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SPECIAL FOR UPSC & GPSC EXAMINATION

DATE : 05-12-25



The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

Friday, 05 Dec, 2025

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Russian President Vladimir Putin's arrival in New Delhi for the 23rd India–Russia Annual Summit marks a high-visibility diplomatic moment for India. Despite the ongoing Ukraine conflict, Western sanctions, and an ICC arrest warrant against Mr. Putin, India extended an exceptional welcome, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi personally receiving him at Palam Air Force Base. The visit reflects India's attempt to balance its historical partnership with Russia while simultaneously deepening ties with the U.S. and Europe.



Bilateral heads: Russian President Vladimir Putin receiving a traditional welcome in Prime Minister Narendra Modi's presence at Palam Air Force Base in Delhi on Thursday. AFP

PM welcomes Putin at airport in warm gesture, hails India-Russia partnership

Kallol Bhattacharjee
Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

In a special gesture, Prime Minister Narendra Modi welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin upon his arrival at the Air Force Station, Palam on Thursday evening, ahead of the India-Russia annual summit scheduled for Friday. This is Mr. Putin's first state visit to India since the beginning of the war in Ukraine, which is currently drawing global attention because of renewed peace efforts involving U.S. President Donald Trump.

Mr. Putin's first engagement started with a private dinner with Mr. Modi at the latter's official residence at 7 Lok Kalyan Marg. The Russian leader will receive a ceremonial reception at the forecourt of the Rashtrapati Bhavan at 11 a.m. on Friday, which will be followed by a visit to Rajghat, where he will lay a wreath at the memorial to Mahatma Gandhi.

On agenda

The 23rd India-Russia annual summit will commence at 11.50 a.m. at Hyderabad House, to be followed by press statements by Mr. Modi and Mr. Putin. The Russian leader had visited India last on December 6, 2021 for the annual summit when he had not addressed the media as it was a brief visit. On Friday afternoon, Mr. Putin will attend a business event at the Bharat Mandapam in the capital. His last official engagement on Friday will be at the Rashtrapati Bhavan where President Droupadi Murmu will host him at a banquet dinner.

Several members of Mr. Putin's official delegation reached New Delhi hours before his arrival. Russian Defence Minister Andrei Belousov met Defence Minister Rajnath Singh on Thursday evening. In a post on 'X', Mr. Singh said after the meeting "India is determined for expanding capacity of indigenous defence industry for both local production and exports and discussed 'new opportunities' in 'niche technologies'".

Around the same time, Russia's First Deputy Prime Minister Denis Manturov met Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman and discussed interbank, credit cooperation, expanding payment infrastructure and the India-Russia investment protection agreement.

Timed with these discussions, Herman Gref, CEO and Chairman of the Executive Board of Russia's largest bank Sberbank met the media and announced that Russia and India have been carrying out large-scale transactions without the use of "third party" technology.

Mr. Gref also said that Sberbank have launched First India, a closed end mutual fund focused on Nifty50 index that will facilitate greater Russian investments into the Indian stock market. Both ministers reiterated that the bilateral partnership is rooted in deep mutual trust, shared principles, and long-standing respect. The Ministry of Defence said, Mr. Singh further underscored India's commitment to strengthening its indigenous defence manufacturing ecosystem under the Atmanirbhar Bharat vision, the Ministry said.

Putin's visit a tense tightrope walk for Modi government amid Western sanction threats

NEWS ANALYSIS

Suhasini Haidar
NEW DELHI

As Prime Minister Narendra Modi walked down the red carpet at Palam airport on Thursday to give Russian President Vladimir Putin his trademark hug as part of a grand welcome, the government signalled that India's ties with Russia are untouched by Western concerns, the International Criminal Court's arrest warrant, and U.S. and European sanctions.

Even so, as the two leaders sit down for bilateral talks on Friday, the government will need to manage a tense tightrope walk, particularly between Russia and Europe, on a number of issues including the optics of the visit, oil imports and trade, defence, nuclear cooperation, and a mobility agreement. The optics of the visit are particularly significant, given the other visitors expected shortly – a U.S. trade delegation is expected this month, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz is set to



Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Russian President Vladimir Putin as they depart Palam Air Force Base in New Delhi on Thursday. AFP

visit India in early January, and the EU's top leadership Ursula von der Leyen and Antonio Costa will be guests for Republic Day and the EU-India summit.

The government hopes to finalise the EU-India free trade agreement (FTA) as well as the U.S.-India FTA in the next few weeks, and will not want the announcements made in meetings on Friday to delay or derail any of those outcomes.

Oil and trade

Russian oil is by far the most contentious piece of the diplomatic puzzle, af-

ter a rapid expansion in India's oil purchases from less than 2% of its oil basket before the Ukraine conflict, to 40% last year, driving India-Russia trade from its annual average of \$10 billion to \$68.7 billion in 2024-25.

With India now expected to cut its oil imports drastically in the wake of U.S. sanctions, India and Russia will on Friday discuss replacing at least some of those oil purchases with other commodities from Russia, as well as boosting Indian exports to Russia of produce and pro-

cessed foods, apparel, and some machinery, particularly over the newly developed Eastern Maritime Corridor from Chennai to Vladivostok.

Both sides will also push for more progress on the FTA between India and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) during the visit, even as Indian exporters hit by the U.S.'s 50% tariffs seek new markets.

Labour mobility

The India-Russia labour mobility agreement to be announced as the "centre-piece" of Mr. Putin's visit could be a crucial boost for Indian skilled and semi-skilled workers seeking jobs as other Western markets tighten their immigration controls.

Meanwhile, war-weary and heavily-sanctioned Russia is facing a labour shortfall of what is estimated to be about 3.1 million jobs by the end of the decade, and is seeking Indian workers for its construction, technology, and manufacturing sectors.

The visit will be watched most closely for any defence deals, given that the

U.S. had earlier threatened to impose sanctions under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act after India finalised a deal to buy S-400 air defence systems from Moscow. Russian technology transfer is key for India, as no other country thus far has agreed to share its most sensitive technologies.

