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India and Canada share historical linkages rooted in Commonwealth membership, democratic values, and a large Indian diaspora (over 1.6 million people of Indian origin, including a significant Sikh community). However, bilateral relations have often been overshadowed by Canada's handling of Khalistani separatist elements on its soil. The latest meeting between National Security Advisers Ajit Doval and Nathalie Drouin in New Delhi marks a cautious attempt to reset ties after two years of strained relations, especially following the Nijjar assassination controversy of 2023.

As India and Canada reset ties, NSAs hold talks on security cooperation

MEA describes meeting held in Delhi as opportunity to take forward discussion by Modi and Carney in June; Ajit Doval and his Canadian counterpart Nathalie Drouin focus on counter-terrorism and extradition of Khalistani activists wanted in India

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

Indian and Canadian National Security Advisers (NSAs) and security teams held talks on enhancing bilateral cooperation in Delhi on Thursday, two years after bilateral ties were ripped apart by Ottawa's allegation that Indian government officials were linked to the killing of Khalistani activist Harjeet Singh Nijjar.

"This is part of the regular bilateral security consultations that happen between the two countries," said Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) spokesperson Randhir Jaiswal. "It was also an opportunity and occasion for them to follow up on the discussions that happened between Prime Minister [Narendra Modi] and [Canadian] Prime Minister [Mark] Carney in Kananaskis on the sidelines of G-7 in Alberta [in June this year]," he added.



Warming ties: Narendra Modi greets Mark Carney during the G-7 Summit in Kananaskis, Canada, on June 17. REUTERS

Sources told *The Hindu* that the day-long talks between NSA Ajit Doval and Nathalie Drouin, the Canadian National Security and Intelligence Adviser, did not focus on the Nijjar case, which is now in trial court. Instead, they discussed moving ahead on sharing information and counter-terror cooperation, as well as India's requests for the extradition of a number of Khalistani activists wanted in cases registered in India.

The Canadian delega-

tion included Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs David Morrison, Royal Canadian Mounted Police Commissioner Mike Duheme, and senior diplomats from Global Affairs Canada.

Significantly, many officials on both sides of the table had been part of the stormy meetings held in 2023, when Canada had claimed it had "credible evidence" that Indian government agents were connected to the assassination of Nijjar who was shot

dead outside a Toronto-area gurudwara in June 2023.

In particular, a meeting in Singapore between Mr. Doval and his previous counterpart had ended with both sides trading charges, and subsequently expelling each other's diplomats for espionage.

The repairing of ties began only earlier this year, after Mr. Carney invited Mr. Modi to the G-7 summit, and both sides decided to restore their High Commissioners and restart the trade talks suspended by Canada two years ago.

Khalistani threats

The talks in Delhi came a day after a Khalistani group laid "siege" to the Indian Consulate in Vancouver, to protest what it called "espionage and surveillance by Indian diplomats" and also targeted the newly arrived Indian High Commissioner to Canada, Dinesh Patnaik, on posters. Mr. Patnaik and Cana-

da's High Commissioner to India Christopher Cooter took charge of their missions last week, and are expected to present their credentials in Ottawa and Delhi later this month.

Asked whether India had taken up the latest threats with the visiting Canadian delegation, Mr. Jaiswal said that the security of diplomatic missions is the responsibility of the host government.

"As and when there is a concern, we do take it up with our [counterparts] in Canada to ensure that there is adequate security of our diplomatic premises," Mr. Jaiswal said.

On Friday, Mr. Morrison also held talks with MEA Secretary (East) P. Kumaran on resuming all dialogue mechanisms suspended since 2023, including on trade, defence and other issues and address the problems for visas due to the downsizing of diplomatic staff strength.

Current Context

1. Security Talks in Delhi (September 2025):

- Discussions focused on counter-terrorism cooperation, information sharing, and extradition of Khalistani activists wanted in India.
- The meeting followed up on Modi–Carney discussions during the G-7 Summit in June 2025.
- Notably, the Nijjar case, now in Canadian trial court, was kept off the table to avoid derailment of talks.

2. Reset of Diplomatic Engagements:

- Restoration of High Commissioners in Ottawa and Delhi.
- Restarting of suspended trade talks and dialogue mechanisms in defence, economy, and visas.
- Canadian delegation included senior security and diplomatic officials, reflecting seriousness.

3. Challenges Persist:

- Khalistani groups in Canada continue to stage protests, targeting Indian diplomats and missions (e.g., siege at Vancouver Consulate).
- India remains concerned about Ottawa's inability or unwillingness to curb extremist activities.

Static Context

- Diaspora Factor: Canada has the largest Sikh population outside Punjab, which influences its domestic politics and foreign policy stance.
- Bilateral Institutions: Regular security dialogues, strategic partnership framework (2005), civil nuclear cooperation agreement (2010).
- Trade Ties: Bilateral trade stands around \$8 billion (2022–23). Negotiations are ongoing for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and Foreign Investment Promotion and Protection Agreement (FIPA).
- Defence & Multilateral Cooperation: Engagement through Commonwealth, G-20, UN, and Arctic Council; both nations committed to climate change and sustainable development agendas.

Analysis

• Strategic Significance for India:

- Canada's advanced technology, resources (uranium supply under civil nuclear pact), and Arctic geopolitics are important for India.
- India seeks greater cooperation in counter-terrorism, extradition treaties, and diaspora management.

- **For Canada:**

- India is a growing economic and strategic partner, crucial for supply chain diversification and Indo-Pacific strategy.
- Yet, domestic electoral politics and protection of free speech create friction in addressing Khalistani extremism.

- **Diplomatic Balancing:**

- Keeping the Nijjar issue aside shows maturity to focus on broader cooperation.
- However, repeated extremist activities in Canada continue to test mutual trust.

Conclusion

The resumption of India–Canada security talks reflects a pragmatic attempt to put relations back on track after a phase of hostility. While counter-terrorism cooperation and extradition remain contentious, both sides recognize the need to insulate strategic and economic engagements from diaspora-linked disputes. For India, balancing its counter-terror concerns with long-term economic and geopolitical cooperation with Canada will remain a test of diplomacy. Ultimately, sustainable ties will depend on whether Ottawa can effectively address India’s security sensitivities while preserving its own democratic values.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: In the context of India–Canada ties, CEPA and FIPA are related to:

- (a) Defence cooperation
- (b) Trade and investment cooperation
- (c) Arctic research cooperation
- (d) Civil nuclear cooperation

Ans: (b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Examine the role of the Indian diaspora in shaping India–Canada relations. To what extent is it an asset, and to what extent a challenge? **(250 Words)**

The Indian Coast Guard (ICG) plays a vital role in safeguarding India's 7,500 km-long coastline, Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), and maritime trade routes. The commissioning of ICGS Adamya—the first in a series of eight Adamya-class fast patrol vessels—at Paradip Port in Odisha marks a significant milestone in strengthening coastal security under the "Make in India" initiative.

