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IMPORTANT INSIGHTS

Cryosphere Under Climate Stress: 2026 Reports Warn of Irreversible Ice Loss and Global Climate Tipping Points

Recent Developments:

- Ahead of **COP31**, scheduled to be held in Antalya, Türkiye, the **International Cryosphere Climate Initiative (ICCI)** and the **United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)** jointly released two reports on 2 November 2026: *State of the Cryosphere 2026: The Cost of Overshoot* and *Overshoot and the Cryosphere: Averting Global Meltdown*.
- The reports warn that temporarily exceeding the **1.5°C global warming threshold** could trigger irreversible changes in ice sheets, mountain glaciers, permafrost and polar oceans, with cascading consequences for sea-level rise, freshwater availability and global climate systems.
- The reports emphasise minimising the magnitude and duration of temperature overshoot through rapid fossil-fuel phase-out, deep emissions reductions and enhanced carbon dioxide removal.

Understanding the Cryosphere:

Definition and Components:

- The **cryosphere** refers to all regions of the Earth where water exists in frozen form. It includes continental ice sheets, mountain glaciers, seasonal snow cover, sea ice, frozen lakes and rivers, and terrestrial and submarine permafrost.
- Major components include:
  - **Ice sheets:** Greenland and Antarctica contain the world's largest reserves of land-based ice.
  - **Glaciers:** Mountain ice masses that accumulate through snowfall and flow under gravity.
  - **Sea ice:** Frozen seawater covering parts of the Arctic and Antarctic oceans.
  - **Permafrost:** Ground that remains at or below 0°C for at least two consecutive years.
  - **Seasonal snow:** Temporary snow cover that influences river flows, soil moisture and regional temperatures.

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Ecological and Climatic Significance:

- **Climate regulation:** Snow and ice possess high albedo, reflecting incoming solar radiation and limiting surface heating.
- **Freshwater storage:** Glaciers and snowpacks act as natural freshwater reservoirs, sustaining rivers and human settlements, particularly during dry seasons.
- **Carbon storage:** Permafrost contains large quantities of organic carbon accumulated over thousands of years, preventing its rapid decomposition under frozen conditions.
- **Ocean circulation:** Polar ice formation, melting and associated changes in ocean salinity influence large-scale ocean circulation and global heat distribution.
- **Ecosystem stability:** Arctic and Antarctic ice environments support specialised biodiversity and regulate marine food webs.

Key Findings of State of the Cryosphere 2026:

Accelerating Warming and Ice Loss:

- **Arctic amplification:** The Arctic is warming substantially faster than the global average, accelerating sea-ice retreat, snow loss and permafrost thaw.
- **Himalayan warming:** The Hindu Kush Himalayan (HKH) region experiences elevation-dependent warming, making high-altitude ecosystems particularly vulnerable to glacier retreat and changing snowfall patterns.
- **Accelerating polar ice loss:** Greenland and Antarctic ice sheets are losing mass, contributing to long-term global sea-level rise. Their retreat may continue for centuries even if atmospheric temperatures subsequently decline.
- **Himalayan glacier depletion:** According to ICIMOD's 2026 assessment, HKH glaciers lost approximately 12% of their total area and 9% of their estimated ice reserves between 1990 and 2020. Glacier ice-loss rates have also doubled since 2000.

Permafrost Carbon Release:

- **Massive carbon reserves:** Terrestrial permafrost covers approximately 14 million sq. km and stores an estimated 1,700 billion tonnes of carbon.
- **Greenhouse gas emissions:** Thawing permafrost exposes previously frozen organic matter to microbial decomposition, releasing carbon dioxide and methane into the atmosphere.
- **Climate feedback:** These emissions intensify global warming, causing further permafrost thaw and creating a self-reinforcing climate feedback loop.

Sea-Level Rise and Oceanic Changes:

- **Coastal vulnerability:** Accelerating ice-sheet melting threatens coastal cities, low-lying islands, river deltas, wetlands and critical infrastructure through rising sea levels and coastal erosion.
- **Potential extreme scenarios:** High-warming projections indicate that sea-level rise could accelerate substantially over the coming centuries, potentially exceeding the adaptive capacity of coastal ecosystems.
- **Arctic sea-ice decline:** Increasingly prolonged ice-free Arctic summers could disrupt marine ecosystems and amplify regional warming.
- **Atlantic circulation risks:** Freshwater influx from melting Greenland ice can reduce North Atlantic surface-water salinity and potentially weaken the **Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC)**.

Major Causes of Cryosphere Decline:

Anthropogenic Greenhouse Gas Emissions:

- Emissions from fossil-fuel combustion, industrial activities, deforestation and land-use changes increase atmospheric concentrations of greenhouse gases, intensifying global warming and accelerating the melting of glaciers and ice sheets.
- Crossing critical temperature thresholds can initiate long-term irreversible changes even if temperatures subsequently decline.

Cryosphere-Albedo Feedback:

- The **ice-albedo feedback** occurs when reflective snow and ice disappear, exposing darker ocean water and land surfaces that absorb more solar radiation.

- Increased heat absorption accelerates further melting, creating a positive feedback loop that intensifies regional warming.
- This mechanism contributes significantly to Arctic amplification and accelerates surrounding permafrost degradation.

Oceanic Thermal Forcing:

- Warm ocean currents can penetrate beneath floating ice shelves, accelerating melting from below and weakening their structural stability.
- The weakening of Antarctic ice shelves reduces their buttressing effect, allowing land-based glaciers to flow more rapidly towards the ocean.

Extreme Weather Events and Wildfires:

- Rain-on-snow events, extreme precipitation and heatwaves accelerate snowmelt, glacier instability and the expansion of glacial lakes.
- Boreal wildfires destroy insulating vegetation and organic soil layers, exposing permafrost to higher temperatures and accelerating thawing.
- In the Himalayas, intense monsoon rainfall, ice avalanches and unstable glacial lakes increase the probability of sudden downstream flooding.

Implications of Cryosphere Decline:

Sea-Level Rise and Coastal Displacement:

- Melting land-based glaciers and ice sheets contribute directly to global sea-level rise, increasing the risks of coastal flooding, erosion, saltwater intrusion and displacement.
- Low-lying coastal regions, small island developing states and densely populated river deltas face disproportionate socioeconomic risks.
- Sea-ice melting does not directly produce an equivalent rise in sea level because floating ice already displaces seawater.

Water and Food Security:

- Himalayan glaciers sustain the **Indus, Ganga and Brahmaputra river systems**, supporting agriculture, drinking-water supplies, hydropower and livelihoods across South Asia.
- Accelerated glacier melting may initially increase river discharge, but long-term glacier depletion can reduce dry-season water availability after peak water is reached.
- Changing snowmelt patterns and seasonal river flows can increase agricultural uncertainty and intensify transboundary water-management challenges.

Glacial Lake Outburst Floods (GLOFs):

- A **GLOF** is a sudden release of water from a glacial lake, generally caused by the failure of an unstable moraine or ice dam.
- Glacier retreat creates and expands glacial lakes, increasing the potential for catastrophic downstream flooding.
- GLOFs can destroy settlements, bridges, roads, hydropower infrastructure and agricultural land.
- India recorded 6,119 deaths across 62 reported GLOF events between 1835 and 2025, according to the supplied report data. Ice avalanches and monsoon rainfall are important triggers.

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Permafrost Thaw and Climate Tipping Points:

- Thawing permafrost releases carbon dioxide and methane, potentially converting a long-term carbon reservoir into a significant greenhouse gas source.
- **Thermokarst** formation occurs when ice-rich permafrost thaws, causing ground subsidence, erosion and the formation of irregular terrain and thaw lakes.
- These processes can destabilise mountain slopes, damage infrastructure and accelerate further carbon release.

