indian coast of roughly **3.3 mm per year**, although the rate varies across locations and depends on local geological and oceanographic conditions.
- **Relative sea-level rise** can become substantially higher locally where land itself is sinking because of land subsidence, groundwater extraction, sediment compaction and other human-induced changes.

Most Vulnerable Regions:

- **Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai and other coastal cities** face increasing exposure to coastal flooding, storm surges, erosion and damage to critical infrastructure.
 - The **Sundarbans and Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna delta** are particularly vulnerable because of their extremely low elevation, dense population and exposure to cyclones and saline-water intrusion.
 - **Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep** face heightened exposure because of their island geography, limited land availability and dependence on vulnerable coastal ecosystems.
- India's coastal vulnerability is also influenced by shoreline modification, urbanisation, ports, coastal infrastructure and other human interventions that alter natural sediment movement and coastal processes.

Government and Policy Response:

Monitoring and Early Warning:

- The **National Centre for Coastal Research** monitors shoreline changes, studies coastal processes and assesses coastal vulnerability associated with climate change, sea-level rise and natural hazards.
- The **Indian National Centre for Ocean Information Services** provides ocean information, forecasts and early-warning services that support coastal disaster preparedness.
- The **Coastal Regulation Zone framework** seeks to regulate development in environmentally sensitive coastal areas and reduce ecological degradation.

Disaster Risk Reduction and Nature-Based Adaptation:

- The **National Disaster Management Authority** and state disaster-management agencies focus on cyclone preparedness, evacuation, early warning, resilient infrastructure and disaster response.
- **Mangrove restoration, wetland conservation, dune protection and other nature-based solutions** can reduce wave energy, storm-surge impacts and coastal erosion while providing ecosystem and livelihood benefits.
- Scientific coastal planning should therefore combine structural measures with **ecosystem-based adaptation** rather than relying exclusively on seawalls and other hard infrastructure.

Way Forward:

Building Climate-Resilient Coasts:

- Effective adaptation requires **early action, reliable scientific assessments, resilient infrastructure and locally appropriate coastal planning**.

- Early-warning systems should be strengthened alongside evacuation planning, climate-resilient housing, critical infrastructure protection and disaster-resilient urban development.
- **Greenhouse-gas emission reductions** remain essential because adaptation alone cannot eliminate long-term sea-level rise.
- Developing countries require **predictable and accessible climate finance, technology transfer and international cooperation** to close the adaptation gap.
- Coastal planning should adopt a **people-centred and human-rights-based approach**, particularly for communities facing displacement, livelihood loss and cultural disruption.
- India should integrate **disaster resilience, sustainable urbanisation, ecosystem-based adaptation and protection of vulnerable communities** into coastal-zone planning.
- Adaptation measures should include **protect, accommodate and managed retreat** approaches according to local risk, land availability, ecological conditions and community preferences.
- Financing mechanisms should prioritise grants and concessional resources for vulnerable developing countries because excessive dependence on debt can reduce their future capacity to adapt.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Key Concepts and Keywords:

- Thermal expansion, saltwater intrusion, land subsidence, coastal erosion, storm surge, managed retreat, nature-based solutions, climate justice, loss and damage, ecosystem-based adaptation and climate-resilient infrastructure are important conceptual terms for understanding sea-level rise.
- The topic directly connects **climate change, disaster management, urbanisation, ocean governance, human rights, international law and sustainable development**.

Conclusion:

- Sea-level rise has evolved from a long-term environmental concern into an immediate **development and human-security challenge** affecting economies, ecosystems, communities and states.
- The 2026 United Nations report reinforces the need to move from reactive disaster management towards **anticipatory adaptation, climate justice and resilient development**.
- For India, the most effective approach is to combine emission reduction with scientifically informed coastal planning, ecosystem restoration, resilient infrastructure, adequate adaptation finance and protection of vulnerable communities.