With the Russian Duma now clearing the RELOS military logistics pact with India, more military exercises with Russia – which the EU had protested earlier this year – could be expected.

Nuclear pact

The same is true for nuclear power cooperation. On December 3, in response to a question in Parliament, the government said the Department of Atomic Energy had held talks with Russia's state-owned nuclear energy giant Rosatom about India's plans for five indigenous small modular reactors.

France and other EU member states are also bidding for these projects.

Key Highlights & Analysis

1. Symbolic Diplomacy: Optics vs. Strategic Necessity

- PM Modi's personal reception and warm greeting signal continuity of a trusted strategic partnership.
- The gesture underscores India's stance that bilateral relations will not be dictated by Western pressures.
- However, the government must carefully manage optics, as India is simultaneously negotiating:
 - India–EU FTA
 - India–U.S. FTA
 - High-level visits from U.S. and EU leaders for Republic Day and strategic dialogues

Demonstrates India's "multi-vector diplomacy" and pursuit of "strategic autonomy."

2. Defence Cooperation: Technology Transfer as the Pivot

- Meetings between Defence Ministers of both countries reinforced commitment to:
 - Joint development
 - Technology transfer
 - Strengthening Aatmanirbhar Bharat in defence
- Russia remains India's largest defence partner, especially for:
 - S-400 systems
 - Submarine technologies
 - Aircraft engines
- The Russian Duma recently approved the RELOS logistic pact, allowing deeper joint military exercises, which Europe has earlier criticized.

Critical point: Russian tech transfer is unmatched; Western nations rarely share high-end defence technology.

3. Energy & Trade: Navigating Sanctions and Rebalancing Imports

- India's import of Russian oil surged from 2% pre-2022 to about 40% over the last year.
- Due to increasing U.S. scrutiny and sanctions, India may reduce crude imports, replacing them with:
 - Russian commodities
 - Fertilisers
 - Coking coal
 - Metals
- Bilateral trade expanded from \$10 bn to \$68.7 bn, but is heavily imbalanced in Russia's favour.
- Discussions include:
 - Boosting Indian exports of food, apparel, machinery
 - Operationalising the Eastern Maritime Corridor (Chennai–Vladivostok)
 - Progress on an India–EAEU FTA

India is using trade diversification to manage geopolitical risk.

4. Labour Mobility Agreement: A New Strategic Frontier

- Expected to be the centrepiece of the summit.
- Russia faces a 3.1 million worker shortfall, especially in:
 - Construction
 - Manufacturing
 - Technology

- India seeks new labour markets due to tightening immigration norms in the West.

Significance: Enhances soft power, remittances, and employment opportunities for skilled/semi-skilled Indians.

5. Nuclear & High-Technology Cooperation

- Talks on small modular reactors (SMRs) with Russia's Rosatom have intensified.
- India is considering five indigenous SMRs, with both Russia and EU countries competing for participation.
- Nuclear cooperation remains a stable and less controversial area of India–Russia ties.

Conclusion

President Putin's state visit reflects India's continued pursuit of strategic autonomy—strengthening old partnerships while simultaneously expanding ties with the West. While the summit reinforces India–Russia defence, energy, labour, and technology cooperation, it also demands careful diplomatic balancing, given upcoming engagements with the U.S. and EU. For India, the challenge lies in converting this historical partnership into a more economically balanced, technologically advanced, and mutually beneficial relationship, without allowing geopolitical pressures to derail its broader foreign policy objectives.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to India–Russia relations, consider the following statements:

1. India and Russia hold an annual bilateral summit under a formal intergovernmental arrangement.
2. India is negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU).
3. India imports more than 40% of its crude oil from Russia as of 2024–25.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 2 and 3 only
- C. 1 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Ans: d)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques: India's strategic partnership with Russia continues to deepen despite Western sanctions and geopolitical tensions." Discuss the major areas of cooperation highlighted during President Putin's 2025 visit and analyse the challenges India faces in balancing its ties with Russia and the West. **(150 Words)**

Page 04 : GS 3 : Environment / Prelims

The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), India's premier wildlife research organisation, has announced that six critically endangered vultures—slender-billed and white-rumped—will be released into the wild in Assam in January 2026. This marks a major step in India's vulture recovery programme, following decades of population crash due to diclofenac poisoning. The initiative aligns with the Action Plan for Vulture Conservation (2020–2025) and India's long-term biodiversity goals.

Wildlife body BNHS to release 6 critically endangered vultures in Assam in 2026

Purnima Sah
MUMBAI

The Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS), which has successfully bred more than 800 vultures in its conservation breeding centres across India, is now preparing to release six vultures in Assam in January 2026.

BNHS scientists on Thursday said they are finalising the dates to release three male and as many female slender-billed and white-rumped vultures, aged between two and three years, in Assam's Kamrup and Biswanath districts. They were bred at BNHS Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre in Rani, Kamrup district.

About the selection of Kamrup and Biswanath districts as the location to release the vultures, BNHS Senior Scientist and Assistant Director Dr. Sachin Ranade explained, "These locations fall within the natural range of vultures where there are already a



White-rumped vulture at BNHS Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre in Kamrup district. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

small flock of them and Biswanath is closer to Kaziranga National Park."

"The vultures will be kept there for a minimum of three months to experience the surrounding nature and adapt. During this time, they will observe other scavengers and become familiar with the environment. Since they have been bred in captivity – even though the enclosures are large – this will be their first experience of

true wilderness."

"Vultures live in flocks, attain maturity after the age of five, and can live up to 50 to 60 years. They have high immunity and do not easily catch infections or diseases," the BNHS scientists said. The founder stock (parents of these vultures) was collected from different parts of Assam. Dr. Ranade said the slender-billed vulture is mainly found in Assam, whereas white-

rumped vultures are found across India.

Currently, India is home to about 20,000 vultures across nine species, including bearded vulture, griffon vulture, and cinereous vulture.