Current Context

1. Technical Features:

- Length: 51 metres; Displacement: ~320 tonnes.
- Engines: Two 3,000 KW diesel engines with speed up to 28 knots.
- Endurance: 1,500 nautical miles at economical speed.
- Fitted with indigenously developed controllable pitch propellers (CPPs) and gearboxes, enhancing manoeuvrability and performance.

2. Indigenous Content:

- Over 60% indigenous components, demonstrating India's growing shipbuilding capability.
- Aligned with Atmanirbhar Bharat and DefenceIndigenisation goals.

3. Strategic Importance:

- Enhances surveillance, search and rescue (SAR), anti-smuggling, anti-poaching, and anti-pollution roles.
- Strengthens ICG's presence along the eastern seaboard and Bay of Bengal, an area critical for energy imports, trade, and maritime security.



Keeping watch: The Indian Coast Guard ship Adamya was commissioned at Paradip Port. X/@IndiaCoastGuard

Patrol ship Adamya commissioned at Odisha's Paradip Port

The Hindu Bureau
BHUBANESWAR

Indian Coast Guard ship Adamya, the first in a series of eight Adamya-class fast patrol vessels, was commissioned at Paradip Port on Friday. According to the Coast Guard, the 51-metre-long vessel has more than 60% indigenous content, strengthening India's maritime might under the Make in India initiative. "The ship displaces ap-

proximately 320 tonnes and is propelled by two 3,000 KW diesel engines to attain a maximum speed of 28 Knots. She has an endurance of 1,500 nm at economical speed," the Coast Guard said. "Adamya is the first ICG ship fitted with indigenously developed two Controllable Pitch Propellers and gearboxes offering superior manoeuvrability, operational flexibility and enhanced performance at sea," it added.

Static Context

- Indian Coast Guard (ICG): Established in 1977, under the Ministry of Defence, with roles in coastal security, law enforcement, environmental protection, and humanitarian assistance.

- Fleet Strength: Over 150 ships and ~65 aircraft; target of 200 ships and 100 aircraft by 2030.
- Significance of Paradip Port: A major eastern seaboard port in Odisha, vital for energy imports (coal, crude) and industrial hinterland.
- Maritime Security: India's EEZ is ~2.37 million sq. km; ICG's role is crucial for protecting fisheries, shipping lanes, and combating non-traditional threats (piracy, trafficking, maritime terrorism).

Analysis

- Strategic Edge: The commissioning of Adamyia boosts India's capacity for maritime domain awareness (MDA), complementing the Navy's blue-water capabilities with coastal vigilance.
- Indigenisation Push: Indigenous CPPs and gearboxes reduce reliance on imports, contributing to defence self-reliance.
- Regional Security: Strengthening the eastern seaboard aligns with India's Act East Policy and ensures security of sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) in the Bay of Bengal and Indo-Pacific.

Conclusion

The induction of ICGS Adamyia reflects India's growing maritime strength and progress in defence indigenisation. By combining advanced technology, indigenous innovation, and operational readiness, it strengthens coastal and offshore security. In the long term, such patrol vessels will be pivotal in addressing both traditional and non-traditional maritime threats, reinforcing India's vision of becoming a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Consider the following statements with reference to ICGS Adamyia:

1. It is the first Adamyia-class Fast Patrol Vessel of the Indian Coast Guard.
2. It is fitted with indigenously developed Controllable Pitch Propellers (CPP) and gearboxes.
3. Its maximum displacement is about 3,200 tonnes.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

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

Ans: (a)

Page 06 : GS 2 : International Relations / Prelims

On September 17, 2025, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistani Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif signed the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) in Riyadh. This agreement aims to formalise military cooperation between the two historically close yet often mistrustful partners. While it represents a bid by both states to address shifting regional security dynamics, especially amid waning U.S. credibility and rising Iran–Israel tensions, questions remain about its effectiveness, sustainability, and implications for South Asia and West Asia.

The Saudi-Pakistan pact is a dodgy insurance policy

The signing of the Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement (SMDA) in Riyadh, on September 17, 2025, by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Pakistani Premier Shahbaz Sharif, with Field Marshal Asim Munir in attendance, is a victory of future hope over past experience. Sunni majority Saudi Arabia and Pakistan share several commonalities. But they also have significant differences, restricting their past defence cooperation. Moreover, they have mutually dissenting threat perceptions.

All this prompts questions about whether the recent agreement would be effective and sustainable, and its granular impact on South West Asia.

The highs and the lows

The bilateral defence links date back to 1951, and their golden period was during 1979-89 when a nearly 20,000-strong Pakistani military contingent was deployed in Saudi Arabia to protect the Holy Harams and Al-Saud in addition to acting as the bulwark against Iran and Yemen. However, mutual differences soon clouded the equation.

At the perceptual level, while the Saudi leadership treated the Pakistani contingent as paid Praetorian Guards, Pakistani top brass, used to commanding back home, bristled at being ordered around. Saudi insistence against the exclusion of Shia troops among the Pakistan contingent was often a deal breaker. By 1990, the entire contingent was sent back. During the subsequent threats faced by the Kingdom – from the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to the Yemeni civil war in 2015 – Pakistan declined Saudi call for deployment, much to the Saudi chagrin. Pakistan avowedly limited their military involvement to defending the kingdom's two Holy Harams against foreign invasion.

The Pentagon has traditionally underpinned the Saudi-Pakistani defence alliance, albeit in an over-the-horizon manner. In the current case, too, the chronology suggests United States involvement. On June 7, Mr. Sharif and Field Marshal Munir met the Saudi Crown Prince in Riyadh to announce the bilateral “strategic cooperation”. On June 22, with the Israel-Iran air war raging, U.S. President Trump hosted a “private lunch” at the White House for Field Marshal Munir, without any previous acquaintance. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the Saudi Crown Prince used his proximity to Mr. Trump to arrange a brainstorming of Pakistan's role in defending Saudi Arabia and other pro-Western regional countries.

Subsequent bromance between the Trump administration and General Headquarters Rawalpindi was presumably under the conviction that Pakistan had the smart keys to the western geostrategic piquancy in West Asia, ranging from a backdoor to Iran to anchoring Gulf Cooperation



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Council (GCC) security through “boots on the ground.” The SMDA was a Hobson's choice for the Saudi Crown Prince. He is known to have demanded that the U.S. fulfil three prerequisites for Saudi recognition of Israel: a binding bilateral Defence Agreement, access to nuclear technology and state-of-the-art American weapon systems. The U.S., in turn, wanted Saudi Arabia to recognise Israel first to enable the passage of the proposed pact through the Congress. However, this delicate choreography was upended by the Hamas blitz on Israel, on October 7, 2023, and the subsequent Israeli invasion of Gaza. The death and destruction in Gaza has caused massive opprobrium and vitiated the political ambience in the Arab Islamic Ummah, forcing the Kingdom, which hosts Islam's two holiest shrines, to postpone the move indefinitely. Thus, the SMDA became a distant consolation prize for Riyadh.

