

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has ruled out the occurrence of El Niño during the upcoming southwest monsoon season, stating that neutral conditions are likely to prevail.

- ➔ However, above-normal summer temperatures are expected across much of India, with eastern parts possibly experiencing up to 10 heatwave days.

Summer set to be warmer, but El Nino unlikely during coming monsoon: IMD

Jacob Koshy

NEW DELHI

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) has “ruled out” the possibility of an El Niño in the coming southwest monsoon season this year.

An El Niño, characterised by a warming of the central equatorial Pacific Ocean, is frequently associated with reduced monsoon rainfall in India.

“Based on the climate forecasts, including international ones, we can rule out El Niño for the monsoon. We will most likely see neutral El Niño conditions,” M. Mohapatra, Director-General, IMD, said in a briefing on Monday.

In 2023, which was an El Niño year, the monsoon season saw a 6% deficit.



Climate forecast: IMD Director-General M. Mohapatra says there will most likely be neutral El Niño conditions. THULASI KAKKAT

Last year witnessed an 8% surplus as “neutral conditions” prevailed.

An El Niño implies a temperature rise between 0.5 degree Celsius to 1 degree Celsius in the Central Pacific. “Neutral” suggests no such rise.

However there have been instances when neu-

tral conditions have led to below-normal rain in India. The IMD gives its first forecast on monsoon rainfall in April.

‘Wait for April forecast’

“We will have to wait for the April forecast to get a sense of the monsoon rainfall this year,” said Mr.

Mohapatra.

Before the monsoon kicks in, however, India will be reeling under “above normal” temperatures during the summer months.

From April to June, India on average reports four to seven heatwave days, defined as temperatures exceeding 45 degrees Celsius or greater-than-five-degrees rise from what’s normal in a region.

“Parts of eastern India could potentially see 10 heatwave days this year,” said Mr. Mohapatra.

In March, several parts of central and southern India reported “above-normal” temperatures and one of the potential reasons was changes in climate due to “global warming”, said Mr. Mohapatra.

Key Points:

- ➔ El Niño and Monsoon Dynamics:

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- El Niño refers to a warming of the central equatorial Pacific Ocean and is typically associated with weakened monsoon rainfall in India.
- In 2023, an El Niño year, India recorded a 6% monsoon deficit.
- However, neutral conditions (no significant warming or cooling) do not guarantee normal rainfall and have also led to below-average monsoons in the past.
- ➔ **Rising Temperatures and Heatwaves:**
 - March 2025 already saw above-normal temperatures in parts of central and southern India.
 - IMD forecasts a hotter summer (April to June), with more frequent and intense heatwave days, especially in eastern India.
 - A heatwave is defined as a temperature above 45°C or a rise of more than 5°C from the normal for that region.
- ➔ **Climate Change Implications:**
 - Increasing frequency and severity of heatwaves are indicators of climate change impacts.
 - IMD attributes the abnormal March heat to broader global warming trends.
- ➔ **Policy and Preparedness:**
 - The news underscores the need for climate-resilient planning in agriculture, water management, urban infrastructure, and health systems.
 - States must update and implement Heat Action Plans, especially for vulnerable regions.
 - Reliable climate forecasts are crucial for disaster preparedness and resource allocation.

Conclusion:

- ➔ While the absence of El Niño brings cautious optimism, the forecast of rising heat underscores the urgent need to strengthen India's climate resilience. With climate variability becoming the new normal, proactive governance, data-driven forecasting, and community-level adaptation are the way forward.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques :Discuss the impact of El Niño and La Niña on the Indian monsoon. How do neutral ENSO conditions affect rainfall variability in India?

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The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasized Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) as an urgent and non-negotiable national priority.

- ➔ Following this, the NIPUN Bharat Mission was launched to ensure that every child in India attains basic reading and numeracy skills by the end of Grade 2. Recent insights from ASER 2024 and field studies reveal how this ambitious policy is faring at the ground level.

NEP 2020 in the classroom, from policy to practice

The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 frames the universal acquisition of Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) as an urgent national mission. Since the release of the policy, the central and State governments have put in enormous efforts into programmes intended to meet the goal of ensuring that every child acquires FLN by Class two, the end of the newly designated 'foundational stage' of education for three to eight year olds.

Findings from the nationwide Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) 2024 survey that was released recently provide some indicators of the percolation of these policy pushes to individual schools. For example, more than 80% of the 15,728 rural schools across the country that were visited as a part of the survey reported having received a directive from the government to implement FLN activities for Classes one to three. In over 75% of these schools, at least one teacher had received in-person training on FLN.

There is an awareness

A deep dive into 24 Class two classrooms in eight States earlier this year provided glimpses of how these changes are translating into practice on the ground. The first conclusion that was clear from observations of the teaching practice of these teachers, and subsequent conversations with them, is that the rationale for why FLN is important appears to have been communicated clearly and on scale.

In the eight States and in most of the schools that the writers of this article visited, teachers articulated this new focus and, for the most part, approved of it. Aspects of the new approach that required attitudinal shifts rather than new pedagogical practices were visible in their classrooms.

However, the challenges and opportunities

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Observations from 24 classrooms in eight States across India point to some change

facing teachers vary substantially, depending on the local context. For example, a classroom that comprises a large number of Class two students with limited space to move about requires a different approach than one with students from several different grades sitting outdoors. Several teachers said that they have limited opportunities to identify and discuss these challenges during training workshops. Creating spaces for practice, discussion and adaptation may be the key to increasing uptake.