Best Institute for OAS/IAS

High-Value Crop Diversification: Region-Specific Agriculture, Horticulture and Sustainable Farm-Income Growth

Recent Developments:

- The **Union Budget 2026–27** has emphasised region-specific promotion of high-value agriculture, including coconut, cashew, cocoa and sandalwood in coastal areas and nut crops in hilly regions, to diversify farm output, improve productivity and generate employment.
- The policy approach seeks to move Indian agriculture beyond excessive dependence on cereal-based systems by aligning crop choices with **agro-climatic conditions, water availability, market demand and regional comparative advantages**.

- The **Economic Survey 2025–26** noted that horticulture productivity increased from 12.10 tonnes per hectare in 2019–20 to 12.56 tonnes per hectare in 2024–25, while horticultural cultivation expanded substantially under the Mission for Integrated Development of Horticulture.
- India's high-value agricultural strategy increasingly connects **crop diversification, post-harvest infrastructure, agro-processing, exports, climate resilience and farmer incomes.**

Concept and Significance of Crop Diversification:

What is Crop Diversification:

- **Crop diversification** refers to shifting agricultural land from excessive dependence on a limited number of crops, particularly water-intensive cereal rotations, towards pulses, oilseeds, horticulture, plantation crops, agroforestry and other commercially viable crops.
- Horticulture is particularly important because it can generate **higher value per unit of land**, support nutritional security, create employment and provide opportunities for processing and value addition.
- Region-specific diversification is more sustainable when crop selection is based on **soil characteristics, rainfall, temperature, irrigation availability, local skills and market access** rather than uniform national cropping patterns.

Emerging Agricultural Trends:

- Indian agriculture recorded a **4.45% decadal growth rate**, indicating a strengthening growth trajectory compared with earlier decades.
- Horticulture contributes approximately **37% of the gross value of output of the crop sector**, demonstrating its increasing importance within agricultural production.
- National horticultural production increased from **277.35 million tonnes in 2013–14 to 370.74 million tonnes in 2024–25**, comprising approximately 217.80 million tonnes of vegetables, 117.65 million tonnes of fruits and 35.29 million tonnes of other horticultural and plantation crops.
- India ranks **second globally in aggregate fruit and vegetable production**, while its horticultural commodities provide substantial opportunities for domestic processing and international trade.

Region-Specific High-Value Crop Strategy:

Coastal States and Island Regions:

- Coastal agro-climatic conditions favour **coconut, cashew, cocoa and sandalwood**, enabling farmers to shift towards plantation crops with significant processing and export potential.
- India is the **second-largest coconut producer globally**, and the coconut economy supports approximately 30 million people, including nearly 10 million farmers.
- The **Coconut Promotion Scheme** announced under the Union Budget 2026–27 seeks to replace aged, senile and low-yielding palms with high-yielding varieties and certified planting material, with institutional support through farmer organisations.
- Diversification in coastal regions can integrate plantation production with **food processing, fibre products, oil extraction, rural employment and export-oriented value chains.**

Northeastern Region:

- The Northeastern Region possesses strong potential for **agarwood, organic agriculture, horticulture and agroforestry** because of its biodiversity, rainfall and varied ecological conditions.
- India has approximately **150 million agarwood trees**, with around 90% located in the Northeastern states, where cultivation is integrated with plantation and agroforestry systems.

- Tripura's agarwood sector has an estimated annual turnover potential of approximately **₹2,000 crore**, while government interventions increasingly focus on processing, market linkages and export promotion.
- Agarwood exports have received policy support through **geospatial mapping, enhanced export quotas, digital export applications and value-chain development**, creating opportunities for the region to move from raw-material production towards higher-value processing.

Hilly and Temperate Regions:

- Hilly and temperate areas possess comparative advantages for **walnut, almond and other nut crops**, which can provide higher-value alternatives to unsuitable conventional crops.
- Jammu and Kashmir accounts for the major share of India's commercial walnut production, while Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur also contribute to the sector.
- Walnut production reached approximately **3.22 lakh tonnes in 2024–25**, while exports were valued at about **7.80 million US dollars**, demonstrating the scope for export-oriented temperate horticulture.