The September 9 Israeli air attack on Hamas's office in Doha added an air of urgency to the SMDA process: it was the first Israeli military attack on a GCC member, viz., Qatar, which hosts the largest U.S. military base in West Asia and has a defence agreement with the U.S. While Washington conceded to having been pre-informed by Israel, it did not defend the country, as obligated, and lamely offered assurance that such attacks would not be repeated. The episode dented the credibility of the U.S.'s security assurances to the GCC States, including Saudi Arabia.

The calculations

Historically, Riyadh has avoided stationing any Arab military contingents on its soil to avoid a political pollination of its masses. It has also chosen not to have troops from Türkiye, the former colonial master. The deployment of non-Muslim U.S. and North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops in the Kingdom to defend Islam's holy shrines during the 1990-91 Kuwait war caused a serious religious rift in the powerful Saudi clergy. Thus, past reservations notwithstanding, Riyadh has narrowed down to the SMDA with Pakistan.

Four points need to be mentioned. First, the Kingdom has got along reasonably well without foreign forces on its soil since 1991, having survived al-Qaeda terrorism, the second Iraqi war and the Yemeni civil war. Riyadh has ordered nearly \$100 billion worth of advanced American weapons during Mr. Trump's visit earlier this year, further bolstering its defences. Second, Pakistan is now a declared nuclear weapons state, and the SMDA could come in handy in case Iran becomes one. Third, Pakistan's strategic tie-up with China, its “all-weather friend”, may be an obstacle in the way of an unmitigated military camaraderie. Last but not least, while a transfer of Pakistani nuclear weapons to Saudi Arabia under the SMDA is possible, it would be highly improbable, given Israeli red lines. It would be

recalled that during the June 2025 war, Pakistani generals reportedly promised to extend a nuclear umbrella to Iran against Israel, only to swiftly recant. However, given A.Q. Khan's precedent, a surreptitious transfer of technology for developing nuclear weapons and delivery systems cannot be ruled out. For these reasons, the SMDA is likely to presage smaller Pakistani footprints in Saudi Arabia than the past involvements.

Islamabad's calculations from the SMDA are likely to be quite asymmetrical to Riyadh's. It has no intention to fight Iran, Yemen or Israel at Saudi behest any more than Saudi would take an active adversarial military role against India or Afghanistan in a South Asian conflict. It would rather exploit the Saudi insecurity to its multiple advantages, keenly monetising the IOUs (‘I owe you’) from Riyadh and Washington to get defence hardware, train on Saudi equipment and personal aggrandisement of its top brass. They would also hope that this trilateral axis would underwrite its intrinsic strategic disadvantage against India. Pakistan would also expect large dollops of Saudi funds and oil supplies to salvage its moribund economy.

Thus, on balance, unless the worst-case scenario pans out – when all bets are off – the SMDA is essentially for the optics and to ensure that Islamabad stays away from Tehran.

What it means for India

Where does the SMDA leave India? Here, India has few cards. India is the world's third-largest oil importer and the only large economy with rising oil consumption. It is traditionally Saudi Arabia's second-largest trading partner and crude buyer. Its diaspora, the Kingdom's largest, is preferred for competence and non-interference. Energetic diplomacy since 2014 has enabled India to bond well with Saudi Arabia, creating bilateral defence and intelligence-sharing ecosystems. Saudi Arabia plans to invest \$100 billion in India, although actual delivery is far short. Significantly, while announcing the SMDA, Reuters quoted an unnamed senior Saudi official as acknowledging the need to balance relations with Pakistan and India, “also a nuclear power”. He added, “Our relationship with India is more robust than it has ever been. We will continue to grow this relationship and seek to contribute to regional peace in whichever way we can.” An official Indian spokesman has also hinted that Riyadh took New Delhi into confidence over the SMDA negotiations. This not only shows that Riyadh needs all the friends it can get on board but also that India's strategic geoeconomic heft seems enough for the moment to “balance” tactical manoeuvring by Pakistan. The SMDA, nevertheless, enjoins India to be vigilant and create greater synergies across the Arabian Sea.

The views expressed are personal

Historical Context of Saudi–Pakistan Defence Ties

- Early Cooperation (1951 onwards): Defence agreements date back to the 1950s, peaking during 1979–89, when ~20,000 Pakistani troops were deployed in Saudi Arabia to secure holy sites and counter Iran/Yemen.
- Decline in Cooperation: By 1990, Pakistani troops were withdrawn; later, Pakistan refused Saudi requests for deployment during the Gulf War (1990), Iraq War (2003), and Yemen Civil War (2015).
- Perception Gap: Saudis saw Pakistani forces as mercenaries, while Pakistani commanders resented restrictions (e.g., exclusion of Shia soldiers).

Current Context and Calculations

1. Saudi Arabia's Perspective:

- Rising insecurity after U.S. hesitation in defending GCC allies (e.g., Qatar airstrike episode, Sept 2025).
- Avoidance of Arab/Turkish troops on its soil for domestic political reasons.
- Insurance against Iran's nuclear ambitions; possible leverage in GCC security.
- Limits: Already well-armed (\$100 bn U.S. defence deals), wary of Pakistani–China nexus, and mindful of Israeli red lines on nuclear sharing.

2. Pakistan's Perspective:

- No appetite for fighting Saudi rivals (Iran, Yemen, Israel).
- Sees SMDA as a bargaining chip for aid, oil, and defence hardware.
- Hopes to exploit Saudi/U.S. insecurity to balance India strategically.
- Internal focus: gain financial inflows amid economic crisis.

3. U.S. Factor:

- Washington's role in nudging SMDA after its credibility crisis.
- U.S. sees Pakistan as a possible "boots on the ground" option in Gulf security, though history shows mixed reliability.

Implications for India

- Energy Security: India is the 3rd largest oil importer and a major buyer of Saudi crude. Stable India–Saudi ties are crucial.
- Diaspora & Economy: ~2.2 million Indians in Saudi Arabia; bilateral trade ~ \$50 bn; Riyadh has pledged \$100 bn investments in India.
- Strategic Balancing: Saudi Arabia reassured that its partnership with India remains robust, even while signing SMDA.
- Defence Cooperation: Since 2014, India has deepened defence and intelligence ties with Saudi Arabia, including joint exercises.