Support for teachers

Consequently, post-training support systems to teachers are of vital importance. Here, States differ markedly in the amount and the type of support that they provide. In some States, the teachers we spoke to were unable to name any form of support available to them post training. In others, trainers were available to be consulted if teachers wished to do so. In still others, regular "monitoring" visits from officials ensured that the focus on FLN was not lost, but the focus was on compliance with data collection protocols rather than teaching-learning in the classroom. In just a couple of cases, teachers spoke about block- or district-level officials actually demonstrating how to do a particular activity in the classroom.

Without the space to practise and then adapt the new methods and materials as needed, teachers are often unable to make full use of the guidelines and materials provided to them. For example, even though the focus on using teaching-learning materials (TLM) in the classroom was clear to all the teachers, in every case where some form of TLM was observed, it was evident in 'demonstration' mode – meaning that in all but one case it was the teacher using the TLM, and not the students. Getting TLM into students' hands requires more thought and flexibility, very often about practical, rather than

pedagogical, questions. For example, in States where teachers are given funds to make their own TLM rather than provided with ready-to-use kits, teachers were worried about the material getting damaged (torn or broken) as they would have to remake them. Others had no space to store TLM in the classroom, while the rest who had been provided with TLM kits were unclear about how and when to use them.

Issue of syllabus completion

Perhaps, most crucially, decisions on what and how to teach are still based primarily on syllabus completion. At the State level, continuous and comprehensive evaluation (CCE) often takes the form of formative and summative assessments of curriculum content, conducted in traditional pen-and-paper format. Although teachers in several States talked about monthly FLN-specific assessments, almost none spoke about using FLN assessment results to inform their classroom practice. Resolving the inherent contradiction between ensuring universal FLN and syllabus completion is a question that the system has yet to reckon with in a systematic way.

There is little doubt that some things have changed for the better since the rollout of National Initiative for Proficiency in Reading with Understanding and Numeracy (NIPUN) Bharat – the mission that lays out detailed guidelines on how FLN goals should be met on the ground and adaptations across the country. The clear focus on FLN and its resultant visibility in schools and among teachers, is in itself a step forward. This is reflected in the fact that for the first time since the ASER survey began 20 years ago, learning levels at the foundational stage have improved across the country, a change mostly driven by government schools. This focus must be maintained in the years ahead to ensure that all children in India acquire these basic skills.

Key Takeaways from the Ground:

- ➔ Policy Awareness and Penetration:
 - Over 80% of surveyed rural schools had received government directives to implement FLN activities.

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- In more than 75% of schools, at least one teacher had received in-person training on FLN.
- Indicates strong policy communication and administrative push.
- ➔ **Positive Teacher Response:**
 - Teachers across various states acknowledged the importance of FLN and supported the shift in focus.
 - Classrooms reflected changes in attitude and awareness, if not always in methodology.
 - Cultural acceptance is evident, laying the foundation for deeper reform.
- ➔ **Practical Constraints in Implementation:**
 - Diverse classroom settings — overcrowded rooms, multi-grade teaching, or lack of infrastructure — hinder uniform implementation.
 - Teachers often lack structured post-training support to adapt to these contextual challenges.
 - Implementation strategies must be localized and responsive to on-ground realities.
- ➔ **Gaps in Training and Support:**
 - Support varies drastically across states — from no follow-up to monitoring focused on compliance, not pedagogy.
 - Very few teachers received demonstrations or mentoring, which are crucial for practical learning.
 - There is a gap between training and sustained teacher development.
- ➔ **Ineffective Use of Teaching-Learning Materials (TLMs):**
 - TLMs are mostly used by teachers, not students — limiting hands-on learning.
 - Concerns over storage, damage, and usage clarity hinder active classroom engagement.
 - Logistical issues are blocking pedagogical intent.
- ➔ **The Syllabus vs. Skill Paradox:**
 - A key systemic challenge is the dominance of syllabus completion over skill development.
 - Assessments remain content-based, with limited linkage to FLN skill progress.
 - The current education system needs to shift from curriculum coverage to competency mastery.

Policy Impact and the Way Forward:

- ➔ **Achievements So Far:**
 - Improved foundational learning levels — a first in two decades of ASER surveys.
 - FLN has gained national visibility and institutional priority.
- ➔ **Key Reforms Needed:**
 - Continuous Teacher Support: Beyond one-time training — regular mentoring, peer learning, and demonstration-based modules.
 - Context-sensitive Pedagogy: Flexibility in curriculum delivery based on local classroom conditions.
 - Assessment Reform: From rote testing to diagnostic tools that inform classroom strategy.

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- Empowering Teachers: Provide autonomy in resource use and schedule planning.
- Administrative Alignment: Shift focus from mere compliance to classroom learning outcomes.

Conclusion:

- ➡ While NEP 2020 and NIPUN Bharat have provided a strong policy framework and initial momentum, the true transformation lies in the everyday experiences of teachers and students. Bridging the gap between policy and practice requires a people-first, context-aware, and pedagogically sound approach. The road ahead demands deep systemic support, not just administrative urgency.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques :Discuss the implementation challenges of NEP 2020 with reference to foundational literacy and numeracy in primary schools. (250 words)

India faces an upcoming challenge with the expiry of the constitutional freeze on the number of parliamentary seats in 2026. Delimitation, historically based solely on population numbers, has generated significant anxiety, especially among peninsular states.

- ➔ This anxiety reflects concerns over reduced political representation due to demographic transitions that have resulted in lower population growth in southern states compared to their northern counterparts.

Thinking beyond population count

The discourse on delimitation and financial devolution has caused an uproar in Parliament and some State Assemblies and poses a threat to the federal character of our nation. The development divide in India has its own derivative on the demographic divide which needs recognition in the calculus of delimitation and financial devolution. The expiry of the constitutional freeze on the number of parliamentary seats is very near and has generated anxiety with regard to the political representation of peninsular States and those in the north.