Disruption of Ocean Circulation and Ecosystems:

- Freshwater influx from melting polar ice can alter ocean salinity, density differences and deep-water formation.
- Potential weakening of the **AMOC** could influence North Atlantic temperatures, precipitation patterns, marine ecosystems and regional climate systems.
- Changes in polar ocean conditions can also affect marine biodiversity, fisheries and global nutrient cycles.

Global and Indian Policy Responses:

International Climate Framework:

- **Paris Agreement (2015):** Seeks to hold the increase in global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels while pursuing efforts to limit it to 1.5°C.
- **COP31:** Provides an important opportunity to strengthen mitigation commitments, climate adaptation and financing for cryosphere-dependent communities.
- **UNEP's Limiting Overshoot Report (2026):** Recommends an overshoot, peak and decline pathway to minimise temperature exceedance and return to below 1.5°C as quickly as possible.
- **Decade of Action for Cryospheric Sciences (2025–2034):** Promotes scientific research, monitoring and international cooperation on snow, ice and permafrost systems.

Measures for Mitigation:

- **Rapid fossil-fuel transition:** Accelerate renewable energy deployment, energy efficiency and electrification to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- **Net-zero transition:** Pursue deep and sustained emissions reductions, with the objective of achieving global net-zero greenhouse gas emissions around mid-century.
- **Carbon dioxide removal (CDR):** Combine natural solutions, including ecosystem restoration, with carefully governed technological carbon-removal approaches to reduce atmospheric CO_2 concentrations.
- **Black carbon reduction:** Reduce soot emissions from diesel engines, biomass burning and inefficient cook stoves because black carbon deposited on snow and ice lowers surface reflectivity and accelerates melting.

Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction:

- **GLOF early-warning systems:** Install automated water-level sensors, weather stations, satellite-based monitoring and community alert mechanisms around vulnerable glacial lakes.
- **Glacial lake management:** Assess high-risk lakes and implement suitable risk-reduction measures, including controlled drainage and lake-level management wherever technically feasible.
- **Scientific monitoring:** Expand glacier observation networks, satellite remote sensing, ground-based measurements and standardised monitoring methodologies.
- **Climate-resilient infrastructure:** Strengthen roads, bridges, hydropower facilities and settlements in vulnerable Himalayan valleys.

- **Climate finance:** Expand adaptation funding and loss-and-damage support for vulnerable mountain communities, coastal populations and Indigenous Arctic communities.

Challenges in Protecting the Cryosphere:

- **Scientific uncertainty:** Predicting the timing and magnitude of ice-sheet instability, permafrost emissions and climate tipping points remains difficult.
- **Monitoring gaps:** Several Himalayan glacier systems remain inadequately monitored, limiting accurate assessment of regional climate and disaster risks.
- **Transboundary governance:** Major river basins originating in the HKH extend across multiple countries, requiring coordinated data-sharing and water management.
- **Climate finance deficit:** Mountain communities often lack the financial and technological resources required for large-scale adaptation and disaster preparedness.
- **Mitigation-adaptation imbalance:** Delayed emissions reductions increase future adaptation costs and may push certain cryospheric systems beyond critical thresholds.

Conclusion:

The cryosphere is an essential component of the global climate system, regulating Earth's temperature, freshwater availability, carbon storage and ocean circulation. Its accelerating degradation threatens ecological stability, human security and long-term climate resilience. Minimising temperature overshoot through rapid decarbonisation, alongside stronger glacier monitoring, GLOF preparedness and climate finance, is essential to limit irreversible damage. For India, protecting the Hindu Kush Himalaya is particularly important for safeguarding water, food, energy and disaster security.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Concepts:

- **Climate Overshoot:** A temporary exceedance of a specified global warming threshold, followed by an attempt to bring temperatures below that threshold through emissions reductions and carbon removal.
- **Climate Tipping Point:** A critical threshold beyond which a climate system may undergo a major, potentially self-sustaining and difficult-to-reverse transformation.
- **Peak Water:** The stage at which glacier meltwater contribution to river discharge reaches its maximum, followed by declining long-term flows as glacier reserves shrink.
- **Thermokarst:** Irregular terrain formed due to the thawing and collapse of ice-rich permafrost.
- **Albedo:** The proportion of incoming solar radiation reflected by a surface; higher albedo generally reduces surface heating.
- **AMOC:** A system of Atlantic Ocean currents that transports heat northwards and influences global climate patterns.

Important Organisations and Reports:

- **ICCI:** International Cryosphere Climate Initiative, which coordinates scientific and policy work on the protection of the cryosphere.
- **UNEP:** United Nations Environment Programme, the UN's principal environmental authority.
- **ICIMOD:** International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, headquartered in Kathmandu, Nepal, which works on sustainable development and environmental research in the Hindu Kush Himalaya.
- **IPCC:** Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which assesses scientific evidence on climate change, its impacts and mitigation and adaptation options.

UPSC Syllabus Linkage:

- **GS Paper I:** Geographical features and changes in critical geographical phenomena, including glaciers, ice sheets and ocean circulation.
- **GS Paper II:** International environmental cooperation, climate negotiations and global institutions.
- **GS Paper III:** Environmental conservation, climate change, disaster management, water security and renewable energy.
- **Essay:** Climate change, ecological sustainability, intergenerational equity and the limits of human adaptation.

Karnataka Revisits Private-Sector Job Reservations, Raising Constitutional and Economic Questions over Regional Employment

Recent Developments:

- In October 2026, the **Karnataka Government** revived discussions on the *Karnataka State Employment of Local Candidates in the Industries, Factories and Other Establishments Bill, 2024*, which had been put on hold following objections from industry representatives.
- The proposed legislation seeks to increase employment opportunities for local candidates (Kannadigas) in private industries. Its original provisions proposed **50% reservation in management positions and 70%–75% in non-management positions**, alongside 100% reservation in Group C and D positions.
- The debate highlights the conflict between regional employment aspirations, constitutional equality, freedom of business and the mobility of labour within India's integrated national market.

Constitutional Provisions Regarding Employment:

Fundamental Rights (Part III):

- **Article 14:** Guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the laws, requiring fairness and non-arbitrariness in government employment policies and administrative decisions.
- **Article 16:** Guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment and prohibits discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, descent, place of birth or residence.
    - **Article 16(3):** Empowers only Parliament to prescribe residence requirements for specified categories of public employment within a State or Union Territory.
    - **Article 16(4):** Enables reservation in favour of backward classes that are not adequately represented in State services.
- **Article 19(1)(g):** Protects citizens' freedom to practise any profession or carry on any occupation, trade or business, subject to reasonable restrictions under Article 19(6).
- **Article 19(1)(c):** Guarantees the right to form associations, unions and cooperative societies, providing the constitutional basis for trade unions and collective representation.
- **Article 21:** Protects life and personal liberty. Judicial interpretation has expanded its scope to include the right to livelihood, dignity and protection against workplace exploitation.
- **Article 23:** Prohibits human trafficking, begar and other forms of forced labour.
- **Article 24:** Prohibits the employment of children below 14 years in factories, mines and other hazardous occupations.

Directive Principles of State Policy (Part IV):

- **Article 39:** Directs the State to secure adequate means of livelihood for men and women, ensure equal pay for equal work and prevent the concentration of wealth and resources.
- **Article 41:** Directs the State, within the limits of its economic capacity and development, to provide for the right to work, education and public assistance in cases of unemployment, old age, sickness and disablement.
- **Article 42:** Directs the State to secure just and humane conditions of work and provide maternity relief.
- **Article 43:** Promotes a living wage, decent working conditions and a dignified standard of life for workers.
- **Article 43A:** Inserted through the **42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976**, it directs the State to secure workers' participation in the management of industrial undertakings.