- Challenge for India: Ensure vigilance in Arabian Sea/IOR, counter Pakistan's attempts to leverage Riyadh, and expand long-term geoeconomic engagement.

Analysis

- Symbolism vs Substance: The SMDA appears more like a political insurance and signalling tool than a practical military alliance.
- Mutual Distrust: Past failures in cooperation and divergent threat perceptions may restrict the agreement to token deployments or training exchanges.
- Regional Geopolitics: Riyadh seeks to hedge between Washington, Beijing, Tehran, and New Delhi. Islamabad seeks to monetise insecurity.
- For India: The pact is a reminder of Pakistan's attempts to stay relevant in West Asia, but India's larger economic weight and diplomatic presence give it leverage to balance.

Conclusion

The Saudi–Pakistan SMDA is best seen as a dodgy insurance policy—a tactical adjustment born of mutual insecurity rather than a durable strategic alliance. While Pakistan hopes for funds and weapons, Saudi Arabia seeks symbolic reassurance amid waning U.S. protection and rising Iran–Israel volatility. For India, the development underscores the need for strategic vigilance, deeper energy and defence partnerships with Riyadh, and sustained diplomacy to ensure that Saudi–Pakistan cooperation does not undermine India's interests across the Arabian Sea and the broader West Asian theatre.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: Recently, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan signed which of the following agreements?

- a) CEPA
- b) Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement
- c) FIPA
- d) GCC Security Pact

Ans :b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Assess the challenges and opportunities posed by SMDA for India's strategic and economic interests. **(150 Words)**

Sonagachi, in Kolkata, is one of India's oldest and largest red-light districts, housing over 12,000 sex workers. For decades, the community has faced stigma, violence, exploitation, and denial of basic rights, despite contributing to public health initiatives such as HIV/AIDS prevention. The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), now celebrating 30 years, has been at the forefront of advocating for labour rights, social recognition, and empowerment for sex workers and transgender individuals in West Bengal.



Activist sex worker poses on the eve of International Labour Day in 2022, in Sonagachi, Kolkata, when the community took part in a torch rally demanding labour rights. (AP Photo)

'Only rights can stop the wrongs'

Kolkata's Sonagachi is one of the largest and oldest red-light areas in India with over 12,000 workers. For decades, the community has fought social taboos, STDs, violence and more. As Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, a collective of sex workers, turns 30, **Shrabana Chatterjee** talks to the community about their lives, difficult working conditions, their long-sought demand to be recognised as workers, and the irony that the soil for the Durga Puja idols comes from their part of town

Only rights can stop the wrongs," reads a poster inside the community centre at the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) office in Sonagachi, Kolkata, West Bengal's capital. The poster dates back to 2010. It still carries the weight of an unfinished fight in the red-light area. DMSC, an organisation working for the rights of sex workers, celebrated 30 years of existence on July 15.

DMSC began distributing condoms in 1992 to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Its formation was based on a 1989-90 survey by Dr. Samrajit Jana, who was commissioned by the World Health Organisation. At the time, high-risk populations were identified and counselled into testing. Dr. Jana asked for the women's permission. Over time, DMSC, which includes transgender people, has emerged as a sex workers' rights organisation, refusing to let people not from their profession speak last truth.

Sonagachi, which translates to golden tree — from the amount of money spent in these north Kolkata lanes — has no signboard. The area and its people still bear the load of stigma. Historically, prostitutes have taken root from Sonagachi to make the Durga idols but the sex workers are not allowed into regular pandals.

In 2001, they tried to start their own Durga Puja celebration but were met with violent resistance from people. They moved the Calcutta High Court and got their rights. Through the decades, the joy of celebrating their own Durga Puja in their own locality was a victory.

About 12,000 women in the area live through the dense, layered history of Sonagachi. There are another 28,000 associated with DMSC across West Bengal.

In the folds of the night
On a cloudy morning on July 15, about 150 women of Sonagachi have gathered at a neighbourhood park to celebrate their 30-year-old journey. "Dear Shrabana Ma'am, our mother, our mother! I work hard for my bread. I demand workers' rights, a song streams in the background as the women prepare to play musical chairs and share a simple community lunch of rice, dal, and vegetable curry.

The women huddle together to catch up on daily gossip. Ritima Legum (name changed), 35, sits towards the back of the gathering that is facing a stage. She is pleasantly surprised to meet a friend from another part of Kolkata after 25 years. "I did everything for my parents, my family. I spent my whole life for them. What do I have left now? I am still alone," Ritima tells her friend.

She is now a field worker for DMSC and stopped sex work after her son got married. "I had to change my lifestyle so he could get social recognition," she says, adding that it's something she herself craves more. Though she has earned her own bread since she was a teenager.

As dusk descends, the women of Sonagachi are



Over the years, the violence has reduced as women have become empowered to stop not to customers who refuse to use condoms or ask for things which they do not want to do

RIMA MONDAL (name changed) came to Sonagachi from Murshidabad with just 20 when she was 15. She has spent 22 years as a sex worker even though many had advised her in her early days that she was too young to get into this business. But she came from an impoverished family and did not have other employment options to feed her family. "I am one person's pleasure another's pain," she says.

Beginning their workday. Located in the heart of Kolkata on one of the arterial roads of the city, Chittaranjan Avenue, the area starts bustling as the night progresses.

After their workday is done, an office going woman comes onto her balcony in a multi-storied house in the area. A group of sex workers stands across the road. They are hardly 100 metres apart. They look at each other — that is as close as the women from the two worlds will get. The bobas (patrons) live across both worlds.

Layered violence

Sonagachi is lined with hundreds of multi-storied buildings which have rooms stacked on each other like matchboxes, three or four floors high, and narrow, cluttered lanes and balconies. Many of these houses are tenements, old, some constructed well before the British arrived.

The sex workers of Sonagachi have lived through various kinds of violence while building their lives in this area, in this profession. Workers point out that violent and intoxicated customers are one of their biggest problems.

"Babas get drunk or high on substances, get angry and take it out on us. Other girls have to intervene when the violence gets out of hand," a young woman from Sonagachi says. Most women say they are used to a certain level of violence and verbal abuse — it is extreme violence they fear.

Through the years, they have fought to get the basics, the cotton cards, Aadhaar cards, bank ac-

counts, when they were discriminated against, they started the USHA Cooperative, one of the first financial cooperatives in Asia that helps women control their own resources.

"It is a misconception that every sex worker is trafficked. The authorities and society use this narrative to discriminate against us," says Shibakha Laskar, secretary of DMSC. In her late 40s, Shibakha says many women join the sex trade to earn a living and feed their families. She insists that the only way to stop trafficking is to decriminalise sex work. "Trafficking is there in every sector of society, even daily wage labourers are trafficked," Shibakha adds.