The history of the delimitation exercise in India during 1951-71 indicates that the number of Lok Sabha seats was increased in response to the population increase that resulted in the population representation per seat. This rose from 7.3 lakh population per Lok Sabha seat in 1951 to 10.1 lakh population per seat in 1971 when the total number of seats reached the current size of 543. The freeze in this number since 1971 extends till 2026. Considering the trend of increasing the number of seats with the rising population, the total number of seats in accordance with the projected population size in 2026 amounts to 753 and the population representation per seat will be around 20 lakh. With this ratio, the reduced share of population in peninsular States may well be represented by a fewer number of seats when compared with States such as Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and others, which are lagging behind on demographic progress.

Political representation

This anxiety about political representation is genuine and was first confronted by the 15th Finance Commission when the population weight in the devolution exercise was substituted by 2011 data in place of the 1971 data. The Commission



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suggested weightage to demographic performance along with population performance. This revision increased the weight of the population component from 0.15 to 0.27 and serves as a balancer across States with a greater population count and poor demographic performances, and States with a lower population count and better demographic performances.

The time has come to go beyond population size as the lone yardstick of allocation and determination of political representation. It is humorous to hear the argument that the southern States won't lose a single seat in the delimitation exercise while the northern States will gain seats. There are multiple concerns that need attention in this delimitation exercise. The first is whether every seat should have an average representation of 20 lakh population and therefore an upper limit in the representational strength needs to be adopted that would ensure expansion of the size of the Lok Sabha with the rising population size of our nation. However, the contention lies in its regional distribution without distorting representation to an unacceptable level. A middle path to be considered could be population density instead of absolute population numbers. This is already the prevailing convention of seats in the north-east which is already represented by a lower population size when compared to the urban centres of the country. Such an alternative would perhaps work out better given the fact that a lower population size may well be associated with a relatively greater density and a greater population size with a smaller density. Further, even maintaining the status quo may require a proportionate rise in allocation of seats once the overall target is decided with an aggregate norm of population representation per seat.

The demographic wisdom therefore is to think beyond

population count as a singular yardstick of allocation or devolution. In the devolution exercise carried out by the 15th Finance Commission, these aspects were debated and a middle path was worked out that led to the introduction of demographic performance in the population component. Another sincere caution as regard to the population-based reading of any outcome needs a consideration of its characteristics and composition. The proposed exercise of delimitation and allocation would not escape this feature given the complexity of gender- and caste-based reservation of the said allocation. In each and every sphere, the population-based standardisation has been on its gross count leading to a per capita measure which is often quite misleading. This is getting adopted on a wider scale in the current SDG environment of generating indicators indiscriminately. We name it as per-capita hangover that does not enable scientific comparison (temporal or cross-sectional) of the state of affairs. The characteristic and composition of population remains paramount in the assessment of needs and entitlements on the one hand and rights and privileges on the other. Hence, a raw population count being in the denominator without accommodating characteristic differences assumes equal for unequals.

A demographic outlook

A demographic reading of a population therefore involves recognition of all potential characteristics and attributes to weigh them and differentiate while making any comparative construct involving population count. Population is beyond a mere head count on issues of representation and allocation which is largely overlooked in common practice. Therefore, a demographic outlook remains the key to resolving the prevailing debates and controversies.

The time has come to go beyond population size as the lone yardstick of allocation and determination of political representation

Significance and Implications for Federalism:

- ➔ Federal Tensions:

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- A shift in political representation toward more populous northern states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar may alter the federal balance, causing southern states to feel politically marginalized despite better socio-economic and demographic outcomes.

➔ Historical Context:

- Between 1951-1971, the number of Lok Sabha seats increased proportionately with population growth. Post-1971, seats have remained frozen at 543. Using projected population trends, if the same method is followed post-2026, India's Parliament would expand significantly (possibly to 753 seats), leading to disproportionate representation favoring populous states.

Challenges of Population-Based Representation:

➔ Demographic Divide:

- Northern states, despite larger populations, generally have lower demographic and socio-economic performance (higher fertility, lower literacy). Conversely, southern states have achieved better developmental outcomes, resulting in slower population growth.

➔ Quality vs. Quantity Debate:

- Using population alone as a criterion overlooks qualitative factors like population density, literacy levels, gender balance, caste composition, and socio-economic progress.

➔ "Per Capita Hangover":

- Excessive reliance on per-capita measures (e.g., financial devolution, political representation) ignores disparities and complex population characteristics, leading to inequality disguised as equality.

Possible Solutions and Alternatives:

➔ Density-Based Representation:

- Rather than solely using absolute population, adopting population density (people per sq. km) as a criterion might balance representation better, as done in Northeast states.

➔ Demographic Performance Index:

- Introducing a Demographic Performance Index (similar to the 15th Finance Commission's model) could reward states achieving lower fertility rates, better education, and improved healthcare outcomes.

➔ Qualitative Factors in Representation:

- Incorporating gender balance, caste representation, and socio-economic indicators in delimitation exercises ensures inclusive and fair political representation beyond mere numerical headcounts.