Indo-Gangetic Plains:

- Punjab and Haryana require diversification away from excessive paddy cultivation because intensive groundwater extraction and residue-management problems have contributed to **groundwater depletion, soil degradation and ecological stress**.
- Shifting suitable areas towards **pulses, oilseeds and protected vegetable cultivation** can reduce pressure on groundwater while improving crop and income diversification.
- Integrating nitrogen-fixing pulses can also contribute to **soil fertility, nutrient cycling and lower dependence on synthetic nitrogen inputs**.

Significance of High-Value Diversification:

Farm Income and Employment:

- High-value horticultural and plantation crops can provide **greater income-generation opportunities per unit of land**, particularly when farmers participate in processing, grading, branding and direct marketing.
- Diversification can create rural employment beyond cultivation through **nurseries, storage, processing, packaging, transportation and export services**.

Water, Soil and Climate Resilience:

- Replacing water-intensive crops in groundwater-stressed regions can reduce **irrigation demand and groundwater depletion**, particularly when diversification is accompanied by micro-irrigation and improved agronomic practices.
- Horticulture and agroforestry can improve resilience to climatic variability by reducing dependence on a narrow crop portfolio and supporting **soil conservation, biodiversity and ecosystem services**.

Agro-Processing and Value Addition:

- Diversification expands the raw-material base for **food processing, cold chains, essential-oil extraction, perfumery, packaging and other agro-industries**.
- The Agriculture Infrastructure Fund can support farm-level and post-harvest infrastructure, while farmer organisations can help aggregate produce and improve bargaining power.
- The National Horticulture Board focuses on production clusters, post-harvest and cold-chain infrastructure, quality planting material and technology adoption in commercial horticulture.

Key Challenges:

Price and Market Risks:

- Unlike wheat and paddy, which benefit from relatively stronger procurement arrangements, many horticultural commodities remain exposed to **seasonal price volatility, perishability and inadequate market intervention**.
- Farmers may therefore hesitate to adopt high-value crops unless reliable markets, processing facilities and risk-management mechanisms are available.

Infrastructure and Post-Harvest Losses:

- Inadequate **pre-cooling, cold storage, refrigerated transportation, grading and processing facilities** can reduce the economic benefits of horticultural diversification.
- Fragmented supply chains also prevent small farmers from capturing a larger share of the final consumer price.

Long Gestation and Regulatory Constraints:

- Tree crops such as **agarwood, sandalwood and nut crops** may require several years before commercial returns are realised, creating liquidity constraints for small and marginal farmers.
- Fragmented processing, weak quality certification and complex phytosanitary and international-trade requirements can restrict access to premium export markets.

Way Forward:

Strengthening Infrastructure and Institutions:

- The **Agriculture Infrastructure Fund** should be used more extensively for primary processing, sorting, grading, storage and cold-chain facilities, particularly where farmer organisations can aggregate production.
- Farmer Producer Organisations should be strengthened as platforms for **collective input procurement, aggregation, processing, branding and market access**.

Improving Price and Production Support:

- Price-deficiency and market-intervention mechanisms should be expanded to suitable high-value crops during periods of severe market gluts.
- Regional nurseries should provide **certified, disease-free and climate-resilient planting material**, including improved varieties, tissue-cultured plants and suitable rootstocks.

Promoting Value Addition and Exports:

- Cluster-based agro-industrial development should connect farmers with **processing, packaging, branding and export markets** rather than relying predominantly on raw agricultural exports.
- Schemes such as the **Pradhan Mantri Formalisation of Micro Food Processing Enterprises** can support decentralised processing and value addition at the local level.
- Export facilitation should combine quality standards, traceability, phytosanitary compliance, logistics and international market intelligence.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Key Concepts:

- **Crop diversification** reduces dependence on a narrow crop basket, while **agro-climatic zoning** aligns crop selection with local ecological conditions.
- **High-value agriculture** links productivity with profitability, processing, employment and market demand.
- **Agroforestry** combines trees with agricultural production and can provide livelihood diversification, ecological benefits and climate resilience.
- **Value-chain development** enables farmers to capture greater economic returns through aggregation, processing, branding and market access.