To address the trafficking issue, DMSC has started a group where both sex workers and external members control any new woman coming into the trade. They say they have rescued and rehabilitated over 2,000 girls who did not come in voluntarily.

In her office, Shibakha remembers her own journey in Sonagachi as she spells out each letter and slowly signs her name on official documents. She has learnt to read and write under the guidance of her teacher, Sanjit Mukherjee, who has taught many women in the area. "We used to sit on plastic sheets for our classes. Whatever I have learnt, I have learnt from him," she adds.

Owning the journey

Rima Mondal (name changed) came to Sonagachi from Murshidabad with just 20 when she was 15. She has spent 22 years as a sex worker even though many had advised her in her early days that she was too young to get into this business. But she came from an impoverished family and did not have other employment options to feed her family. "I am one person's pleasure another's pain," she says.

By the time I got the salt, the rice was over.

Rima's family could not afford to pay ₹7,000 for her dowry, but through sex work she got her older brother married, refusing to take dowry from her sister-in-law. "No one came to feed me when I was struggling on an empty stomach. They have no right to judge my life choices now," says Rima, who does field work for the DMSC during the day and returns to her regular 30x night.

One reason she does not want to be photographed is that her daughter has married a man outside Sonagachi, and she fears her daughter-in-law may feel ashamed of her profession. In the last three decades, she has come to open up about her profession to her mother but the rest of her family still believes that she has a job in the city.

It is the evening. Rain lashes Kolkata, washing

the dust off trees and turning the city into a penitential crucible. In Sonagachi, the smell of old cigarettes, pungent alcohol, and fried food is now mixed with the smell of fresh rainwater. Rima tries to duck from the rain, running into her building. She climbs up the dingy, dark, narrow serpentine stairs of the building she has lived in for the past 28 years. She is home.

Rima sits in her 4x4 ft room on the fourth floor. She remembers that when she came into the trade, things were different. "From forced sex to voluntary by customers and neighbourhood goons, we have seen it all. During one of our trips to raise awareness and distribute condoms, bribed men overpowered her water on us because they thought we will force women to stop working and they would lose business," she says. "Over the years, the violence has reduced as women have become empowered to say no to customers who refuse to use condoms or ask for things which they do not want to do."

She sits on her bed, catching a moment of rest before she prepares her dinner and her customers arrive at night. Her kitchen spills over to the balcony. A single almirah and refrigerator hold all her belongings; everything has a place. There are two netted windows that barely allow light or air into the room, but keep the pests away.

On the green walls hang her awards and certificates, reminders of battles fought and milestones achieved. Hundreds of such tokens crowd these lanes, each reflecting the lives of its residents, the DMSC, as locals call them.

Rights and wrongs

Priyanka Kar (name changed), in her 50s, calls herself a daughter of Sonagachi because her mother was paid to be a sex worker in a police officer in the area. Kar is married and says that she has been doing sex work since she was a teenager. "I cannot be one of the five or six girls standing on the road level because my in-laws' house is also here. So I had to hide and go to other places to do my work," Priyanka says, adding that her husband knew about her profession. She laughs and adds that she has always been "naughty", and never shed any tears while saying, "I was a sex worker."

Over time, her husband became abusive because of her profession. "I tried to kill myself when my family questioned my morality and work," she says. She found social recognition when her daughter is now a doctor and respected her choice, saying that she did not cheat anyone or earn a wage and did things on her own terms. She beams with pride while saying this, looking at her daughter's life who will be less precarious than hers.

At a DMSC conference this January, Kingshuk Sarkar, an assistant professor at the Centre for Management who had worked for the West Bengal government as a labour administrator, had said that the lack of acceptance of sex work as work causes problems in getting workers' rights and benefits. He insisted that sex workers need to be included in India's existing labour laws to normalise their work and stop human rights violations. "We all use our body parts to do work, then why is sex work different? And why are some body parts singled out?" said Sarkar.

The women of Sonagachi echo this, adding that they will also be protected by law if there is violence or harassment at the workplace. They can access public services without discrimination or stigma, and be included in other workers' schemes in the country.

Down the lanes of Sonagachi, there are at least a dozen different posters and banners of the local M.A. Shashi (name changed), the Minister of Women and Child Development and Social Welfare of West Bengal. She is a regular at DMSC events, taking away some of the stigma.

The women often refuse for their real names to be published or their photographs taken. They know the fallout could be severe.

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The sex workers of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in Kolkata took their movement demanding workers' rights to the Parliament in Delhi in 2005. (AP Photo/Ankur Khatwani)

in Delhi in 2005. (AP Photo/Ankur Khatwani)

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Current Context

1. Community Mobilisation:

- **DMSC began** distributing condoms in 1992 with WHO support, evolving into a rights-based organisation led by sex workers themselves.
- The community has fought for access to ration cards, Aadhaar, bank accounts, and labour benefits.
- Efforts include cooperative models like USHA Cooperative, financial literacy, and rehabilitation of trafficked persons.

2. Cultural Integration & Recognition:

- Sex workers historically barred from participating in Durga Puja celebrations despite providing soil for idols.
- Legal victories have allowed limited participation, reflecting slow societal recognition of dignity and rights.

3. Challenges Faced:

- Persistent violence from clients and middlemen, social ostracism, and economic vulnerability.
- Legal ambiguities: Sex work is not fully decriminalised in India, leading to human rights violations and limited access to welfare schemes.
- Internal social dynamics: Many conceal their profession to protect family reputation.

Static Context

• Legal Framework:

- Indian Penal Code (IPC) sections 354A, 370, 372 criminalise exploitation but not voluntary adult sex work; laws are ambiguous, leaving workers unprotected.
- Supreme Court judgments (e.g., BudhadevKarmaskar vs State of West Bengal, 2011) have emphasised dignity and autonomy of sex workers.

• Labour Rights & Social Security:

- Sex workers demand inclusion under labour laws, minimum wage protections, healthcare benefits, maternity rights, and access to social schemes.

• Public Health:

- Community-led interventions like DMSC have been central in combating HIV/AIDS and promoting safe sex practices in India.

Analysis

- Empowerment through Organising: DMSC demonstrates that self-representation is crucial; external actors often misrepresent sex workers' realities.

- Intersection of Rights and Labour: Sex work, when recognised as legitimate labour, allows access to legal protection, healthcare, social security, and financial inclusion.
- Social Stigma vs Policy Reality: Despite decades of activism, societal prejudice remains entrenched, creating psychological and economic vulnerability.
- Gender and Caste Dimensions: Many workers come from marginalised communities; empowerment initiatives must integrate gender justice and economic equity.