Way Forward (Conclusion):

- ➔ A mere numerical approach to representation risks weakening India's federal fabric by neglecting states' developmental efforts. Delimitation and financial devolution must incorporate qualitative demographic

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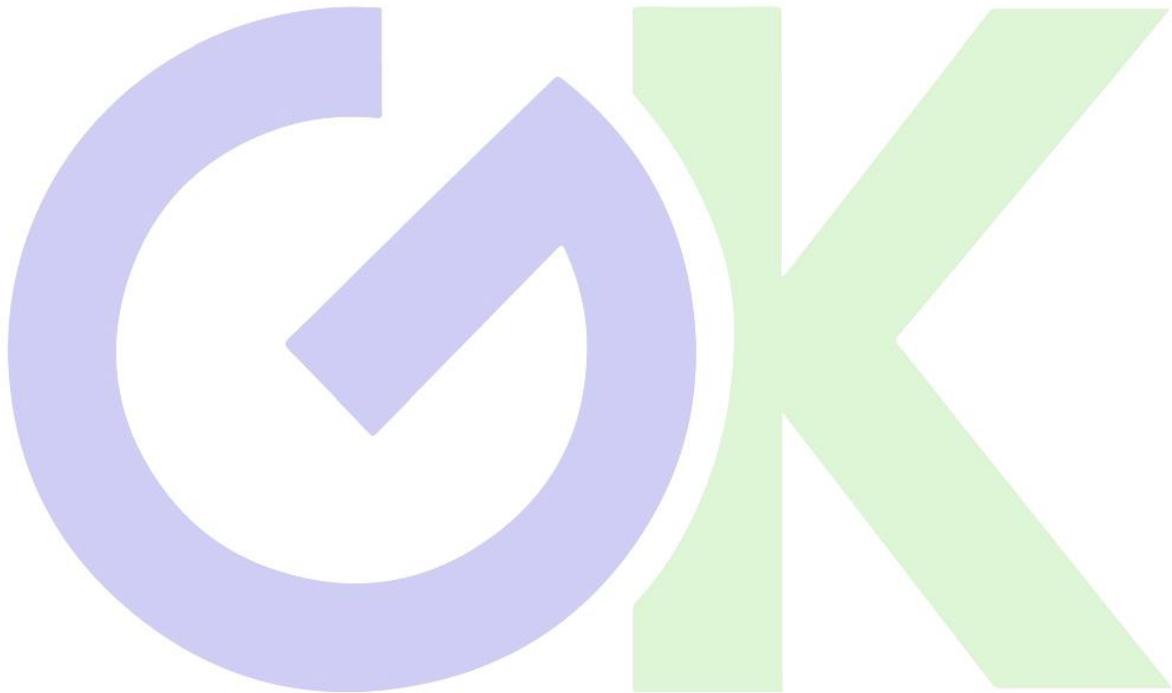
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factors, thereby ensuring both political equity and developmental justice. Only by acknowledging the complexities of population characteristics can India sustainably manage its democratic and federal structures in the future.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : "Population alone should not dictate political representation." Critically evaluate this statement in the context of the upcoming delimitation in India.



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Page 10:GS 2 : International Relations

➔ The Arctic region, historically remote and isolated, is rapidly emerging as a critical geopolitical hotspot due to climate change-induced ice melting. This environmental shift exposes vast untapped natural resources and opens new commercial sea routes, significantly altering global strategic dynamics.

Why are tensions high in the Arctic?

Who are the members of the Arctic Council? Why has the Arctic region become an area of interest now? What is the conflict around the Northwest Passage? How has Russia made its presence known in the region?

EXPLAINER
Franciszek Smarski

The story so far:
International observers have raised concerns about escalating tensions in the Arctic, warning that if left unchecked, they could eventually spark conflict in the region.

What is happening?
The Arctic, the northernmost area of the planet, has remained largely isolated for centuries. However, as climate change accelerates the melting of ice caps, new strategic opportunities are emerging for global powers. Beneath the frozen landscape lie untapped reserves of natural resources such as fossil fuels, rare earth elements, phosphates, and copper as well as lucrative fishing grounds. Most of these resources are currently inaccessible due to the year-round ice barriers, but as climate change destroys the Arctic environment, these resources and nearby trade routes will become increasingly viable. Unlike the Antarctic, which is demilitarized and environmentally protected by a dedicated international treaty, the Arctic lacks similar legal safeguards and is primarily governed by the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This allows nations to claim territories in the region and deploy military infrastructure. In recent years, overlapping maritime claims and military posturing have exacerbated tensions.

Who is in control?
The various islands and coastal areas in the Arctic are controlled by eight countries — Canada, Denmark (through Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the U.S. Together, these nations form the Arctic Council, an international body tasked with protecting the environment, conducting scientific research, and safeguarding the interests of indigenous peoples in the region. These nations exercise sovereignty over the Arctic land and can also exploit resources within their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). The waters between these territories fall under international jurisdiction, ensuring freedom of navigation. According to UNCLOS, nations can extend their claims to the seabed beyond the 200-nautical-mile EEZ if they can prove that the area is a natural prolongation of their continental shelf. Canada, Denmark, and Russia have all submitted overlapping claims to the Arctic seabed to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. Despite these territorial declarations, infrastructure in the Arctic remains underdeveloped, with only a few operational ports along the coast. Among the Arctic Council members, Russia is the only country with a significant fleet of icebreakers, including one which is nuclear-powered, capable of navigating through the region's treacherous sea ice.

Where do the tensions arise?
For months, news headlines have revolved on U.S. President Donald Trump's renewed interest in acquiring Greenland from Denmark. He has described the world's largest island as a matter of "national security" and has questioned the legitimacy of Denmark's sovereignty over the territory. Greenland, which has been under Danish control for over 300 years, also hosts the U.S. Pituffik military base. In January, following Mr. Trump's renewed interest, Denmark's

Ice cold war
The melting of Arctic sea ice has prompted renewed interest in the region. The U.K. has reportedly emphasised the strategic importance of the Greenland-Iceland-U.K. (GIUK) gap, a critical choke point for NATO's naval defences

NATO Joint Expeditionary Force	
1 Denmark	6 Sweden
2 Iceland	7 Finland
3 U.K.	8 Estonia
4 Netherlands	9 Latvia
5 Norway	10 Lithuania

Jan 2025: Russian spy vessel Yantar in U.K. waters

Boeing P-8 Poseidon: Maritime patrol and reconnaissance for Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW), based out of Keflavik

UAWRs: Solid-state, phased-array, all-weather, long-range radar, operating in Ultra High Frequency Band

RUSSIA: New early warning radar planned

GIUK gap: a critical choke point for NATO's naval defences.