The endangered species are the Egyptian vulture and the Himalayan griffon vulture, while the critically endangered species include the red-headed vulture, white-rumped vulture, long-billed vulture, and slender-billed vulture.

The scientists are working with local communities to save vultures in their natural habitats. The BNHS team, supported by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Assam Forest Department, has been working for over 15 years to prepare the ground for the release.

They are conducting village-level meetings and educating villagers about vultures and their importance.

Key Points & Analysis

1. Why This Release Matters

- The six vultures (3 male + 3 female), aged 2–3 years, were bred at the BNHS Vulture Conservation Breeding Centre, Rani (Kamrup district).
- This is part of a 15+ year effort to revive vulture populations after they collapsed by more than 95% in the 1990s–2000s.

2. Why Kamrup & Biswanath?

- These districts fall within the natural range of the two species.
- They already have small existing vulture flocks.
- Biswanath district is close to Kaziranga National Park, a key ecological habitat.

Ecological significance: Releasing captive-bred individuals into areas with existing flocks increases survival success due to social behaviour and food source availability.

3. Rewilding Process

- The vultures will be kept in soft-release enclosures for at least 3 months.
- They will:
 - acclimatise to natural surroundings,
 - observe other scavengers,
 - learn feeding cues,
 - adapt to diverse weather conditions.
- Vultures mature at 5 years and can live 50–60 years.

This staged rewilding is crucial because these vultures were born in captivity.

4. Vulture Status in India

India has ~20,000 vultures across nine species, including:

- Critically Endangered:
 - White-rumped vulture
 - Long-billed vulture
 - Slender-billed vulture
 - Red-headed vulture
- Endangered:
 - Egyptian vulture
 - Himalayan griffon

The two species being released (slender-billed & white-rumped) are among the most threatened.

Vultures are keystone scavengers; their decline led to rise in feral dogs & spread of rabies.

5. Role of BNHS, RSPB & Assam Forest Department

- BNHS has bred 800+ vultures across its centres.
- Supported by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB).
- Extensive community outreach is ongoing:
 - village meetings,

- awareness about avoiding diclofenac-use in livestock,
- creating vulture-safe zones.

Significance: Conservation depends heavily on local community participation.

Conclusion

The planned release of six critically endangered vultures in Assam is a landmark step in India's vulture conservation strategy. It reflects successful ex-situ breeding, strong scientific planning, and collaboration between BNHS, RSPB, and the Assam Forest Department. If implemented effectively, this could accelerate the revival of vulture populations in the eastern Himalayan ecosystem, strengthening India's broader biodiversity commitments and ecological balance.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques : With reference to vulture conservation in India, consider the following statements:

1. The slender-billed vulture is found only in Assam.
2. The white-rumped vulture is listed as Critically Endangered.
3. Vultures mature early, usually by the age of two.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 2 only
- C. 1 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : Critically evaluate India's Action Plan for Vulture Conservation (2020–25). What challenges remain in restoring vulture populations to their historical levels? Suggest measures. **(150 words)**

The Department of Posts has released a draft amendment to the Post Office Act, 2023 proposing a transformative digital addressing framework called DHRUVA (Digital Hub for Reference and Unique Virtual Address). This system aims to modernise India's addressing architecture by replacing long textual addresses with UPI-style digital address labels (e.g., name@entity), significantly improving logistics, e-commerce efficiency, and public service delivery. It is part of India's broader Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) push.

Postal department considers UPI-like 'labels' for addresses

The system, called DHRUVA, will provide users a convenient way to share their addresses across platforms; users can grant firms limited address access, after which the label needs re-authorisation

Aroon Deep
NEW DELHI

The Department of Posts this week released a draft amendment to the Post Office Act, 2023, aimed at introducing an interoperable, standardised, and user-centric addressing system called the Digital Hub for Reference and Unique Virtual Address, or DHRUVA. The framework has been under consultation for a few months, with one key element, DIGIPIN, rolled out in March.

A senior official involved in DHRUVA's implementation said it would be able to replace textual addresses with email or UPI address-like labels such as "name@entity", which would act as a proxy for a physical address.

The government hopes to build this system as part of its digital public infrastructure initiatives and will allow private companies to participate.

The department is hoping to draw interest from e-commerce and gig platforms, where users need to provide addresses across

Smart addresses

A draft amendment seeks to enable an interoperable system replacing physical addresses with smart labels like "name@entity" powered by DIGIPIN for precise geolocation

- Labels will be provided by address service providers, while consent architecture will be managed by address information agents

- It will be based on the DIGIPIN system, which is a 10-character alphanumeric expression of latitude and longitude coordinates



- The technology was developed to provide more precise locations in rural areas or in cases where the textual expression of a physical address does not

- offer adequate information

- The draft amendment is under consultation; Section 8 entity proposed (like NPCI for UPI)

- The system will be built as part of government's digital public infrastructure initiatives, and will allow private firms to participate

multiple services. On these platforms, individuals would be able to provide a label instead of an address and authorise firms to receive the geographic coordinates and full text of their address instantly, instead of filling out address forms repeatedly.

The draft amendment would allow the postal department to set up a Section 8 not-for-profit entity under government supervision. The body would

play a role similar to the National Payments Corporation of India, which is an association of banks administering the UPI payments system.

Consent-based

Users would be able to authorise companies to view their address for a specified period if they wish, after which a given label will require re-authorisation.

There is no compulsion

in the draft amendment for private players to join, the official said, and the department hopes the system will be compelling enough for firms and users to sign up.

Labels will be provided by address service providers, and the consent architecture will be managed by address information agents, or AIAs.

DIGIPIN system

The DIGIPIN system is the foundational layer for this service, the official said. DIGIPIN is a 10-character alphanumeric expression of latitude and longitude. The technology was developed to provide more precise locations in rural areas or in cases where the textual expression of a physical address does not offer adequate information.

DIGIPIN was open-sourced by the department, and each DIGIPIN corresponds to a roughly 14 square metre patch of land, with a mathematical function deterministically generating a unique code. This translates to around 228 billion DIGIPINs for Indian territory.