Legislative Division (Seventh Schedule):

- **Article 246:** Distributes legislative powers between Parliament and State Legislatures through the Union List, State List and Concurrent List.
- **Concurrent List (List III):** Employment and labour-related matters fall under the concurrent legislative framework:
    - **Entry 22:** Trade unions and industrial and labour disputes.
    - **Entry 23:** Social security, social insurance, employment and unemployment.
    - **Entry 24:** Welfare of labour, including working conditions, provident funds, employers' liability, maternity benefits and related matters.
- Both Parliament and State Legislatures can legislate on Concurrent List subjects, subject to constitutional limitations and the rules governing repugnancy under Article 254.

Arguments Regarding Domicile-Based Reservations:

Arguments in Favour:

- **Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation:** Industries are frequently established on land acquired from local farmers. Supporters argue that affected families and local communities should receive employment opportunities as part of their rehabilitation and socio-economic development.
- **Protection against Wage Suppression:** Migrant workers with limited social security may accept exploitative wages and working conditions, potentially weakening the bargaining position of local workers and encouraging employers to suppress wages.
- **Agrarian Distress and Unemployment:** Declining agricultural viability and limited rural employment opportunities push young people towards urban centres, creating pressure on State Governments to generate manufacturing and service-sector employment.
- **Pressure on Metropolitan Infrastructure:** Unregulated migration can increase pressure on housing, transportation, sanitation and public health infrastructure in cities such as Bengaluru and Gurugram.
- **Linguistic and Cultural Efficiency:** Local recruitment in hospitality, retail and customer-facing services can improve regional-language communication, customer relations and social integration.

Arguments Against:

- **Threat to National Integration:** In *Dr. Pradeep Jain v. Union of India (1984)*, the Supreme Court emphasised that the Constitution recognises a single Indian domicile rather than separate State domiciles. Excessive regional protectionism can weaken national unity and the freedom of citizens to move and work across India.
- **Fragmentation of the Labour Market:** If States introduce competing local employment quotas, a retaliatory protectionist cycle may emerge, restricting labour mobility and weakening the benefits of India's demographic dividend.

- In *IMT Industrial Association v. State of Haryana (2023)*, the **Punjab and Haryana High Court** struck down the Haryana State Employment of Local Candidates Act, 2020, which mandated 75% reservation for local candidates in specified private-sector jobs.

- **Erosion of Ease of Doing Business:** Compulsory recruitment quotas can increase compliance costs, administrative interference and recruitment restrictions, affecting employers' operational flexibility and investment decisions.
- **Skill Deficit and Capital Flight:** Industries requiring specialised technical skills may not find suitably qualified candidates locally. Compulsory recruitment without adequate skill availability can reduce productivity and discourage domestic and foreign investment.
- **Constitutional Concerns:** Article 16(2) expressly prohibits residence-based discrimination in public employment, while Article 16(3) gives Parliament the power to prescribe specified residence requirements. Extending domicile-based restrictions to private employment raises separate questions concerning legislative competence, Article 19 and the reasonableness of restrictions.

Measures to Address Regional Unemployment:

Structural Economic Diversification:

- **Regional Comparative Advantage:** Promote industries according to local economic strengths, such as agro-processing in agricultural regions, renewable energy in arid regions and logistics industries along freight corridors.
- **Decentralisation of Industrial Clusters:** Provide targeted tax incentives, infrastructure subsidies and simplified land-use approvals to attract medium and large enterprises to Tier-2 and Tier-3 cities.
- **Local Entrepreneurship:** Establish regional incubation centres, improve access to seed capital and simplify regulatory compliance for rural enterprises and micro-businesses.

Infrastructure and Connectivity:

- **Physical and Digital Infrastructure:** Expand expressways, rural roads, railway freight corridors and high-speed broadband to reduce logistics costs and connect regional producers with national and global markets.
- **Industrial Infrastructure:** Develop special economic zones, agro-parks and ready-to-use manufacturing facilities in economically lagging regions to reduce initial investment costs for businesses.

Human Capital and Skill Development:

- **Industry-Linked Vocational Training:** Design decentralised technical and vocational education and training programmes in collaboration with local industries, agricultural enterprises and employers.
- **Apprenticeship Opportunities:** Encourage industries to recruit and train local youth through formal apprenticeships, supported by appropriate wage subsidies and skill-development incentives.
- **Demand-Driven Skills:** Align educational curricula with emerging employment opportunities in manufacturing, information technology, renewable energy and services.

Agricultural Transition and Rural Resilience:

- **Non-Farm Employment:** Shift surplus agricultural labour towards food processing, cold-chain storage, rural tourism and agricultural machinery maintenance.
- **High-Value Agriculture:** Promote crop diversification, climate-resilient farming and agricultural cooperatives to increase rural incomes and generate local employment.
- **Farmer Producer Organisations:** Strengthen Farmer Producer Organisations to improve collective marketing, processing, value addition and access to agricultural markets.

Decentralised Governance and Policy Flexibility:

- **Empower Local Bodies:** Strengthen the financial and administrative autonomy of municipal bodies and district authorities to formulate region-specific economic development strategies.
- **Productive Public Investment:** Use public employment programmes during seasonal unemployment to create durable local assets, including water conservation structures, storage facilities and rural infrastructure.
- **Cooperative Federalism:** Encourage Centre-State coordination on industrial investment, skill development, labour welfare and employment generation instead of competing State-level restrictions.

Conclusion:

Regional employment generation is a legitimate developmental objective, particularly in States facing unemployment, agrarian distress and uneven industrial growth. However, rigid domicile-based reservations in private employment can raise constitutional concerns, restrict labour mobility and discourage investment. **Skill development, decentralised industrialisation, local entrepreneurship and cooperative federalism** provide more sustainable solutions by improving local employability while preserving India's integrated national labour market.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Important Constitutional and Judicial References:

- **Article 16(2):** Prohibits discrimination based on residence in matters of public employment.
- **Article 16(3):** Only Parliament can prescribe specified residence requirements for certain categories of public employment.
- **Article 19(1)(g):** Protects freedom of occupation, trade and business, subject to reasonable restrictions.
- **Dr. Pradeep Jain v. Union of India (1984):** Recognised the concept of a single Indian domicile and cautioned against excessive regional preferences.
- **IMT Industrial Association v. State of Haryana (2023):** The Punjab and Haryana High Court invalidated Haryana's 75% private-sector local employment reservation law.

Important Concepts:

- **Domicile:** A person's permanent legal home, generally associated with the intention to reside indefinitely; it is distinct from ordinary residence.
- **Labour Mobility:** The ability of workers to move between geographical regions, occupations and industries in search of employment.
- **Demographic Dividend:** The potential economic benefit arising from a larger proportion of working-age population relative to dependants.
- **Jobless Growth:** A situation in which economic output increases without a proportionate increase in employment opportunities.
- **Cooperative Federalism:** A governance approach in which the Union and State Governments coordinate their policies and resources to achieve common developmental objectives.

UPSC Syllabus Linkage:

- **GS Paper I:** Population distribution, migration, urbanisation and associated social challenges.
- **GS Paper II:** Fundamental Rights, Directive Principles, Centre-State relations and constitutional provisions.
- **GS Paper III:** Employment generation, inclusive growth, skill development, industrial policy and economic reforms.

- **Essay:** National integration, regional inequality, economic freedom and the relationship between development and social justice.

Madras High Court Orders Temporary Management of Chidambaram Temple Amid Allegations of Financial and Heritage Mismanagement

Recent Developments:

- On **30 October 2026**, the **Madras High Court**, in *Sri Sabanayagar Temple v. State of Tamil Nadu*, constituted a five-member **Board of Management** to address alleged maladministration at the Chidambaram Sabanayagar Temple in Tamil Nadu.
- The Court found serious deficiencies in financial accountability, protection of heritage structures, management of temple properties and access to the **Kanagasabai Mandapam** for devotees.
- The Board will take charge of the temple's administration **until the identified deficiencies are remedied**. However, the **Podhu Dikshitars** retain exclusive authority over daily rituals and periodic festivals, subject to established customs and practices.
- The judgment seeks to balance the **denominational rights under Article 26** with public access, administrative accountability and the preservation of a historically significant religious institution.