Why does the Arctic matter so much?
Aside from ongoing resource extraction, interest in the Arctic surged following a 2009 U.S. Geological Survey report estimating that the region holds 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30% of its untapped natural gas reserves. Most of these resources lie beneath the seabed, making maritime claims highly significant. Greenland also harbours some of the world's richest deposits of rare earth elements, which drew significant investment interest from Chinese companies in the early 2020s. However, many of these projects were later suspended due to environmental concerns or U.S. political pressure.

The melting of Arctic sea ice has also prompted interest into the opening of new commercial trade routes. The Northeast Passage, which runs along Russia's Arctic coast, is particularly critical for Chinese trade. This route, stretching from the Bering Strait to Norway, could reduce the maritime distance between East Asia and Europe by approximately 4,000 kilometres compared to the traditional route through the Suez Canal. Navigating commercial shipping through this passage could save Beijing billions in transportation costs. However, the so-called Polar Silk Road would require Russia to grant Chinese ships access to its Arctic ports, a prospect Moscow has so far approached with caution.

What lies ahead?
Aside from political declarations and territorial claims, some nations have taken concrete steps to assert their Arctic ambitions. In 2007, Russia sent the MIR-1 submarine to the North Pole to plant a Russian flag on the seabed beneath the Arctic ice cap — a symbolic demonstration of its presence and capabilities. Moscow has also maintained a number of military bases in the Arctic, most of them dating back to the Soviet era. In 2022, it conducted joint naval exercises with Beijing in the East China Sea, which indicated strategic implications for Arctic security.

China has also steadily become more vocal about its Arctic interests, declaring itself a "near-Arctic state" in 2009 and planning the construction of its first nuclear-powered icebreaker. Since Sweden and Finland joined NATO following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the alliance has intensified its military presence in the Arctic, conducting large-scale exercises near the Russian border in Finland in 2024. Analysts have pointed out NATO's limited operational capabilities in the Arctic, raising concerns about strategic imbalances. As temperatures continue to rise, tensions in the melting Arctic may soon reach a boiling point.

Franciszek Smarski is an intern at The Hindu.

increasingly strained. Russian officials, including Defence Committee of State Duma member Andrei Gurevich, have suggested that Norway's Arctic island of Svalbard should fall under Russian control. Meanwhile, observer states of the Arctic Council, including India, are closely monitoring developments. The U.K., for instance, has repeatedly emphasised the strategic importance of the Greenland-Iceland-U.K. (GIUK) gap, a critical choke point for NATO's naval defences. This passage is the only feasible route for Russian submarines attempting to access the Atlantic to potentially disrupt NATO shipping in case of conflict, making it a focal point of Western military planning.

THE GIST

- ➔ The Arctic, the northernmost area of the planet, has remained largely isolated for centuries. However, as climate change accelerates the melting of ice caps, new strategic opportunities are emerging for global powers.
- ➔ Interest in the Arctic surged following a 2009 U.S. Geological Survey report estimating that the region holds 13% of the world's undiscovered oil reserves and 30% of its untapped natural gas reserves.
- ➔ The various islands and coastal areas in the Arctic are controlled by eight countries — Canada, Denmark through Greenland, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the U.S. Together, these nations form the Arctic Council, an international body tasked with protecting the environment, conducting scientific research, and safeguarding the interests of indigenous peoples in the region.

Why is the Arctic Region Gaining Attention?

- ➔ Natural Resources:
 - The Arctic holds an estimated 13% of undiscovered global oil and 30% of untapped natural gas reserves.
 - Rich deposits of rare earth minerals, crucial for modern technology, notably found in Greenland, have also attracted international interest.

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➔ **New Maritime Routes:**

- Melting ice opens shorter trade routes, particularly the Northeast Passage (Northern Sea Route along Russia's coast), significantly cutting travel time and costs between Europe and Asia.
- Such routes present both economic opportunities and strategic vulnerabilities.

Who Governs the Arctic? – The Arctic Council:

- ➔ Comprising eight countries—Canada, Denmark (Greenland), Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the USA—the Arctic Council aims to ensure sustainable development, environmental protection, and safeguarding indigenous communities.
- ➔ Unlike the Antarctic, governed by a demilitarized international treaty, the Arctic relies heavily on the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), allowing states to assert territorial claims extending beyond their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs).

Key Reasons Behind Escalating Tensions:

- ➔ **Territorial and Maritime Disputes:**
 - Overlapping claims exist between Canada, Denmark, and Russia over extended continental shelf territories rich in resources.
 - The Northwest Passage dispute: Canada considers this strategic route through its Arctic Archipelago as internal waters, while the USA argues it falls under international navigation laws.
- ➔ **Military and Strategic Posturing:**
 - Increased military activities from Arctic states, especially Russia and NATO members, are evident. Russia maintains several military bases and has conducted joint naval exercises with China.
 - NATO, strengthened by recent accession of Sweden and Finland, has expanded military drills near Russia's borders, heightening strategic competition.
- ➔ **Economic and Trade Interests:**
 - China's growing interest, declaring itself a "Near-Arctic State," intends to leverage the Arctic's commercial routes ("Polar Silk Road") for strategic economic benefit.
 - The Greenland question, highlighted by past U.S. interests in purchasing Greenland, underscores how economic and security interests intertwine, causing further regional anxiety.