Key Points & Analysis

1. What is DHRUVA?

- An interoperable, standardised, user-centric digital addressing system.
- Works like email IDs or UPI handles: example: abhay@india could represent a full physical address.
- Users can share this label instead of filling detailed addresses repeatedly on e-commerce, gig, and delivery platforms.

2. Consent-Based Address Sharing

- Users can allow companies to read full address details or geocoordinates instantly through the DHRUVA label.

- Access is:
 - time-bound,
 - consent-based,
 - requires re-authorisation after expiry.

Importance: Strengthens data privacy, ensures minimal data sharing.

3. Institutional Structure

- Amendment enables creation of a Section 8 (not-for-profit) entity, similar to NPCI, to run the system.
- Private players (like Amazon, Zomato, Swiggy, Dunzo) may voluntarily join.

Note: Government expects the system to become organically popular due to convenience.

4. Address Service Providers & AIAs

- Address Service Providers (ASPs): issue digital labels (UPI-like handles).
- Address Information Agents (AIAs): manage user consent and data flow.

This mirrors the architecture of UPI's PSPs and TPAPs → distributed governance + interoperability.

5. DIGIPIN: The Technological Core

- DIGIPIN = 10-character alphanumeric code representing latitude + longitude.
- Accuracy: ~14 sq. metres per code.
- 228 billion unique DIGIPINs possible across India.
- Developed to address imprecise rural addresses or informal settlements.

Significance:

- Helps emergency services, census, delivery services, public welfare schemes.
- Open-sourced: ensures transparency and innovation.

6. Why This Matters for India

- India faces one of the world's largest addressing challenges (unstructured addresses, language diversity).
- DHRUVA will:
 - reduce delivery failures,
 - improve e-commerce logistics,
 - speed up service delivery,
 - support urban planning & disaster management,
 - enable geospatial precision for governance.

Conclusion

The DHRUVA digital address system represents a major leap in India's digital infrastructure journey, aiming to make addresses interoperable, precise, and consent-based. By using UPI-like virtual labels supported by DIGIPIN's geo-coded intelligence, the postal department is positioning India to solve long-standing logistical and administrative challenges. If widely adopted, DHRUVA could become a foundational layer for governance, economic activity, and digital services in the coming decade.

UPSC Prelims Practice Question

Ques: With reference to the DHRUVA system recently proposed by the Department of Posts, consider the following statements:

1. It aims to replace textual physical addresses with interoperable digital address labels.
2. It is fully mandatory for all private e-commerce platforms to join the system.
3. It uses a 10-character alphanumeric code called DIGIPIN to encode geo-coordinates.

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: c)

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : The proposed DHRUVA digital address system has the potential to transform India's public service delivery framework. Discuss the significance of consent-based digital addresses in improving governance efficiency and citizen empowerment. **(250 words)**

Page 07 : GS 2 : Social Justice

Despite major advances in HIV prevention and maternal healthcare, mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) continues to be a significant global public health challenge. A worrying pattern has emerged: infants are testing positive for HIV even though their mothers tested negative during pregnancy. This phenomenon, known as the “silent transmission gap”, reveals critical weaknesses in timing, frequency, and follow-up of HIV testing.

Key Issues & Analysis

1. How HIV Transmits from Mother to Child

HIV can spread:

- during pregnancy (in-utero),
- during delivery,
- during breastfeeding.

Improved antenatal testing and ARV therapy have reduced transmission globally, but gaps persist.

2. Why Babies Get HIV Even When Mothers Test Negative

a) New Maternal Infections During Pregnancy: Many women test negative in early pregnancy but acquire HIV later, when viral load is highest, sharply increasing the risk of transmission.

b) Window Period: The “window period” is the initial phase after HIV infection when standard tests may be negative despite the virus being present. A woman may test negative, but still be highly infectious.

c) Single-Test Protocol: Most programmes recommend only one HIV test in early pregnancy.

No routine repeat testing in:

- late pregnancy,
- at delivery,
- breastfeeding period.

This allows newly acquired infections to go undetected.

3. Why This Is a Public Health Concern

- Missed maternal infections → missed early initiation of ART.
- Higher infant transmission risk during late pregnancy, delivery, and breastfeeding.
- Hidden burden undermines the global goal to eliminate paediatric HIV.

A worrying pattern of HIV transmission in children



Cause for concern: HIV can pass from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, during delivery or through breastfeeding. ISTOCKPHOTO

Amol Jaybhaye

Mother to child transmission of HIV remains one of the major challenges in the effort to eliminate HIV in children. HIV can pass from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, during delivery or through breastfeeding. Over the years, early antenatal HIV testing, treatment for pregnant women living with HIV and medicines for newborns have reduced transmission rates across many regions. However, an important concern continues to appear in clinical practice. Some babies are still diagnosed with HIV even though their mothers tested negative during pregnancy. This worrying pattern, often called the silent transmission gap, highlights key gaps in testing, timing and follow-up care.

Many women test negative in early pregnancy, but may acquire HIV later. If a person becomes newly infected during pregnancy, her viral load is often very high, which greatly increases the chance of passing the virus to the baby. A single test at the start of pregnancy may therefore miss new infections that happen later.

After a new infection, there is also a “window period” – an interval of time during which standard screening tests may not detect HIV even though the virus is present. During this time, the chance of transmitting HIV is high. This means a pregnant woman may test negative despite recently acquiring the infection. Usually, only one HIV test is recommended during the early stages of pregnancy. Hence, without repeated

Some babies are still diagnosed with HIV even though their mothers tested negative during pregnancy. This worrying pattern is often called the silent transmission gap

testing in the later stages of pregnancy and during breastfeeding, some new infections have a high chance of being undetected. This creates a missed opportunity for early treatment and prevention.

The risk of transmission is especially high if the mother acquires HIV during late pregnancy, delivery or the breastfeeding period. Transmission can happen before birth, during birth or after birth through breast milk.

What can be done?