Constitutional and Legal Framework:

1. Article 25 – Freedom of Religion:

- **Article 25(1)** guarantees freedom of conscience and the right to freely profess, practise and propagate religion, subject to **public order, morality, health and other provisions of Part III**.
- **Article 25(2)(a)** permits the State to regulate or restrict economic, financial, political and other secular activities associated with religious practice.
- **Article 25(2)(b)** allows the State to enact laws for social welfare and reform, including opening Hindu religious institutions of a public character to all classes and sections of Hindus.
- These provisions establish that religious freedom does not automatically exempt the secular administration of religious institutions from lawful regulation.

2. Article 26 – Freedom to Manage Religious Affairs:

- Article 26 grants every religious denomination or section thereof the right, subject to **public order, morality and health**, to:
  - Establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes.
  - Manage its own affairs in matters of religion.
  - Own and acquire movable and immovable property.
  - Administer such property in accordance with law.
- The **Podhu Dikshitars** have been recognised by the Supreme Court as a religious denomination entitled to administer the religious affairs of the Chidambaram temple.
- However, the right to administer religious property does not create immunity from lawful regulation of secular activities or justify maladministration.

3. Constitutional Balance – Religious Autonomy versus State Regulation:

- **Religious autonomy:** The State cannot permanently displace a recognised religious denomination from its constitutionally protected right to manage religious affairs.
- **Secular regulation:** Financial accounts, property management, collection of donations, conservation of heritage structures and other non-religious administrative activities can be subjected to appropriate regulation.
- **Public access:** The right of devotees to worship in a public religious institution must coexist with the denomination's authority over religious ceremonies and established practices.
- **Judicial oversight:** Courts can intervene where administrative failures, misuse of institutional autonomy or violations of citizens' rights require corrective action.

4. Doctrine of Proportionality and Temporary Intervention:

- The **doctrine of proportionality** requires State action to pursue a legitimate objective through measures that are appropriate and not unnecessarily excessive.
- In religious institution administration, intervention must address the identified deficiencies without permanently extinguishing constitutionally protected denominational rights.
- The High Court adopted a temporary management arrangement rather than permanently transferring the denomination's religious functions to the State.
- The arrangement preserves daily rituals and periodic festivals under the Podhu Dikshitars while placing secular administration and corrective measures under the Board's supervision.

Grounds for Judicial Intervention:

1. Financial Accountability and Audit:

- The Court found that the accounts submitted by the Podhu Dikshitars were inadequate and did not provide a reliable picture of the temple's income and expenditure.
- Accounts produced for the period **2018–2020** were found to be unaudited rough day-book ledgers rather than properly audited financial statements.
- The Court observed that the temple's financial records, including income from endowed properties and donations, required detailed scrutiny and forensic auditing.
- It directed that income from temple properties and *Kattalais* (religious endowments for specified purposes) be separately accounted for and reported to the Board every month.

2. Damage to Heritage Structures:

- The Court found that unauthorised constructions and renovation activities had damaged ancient architectural features, including sculptures and murals.
- The Board was directed to consult the **Tamil Nadu Heritage Commission** and remove unauthorised or unnecessary constructions that damage the historic structure.
- Any renovation must be undertaken with expert advice and without altering the temple's original heritage character.

3. Mismanagement of Temple Properties:

- The temple owns approximately **1,000 acres of land**, apart from valuable movable assets.
- The Court found deficiencies in property registers, rent collection, recovery of arrears and action against encroachments.

- The Board was directed to work with the district administration to retrieve encroached properties, recover outstanding rent and lease payments, and improve income from temple assets.
- It must also prepare an inventory of movable assets and valuables and take steps to secure missing valuables, if any.

4. Access to Kanagasabai Mandapam:

- The **Kanagasabai Mandapam** is an elevated sacred platform associated with the worship of Lord Nataraja and Sivagami Ammal.
- The dispute concerned restrictions on devotees seeking close darshan from the Kanagasabai after the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The High Court upheld the Government Order dated **17 May 2022**, which permitted devotees to climb the Kanagasabai and worship in accordance with the temple's customary practices.
- The Board must ensure **fair and equal opportunity** for devotees to have darshan without interfering with established religious customs and the performance of rituals.
- The Court also emphasised that denominational rights cannot be used to deny the public its legitimate right to worship in a public temple.

Landmark Supreme Court Judgment:

Dr. Subramanian Swamy v. State of Tamil Nadu (2014):

- The Supreme Court recognised the **Podhu Dikshitars as a religious denomination** entitled to administer the religious affairs of the Chidambaram temple under Article 26.
- It held that the State may intervene in cases of **maladministration**, but such intervention must be temporary and directed towards remedying the identified deficiencies.
- Once the consequences of maladministration have been removed, management must be restored to the persons or denomination legally entitled to administer the institution.
- An indefinite or permanent takeover of temple administration would violate the constitutional protection under **Article 26(d)**.
- The judgment clarified that the power to regulate religious institutions does not include an unrestricted power to permanently supersede their administration.

Board of Management: Composition and Responsibilities:

1. Composition:

The five-member Board constituted by the Madras High Court comprises:

- **Justice V. Bharathidasan (Retd.)** – Chairman.
- **Justice R. Suresh Kumar (Retd.)** – Co-Chairman.
- **C. Rajendran (Retd. IAS)** – Member.
- Secretary, Podhu Dikshitars, Sri Sabanayagar Temple – Ex-officio Member.
- Secretary to the Government, Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Department, Tamil Nadu – Ex-officio Member.

2. Major Responsibilities:

- Ensure transparent administration, equal access to the Kanagasabai, and preservation of customary religious practices.

- Coordinate heritage conservation and removal of unauthorised constructions with the Tamil Nadu Heritage Commission.
- Recover encroached temple properties, collect outstanding rents and improve revenue management.
- Maintain separate accounts of temple income and endowments and submit monthly statements.
- Prepare an inventory of movable assets and valuables and ensure their protection.
- Establish a transparent electronic payment system for temple donations, with separate accounts for donations earmarked for specific renovation works.

3. Safeguards for Religious Autonomy:

- The Podhu Dikshitars retain exclusive authority over **daily rituals and periodic festivals**, subject to established customs and practices.
- Existing fixed deposits and other temple income handled by the Podhu Dikshitars will continue to remain with them, subject to regular submission of accounts to the Board.
- The Board's mandate is corrective and supervisory; it is not intended to permanently transfer the denomination's constitutionally protected religious functions.

About Chidambaram Sabanayagar Temple:

1. Location and Religious Significance:

- The **Chidambaram Sabanayagar Temple**, also known as the **Thillai Nataraja Temple**, is situated in Chidambaram town, Cuddalore district, Tamil Nadu.
- It is dedicated to **Lord Shiva in the form of Nataraja**, representing the cosmic dance of creation, preservation and destruction.
- The temple is an important centre of **Shaivism** and is associated with the concept of *Chidambara Rahasyam*, symbolising the formless aspect of the divine.

2. Historical Background:

- Historical and literary traditions associate the temple with the ancient settlement of **Thillai**, named after the Thillai trees that once grew in the region.
- The temple received substantial patronage from the **Chola dynasty**, particularly during the medieval period.
- **Parantaka Chola I** is traditionally associated with gilding the roof of the Chit Sabha.
- Later Chola rulers, including Rajaraja Chola I and Kulothunga Chola I, also contributed to the temple through donations and endowments.
- Subsequent rulers and regional powers, including the **Vijayanagara rulers and Madurai Nayakas**, contributed to its renovation and expansion.
- The temple's present architectural complex reflects several phases of construction, renovation and patronage over centuries.
- The **Podhu Dikshitars**, a hereditary community of priests, have traditionally performed rituals and administered the temple's religious affairs.