The Russia Factor:

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- ➔ Russia is the largest Arctic nation and has proactively asserted its influence, demonstrated by planting a flag on the seabed at the North Pole in 2007.
- ➔ Moscow operates a significant fleet of icebreakers (including nuclear-powered), enabling it exclusive mobility and advantage in navigating Arctic waters.
- ➔ The war in Ukraine intensified Russia-West tensions, spilling over into Arctic geopolitics, complicating cooperation within the Arctic Council.

Potential Risks and Implications:

- ➔ Heightened militarization and unclear territorial claims could transform the Arctic into a zone of international conflict rather than cooperation.
- ➔ Environmental degradation could accelerate, undermining global climate stability.
- ➔ Rising tensions threaten indigenous communities' traditional livelihoods and cultures.

The Way Forward (Possible Measures & Solutions):

- ➔ Strengthen Arctic governance: Establish a dedicated international legal regime akin to Antarctica's demilitarized treaty, ensuring peaceful cooperation.
- ➔ Confidence-building measures (CBMs): Foster military transparency and regular dialogue among Arctic nations to mitigate misunderstandings.
- ➔ Sustainable resource management: Emphasize cooperative exploration and sharing of Arctic resources with stringent environmental standards to prevent ecological harm.

Conclusion:

- ➔ The Arctic region, once isolated, now stands at the crossroads of cooperation and confrontation. As geopolitical, economic, and environmental interests intersect, the Arctic demands international commitment to peaceful, sustainable, and inclusive governance. Global stability in the future may well depend on how wisely humanity navigates the melting waters of the Arctic today.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : The melting of Arctic ice due to climate change has opened new strategic frontiers."Discuss the geopolitical implications of this transformation, highlighting how it impacts international peace and security.

Places In News :Brahmagiri Wildlife Sanctuary

The Karnataka government's move to build a tribal village in Brahmagiri Wildlife Sanctuary's buffer zone has sparked debates on environmental conservation, tribal rights, and human-wildlife conflict.



About Brahmagiri Wildlife Sanctuary:

- The Brahmagiri WLS is located in Kodagu District, Karnataka, within the Western Ghats.
- It serves as a crucial ecological corridor, facilitating wildlife movement between Nagarhole National Park and Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary.
- **Geographical Location and Features**
 - It is situated approximately 250 km from Bengaluru and derives its name from the Brahmagiri Peak, the highest point in the region.
 - The sanctuary was declared a protected area on June 5, 1974, to conserve its unique flora and fauna.
 - The terrain consists of evergreen and semi-evergreen forests, grasslands, and shola forests, which provide a habitat for various species.

➤ **Flora:**

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- Bamboo species are widely spread across the region, providing food for herbivores like elephants and deer.
- The diverse vegetation supports a wide range of faunal species by offering food, shelter, and nesting sites.

➔ Fauna:

- **Carnivores:** Tigers, jungle cats, leopard cats, wild dogs, and sloth bears.
- **Herbivores:** Indian elephants, gaurs, sambars, spotted deer, barking deer, mouse deer, and wild pigs.
- **Primates:** Lion-tailed macaques, Nilgiri langurs, slender loris, bonnet macaques, and common langurs.
- **Small Mammals & Rodents:** Malabar giant squirrels, giant flying squirrels, Nilgiri martens, common otters, brown mongooses, civets, porcupines, and pangolins.
- **Reptiles:** King cobras, Indian cobras, pythons, Malabar pit vipers.
- **Birds:** Emerald doves, square-tailed bulbuls, and Malabar trogons.

INDIA bloc as a beginning of democratic renewal

The battle to secure India's democracy and safeguard its constitutional values cannot be won through politics as usual. The ruling party thrives on centralisation and subversion – of institutions, narratives, and decision-making. The Opposition must embrace the opposite: decentralisation, open dialogue, respect for norms, and a politics that listens before it speaks.

The Bharat Jodo Yatra and Bharat Jodo Nyay Yatra led by Congress leader Rahul Gandhi (and now Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha) showcased this approach. Unlike scripted political campaigns, these yatras were open-ended engagements – with leaders listening as much as they spoke, and communities shaping the agenda rather than merely receiving promises. These were in stark contrast to the ruling party's rigid command-and-control structures. Yet, this lesson, despite its success, has not been fully internalised by the Opposition.

Crucially, these yatras were not just political events but also acts of trust-building. And no one deserves more credit for this than Mr. Gandhi. Dismissed by detractors, undermined by the media, and politically isolated even within his own ranks, he reshaped the conversation in Indian politics – walking, listening, and making space for people's voices. His approach was not about dictating terms but fostering participatory politics, where trust – not slogans and gimmicks – shaped the discourse.

The way Mr. Gandhi transformed 'Samvidhan Khatre Mein Hai' (the Constitution is in danger) from a slogan into a deeply felt public sentiment was no accident. It was the result of sustained engagement, town halls, direct interactions, and a refusal to play politics as usual. The yatras created an environment wherein people felt heard and because they trusted him to listen; they believed him when he displayed a copy of the Constitution in speech after speech and warned about the threats that it faced. This was not just narrative-building; it was trust building.

A reality check

The results of recent State elections provide a reality check. The electoral losses in Maharashtra, Haryana and Delhi are reminders of what happens when the Opposition abandons the listening model and falls back on old habits. Maharashtra showed that a coalition focused on internal negotiations and not grassroots engagement cannot withstand the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)'s onslaught of money, muscle, and machinery. Haryana demonstrated that mass discontent alone is not enough; it must be converted into political momentum. Delhi was a case study in how arithmetic without chemistry fails and how voters punished the Aam Aadmi Party government's theatrics and gimmicks. In each case, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) failed its own supporters by taking them for granted.