To close this silent gap, the following steps are important:

For pregnant women: Repeat HIV testing in the later months of pregnancy, testing again at the time of delivery and testing during breastfeeding can help to check for the infection. Additional testing should be carried out for women with recent exposure or symptoms.

For infants: Early virologic testing soon after birth and repeat follow-up testing if needed can go a long way. Prompt treatment must begin in case of a positive result.

Closing the gap

The occurrence of HIV in babies whose mothers test negative during pregnancy, indicates a significant gap in prevention efforts. This gap is not due to treatment failures in known HIV positive mothers, but mainly due to the occurrence of new maternal infections, the window period and a lack of repeat testing.

A few basic steps such as enforcing repeated testing regulations, improving close follow-ups especially during pregnancy and breastfeeding and ensuring early infant testing will go a long way toward ensuring that essential steps are taken to protect the newborns. Closing this silent transmission gap is crucial as part of the global effort to eliminate HIV in children.

(Dr. Amol Jaybhaye is consultant - paediatric infectious diseases, Narayana Health SRCC Children's Hospital, Mumbai. Info.Srcc@narayanahealth.org)

4. What Can Be Done? (Way Forward)

For Pregnant Women

- Mandatory repeat HIV testing:
 - in the third trimester,
 - at delivery,
 - periodically during breastfeeding.
- Additional testing for high-risk exposure or symptoms.

For Infants

- Early virologic testing (PCR-based testing soon after birth).
- Repeat follow-up tests where needed.
- Immediate initiation of treatment for HIV-positive infants (early ART improves survival drastically).

Systemic Strengthening

- Enforce protocols on repeat testing.
- Strengthen antenatal and postnatal follow-up.
- Integrate community counselling and awareness on new infections and window periods.

Conclusion

The rise in HIV infection among infants despite mothers testing negative during pregnancy exposes a silent yet preventable gap in India's and global HIV-prevention strategies. The issue is not treatment failure in known HIV-positive mothers but failure to detect new maternal infections. Strengthening repeat testing, improving clinical follow-up, and ensuring early infant diagnosis are essential for closing this gap. Addressing these shortcomings is crucial to achieving the global goal of eliminating HIV in children.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : The rise of HIV infections in infants despite mothers testing negative during pregnancy reveals a silent transmission gap in India's maternal healthcare system." Discuss the reasons behind this gap and suggest measures to eliminate mother-to-child transmission of HIV. **(250 Words)**

Page 10 : GS 1 : Society & Geography

As China approaches its 15th Five-Year Plan (2026–2030)—envisioned as the “consolidation and full implementation stage” of the goal of achieving socialist modernisation by 2035—its long-term programmes on poverty alleviation and rural revitalisation are beginning to show significant results. The article highlights how targeted State intervention, large public investments, and community participation have transformed remote rural counties across western and central China.

China's story of rural revitalisation

As China prepares to enter into its 15th five-year plan, considered to be the consolidation and full implementation period of the goal to realise socialist modernisation by 2035, the efforts taken up by the administration for poverty alleviation and rural revitalisation are showing results

WORLD INSIGHT

Vignesh P. Venkitesh

Chinese President Xi Jinping, while visiting Fujian County of Hebei Province in his first year as general secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) in 2012, had noted that eradication of poverty and improving people's livelihoods are essential requirements of socialism. He had called for close attention to people in 'straitened circumstances', noting that 'with confidence, barren clay can be turned into gold'. The people of the Xichou county in Yunnan province, which was earlier a deserted rocky one, calls this confidence to turn clay into gold the 'Xichou spirit', taking pride over their accomplishment in regional development, where they haul down rocks with their bare hands, over the years, to bring in greenery and improve living conditions.

A stark divide

China is a land of dichotomy. The country run by the CPC under principles of socialism with Chinese characteristics has embraced market economy and state-led capitalism, which can be seen in the urban landscape of the country with its sprawling skyscrapers and brands, both foreign and local, competing for consumers. While urban China, with its postmodern skyline of Shanghai and strategic eloquence of Beijing, springs ahead in terms of development and modernisation to make up the core of the country's economy, its countryside is a quiet but strong testament to Chinese socialism. As China prepares to enter into its 15th five-year plan, considered to be the 'consolidation and full implementation' period of the goal to realise 'socialist modernisation by 2035', the efforts taken up by the administration for poverty alleviation and rural revitalisation are showing results.

In China, one can see a regional divide in terms of development and modernisation, with the eastern provinces and cities being on par with global business hubs and tourist attractions while central and western provinces lag behind. Provinces like Guangdong (with special economic zones in Shenzhen and Zhuhai) which directly benefited from the reforms in the late 1970s, Taiwan, and provincial-level cities like Beijing and Shanghai are popular destinations for businesses and tourists. Its facilities and attractions providing opportunities for growth, but if one moves into the heart of the country, the landscape begins to change.

The progress of poverty programs

In Sichuan, home of the past pandas located near the heart of China, and Yunnan bordering Vietnam and Myanmar, one can see long, winding roads leading to scattered towns and villages. These towns are on an entirely different plane of existence when compared to Shenzhen or Shanghai. Adorned with 'ash mountains and hard waters', which, in the words of Mr. Xi, is the richest asset of a country, the calm and slow-paced life in these towns makes up the heart of China.

While the Chinese government stressed on modernisation and development during the decades following the opening up of its economy under former President Deng Xiaoping, poverty alleviation had also received its fair share of attention. Special poverty relief institutions were set up across the country in 1986 to determine poor counties, and draw up criteria for poverty alleviation measures. A total of 273 counties were initially listed as State-level impoverished counties, which later rose to 528 in 1988. A 'seven-year programme for lifting 80 million people out of poverty' was initiated in 1994. This was followed by the 'village for development oriented poverty alleviation for China's rural areas' in 2001. The outline noted that while the number of existing State-level impoverished counties in developed coastal areas in the east had reduced to zero, there was an increase in impoverished counties in the central and western areas. Between 2001 and 2010, poverty headcount ratio dropped to 3.8% from 10.2% while per capita net income of farmers in key counties rose by an average of 7.6%.