3. Architectural Features:

- The temple complex covers approximately **40 acres** and represents a significant example of South Indian temple architecture, particularly the Chola architectural tradition.
- The complex has **four prakarams (enclosures)** surrounded by walls and several gateways, including prominent gopurams.
- Its principal structures include the sanctum and five important halls or *Sabhas*:
    - **Chit Sabha:** The principal sanctum associated with Lord Nataraja.

- **Kanaka Sabha:** The golden hall associated with worship and rituals.
- **Nritta Sabha:** The hall associated with the cosmic dance of Nataraja.
- **Deva Sabha:** One of the principal ceremonial halls.
- **Raja Sabha:** The thousand-pillared hall.

- Sculptural representations of the **108 Karanas** described in the *Natya Shastra*, traditionally attributed to Bharata Muni, are significant features of the temple's artistic heritage.
- These Karanas represent movements and transitional postures associated with classical Indian dance traditions, including Bharatanatyam.

Way Forward:

- **Accountability with autonomy:** Religious institutions should retain constitutionally protected authority over religious affairs while maintaining transparent financial and administrative systems.
- **Heritage conservation:** Ancient temples require scientific conservation, expert supervision and strict control over unauthorised construction and renovation.
- **Transparent asset management:** Regular audits, updated property registers, digital records and effective recovery of encroached land can improve institutional accountability.
- **Inclusive access:** Public religious institutions should ensure fair access to worshippers while respecting established rituals, customs and legitimate safety requirements.
- **Time-bound intervention:** State or judicial intervention should remain proportionate, purpose-specific and temporary, with restoration of management once the identified deficiencies are remedied.

Value Addition for UPSC:

1. Important Constitutional Provisions:

- **Article 25:** Freedom of conscience and free profession, practice and propagation of religion.
- **Article 25(2)(a):** State regulation of secular activities associated with religious practice.
- **Article 25(2)(b):** Social welfare and reform, including access to Hindu religious institutions of a public character.
- **Article 26:** Rights of religious denominations to manage religious affairs and administer property in accordance with law.
- **Article 49:** Obligation of the State to protect monuments and places of national importance.
- **Article 51A(f):** Fundamental duty to value and preserve the rich heritage of India's composite culture.

2. Important Legal Concepts:

- **Religious denomination:** A distinct religious group having a common faith, organisation and distinctive name, subject to the constitutional tests evolved by the Supreme Court.
- **Secular activities:** Economic, financial, political and other non-religious activities associated with religious practice that may be regulated by law.
- **Maladministration:** Administrative failure involving mismanagement, lack of accountability, misuse of institutional resources or failure to protect entrusted assets.
- **Proportionality:** A principle requiring State intervention to remain appropriate, necessary and proportionate to its legitimate objective.

3. Mains Relevance:

- **GS Paper II:** Fundamental Rights, freedom of religion, constitutional limitations and Centre–State relations.
- **GS Paper III:** Heritage conservation, protection of cultural assets and institutional accountability.

- **GS Paper IV:** Transparency, accountability, public trust, ethical administration and responsible management of public resources.

4. Key Takeaway:

The Chidambaram temple judgment illustrates that **religious autonomy and administrative accountability are complementary constitutional concerns**. The State may intervene to remedy proven maladministration, but such intervention must not become a permanent takeover of the religious denomination's constitutionally protected rights.

International Day for Biosphere Reserves Highlights Community-Based Conservation and Sustainable Development

Recent Developments:

- The **International Day for Biosphere Reserves** is observed annually on **3 November** to highlight the contribution of biosphere reserves to biodiversity conservation and sustainable development.
- The **41st session of the UNESCO General Conference (2021)** proclaimed this international day, and its first official observance took place in **2022**.
- According to the Government of India's **Press Information Bureau backgrounder dated 2 November 2026**, the **World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR)** comprises **797 biosphere reserves across 145 countries**.
- India has **18 nationally notified Biosphere Reserves**, of which **13 are included in UNESCO's World Network**, including the Cold Desert Biosphere Reserve, added in 2025.
- The observance emphasises biosphere reserves as **living laboratories** that integrate biodiversity conservation, scientific research and sustainable livelihoods.

Biosphere Reserves: Concept and Evolution:

1. Meaning and Significance:

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- **Biosphere Reserves** are geographically defined areas identified by national governments for conserving biodiversity and promoting environmentally sustainable development.
- They protect natural habitats, maintain ecological balance, conserve genetic resources and promote the sustainable use of biological resources.
- Unlike conservation models based exclusively on strict protection, biosphere reserves integrate **ecosystems, local communities and economic activities** within a common management framework.
- They support food security, water availability, climate resilience, traditional livelihoods and the conservation of associated cultural diversity.
- The first biosphere reserves were designated in **1976**, and such reserves are now present on every continent except Antarctica.

2. UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme:

- The **Man and the Biosphere (MAB) Programme** was launched by UNESCO in **1971** as an intergovernmental scientific initiative to improve the relationship between human societies and their environment.

- It promotes interdisciplinary research, ecosystem monitoring, environmental education, training and sustainable management of natural resources.
- Biosphere reserves function as **living laboratories** for testing and demonstrating approaches that reconcile biodiversity conservation with human development.
- The **World Network of Biosphere Reserves (WNBR)** facilitates international cooperation, joint research, exchange of knowledge and sharing of successful conservation practices.
- The network is coordinated through UNESCO's MAB framework, including the **International Coordinating Council of the MAB Programme**.

3. Global Status and Significance:

- The WNBR comprises **797 biosphere reserves across 145 countries**, according to the latest Government of India backgrounder issued in November 2026.
- UNESCO reports that these reserves cover approximately **7.5 million square kilometres**, representing more than **5% of the Earth's terrestrial surface**.
- Around **300 million people** live within biosphere reserves, demonstrating their importance for both ecological protection and human livelihoods.
- According to the World Network of Biosphere Reserves map for 2025–26, approximately **40% of biosphere reserves may face more extreme climate events by 2050**, while more than **50% overlap with another international designation**.
- The **Mata Atlântica Biosphere Reserve in Brazil** is recognised by UNESCO as the world's largest biosphere reserve.

Three-Zone Structure of Biosphere Reserves:

1. Core Area:

- The **Core Area** provides the highest level of protection and is dedicated primarily to the long-term conservation of biodiversity, habitats, species and genetic resources.
- It is generally legally protected under applicable national or subnational conservation frameworks, and human activities are strictly restricted.
- Compatible scientific research, ecological monitoring and activities necessary for conservation may be permitted under regulated conditions.
- The core area maintains essential ecological processes and provides a reference site for studying relatively undisturbed ecosystems.

2. Buffer Zone:

- The **Buffer Zone** surrounds or adjoins the core area and protects it from external human pressures.
- It accommodates activities compatible with conservation, including environmental education, scientific research, ecological monitoring and regulated ecotourism.
- Sustainable resource use and community-based conservation activities may also be permitted, subject to applicable regulations.
- The buffer zone reduces pressure on strictly protected ecosystems while strengthening public understanding of biodiversity conservation.

3. Transition Area:

- The **Transition Area** is the outermost zone where local communities, researchers, businesses and management authorities cooperate to promote sustainable development.

- It accommodates human settlements, traditional agriculture, sustainable forestry, ecotourism and other locally appropriate economic activities.
- Local communities participate in resource management and apply traditional ecological knowledge to support conservation.
- The transition area demonstrates how **livelihood security and ecological sustainability** can be pursued together.

Three Core Functions of Biosphere Reserves:

1. Conservation Function:

- Protect biodiversity at the genetic, species and ecosystem levels, including natural landscapes and associated cultural diversity.
- Conserve threatened species, natural habitats and ecological processes while maintaining ecosystem services.
- Support the protection and restoration of forests, wetlands, grasslands, coastal ecosystems and marine habitats.

2. Sustainable Development Function:

- Promote economic and social development that respects ecological limits and local cultural values.
- Encourage sustainable agriculture, responsible forestry, ecotourism and community-based livelihood activities.
- Integrate local and indigenous communities into conservation planning and management rather than treating them merely as beneficiaries.