Conclusion

The story of Sonagachi underscores that recognition of rights—not moral policing—can address exploitation. The DMSC’s 30-year journey highlights the transformative potential of community-led mobilisation, legal advocacy, and social awareness. For India, the lesson is clear: protecting the dignity, health, and economic rights of marginalised communities strengthens social justice, public health, and inclusive development. Decriminalisation and labour law integration of sex work are critical next steps to ensure that “only rights can stop the wrongs.”

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : Choose the correct statement about DMSC (Durbar MahilaSamanwaya Committee):

- a) It works only for the transgender community.
- b) It is a community-led organisation that works for the rights of sex workers.
- c) It started an HIV-AIDS prevention programme in 2010 with the support of WHO.
- d) It provides only financial assistance.

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Discuss the advantages and challenges of including sex workers under Indian labour laws. (150 Words)

Despite Karnataka being the first Indian state to legislate against single-use plastics (SUPs) in 2016, the menace persists due to poor enforcement, civic apathy, and economic incentives. SUPs, such as plastic bags, disposable cutlery, straws, and thermocol, continue to dominate urban and rural markets, posing serious environmental and public health risks. While the Union government introduced a nationwide ban later, Karnataka's struggle highlights the gap between policy intent and ground-level implementation.



Banned but omnipresent: A view from K.R. market in Bengaluru. The KSPCB and municipal bodies inspected 1,25,564 establishments, seizing 1,012 tonnes of plastic in the last three years. **ALLIED IMAGES**

Ban on single-use plastic remains a flimsy promise

Though Karnataka was the first State in India to pass a law against the use of single-use plastics, it continues to thrive in the face of poor enforcement and civic apathy, finds **Chetan B.C.**

In the streets of Bengaluru, single-use plastic (SUP) is everywhere. Fruit vendors hand over items in plastic bags, roadside tea stalls serve piping hot beverages in disposable cups, and even caterers rely on plastic cutlery. Despite a ban that has been in place for years, these banned plastics continue to dominate daily life. Like other States in India, Karnataka is struggling with the SUP menace, fuelled both by civic indifference and the lucrative profits for industries producing it.

Environmental activists blame civic bodies and the Karnataka State Pollution Control Board (KSPCB) for a lack of enforcement, even though Karnataka was the first State in India to pass a law against the use of plastic. In 2016, the Forest, Ecology, and Environment Secretariat imposed a ban on the manufacture, supply, sale, and use of SUP under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986. Five years later, the Union Ministry followed with a similar ban. Items such as carry bags, banners, flex, flags, cutlery, cling films, thermocol, balloons, invitation cards, straws, and PVC banners were prohibited. Yet, these items remain in everyday use.

According to the United Nations, 2,000 garbage trucks worth of plastic trash end up in oceans, rivers, and lakes every day. Globally, 19 to 21 million tonnes of plastic leak into aquatic ecosystems annually.

Karnataka produces an average of 3.6 lakh tonnes of plastic waste each year, about 1,000 tonnes daily, according to the State Pollution Control Board. Between 2021 and 2024, annual production ranged from 3.45 lakh tonnes to over 5.28 lakh tonnes. Yet, only 30% of this waste reaches processing and recycling units, according to a senior KSPCB officer. In Bengaluru alone, of the 500 tonnes of SUP used daily, just 200 tonnes is processed, and the rest either reaches landfills or breaks down into microplastics.

Hazards of SUPs

A 2021 study published in *Environment International* revealed, for the first time, the presence of microplastics in human placenta, highlighting the infiltrating strength of plastic. Meenakshi Bharath, a Bengaluru-based gynaecologist and environmental activist, stressed the health risks posed by SUPs. "Often, people near or store hot food in a plastic bag or box, which leads to microplastics mixing with the food and ultimately reaching the human body. Microplastics deposit inside the body and cause a multitude of health complications, including hypothyroidism, inflammation, respiratory issues, and more," she said.

She pointed out that plastics in landfills degrade into microplastics (particles smaller than 5 mm), which seep into soil and water, mix with plants and organisms, and eventually enter the human body when we consume greens. A.N. Vellappa Reddy, former Forest Secretary and subcollector, noted that plastic travels with wind and rains, eventually breaking down into smaller units. "When plastic reduces to micro-

plastics, it affects microbial ecosystems and diminishes them. When such ecosystems are damaged, it negatively impacts larger ecosystems, destabilising environmental balance," he explained.

Mr. Reddy further said that urban cattle and other animals consume plastic, with deadly consequences, as nanoparticles pass through the bloodstream and deposit in cells and organs. A well-placed source in Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Ltd. (BSWML) said that under this cover, many industries continue to produce and import SUPs illegally. "While there are a handful of registered industries, more than 300 illegal plastic-producing units are operating in Bengaluru. All they need is a 10x10 ft. space for a machine and 10 kWh to 20 kWh of power," said Rajesh Babu, a city-based sustainable entrepreneur. "Even the raw materials and chemicals are easily available. So, a makeshift setup brings huge profit for people running such illegal SUP manufacturing units," he added.

Virgin plastic granules, titanium dioxide, red oxide, colourants, calcium carbonate, and other chemicals are used to manufacture SUP. Karan Gowda, CEO, Bengaluru Solid Waste Management Ltd., confirmed that some backdoor industries were found to be manufacturing SUP during their recent inspections. "Not just manufacturers; during our recent raids, we found importers bringing SUP from other States. There are distributors as well who deliver SUP," Mr. Gowda said, hinting at a crack down on these networks.

A KSPCB source listed hotspots for such manufacturing units and dealers: Peenya Industrial Area, Daaraballi, Kamalshippalya, J.C. Road, S.P. Road, and pockets of the pete area in central Bengaluru. Further, some dealers imported a stock of policy to complete the cycle of waste collection, segregation, and processing. This issue would be addressed, he noted.

Mr. Vellappa Reddy added that the absence of awareness drives contributors to continued SUP use. Civic bodies, he said, should conduct awareness campaigns, educate children, and string them existing laws by adding stricter punishments for offenders.

Meanwhile, after the formation of five new corporations in Bengaluru, the new Commissionery has stressed regular inspections and drives against SUPs. BSWML has formed 27 teams under senior officers to conduct checks, with support from marshals.

It remains to be seen whether a new administrative set-up for Bengaluru can beat the challenge that its predecessors failed to.

Cases between Sept. 3 and 16, 2023 in Bengaluru

Total raids	5,581
Items collected	1,46,23,438
Plastic seized	30,41.04 kg

Quantity of plastic waste generated in Karnataka

Year	Generated plastic waste (tonnes per annum)
2023-2024	3,46,700
2022-2023	3,16,700
2021-2022	2,49,014
2020-2021	1,64,400
2019-2020	2,96,300
2018-2019	2,72,716

PHOTO: K. MURALI KUMAR



Karnataka produces an average of 3.6 lakh tonnes of plastic waste each year; about 1,000 tonnes daily, according to the State Pollution Control Board. **ALLIED IMAGES**

six places, one dealer finally gave the address of a producer. When approached, the producer denied having any stock and claimed no dealers operated nearby.