For rural towns and counties, like Malipo and Jinping in Yunnan and Panzhuang in Sichuan, which are mountainous areas isolated from the provincial capitals, development has had to take the long road. However, they show results of heavy investments in both accessibility and sustainability. Windmills propped up on high hill tops which appear to be churning the clouds are a common sight along the roads in these regions. Large investments were made by the central government in these distant, sparsely populated regions with the goal to reach common prosperity, says Zhao Xin, vice governor of Malipo county. While 99% of land in the county is mountainous and remote, the government has tapped into its abundant natural resources. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has provided assistance to the county since 1992, underlining projects in areas such as basic living needs, education, and healthcare. According to Mr. Xin, the central government has also set up enterprises to promote job opportunities. He noted that the county has been free from extreme poverty since 2020 with an annual disposable income of 9,000 RMB per person.

The spirit of the people

While government investments and projects have played a huge role in the upliftment of the regions, the role of the people is equally important. The Jinshui village in Ma and township of Jinping county in Yunnan tells one such tale of people's cooperation. Located nearly 150 km away from the county centre at an altitude of nearly 1,300 m from sea level, the village is home to ancient tea trees, with the oldest ones being around for nearly 800 years, bringing prosperity to those who touch it and are the main income source for the village.

Here the 'Yuhouan ancient tea production and marketing professional cooperative, established in 2014, runs business. Local people work part time in the collection and processing of the tea leaves. According to Su Yuan Hui, head of the cooperative, the tea leaves are sold in domestic markets and are exported to countries like France, Japan, and Vietnam. The cooperative has five private shareholders along with 2.8 million RMB investments from the provincial government and Shaojiao municipality in an example of inter-provincial cooperation model where developed regions from eastern China send investments and human resources to aid the western provinces. The annual revenue of the cooperative stands at 1,000,000 to 1,200,000 RMB and the profits are split between the shareholders, with the village committee getting a share which is distributed to the villagers where the average household income is nearly 30,000 RMB per year, says Mr. Su. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has also assisted in the setting up of the tea processing factory with interest-free loans, he says.

With poverty alleviation measures having shown results in improving basic living conditions, China is slowly shifting its focus to accelerating rural revitalisation. In January this year, the central committee of the CPC released the 'Rural comprehensive revitalisation plan' which aims at enhancing agricultural output to secure food security while boosting the prosperity of rural communities, closing the urban-rural income gap, and developing infrastructure.

Other than the serene nature and exciting landscape, what makes rural China stand out is the spirit of people. Travelling along the slopes through long cliff passes at a height of more than 200 metres make the villages look tiny — until the realisation strikes that the wall of the same people in these tiny villages has played its part in building up the silk.

The writer is in China at the invitation of the China Public Diplomacy association.

THE GIST

While urban China, with its postmodern skyline of Shanghai and strategic eloquence of Beijing, springs ahead in terms of development and modernisation to make up the core of the country's economy, its countryside is a quiet but strong testament to Chinese socialism.

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Scenic view: A windmill on top of a hill in Panzhuang in the Sichuan province, China.



Key Issues & Analysis

1. Historical Background of Poverty Alleviation

China has a long trajectory of institutionalised poverty reduction:

- 1986: Special poverty-relief institutions created; 273 poor counties identified.
- 1994: Seven-year programme to lift 80 million people out of poverty.
- 2001: Development-oriented poverty alleviation outline emphasised rural restructuring.
- 2001–2010: Poverty headcount fell from 10.2% to 3.8%; rural incomes grew 7.6% annually.
- 2020: China declared it had eliminated extreme rural poverty.

Illustrates state-led development + targeted welfare + long-term planning.

2. The Urban–Rural & Regional Divide

China demonstrates a striking duality:

- East (Guangdong, Shanghai, Beijing):
 - Globalised, industrialised, integrated with world markets
 - Home to SEZs like Shenzhen and Zhuhai
- Central & Western regions (Sichuan, Yunnan):
 - Mountainous, sparsely populated, historically isolated
 - Slower development, limited connectivity

The rural revitalisation efforts focus on bridging this urban–rural gap, a core CPC priority under Xi Jinping’s governance philosophy.

3. Development in Remote Regions: Infrastructure & Sustainability

Examples from Sichuan, Yunnan, Malipo, Jinping, and Panzhihua show:

- Massive investments in roads, wind energy, and ecological projects.
- Windmills on high ranges, green cover restoration, water conservation.
- Government tapping natural resources to generate local employment.

Malipo county’s case:

- 99% mountainous
- Annual per capita disposable income now 9,000 RMB
- Assistance from:
 - Ministry of Foreign Affairs (since 1992)
 - Provincial government
 - State-funded enterprises

This ties into China’s model of “common prosperity” and state-driven regional equalisation.

4. Role of Local Communities: The ‘Xichou Spirit’

People’s participation is highlighted as essential:

- Residents transformed barren rocky land in Xichou into green productive spaces—called the “Xichou spirit”.
- Jiwozhai village’s ancient tea cooperative (est. 2014) in Jinping county:
 - Processes 800-year-old tea trees
 - Exports to France, Japan, Vietnam
 - Backed by:
 - 2.8 million RMB investment from Yunnan & Shanghai (inter-provincial support model)
 - Interest-free loans from Ministry of Foreign Affairs
 - Household incomes around 30,000 RMB/year

This signals China’s blended model of collective enterprise + State capital + cooperative governance.

5. Shift Towards Rural Revitalisation (Post-Poverty Era)

China's new focus:

- January 2025: CPC announced the Rural Comprehensive Revitalisation Plan (2025–2027)
- Objectives:
 - Strengthen agricultural productivity (food security)
 - Narrow urban–rural income gap
 - Build rural infrastructure and public services
 - Promote rural industries (tea, tourism, handicrafts)
 - Stabilise living standards after removal from poverty lists

Strategic significance: Prevents “return to poverty” and supports long-term rural sustainability.