3. Scientific and Logistic Support Function:

- Facilitate scientific research, environmental monitoring, ecological education, training and knowledge exchange.
- Provide opportunities to study climate change, ecosystem degradation, biodiversity loss and human–environment interactions.
- Promote cooperation between research institutions, government agencies, local communities and international organisations.

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Biosphere Reserves and Other Protected Areas:

1. Difference from National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries:

- **National Parks and Wildlife Sanctuaries** primarily focus on protecting wildlife, habitats and ecosystems under applicable wildlife protection laws.
- Biosphere reserves adopt a broader landscape-level approach by integrating protected ecosystems with surrounding settlements and sustainable economic activities.
- A biosphere reserve may include one or more national parks, wildlife sanctuaries and other protected areas within its larger geographical boundary.
- Unlike the assumption that conservation necessarily requires the exclusion of people, the biosphere reserve model recognises local communities as active participants in conservation and sustainable resource management.
- Biosphere reserves do not automatically confer the same statutory protection on their entire geographical area; the legal status of individual zones depends on the applicable national and state laws.

2. International Designation and Review:

- Biosphere reserves are **nominated by national governments** and designated under UNESCO's intergovernmental MAB Programme following consideration by its International Coordinating Council.
- Their geographical areas remain under the sovereign jurisdiction of the countries in which they are located; UNESCO recognition does not transfer territorial authority to UNESCO.
- The **1995 Statutory Framework of the World Network of Biosphere Reserves** and the Seville Strategy provide the principal international framework for their development and recognition.
- UNESCO conducts a **periodic review every 10 years** to assess the functioning, zonation, management and participation of local communities in each reserve.

India's Biosphere Reserves:

1. National Status:

- India has **18 nationally notified Biosphere Reserves**, covering approximately **91,425 square kilometres**, of which **13 are included in UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves**.
- These reserves represent diverse ecosystems, including tropical forests, mountain landscapes, mangroves, coastal wetlands, coral reefs, islands and high-altitude cold deserts.
- The **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** provides policy and financial support through the Biodiversity Conservation scheme, a component of the broader Conservation of Natural Resources and Ecosystems framework.
- State Forest Departments primarily implement conservation and development activities in accordance with approved management plans.

2. Important Biosphere Reserves:

Biosphere Reserve	Year of National Designation	State/Region	Important Fact
Nilgiri	1986	Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka	India's first Biosphere Reserve; UNESCO recognition in 2000
Nanda Devi	1988	Uttarakhand	Himalayan ecosystem; UNESCO recognition in 2004
Nokrek	1988	Meghalaya	Important biodiversity region of the Garo Hills
Gulf of Mannar	1989	Tamil Nadu	Marine ecosystem with coral reefs, seagrass beds and mangroves
Sundarbans	1989	West Bengal	Mangrove ecosystem and tiger habitat
Manas	1989	Assam	Not included in UNESCO's WNBR
Great Nicobar	1989	Andaman and Nicobar Islands	Island and tropical rainforest ecosystems
Similipal	1994	Odisha	Tropical forests and important wildlife habitat
Dibru-Saikhowa	1997	Assam	Smallest nationally notified Biosphere Reserve by area
Dehang-Dibang	1998	Arunachal Pradesh	Eastern Himalayan ecosystem
Pachmarhi	1999	Madhya Pradesh	Central Indian highland ecosystem
Khangchendzonga	2000	Sikkim	UNESCO recognition in 2018; important Himalayan landscape
Agasthyamalai	2001	Kerala and Tamil Nadu	Southern Western Ghats biodiversity

Achanakmar-Amarkantak	2005	Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh	Central Indian forest ecosystem
Great Rann of Kutch	2008	Gujarat	Largest nationally notified Biosphere Reserve by area
Cold Desert	2009	Himachal Pradesh	Added to UNESCO's WNBR in 2025
Seshachalam	2010	Andhra Pradesh	Important Eastern Ghats forest ecosystem
Panna	2011	Madhya Pradesh	UNESCO recognition in 2020

3. Important Facts for Prelims:

- **First Biosphere Reserve in India:** Nilgiri, designated in 1986.
- **Largest nationally notified Biosphere Reserve:** Great Rann of Kutch, Gujarat, covering approximately 12,454 square kilometres.
- **Smallest nationally notified Biosphere Reserve:** Dibru-Saikhowa, Assam, covering approximately 765 square kilometres.
- **Latest Indian addition to UNESCO's WNBR:** Cold Desert Biosphere Reserve, Himachal Pradesh, included in 2025.
- **Number of nationally notified reserves:** 18.
- **Number included in UNESCO's WNBR:** 13.
- **UNESCO's first biosphere reserves:** Designated in 1976.

4. Funding and Management:

- The MoEFCC administers the **Biodiversity Conservation scheme** to support conservation and development activities in biosphere reserves.
- Financial assistance is provided to State Governments through grants-in-aid, with implementation primarily undertaken by State Forest Departments.
- The funding pattern is **60:40 between the Centre and States** for most States and **90:10** for North-Eastern and Himalayan States.
- Since **2022–23**, the Ministry has piloted five-year **Integrated Management Plans** for Nanda Devi, Pachmarhi, Dehang-Dibang and Agasthyamalai.
- These plans integrate habitat restoration, biodiversity monitoring, scientific research and sustainable livelihood development.

Mains Analytical Dimensions:

1. Biodiversity Conservation and Global Commitments:

- Biosphere reserves contribute to **Sustainable Development Goal 15 (Life on Land)** by protecting terrestrial ecosystems, restoring degraded habitats and conserving biodiversity.
- They also support **Sustainable Development Goal 14 (Life Below Water)** through the conservation of marine and coastal ecosystems.
- Their objectives complement the **Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework**, particularly its targets relating to biodiversity conservation, ecosystem restoration and sustainable use of biological resources.
- They contribute to climate change adaptation by protecting carbon-rich ecosystems, maintaining ecological connectivity and strengthening ecosystem resilience.

2. Community Participation and Traditional Knowledge:

- Indigenous peoples and local communities act as important stakeholders in biodiversity conservation through traditional ecological knowledge and sustainable resource-use practices.
- Community participation can reduce human–wildlife conflict, improve conservation outcomes and create livelihood opportunities through ecotourism and sustainable forest-based activities.
- Conservation strategies are more effective when local communities participate in decision-making and receive equitable benefits from the sustainable use of natural resources.

3. Climate Change and Ecosystem Resilience:

- Forests, mangroves, wetlands and other ecosystems within biosphere reserves act as **carbon sinks** and contribute to climate change mitigation.
- Ecological corridors and connected habitats support wildlife movement, migration and adaptation to changing climatic conditions.
- Scientific monitoring within biosphere reserves helps assess climate-related risks, ecosystem degradation and changes in species distribution.
- Increasing extreme weather events, habitat fragmentation, invasive species and biodiversity loss require climate-resilient management plans.

4. Major Challenges:

- **Developmental pressure:** Infrastructure expansion, mining, tourism and land-use changes can increase pressure on ecologically sensitive landscapes.
- **Human–wildlife conflict:** Competition over land and resources can affect local livelihoods and weaken community support for conservation.
- **Administrative fragmentation:** Overlapping jurisdictions and inadequate coordination among forest departments, local bodies and other agencies can weaken integrated management.
- **Financial and scientific constraints:** Limited funding, inadequate ecological data and insufficient monitoring capacity can restrict effective conservation.
- **Climate and invasive species:** Extreme weather events, changing ecological conditions and invasive species threaten habitat stability and native biodiversity.

