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Prelims Test Series

GENERAL STUDIES 1

1.1. GEOGRAPHY

1.1.1. DRY DAYS AHEAD: PREPARING FOR A RAINFALL-DEFICIT MONSOON IN INDIA

Context:

- India's **South-West Monsoon** (June–September) is the lifeline of the nation's agriculture, water security and rural economy, contributing nearly **70 per cent of the country's annual rainfall** and sustaining the livelihoods of over half a billion people directly dependent on rain-fed farming.
- Following **two consecutive years of above-normal precipitation**, the **India Meteorological Department (IMD)** has now forecast an **8 percent rainfall deficit** with an uncertainty band of $\pm 5\%$ for the **2026 monsoon season** — a development that demands urgent policy attention, scientific understanding, and institutional preparedness.



Understanding Rainfall Classification

The **India Meteorological Department (IMD)** classifies **seasonal rainfall** relative to the **Long Period Average (LPA)**, currently set at **87 cm for the June–September period** based on the **mean summer-monsoon rainfall over India** for the base period **1971–2020**. The main categories are:

- **Normal Rainfall:** Rainfall between **96 per cent and 104 per cent of LPA**. In such years, **agricultural output is largely stable**, reservoir storage is adequate and the macro-economy remains insulated from weather shocks.
- **Above Normal / Excess Rainfall:** **Rainfall above 104 per cent of LPA**. While beneficial for water storage and groundwater recharge, excess rainfall can trigger floods, waterlogging and crop damage in vulnerable districts.
- **Below Normal Rainfall:** **Rainfall between 90 per cent and 96 per cent of LPA**. This signals an emerging moisture deficit but may not trigger a formal drought declaration unless spatial distribution is severely skewed.
- **Deficient Rainfall:** **Rainfall below 90 per cent of LPA at the national scale**. Deficient rainfall over large spatial extents is typically associated with drought conditions, disrupted kharif sowing, and significant agricultural distress.
- **Drought:** The term **drought** refers to a **prolonged and significant deficiency of precipitation over a region relative to its expected average**, resulting in **water scarcity that adversely affects agriculture, ecosystems, and human populations**.
- **Drought Classification:** In the **Indian context**, droughts are formally classified into **meteorological drought** (rainfall deficiency), **hydrological drought** (depletion of surface and groundwater), **agricultural drought** (soil moisture deficit hampering crop growth), and **socio-economic drought** (when water scarcity disrupts livelihoods and food security).
- The **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)** guidelines provide the **administrative framework for drought declaration, compensation, and relief**.

- **Current Context:** In 2015, the IMD's first-stage forecast was **93% of LPA (below normal)**; the actual rainfall turned out to be **86% of LPA**, which marked a **deficient monsoon** and is widely treated in public discourse as a **drought year**. This historical pattern underscores that **even a "below-normal" forecast can rapidly slide into deficit and drought conditions**.

How the Monsoon Works: Role of Ocean–Atmosphere Linkages

The **Indian summer monsoon** is primarily driven by the **differential heating of land and ocean**. In summer, the **Indian subcontinent** heats up faster than the surrounding seas, creating a **low-pressure zone** over the land.

Warm, moist air from the **southern Indian Ocean** is drawn inland, **rises over mountain ranges** such as the **Western Ghats** and the **Himalayan foothills** and **condenses to produce widespread rainfall**. However, this seemingly straightforward mechanism is heavily modulated by **large-scale ocean-atmosphere interactions**, especially **El Niño**, **La Niña** and the **Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)**.

- A. El Niño:** El Niño refers to the **abnormal warming of sea surface temperatures (SSTs) in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean**, typically occurring at intervals of **two to seven years** and **often exceeding 1°C above normal**.
- **Origin:** The name 'El Niño' (Spanish for 'the Child') was historically used by **Peruvian fishermen** who observed **warm coastal waters around Christmas time**. In meteorological terms, it is the **warm phase of the El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO) cycle** — a **coupled ocean–atmosphere system**.
 - **Mechanism:** During an El Niño event, the **Walker Circulation** — the **large-scale east–west atmospheric circulation over the tropical Pacific** — weakens. This suppresses convection (**rising air and rainfall**) over the **Indo-Pacific region** and enhances it over the **central and eastern Pacific**.
 - **Impact:** The consequent **anomalous subsidence of dry air** over the Indian subcontinent **weakens the monsoon trough**, reduces **moisture flux from the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal**, and leads to **below-normal or deficient rainfall over large parts of India**. **Since 1950, El Niño has coincided with a deficient monsoon in India in nine out of sixteen occurrences**.
 - **Current Context:** IMD's 2026 forecast anticipates that El Niño conditions will intensify in the **second half of the monsoon season — August and September**, making the latter part of the season particularly vulnerable.
 - Critically, the **timing of El Niño** determines its impact. **When warming peaks outside the monsoon months, its influence is limited**. The **2019 season illustrates this well**: despite early El Niño-like conditions, rainfall turned out to be above normal because the warming was short-lived and did not sustain through the core monsoon months.
- B. La Niña:** La Niña is the **opposite phase of ENSO**, characterised by **anomalous cooling of SSTs in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific**. The name 'La Niña' (Spanish for 'the Girl') reflects its contrast with El Niño.