Conclusion

China's rural revitalisation story represents a model of state-led, long-range, institutionally backed development, where infrastructure, ecology, poverty reduction, and community participation converge. While large regional disparities persist, China's example shows how sustained political commitment, central planning, and local mobilisation can transform remote mountainous regions into productive, economically integrated areas. For UPSC, it offers strong comparative insights into development strategies, rural transformation, cooperative governance, and poverty eradication models.

UPSC Mains Practice Question

Ques : China's rural revitalisation model reflects a mix of state-led development, community participation and long-term planning. Discuss. **(150 words)**

New Delhi's relative isolation, India's tryst with terror

The current period might well be viewed, or termed, as India's moment of reckoning. For one, India today – and despite its highly regarded diplomatic skills – increasingly appears more like an 'outlier' than a major player in world affairs. It has been virtually sitting on the sidelines when it comes to issues involving peace and order in different regions of the globe, especially in West Asia and Europe. It is also a virtual onlooker as far as the emerging situation in the Indo-Pacific is concerned. Seldom indeed has India faced a situation of this kind.

If this was not bad enough, the entire South Asian region in which India is situated, appears to be in turmoil at present. Afghanistan and Nepal are among the countries on India's periphery that appear to be most affected, but from the Maldives to Myanmar and further afield, India can hardly count on many friends and allies. This is a frightening scenario given that each day produces a range of new threats, including cyber.

Hostility from west to east

Currently, India has to contend with two openly hostile powers on its western and eastern flanks – Pakistan and Bangladesh, respectively. In the case of Pakistan, the threat level has been going up steadily, with a growing cacophony of voices being heard in that country to teach India a proper lesson. What is aggravating the situation further is the approval of the 27th Constitutional Amendment Bill by Pakistan's Joint Parliamentary Committee of the Senate and National Assembly, which has altered the precarious balance between civil and military authority in that country.

Also, a recent amendment has introduced the concept of a new 'Chief of Defence Forces', elevating Field Marshal Asim Munir as the nation's military supremo, and the commander-in-chief of all three services, having sole control over Pakistan's nuclear assets. The amendment has invested Field Marshal Munir with absolute authority to deal with enemies (such as India), removing the fig leaf of parliamentary restraint and posing a real threat to India on its western flank. Military dictatorships in Pakistan, as elsewhere, have traditionally proved to be extremely hostile to a democratic India, and the rise and rise of Field Marshal Asim Munir, with unfettered authority, represents a significant and direct threat to a democratic India.

That such concerns are well merited, and that military dictators tend to be short sighted, is well known. Concentration of power encourages strategic adventurism. This, in turn, increases the chances of miscalculation in crises. Also, and in keeping with the general trend among military regimes, there is likely to be a tendency to turn local conflicts into spheres of proxy competition and inter-state confrontation. Hence, prospects of a lasting peace with Pakistan are unlikely. On the other hand, the risk of conflict has enhanced



M.K. Narayanan

is a former Director, Intelligence Bureau, a former National Security Adviser, and a former Governor of West Bengal

The country is having to deal with being an onlooker in world affairs, and also the fault lines in its multi-cultural, multi-religious society

significantly. Thus, it would be wise for India not to ignore the possibility of yet another conflict with Pakistan in the near future and be prepared for all eventualities. This may as yet be in the realm of speculation, but the danger must not be ignored.

India's Pakistan problem is compounded by the fact that the interim government in Bangladesh to India's east, is proving unfriendly, if not openly hostile, to it. To add to India's discomfiture, Bangladesh is currently displaying a willingness to establish warmer relations with Pakistan. In a first, a Pakistan navy ship visited Bangladesh after almost a half-a-century and this is expected to help Pakistan re-establish its presence in the Bay of Bengal. This has serious security implications for India.

Hence, a mixture of ideological posturing and military governance on India's western and eastern flanks has raised diplomatic temperatures across the region. It could have serious and adverse consequences, if not properly handled. Extreme vigilance and careful manoeuvring is called for.

The surfacing of 'urban terror'

Compounding India's problems at this time is the return of 'urban terror' after a gap of several years, though in a different mould, and by a whole new set of indigenous actors. It is only fair to think that in the highly disparate world that we live in, and in the circumstances prevailing today, terror is merely a hand's length away from everyday existence. Yet, till recently, urban terrorism on a significant scale had taken a back seat after the 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai sponsored by Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammed in collusion with elements of the Pakistan military establishment.

During the past two decades, sporadic terror attacks had been reported in certain urban pockets, but the latest module of urban terror – extending from Jammu and Kashmir to Faridabad and Delhi, and involving medical practitioners and doctors (most of whom had connections to the Al-Falah university, Faridabad, Haryana) reveals a new chapter in India's tryst with terrorism.

The latest terror module, comprising almost only medical practitioners, draws inspiration from, and harps back to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (in 1992). It fundamentally differs from the terror attacks witnessed in Mumbai (and certain other pockets) during 1992-1993 in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition, which were mainly carried out by 'lumpen' elements.

That more than three decades after the destruction of the Babri Masjid, terror still finds supporters and that too among the educated elite. That is it more so among groups, such as doctors, is highly disturbing. It reveals that religious terrorism is not only alive but still active.

Also, its newest disciples represent some of the best and brightest elements of a community. This

is a quantitative and qualitative leap as far as the annals of terror are concerned.

Details of the terror module, which extends from Srinagar to Faridabad to Delhi, have been widely aired. But what should cause more serious and deep concern is that they could accumulate nearly 3,000 kilograms of explosive material and also safely hide it in two houses. Further, it is alarming that a car laden with explosives could escape the police dragnet around India's capital city, Delhi, and trigger an explosion in the vicinity of Red Fort in the heart of Delhi. This reveals either extremely careful planning at one level, or total ineptness on the part of the authorities, on another. Worse still, while the 1993 terror explosions were carried out by 'lumpen elements' and the 2008 Mumbai attacks were directly sponsored by Pakistan, the latest incidents were of an entirely different character.