M.G. Sateesh, Senior Environmental Officer at KSPCB, explained that this is the challenge they face when acting on tip-offs. "Even with the slightest suspicion, such dealers back off. They only sell to people within their trusted network," he said. The dilemma.

A BSWML source said that just two days before this reporter's visit, they had raided the same location. BSWML's records corroborate the presence of illegal SUP. Between September 3 and 16, 5,581 establishments were raided, and 30,421 kg of plastic was seized and 762.57 lakh in fine was collected.

Why are SUPs in demand?
Economics driven demand. Mr. Rajesh says producing 1 kg of SUP costs ₹50 to ₹80, while it sells at ₹200. Alternatives such as cloth or cotton bags cost ₹2 per piece at production and ₹4 to ₹5 at sale. Retailers and wholesalers prefer SUP, as it's cheaper and convenient.

A fruit seller in Jayanagar, requesting anonymity, explained, "For us, it's about business and competition. Many people don't bring their own bags, especially in the evenings while returning home from work, and demand one. If we refuse, they move on to another seller. It's about customer convenience."

When questioned, four of seven people in the same market in Jayanagar either thought the ban on plastic had been lifted or were unaware of it. V. Ramprasad, an expert in solid waste management, stresses that lack of enforcement has allowed SUP to flourish. "These agencies act only when they receive a tip-off. This menace is multi-layered, with stakeholders at every level," he says.

Mr. Ramprasad's concerns are reflected in enforcement data. Across Karnataka, KSPCB and municipal bodies inspected 1,25,564 establishments, seizing 1,012 tonnes of plastic in the last three years.

Although the numbers look substantial, enthusiasm for enforcement declined within a year after the Centre passed the law. Officials raided 1,25,564 establishments in 2022-23, immediately after the ban. Raids dropped to 22,392 in 2023-2024 and further to 18,111 in 2024-2025.

However, M.G. Sateesh, Senior Environmental Officer at KSPCB, maintained that they actively act on tip-offs in addition to surprise checks. Another KSPCB official noted that enforcement is particularly challenging in rural areas, which explains the fewer raids. "Usually, people in rural areas carry bags, as the santhi (weekly market) system is still active. However, they rarely cooperate during raids," he said. "There's also a severe shortage of field staff. One person is doing the work of four," he added.

Policy gaps

Nalini Shekar, co-founder of Haisru Dada, said that proper segregation of solid waste would improve the amount of plastic reaching processing units, stressing the critical role of ragpickers. Mr. Karan Gowda agreed that there is a lack of policy to complete the cycle of waste collection, segregation, and processing. This issue would be addressed, he noted.

Mr. Vellappa Reddy added that the absence of awareness drives contributors to continued SUP use. Civic bodies, he said, should conduct awareness campaigns, educate children, and string them existing laws by adding stricter punishments for offenders.

Meanwhile, after the formation of five new corporations in Bengaluru, the new Commissionery has stressed regular inspections and drives against SUPs. BSWML has formed 27 teams under senior officers to conduct checks, with support from marshals.

It remains to be seen whether a new administrative set-up for Bengaluru can beat the challenge that its predecessors failed to.

Current Context

1. Extent of SUP Use and Environmental Impact:

- Karnataka produces ~3.6 lakh tonnes of plastic waste annually; only ~30% reaches recycling units.
- SUPs degrade into microplastics, contaminating soil, water, food chains, and even human placenta, leading to health risks such as respiratory issues, hypothyroidism, and inflammation.
- Urban fauna, including cattle, ingest plastic waste, causing widespread ecological damage.

2. Enforcement Challenges:

- Despite inspections of 1,65,964 establishments and seizure of 1,012 tonnes of plastic over three years, enforcement has declined due to shortage of personnel, administrative gaps, and rural non-cooperation.
- Illegal production units thrive in industrial pockets and through inter-state supply networks.
- Economic incentives make SUPs more attractive than alternatives like cloth or paper, reinforcing continued usage.

3. Policy and Infrastructure Gaps:

- Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) exists but recycling capacity is insufficient and often underutilised.
- Lack of public awareness campaigns and incomplete waste segregation hinder compliance.
- Rural markets and weekly "santhe" systems remain largely outside regulatory reach.

Static Context

• Legal Framework:

- Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 empowers states to regulate hazardous materials including plastics.
- Central ban on SUPs (2019-2021) restricts manufacture, import, and sale of specific items.

• International Obligations:

- UN Sustainable Development Goal 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production) and UN Environment Assembly resolutions call for plastic pollution mitigation.

• Technological Measures:

- Recycling, bio-plastics, and waste-to-energy plants are encouraged but underutilised.
- Community-based solid waste management (ragpicker networks) is critical for processing.

Analysis

- **Policy–Implementation Gap:** Despite laws, lax enforcement, shortage of manpower, and corruption allow SUPs to thrive.
- **Economic Drivers:** High profit margins and convenience sustain demand for SUPs; alternatives are cheaper environmentally but less convenient economically.
- **Health and Environmental Nexus:** Microplastic contamination demonstrates the interconnectedness of environmental degradation and human health, emphasizing urgent action.
- **Multi-Stakeholder Responsibility:** Producers, distributors, civic bodies, and citizens all play a role; EPR mechanisms alone cannot solve the problem without behavioural change and systemic enforcement.

Conclusion

Karnataka's SUP ban highlights the limitations of top-down regulation without awareness, infrastructure, and enforcement. To combat plastic pollution, India needs a multi-pronged approach: strengthening EPR frameworks, incentivising alternatives, conducting awareness campaigns, enhancing enforcement, and improving waste segregation and recycling infrastructure. Without sustained systemic and societal intervention, bans on SUPs will remain symbolic rather than transformative, undermining environmental and public health objectives.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: What is the main objective of “Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)”?

- a) To ensure the responsibility of industries in waste management
- b) To prevent citizens from using plastics
- c) To develop alternatives to plastics
- d) To provide additional tax revenue to the government

Ans: a)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: Microplastic pollution poses a serious threat to human health and ecosystems. Examine this statement from environmental and public health perspectives. **(150 Words)**

A climate-health vision with lessons from India

On July 29-31, 2025, Brazil hosted the 2025 Global Conference on Climate and Health, with delegates from 90 countries shaping the Belém Health Action Plan. Set to be launched at COP30 to be held in November 2025, this plan will define the global agenda on climate and health. India was not officially represented – a significant missed opportunity to emerge as a global exemplar, given its developmental approach offers lessons for implementing the Belém Plan.