Way Forward:

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- **Strengthen community-led conservation:** Involve indigenous peoples, local communities and local institutions in planning, monitoring and benefit-sharing mechanisms.
- **Improve scientific management:** Expand ecological monitoring, biodiversity inventories, climate-risk assessments and research partnerships.
- **Promote sustainable livelihoods:** Develop regulated ecotourism, sustainable agriculture, responsible forestry and locally appropriate livelihood opportunities.
- **Integrate climate adaptation:** Incorporate climate-resilient planning, ecosystem restoration and ecological connectivity into management plans.
- **Improve institutional coordination:** Strengthen cooperation among the MoEFCC, State Forest Departments, research institutions, local bodies and international organisations.
- **Ensure periodic evaluation:** Use UNESCO's ten-year review mechanism and national monitoring systems to assess conservation outcomes and community participation.

Conclusion:

The International Day for Biosphere Reserves highlights a fundamental principle of modern conservation: **biodiversity protection and human well-being must advance together**. India's 18 Biosphere Reserves, including 13 recognised under UNESCO's World Network, provide an important framework for conserving ecological diversity while supporting sustainable livelihoods. Strengthening community stewardship, scientific management, climate adaptation and institutional coordination can make these landscapes resilient centres of conservation and sustainable development.

Value Addition for UPSC:

1. Important International Frameworks:

- **UNESCO's Man and the Biosphere Programme, 1971:** Promotes scientific cooperation and sustainable relationships between people and the environment.
- **Seville Strategy, 1995:** Provides strategic guidance for the development and effective functioning of biosphere reserves.
- **Statutory Framework of the WNBR, 1995:** Establishes the international framework for the designation and functioning of biosphere reserves.
- **Convention on Biological Diversity, 1992:** Provides the global framework for biodiversity conservation, sustainable use and fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from genetic resources.
- **Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework, 2022:** Establishes global biodiversity targets, including conservation of at least 30% of terrestrial, inland water, coastal and marine areas by 2030.

2. Important Concepts:

- **In-situ Conservation:** Conservation of species in their natural habitats and ecosystems.
- **Genetic Diversity:** Variation in genetic characteristics among individuals and populations of the same species.
- **Ecological Connectivity:** Functional connections between habitats that facilitate species movement and maintain ecological processes.
- **Ecosystem Services:** Benefits obtained from ecosystems, including food, freshwater, climate regulation, pollination and cultural services.
- **Community-Based Conservation:** A conservation approach that involves local communities in the protection and sustainable management of natural resources.

3. Mains Relevance:

- **GS Paper I:** Distribution of natural resources, geographical features and biodiversity.
- **GS Paper III:** Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment, climate change and biodiversity.
- **GS Paper IV:** Environmental ethics, intergenerational equity, community participation and sustainable use of natural resources.

4. Key Takeaway:

Biosphere reserves represent an **integrated conservation model** based on three interconnected functions—conservation, sustainable development and scientific support—implemented through core, buffer and transition zones. Their success depends on combining ecological protection with community participation and sustainable livelihoods.

VB-G RAM G Grievance Rules, 2026 Establish a Time-Bound Accountability Framework for Rural Employment

Recent Developments:

- The **Ministry of Rural Development** notified the **VB-G RAM G Grievance Redressal Rules, 2026**, on **2 November 2026**, establishing a structured mechanism to address complaints concerning the implementation of the Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin).
- The Rules provide for a **three-tier grievance redressal mechanism** at the Gram Panchayat, Block and District levels, multiple channels for complaint submission, mandatory registration, digital tracking and escalation of unresolved grievances.
- The prescribed timelines require an enquiry to be completed within **7 working days** and the grievance to be resolved within **15 days** of its receipt. The Rules seek to strengthen transparency, administrative accountability and citizens' access to statutory entitlements.

Grievance Redressal Rules, 2026:

Accessibility and Registration of Grievances:

- **Universal access:** Any person may submit a grievance concerning any matter arising out of or connected with the implementation of the Scheme. Complaints may be submitted in person, through speed post, telephone or designated helplines, digital platforms and other modes permitted by State Governments.
- **Mandatory registration:** Grievances received physically at the Gram Panchayat, Block or District level must be entered into the designated Digital Public Infrastructure on the day of receipt or, where this is not feasible, by the next working day. The complainant must receive an acknowledgement containing the registration number, date of receipt and designation of the receiving authority.
- **Protection against procedural exclusion:** Rule 4(5) prohibits refusal of registration on grounds of format, language, manner of submission or procedural deficiency. This provision reduces barriers for rural workers, particularly those with limited literacy or digital access.

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Three-Tier Institutional Mechanism:

- **Gram Panchayat Level:** Acts as the grassroots point for receiving, registering and initially handling complaints.
- **Block Level:** Examines grievances and facilitates their resolution or escalation through the designated Grievance Redressal Officer.
- **District Level:** Provides higher-level oversight, with the **District Programme Coordinator (DPC)** supervising the process and ensuring that complaints are handled through the prescribed mechanism and digital infrastructure.
- **Digital integration:** State Governments must integrate the grievance mechanism with the Digital Public Infrastructure designated by the Central Government, enabling end-to-end tracking from registration to final disposal.

Time Limits, Corrective Action and Appeals:

- **Enquiry:** The designated Grievance Redressal Officer must complete the enquiry within **7 working days** from receipt of the grievance. The officer may call for relevant records, registers, documents, reports and electronic data from concerned authorities.
- **Opportunity of hearing:** Where necessary, the complainant must be given a reasonable opportunity to present their case, either physically or electronically.
- **Resolution:** The grievance must be resolved within **15 days** of receipt. Findings and corrective or remedial action must be recorded on the designated digital platform and communicated to the complainant.
- **Escalation and appeals:** Grievances unresolved within the prescribed period are escalated to the next higher level and electronically monitored until disposal. Appeals against orders are governed by the relevant provisions of **Schedule I of the VB-G RAM G Act, 2025**.

VB-G RAM G Act, 2025: Background and Key Provisions

Transition from MGNREGA to VB-G RAM G:

- The **Viksit Bharat–Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Act, 2025**, replaced the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), 2005. It came into force across rural India on **1 July 2026**, from which date MGNREGA stood repealed.
- The new legislation seeks to integrate **wage employment, livelihood security, durable asset creation and climate resilience** within a broader rural development framework aligned with the vision of **Viksit Bharat @2047**.
- The framework retains a statutory employment guarantee but changes the approach to planning, funding and asset creation. Its normative allocation model is a significant departure from the earlier demand-linked funding architecture; therefore, the change should not be understood as the abolition of the statutory employment entitlement.

Enhanced Employment Guarantee and Worker Entitlements:

- **125 days of employment:** Every eligible rural household whose adult members volunteer to undertake unskilled manual work is entitled to **125 days of wage employment per financial year**, compared with 100 days under MGNREGA.
- **Unemployment allowance:** If employment is not provided within **15 days** of the application, the State Government is liable to pay unemployment allowance. Under the new framework, the minimum rate is one-fourth of the notified wage for the first 30 days and one-half for the remaining period of the financial year.
- **Wage payment:** Wages are to be paid weekly or, at the latest, within a fortnight after closure of the muster roll. Delayed payments attract compensation under the Act.
- **Worksite facilities:** The Act provides for safe drinking water, shade, rest periods and first-aid facilities. It also provides for childcare arrangements where five or more children below five years of age are present at a worksite.

Funding and Agricultural Season Management:

- **Centrally Sponsored Scheme:** The programme follows a Centre–State cost-sharing framework. The Central Government makes normative allocations to States on the basis of prescribed objective parameters, while expenditure beyond the allocation is the responsibility of the State.
- **Normative allocation:** States are responsible for transparent and need-based distribution of funds among districts and Gram Panchayats, taking account of Panchayat categories and local development requirements. This increases the importance of fiscal planning and State-level implementation capacity.

- **Agricultural labour availability:** States may notify an aggregate period of **60 days in a financial year**, covering peak sowing and harvesting seasons, during which works under the Act will not be undertaken. The full 125-day guarantee remains applicable during the remaining period.