These were organised by a group of medical professionals, some of whom were perhaps not even born when the destruction of the Babri Masjid took place, revealing a major fault line in India's multi-cultural, multi-religious society. Far more than the details of the terror module that are being revealed through painstaking investigation, it is this aspect, and the aspect of revenge, which has been the catalyst for some of the best and brightest in a community, which should be seen as a blot on India's civilisational journey and progress.

The moot point is whether the latest incident represents mere disenchantment and anger against the nation state, or something more fundamental. It has been India's belief, and as claimed by the Union Home Minister in Parliament, that no local had joined a terrorist group in Jammu and Kashmir in recent times.

This myth has been exploded. Investigations have revealed that this is an entirely local terrorist module, which had been using encrypted channels for indoctrination, coordination, fund movements and logistics. Another aspect is that funds were being raised by professional and academic networks under the guise of social/charitable causes. There are other reports that the groups were in touch with elements in Pakistan. The links of the group also seem to extend beyond Pakistan to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye.

The need for vigil

Given the new perilous external dimension to India's security, a hostile Pakistan and Bangladesh on its western and eastern borders, and the fact that much of West and South Asia are in turmoil, India needs to be careful that the situation does not lead to the fostering of religious fascism on a more extended scale. Given India's tolerance and acceptance of disparate religious beliefs, this may seem unlikely. But eternal vigilance (or diligence) is the price that needs to be paid to ensure that the situation does not deteriorate further, necessitating cause for alarm.

GS-1 : Indian Society & Geography

UPSC Mains Practice Question : Indian cities are increasingly becoming vulnerable to climate extremes, and traditional urban planning metrics are failing to capture this new reality. In this context, discuss the challenges posed by climate change to India's urban centres and suggest a resilient urban planning framework. (250 words)

Context :

The article argues that India is entering a challenging geopolitical phase marked by strategic isolation, worsening neighbourhood relations, and a renewed wave of domestic 'urban terror'. The author, a former National Security Adviser, warns that India faces simultaneous threats: unstable neighbours, rising military dominance in Pakistan, hostility from Bangladesh, and newly emerging indigenous terror modules. The situation demands increased vigilance, diplomatic recalibration, and domestic cohesion.

1. India's Emerging Diplomatic Isolation**a. India as an 'Outlier'**

- Despite India's diplomatic activism, it is increasingly absent from major global conversations on peace and conflict.
- India is sidelined in:
 - West Asia (Israel– Hamas conflict, Red Sea crisis)
 - Europe (Ukraine–Russia war)
 - Indo-Pacific (U.S.-China rivalry, AUKUS, QUAD challenges)

This perception of India "sitting on the sidelines" undermines its claim to being a decisive global player.

2. Perilous Neighbourhood: Crisis Across South Asia**a. Regional Turmoil**

Almost every country around India is unstable:

- Afghanistan: Taliban rule, extremist networks
- Nepal: political flux, China's increasing influence
- Maldives: anti-India rhetoric
- Myanmar: civil war and refugee flows

This has reduced India's influence in its immediate neighbourhood.

3. Hostility from Both Flanks: Pakistan and Bangladesh**a. Pakistan – Rising Military Adventurism**

Pakistan's threat perception is worsening due to:

- 27th Constitutional Amendment Bill reducing civilian control over military
- Creation of a new post: Chief of Defence Forces
- Field Marshal Asim Munir now holds absolute authority over:
 - The three armed services
 - Nuclear arsenal
 - Decisions on war and conflict

Implication: Military dictatorships historically adopt aggressive postures toward India → Risk of miscalculation and renewed conflict increases.

b. Bangladesh – From Friendly to Unfriendly?

The interim government in Bangladesh shows:

- Diplomatic frostiness toward India
- Move to improve ties with Pakistan
- A Pakistan Navy ship visiting Bangladesh after 50 years → This creates security concerns in the Bay of Bengal.

The author highlights that both eastern and western borders pose threats simultaneously, a rare and dangerous situation.

4. Return of “Urban Terror”: A New Internal Security Challenge

a. New Terror Module – A Disturbing Shift

- A terror module stretching from Srinagar → Faridabad → Delhi
- Involves doctors and medical practitioners, not lumpen elements
- Connected with Al-Falah University, Haryana
- Motivated by “revenge” for Babri Masjid (1992) despite being born years after the event
- Accumulated 3,000 kg explosives, hid them in residential areas
- Managed to detonate an explosive-laden car near Red Fort

Key shift:

Earlier terror waves were:

- 1993 → by criminal elements
- 2008 → Pakistan-sponsored
- But 2024-25 module is:
 - Totally local
 - Highly educated
 - Ideologically radicalized
 - Using encrypted communication

This signals a worrying trend of homegrown radicalisation among the educated elite.

b. Implications for Internal Security

- Myth shattered: “No local joins terror in J&K.”
- Funds raised through professional, academic, and charitable networks.
- Links extend beyond Pakistan to UAE, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye.

This is a qualitative leap in terror threats.

5. What Should India Do? – Need for Vigilance & Strategic Recalibration

a. External Threats

- India must prepare for a possible military confrontation with Pakistan.
- Must manage Bangladesh carefully to prevent strategic drift.
- Re-engage with South Asia and restore influence.

b. Internal Security

- Strengthen intelligence coordination across states.
- Monitor radicalisation within universities and professional networks.
- Improve cyber-surveillance on encrypted channels.

c. Preventing “Religious Fascism”

The author warns that external hostility combined with internal radicalisation could polarize society. India's strength lies in:

- Pluralism
- Religious coexistence
- Democratic institutions

These must be protected through vigilance and social harmony.

Conclusion

India today faces a dual-front challenge: strategic isolation internationally and renewed internal terror domestically. The combination of military authoritarianism in Pakistan, shifting alignments in Bangladesh, and emerging urban terror modules among educated youth poses serious threats to national security. The way forward is eternal vigilance, smarter diplomacy, and stronger internal cohesion. India must reclaim strategic space abroad while ensuring that internal radicalisation does not undermine the country's civilisational fabric.