In Indian classical music, a *jugalbandi* is a



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performance of equals, where two musicians respond to each other, improvising, and creating something greater than the sum of their parts. The INDIA bloc must embrace this spirit. Instead of a top-down approach, it must empower regional leaders, organisations and movements to take initiative where they are strongest.

The BJP has mastered centralisation, where messaging is uniform and decision-making flows from top down. The Opposition can only counter this by embracing decentralisation – not as an admission of disunity, but as a source of strength.

The yatras succeeded because they rejected the idea that leadership is about control. Instead of issuing directives, they created spaces where local leaderships and movements could shape the conversation with a national leader. Instead of relying on a media ecosystem hostile to the Opposition, they built direct connections with people. Instead of treating politics as a series of transactions, they worked to rebuild trust.

There have been times when the INDIA bloc has struggled with internal coordination, but that is not unusual for a coalition of diverse regional and national parties. Coordination is not just about enforcing decisions. It is about ensuring that every party feels invested in a shared strategy.

From disarray to opportunity

The alliance's struggles in Parliament reflect its broader challenges. Since June 2024 (when the election results were declared), the INDIA bloc has faced difficulties in maintaining unity and effective coordination. While there were flashes of Opposition unity, these were largely fragmented interventions, missed opportunities to hold the government accountable, and an inability to secure key positions such as the Deputy Speaker's post in the Lok Sabha.

Yet, this disunity presents an opportunity for introspection and restructuring. By focusing on shared concerns, be it economic policies, social justice, institutional integrity, or naked expansion of crony capitalism, the INDIA bloc can forge a cohesive strategy that resonates within Parliament and with the public. The alliance must shift from an ad hoc approach to one that is issue based and collaborative. There has already been a subtle shift in the ongoing Budget session, where coordination between the parties has been nimble and informal, allowing space for every party to represent its key issues in Parliament such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), food security, delimitation, voter rolls, while uniting against gross misconduct either by the Treasury benches or even the Presiding Officer. This would not have been possible with a centralised Secretariat of the INDIA bloc issuing diktats.

A credible vision for India's future must emerge from the ground up, shaped by youth, workers, farmers, entrepreneurs, and marginalised communities, and not dictated by elites. Listening must guide policy. The INDIA

bloc must engage directly with those affected by economic shifts particularly in the use of Artificial Intelligence and automation, which are reshaping industries. In a recent parliamentary address, Mr. Gandhi warned that AI will redefine employment and production. Policies must ensure that technology enhances – rather than displaces – livelihoods by balancing innovation with worker protections.

Small and medium businesses, startups, and entrepreneurs struggle under monopolised markets and political patronage. A government that prioritises corporate allies over public welfare erodes social justice, weakens institutions, and deepens inequality. This is why a caste census is not just about representation; it is about aspiration. The vast majority of Indians remain locked out of education, employment, and entrepreneurship networks. Justice and opportunity must be built on data and evidence, and not assumptions.

The ruling party has mastered top-down control of narratives, dictating what the nation should care about. The Opposition must disrupt this by listening to people's real concerns and letting them shape the national conversation. This cannot be an election-season exercise. It requires sustained engagement, mobilisation, and action.

Listening as a political act

The biggest challenge facing the INDIA bloc is not just voter scepticism but also disengagement. Many who oppose the BJP are disillusioned, feeling that electoral politics offers little real choice. This is why the yatras resonated – they did not just ask for votes. They invited people to participate.

This approach must now be internalised. The alliance must engage with people's movements, not just for photo-ops, but as partners in shaping a political vision. It must demonstrate that it is listening – not just to its own leadership but also to workers, farmers, youth, entrepreneurs and marginalised communities.

Most importantly, it must recognise that listening is not passive. It is an act of political resistance. In an era where the ruling party seeks to impose a single narrative, creating spaces for alternative conversations is itself a challenge to power. The Opposition must not just oppose. It must offer a compelling, inclusive, and participatory alternative.

The yatras showed what is possible when politics is not confined to election cycles, when leaders listen rather than just speak, and when mobilisation is for continuous engagement rather than a campaign gimmick.

If the INDIA bloc learns this lesson, wherein it builds trust, frames a clear vision, and listens before it speaks, it will not just be an electoral alternative. It will be the beginning of a democratic renewal that India desperately needs.

The views expressed are personal

The INDIA bloc needs to engage with people's movements and demonstrate that it is listening to the real India

Paper 02: International Relations

UPSC Mains Practice Question: "Effective opposition is crucial for a vibrant democracy." Examine the role and challenges of opposition unity in contemporary India, citing the INDIA bloc experience.

Context :

- ➔ The formation of the INDIA (Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance) bloc represents a significant attempt by opposition parties to counterbalance the political dominance of the ruling party. Central to its strategy has been the emphasis on democratic renewal through grassroots engagement, decentralisation, and participatory politics.

Significance of INDIA Bloc's Approach:

- ➔ Shift from Top-Down to Bottom-Up Politics:
 - Traditionally, Indian politics has been driven by top-down directives, rigid hierarchies, and centralised command structures.
 - The INDIA bloc attempts a shift toward decentralised, participatory governance, as exemplified by campaigns like the Bharat Jodo Yatra.
 - The yatras showcased a model where listening to the public shaped political agendas rather than merely disseminating predetermined slogans.
- ➔ Rebuilding Trust and Engagement:
 - Political disengagement and voter apathy remain significant challenges. Movements like Bharat Jodo Yatra worked to re-engage citizens who felt disconnected from mainstream politics.
 - Trust-building through continuous engagement and responsiveness rather than mere transactional politics emerged as an innovative political approach.