Insights from India's welfare programmes
For countries in the Global South seeking synergistic policies that advance multiple developmental goals, India's intersectoral welfare programmes offer valuable insights. Consider the Pradhan Mantri Poshan Shakti Nirman (PM POSHAN), India's flagship nutrition scheme covering over 11 crore children across nearly 11 lakh schools. Its accomplishment lies in also connecting the dots between health, education, agriculture and food procurement systems. By promoting millets and traditional grains, it addresses malnutrition and also builds climate-resilient food systems.

Similarly, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has tackled sanitation, public health, human dignity and environmental sustainability, while MNREGA's environmental works have improved rural livelihoods while restoring degraded ecosystems. And with Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), the switch to clean cooking fuel has reduced household air pollution, a major cause of respiratory illness, while cutting carbon emissions.

None of these initiatives was designed explicitly as "climate policies", yet they have had significant health and climate co-benefits. These policies demonstrate a critical insight: non-health interventions can generate substantial health co-benefits while addressing climate challenges. Each intervention has also proved that intentional, intersectoral action can multiply impact. India's experience has takeaways for operationalising an integrated climate-health



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India's non-health interventions are a model that can generate substantial health co-benefits and also address climate challenges

vision. First, strong political leadership makes a difference. PMUY and Swachh Bharat gained benefits from direct Prime Ministerial involvement, ensuring cooperation across Ministries. When political leaders frame climate action as a health emergency rather than just an environmental issue, it commands attention across government departments and receives wider public support.

Second, community engagement is a vital ingredient. Swachh Bharat leveraged cultural symbolism, invoking Mahatma Gandhi's vision of cleanliness. PM POSHAN built grass-root support through parent-teacher associations and school committees. Similarly, climate action needs cultural anchoring, linking environmental protection to societal values of health and prosperity.

Third, past policies succeeded by building on existing institutions rather than creating parallel structures. Climate action must be embedded in existing social and institutional frameworks. Accredited Social Health Activists, self-help group members, municipal bodies and panchayat representatives can become powerful advocates, especially when they internalise the interlinks between environmental changes and community well-being.

Some challenges

However, experience also reveals fundamental constraints in implementing intersectoral policy through siloed administrative machineries. As policies progress from providing proximal outputs to delivering associated outcomes, divergent responsibilities and institutional mandates of various sectors begin to reassert themselves. For instance, high LPG refill costs under PMUY persist, partly due to oil marketing business interests outweighing beneficiary needs. Further, social and cultural barriers will continue to hinder utilisation and equitable access in the absence of sustained reinforcing mechanisms. These challenges show that climate solutions must also address structural inequities through institutionalised mechanisms that measure

outcomes, not just outputs. India's experience points toward a framework for institutionalised, health-anchored climate governance, built on three pillars.

The first is strategic prioritisation by political leaders through framing climate policies in terms of immediate health rather than abstract future risks. Just as PMUY succeeded by positioning clean cooking as women's empowerment, climate action needs a similar high-level framing that connects environmental policies to health outcomes that people experience directly.

The second is procedural integration across government departments by embedding health impact assessments into all climate-relevant policies. Just as environmental clearances are now standard for major projects, health considerations should be mandatory for policies affecting energy, transport, agriculture and urban planning.

Third, participatory implementation that leverages health as a mobilising force. Communities understand the health benefits of cleaner air, safer water and nutritious food more intuitively than carbon accounting. Local health workers can become climate advocates when they see direct connections between environmental changes and health outcomes in their practice.

A clear choice

The choice is clear. India can continue fighting climate change and health challenges separately, with limited success and mounting costs. Or, it can leverage the institutional wisdom embedded in its welfare policies and deepen its international engagement to create a new model of governance that treats these challenges as interconnected problems requiring coordinated solutions. The stakes are high, the costs of inaction devastating, and the potential for transformative impact immense. India and the world cannot afford anything less than a bold, intersectoral, whole-of-society approach.

The views expressed are personal

GS. Paper 02& 03 – International Relations & Environment

UPSC Mains Practice Question: Why is India's developmental approach significant for Global South countries in the context of climate-health policy? (150 Words)

Context :

The 2025 Global Conference on Climate and Health in Brazil, which shaped the Belém Health Action Plan, highlighted the urgent need to integrate climate and health policy. India, despite its pioneering welfare programmes with implicit climate-health co-benefits, was absent. Its experience offers critical lessons for operationalising an intersectoral, health-anchored approach to climate action.

Current Context

1. Intersectoral Programmes with Co-Benefits:
 - PM POSHAN: Addresses malnutrition, promotes climate-resilient grains, links health, education, and agriculture.
 - Swachh Bharat Abhiyan: Improves sanitation, public health, environmental sustainability.
 - PMUY: Provides clean cooking fuel, reducing household air pollution and carbon emissions.
 - MNREGA Environmental Works: Restores ecosystems while improving rural livelihoods.
2. Key Success Factors:
 - Political Leadership: High-level support ensures cross-ministry coordination and public visibility.
 - Community Engagement: Cultural symbolism and grassroots participation enhance adoption.
 - Institutional Anchoring: Leveraging existing institutions (ASHAs, self-help groups, panchayats) avoids duplication and increases efficiency.
3. Challenges Identified:
 - Siloed administrative structures limit intersectoral coordination.
 - Economic interests and cultural barriers hinder equitable access (e.g., high LPG refill costs under PMUY).
 - Monitoring outcomes rather than mere outputs is essential for sustained impact.

Static and Thematic Context (Relevant UPSC Material)

- SDG Linkages: Aligns with SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 13 (Climate Action), and SDG 2 (Zero Hunger).
- Global Climate Governance: Belém Plan at COP30 emphasizes integrated climate-health strategies.
- Policy Instruments: Health Impact Assessments, community mobilization, and inter-ministerial coordination are emerging best practices.

Analysis

- **Integration Over Isolation:** India's programmes show that non-health policies can yield substantial health co-benefits while addressing environmental challenges.
- **Governance Lessons:** Strategic prioritisation, procedural integration, and participatory implementation are three pillars for effective climate-health governance.
- **Scalability and International Relevance:** India's approach provides a model for Global South countries with limited resources, demonstrating that development, health, and climate objectives can be addressed simultaneously.

Conclusion

India's experience underscores that climate and health challenges are intertwined, requiring coordinated, intersectoral, whole-of-society approaches. Leveraging welfare schemes, institutional wisdom, and community engagement can generate multiplicative impact. As COP30 approaches, India has the opportunity to lead by example and showcase a model where climate action is health-anchored, equitable, and sustainable. Inaction or compartmentalised responses risk escalating both environmental and public health crises.