Planning, Works and Institutional Oversight:

- **Viksit Gram Panchayat Plans (VGPPs):** Gram Panchayats prepare decentralised development plans based on local needs, with planning inputs consolidated at higher levels and integrated with national spatial planning systems, including **PM Gati Shakti**.
- **Four priority areas of works:** Water security, core rural infrastructure, livelihood-related infrastructure and special works for extreme weather events. These priorities connect wage employment with productive assets, agricultural support and climate adaptation.
- **Technology-enabled monitoring:** The framework uses biometric authentication, geo-tagging, mobile-based monitoring, real-time dashboards and AI-enabled analytics to strengthen verification and oversight.
- **Social audit and transparency:** Social audits, public disclosure systems and Janata Boards displaying sanctioned works, labour estimates and expenditure are intended to facilitate community monitoring.
- **Institutional oversight:** The **Central Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Council** and State Gramin Rozgar Guarantee Councils are responsible for review, monitoring and effective implementation. Central and State-level steering committees support coordination and policy oversight.

MGNREGA, 2005: Understanding the Earlier Framework

- The **Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005** was enacted to provide a statutory guarantee of at least **100 days of wage employment per financial year** to rural households whose adult members volunteered for unskilled manual work. It was implemented from **2006** and renamed MGNREGA in **2009**.
- **Demand-driven and rights-based character:** Rural households could apply for employment, and the State was legally required to provide work within 15 days. Failure to provide employment triggered entitlement to unemployment allowance.
- **Decentralised implementation:** Gram Panchayats played a central role in registration, planning and execution of works, supported by social audits and institutional monitoring.
- **Women's participation:** The Act provided that at least **one-third of the beneficiaries** should be women. This helped expand women's participation in paid rural employment and strengthened their economic agency.

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Significance and Implementation Challenges:

Governance and Development Significance:

- **Strengthening accountability:** Mandatory grievance registration, fixed timelines, digital tracking and escalation make administrative inaction more visible and provide a structured route for seeking remedies.
- **Deepening decentralisation:** The three-tier mechanism places grievance handling closer to citizens while retaining block- and district-level supervision.
- **Protecting vulnerable workers:** Acceptance of complaints irrespective of language, format or procedural deficiencies can improve access for workers facing literacy, connectivity and administrative barriers.
- **Convergence and asset creation:** VGPP-based planning connects employment generation with water conservation, rural infrastructure, livelihood diversification and climate resilience.

Key Challenges:

- **Digital divide:** Dependence on digital infrastructure may disadvantage workers with limited internet access, digital literacy or access to devices. Effective offline complaint channels and assisted registration are therefore essential.
- **Administrative capacity:** Short resolution deadlines require adequately staffed grievance offices, trained personnel and coordination across Panchayat, Block and District administrations.
- **Fiscal federalism:** Normative allocations and State responsibility for expenditure beyond allocations may create implementation pressures in States with greater employment demand or weaker fiscal capacity.
- **Rights versus implementation constraints:** Seasonal work pauses, fund availability and administrative delays must not undermine the effective delivery of the statutory employment guarantee.
- **Quality of accountability:** Digital dashboards and formal disposal of complaints are insufficient unless corrective action is timely, independently verifiable and communicated to complainants.

Value Addition for UPSC:

- **GS Paper II:** Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections, accountability and transparency, e-governance, decentralisation, Panchayati Raj institutions and grievance redressal mechanisms.
- **GS Paper III:** Inclusive growth, rural employment, agricultural labour markets, rural infrastructure, sustainable development and climate resilience.
- **Important distinction:** The **employment guarantee** concerns the statutory entitlement to wage employment, whereas the **grievance redressal mechanism** provides an institutional route to address violations or deficiencies in implementing that entitlement.
- **Governance concepts:** Social audit, citizen-centric administration, digital public infrastructure, last-mile delivery, fiscal federalism and outcome-oriented public expenditure.
- **Analytical theme:** The transition from MGNREGA to VB-G RAM G reflects an attempt to combine social protection with productive asset creation. Its success will depend on preserving the enforceability of employment rights while ensuring adequate funding, accessible grievance redressal and meaningful local participation.

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QUESTIONS

1. Consider the following components of Earth's hydrosphere:

(1) Continental Ice Sheets

(2) Submarine Permafrost

(3) Floating Sea Ice

(4) Mountain Glaciers

(5) Seasonal Snow Cover

How many of the above components directly contribute to net global sea-level rise upon undergoing thermal melting?

(A) Only two

(B) Only three

(C) Only four

(D) All five

2. With reference to the constitutional provisions governing labour and employment in India, consider the following statements:

(1) Residence is a prohibited ground of discrimination under Article 16(2), but not under Article 15(1).

(2) Trade unions, industrial disputes and welfare of labour fall under the Concurrent List.

(3) A State law prevails over a conflicting Central law on a Concurrent List subject, irrespective of Presidential assent.

(4) Article 23 prohibits forced labour by both the State and private individuals.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(A) 1 and 3 only

(B) 1, 2 and 4 only

(C) 2, 3 and 4 only

(D) 1, 2, 3 and 4

3. With reference to the constitutional rights of religious denominations, consider the following statements:

Statement 1: Article 26 permits denominations to restrict public access to all religious services in their temples.

Statement 2: Article 25(2)(b) limits denominational autonomy concerning access to public Hindu religious institutions.

Which one of the following is correct?

(A) Both statements are correct, and Statement 2 explains Statement 1.

(B) Both statements are correct, but Statement 2 does not explain Statement 1.

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

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

4. With reference to Biosphere Reserves, consider the following statements:

(1) Buffer zones may include degraded ecosystems designated for ecological restoration.

(2) Traditional resource-use practices may continue in buffer zones subject to ecological sustainability.

(3) Customary resource-use practices predating the designation of a Biosphere Reserve are exempt from conservation restrictions.

(4) Renewable energy infrastructure may be permitted in buffer zones subject to ecological compatibility.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(A) 1, 2 and 4 only

(B) 1 and 3 only

(C) 2 and 3 only

(D) 1, 2, 3 and 4

5. With reference to permissible works under the VB–G RAM G Act, 2025, consider the following statements:

(1) Reclamation of community waterlogged land constitutes water security works.

(2) Cold storage facilities fall under core rural infrastructure works.

(3) Works outside the specified categories cannot be included through Central notification.

(4) Individual-beneficiary works require express notification and prescribed eligibility criteria.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(A) 1 and 3 only

(B) 2 and 4 only

(C) 1 and 4 only

(D) 1, 2, 3 and 4

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ANSWER KEY

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

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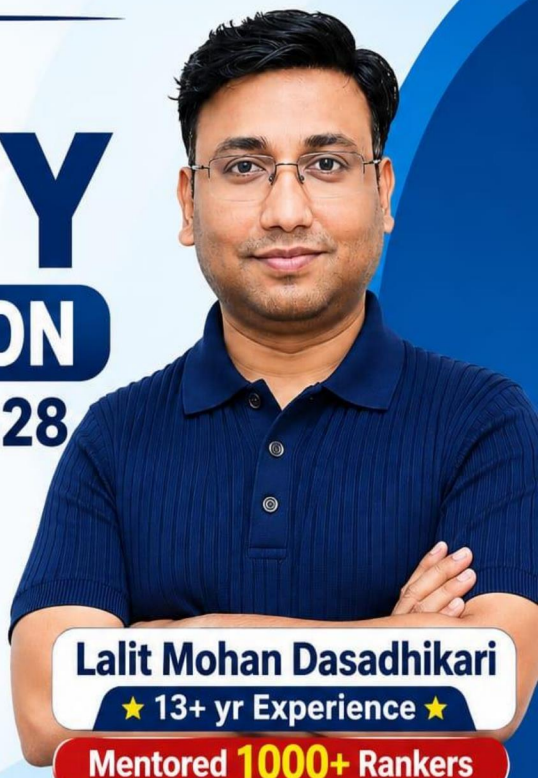
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