Key Challenges Faced by INDIA Bloc:

- ➔ Electoral Setbacks due to Traditional Approaches:
 - Recent defeats in Maharashtra, Haryana, and Delhi underline that opposition parties cannot succeed by relying solely on coalition arithmetic or superficial alliances.
 - A lack of grassroots mobilisation and genuine public engagement weakened these coalitions, highlighting the need for deeper democratic practices.
- ➔ Coordination and Unity Among Diverse Parties:
 - The INDIA bloc comprises diverse regional and national parties with varying priorities. This diversity, while potentially a strength, complicates internal coordination.

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- Effective opposition requires balancing regional interests with national coherence, demanding strategic coordination rather than top-down management.
- ➔ Resistance to the Ruling Party's Centralisation:
 - The BJP's success is partly attributed to its highly centralised command and control, efficient narrative management, and disciplined party machinery.
 - The opposition, in contrast, has struggled to offer a cohesive alternative narrative due to fragmented and reactionary approaches.

Potential of the INDIA Bloc's Model:

- ➔ Issue-Based Mobilisation:
 - Focusing on genuine public concerns like employment, technology-driven disruptions (AI, automation), and economic inequalities could resonate widely.
 - Initiatives such as demanding a caste census, highlighting unemployment, and addressing small and medium enterprise struggles reflect an issue-based political strategy capable of wider appeal.
- ➔ Listening as a Political Strategy:
 - By prioritising active listening and responsiveness, INDIA bloc can position itself uniquely against the ruling party's more rigid approach.
 - Engaging citizens continuously rather than episodically could help the opposition reclaim credibility and legitimacy.
- ➔ Strengthening Democratic Values:
 - Emphasising constitutional integrity, decentralisation, and institutional autonomy could become a defining feature of the bloc, appealing to voters concerned about democratic erosion.
 - Continuous grassroots engagement could not only mobilise voters but also help nurture democratic practices within communities.

Implications for Democratic Renewal:

- ➔ Political Participation:
 - Sustained citizen engagement through participatory politics fosters active citizenship rather than passive voter bases.
- ➔ Accountability and Transparency:
 - Regular public interactions encourage accountability, compelling political leaders to be transparent and responsive rather than insulated and authoritarian.
- ➔ Federalism and Decentralisation:
 - Empowering local and regional movements reinforces India's federal structure, ensuring that diverse voices shape national discourse.

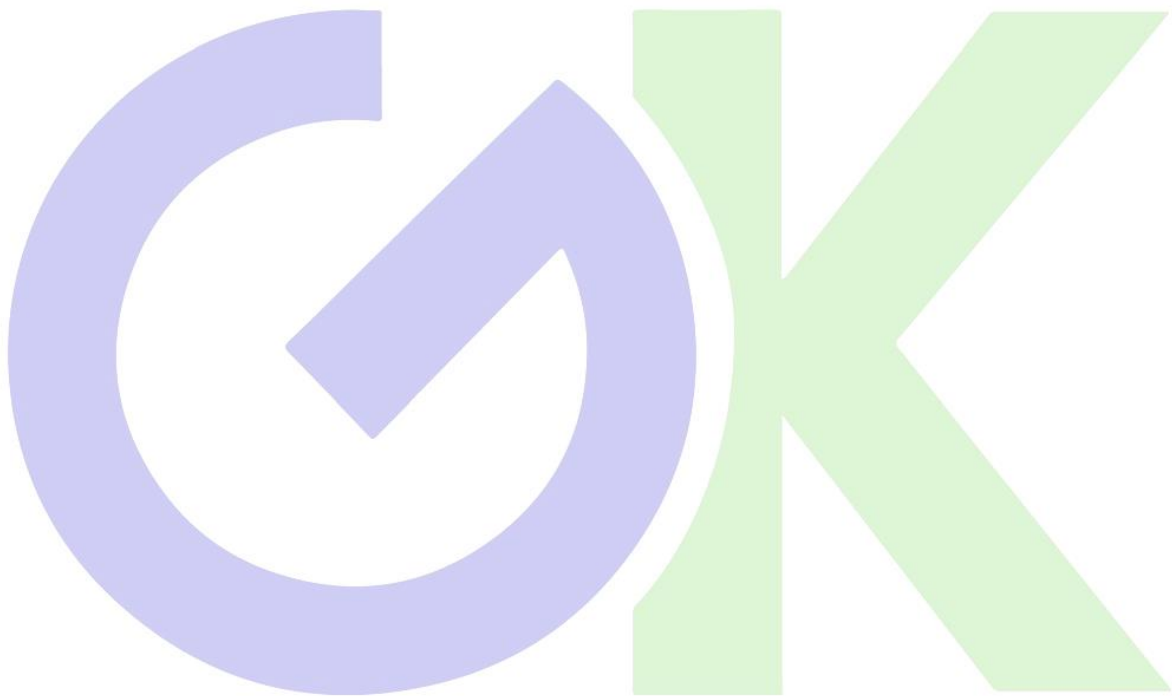
Conclusion and Way Forward:

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- The INDIA bloc's potential lies not merely in electoral strategy but in its vision for democratic renewal. By embracing decentralisation, listening actively, and responding genuinely to citizens' concerns, it could present a viable alternative to centralised governance.
 - The key to revitalising democracy in India is sustained public engagement, responsiveness to grassroots movements, and building trust through democratic practices.
 - The INDIA bloc, if effectively managed, could significantly shape India's political future, not merely as an electoral alliance but as a vehicle for genuine democratic renewal.
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