Conclusion:

- India's agricultural transformation requires a shift from a predominantly production-oriented approach towards a **regionally differentiated, value-oriented and resource-efficient agricultural system**.
- The Union Budget 2026–27's emphasis on coastal plantation crops, Northeastern agroforestry and temperate nut crops reflects the principle that **India's diverse agro-ecological strengths should determine its future crop choices**.
- Combining crop diversification with **post-harvest infrastructure, farmer collectivisation, value addition, climate-resilient planting material and efficient export logistics** can make high-value agriculture a durable source of farmer prosperity and sustainable rural growth.

QUESTIONS**1. Consider the following statements:**

Statement 1: Freight operations contribute significantly to the revenues of Indian Railways and support the financial sustainability of passenger services.

Statement 2: Shifting freight transport from road to dedicated rail corridors decreases fuel consumption, transport emissions, and road congestion.

Which one of the following is correct in respect of the above statements?

- (A) Both Statement 1 and Statement 2 are correct and Statement 2 is the correct explanation for Statement 1
- (B) Both Statement 1 and Statement 2 are correct but Statement 2 is NOT the correct explanation for Statement 1
- (C) Statement 1 is correct but Statement 2 is incorrect
- (D) Statement 1 is incorrect but Statement 2 is correct

2. Arrange the following map projections in chronological order of their historical development/introduction, from the earliest to the most recent:

- (1) Equal Earth Projection
- (2) Mercator Projection
- (3) Winkel Tripel Projection
- (4) Robinson Projection

Select the correct sequence using the code given below:

- (A) 2–3–4–1
- (B) 2–4–3–1
- (C) 3–2–4–1
- (D) 2–3–1–4

3. With reference to the evolution of the Collegium system in India through the Three Judges Cases, consider the following statements:

- (1) The First Judges Case (S.P. Gupta v. Union of India, 1981) gave executive primacy over the judiciary in judicial appointments.
- (2) The Second Judges Case (1993) established judicial primacy and introduced the concept of the Collegium.
- (3) The Third Judges Case (1998) expanded the Supreme Court Collegium to a five-member body comprising the CJI and four senior-most judges.

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

4. Consider the following terms associated with coastal vulnerability and ocean dynamics:

(1) Thermal expansion

(2) Saltwater intrusion

(3) Land subsidence

(4) Managed retreat

(5) Baselines fixation

How many of the above phenomena or strategies are direct physical drivers or consequences of relative sea-level rise?

(A) Only two

(B) Only three

(C) Only four

(D) All five

5. Consider the following statements:

Statement 1: Small and marginal farmers often exhibit hesitation in adopting long-gestation high-value tree crops such as sandalwood, agarwood, and walnut.

Statement 2: High-value tree crops generate immediate seasonal cash flows that fully offset initial capital investments within the first year of planting.

Which one of the following is correct in respect of the above statements?

(A) Both Statement 1 and Statement 2 are correct, and Statement 2 is the correct explanation for Statement 1.

(B) Both Statement 1 and Statement 2 are correct, but Statement 2 is NOT the correct explanation for Statement 1.

(C) Statement 1 is correct, but Statement 2 is incorrect.

(D) Statement 1 is incorrect, but Statement 2 is correct.

ANSWER KEY

1 – Answer (B), 2 – Answer (A), 3 – Answer (D), 4 – Answer (D), 5 – Answer (C)



OAS HUB

DAILY CHRONICLE CURRENT AFFAIRS



In today's fast-changing world, staying updated with current affairs is essential for both academic success and professional growth. Awareness of national and international events not only broadens general knowledge but also sharpens critical and analytical thinking skills. It enables individuals to form well-informed opinions, which are crucial for competitive examinations, group discussions, interviews, and impactful essay writing.

Being well-informed reflects adaptability, awareness, and intellectual curiosity—qualities that are highly valued in a competitive environment. A strong grasp of contemporary issues enhances confidence, widens perspective, and prepares individuals to tackle real-world challenges effectively, ultimately opening the door to better opportunities and long-term personal and career advancement.

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