- **Mechanism:** During a La Niña phase, the **Walker Circulation strengthens, enhancing convection over the Indo-Pacific region and increasing the supply of moisture** to the Indian subcontinent.
 - **Impact:** La Niña years are therefore generally associated with **above-normal or excess rainfall** over India, particularly over **central and peninsular India**, though regional variability persists. India's recent years of **surplus rainfall** can be partly attributed to **La Niña conditions**, illustrating the cyclical nature of **monsoon variability**.
- C. Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)- Counter-Mechanism:** The **Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)** sometimes called the "**Indian Niño**" is characterised by differences in SSTs between the **western Indian Ocean (near the Arabian Sea and East Africa) and the eastern Indian Ocean (near Sumatra and Indonesia)**. Unlike ENSO, which operates in the Pacific, the **IOD is an indigenous Indian Ocean phenomenon** that exercises a more **direct and proximate influence on the Indian monsoon**.
- **Positive IOD:** A **Positive IOD (pIOD)** event occurs when the western Indian Ocean warms anomalously while the eastern Indian Ocean cools. This strengthens the **moisture-laden westerly winds** flowing towards India, enhances convection over the subcontinent, and is associated with **above-normal rainfall** over most of India. Crucially, a positive IOD can **counteract or partially offset the negative effects of a concurrent El Niño**
 - **Negative IOD:** Conversely, a **Negative IOD (nIOD)**, in which the eastern Indian Ocean is warmer than the western Indian Ocean, **suppresses moisture flux towards India and can compound the deficit effects of El Niño, thereby amplifying the risk of drought**.
- D. Madden-Julian Oscillation (MJO)-The Intraseasonal Regulator:** An **eastward-moving system of enhanced and suppressed convection** over the **tropical Indian and Pacific Oceans**, operating on **30–60 day timescales**.
- **Active Phase over Indian Ocean:** Enhances **moisture convergence and rainfall over India**.
 - **Suppressed Phase over Indian Ocean:** Leads to **temporary weakening (break) in monsoon rainfall**.
 - Used by the **IMD** for **extended-range forecasts (2–4 weeks)** aiding **agriculture and disaster preparedness**.
- E. Equatorial Indian Ocean Oscillation (EQUINOO):** Variability in **convection over the equatorial Indian Ocean**, identified by **Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology**; complements IOD in influencing **monsoon rainfall**.
- **Eurasian Snow Cover:** Affects **land–sea thermal contrast**, influencing **monsoon onset and strength**.
 - **Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation (AMOC):** A large-scale **Atlantic Ocean circulation system** influencing **global climate and monsoon via teleconnections**.
 - **North Atlantic Sea Surface Temperatures (SSTs):** Alter **atmospheric circulation**, impacting the **Indian monsoon**.

Why Forecasting the Monsoon is Challenging

- Monsoon prediction is inherently difficult due to the **non-linear interaction of multiple climate drivers**, including El Niño, La Niña and IOD.
- Key challenges include:
 - **Timing uncertainty**, as the impact of El Niño depends on whether it peaks during or outside monsoon months
 - **Intensity variation**, since weak El Niño conditions may not significantly disrupt rainfall
 - **Regional diversity**, where different parts of India may experience contrasting rainfall patterns
 - For example, in **2019**, despite the presence of El Niño-like conditions, India recorded **above-normal rainfall**, highlighting the limitations of deterministic forecasting.
- These complexities underscore that forecasts are **probabilistic rather than absolute**, requiring cautious interpretation and flexible policy responses.

Emerging Challenges in a Deficit Monsoon Year

- **Agricultural Stress: Kharif crops** such as **rice, pulses, oilseeds** and **sugarcane** are directly sown during the **monsoon season**. A **shortfall reduces sown area**, lowers yields, and **triggers farm distress**, particularly for small and marginal farmers who lack irrigation access.
- **Inflationary Pressures:** Food inflation is a direct consequence of poor monsoons. Shortages in pulses and oilseeds can disrupt the **Consumer Price Index (CPI)**, forcing the **Reserve Bank of India to maintain high interest rates**, thus slowing economic growth.
- **Fertilizer and Input Uncertainty:** Ongoing **geopolitical tensions in West Asia**, a region critical to **India's supply of natural gas used in urea production** could compound agricultural challenges by disrupting fertilizer availability and inflating input costs at a time when farmers are already dealing with weak rains.
- **Rural Demand Contraction:** The rural economy is closely tied to agricultural income. A poor monsoon weakens rural purchasing power, contracts demand for manufactured goods, and can slow the broader economic recovery.
- **Water–Energy Stress:** A deficient monsoon reduces reservoir recharge, leading to **critically low water storage** that affects both **irrigation and drinking supply during the rabi season**, while also **lowering hydropower generation**, thereby increasing reliance on **costlier thermal power and raising overall energy stress**.

Government Initiatives and Institutional Frameworks

- **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA):** Provides **coordination and policy guidance for drought response**, including early **warning dissemination and inter-state coordination**.
- **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY):** The flagship crop insurance scheme is **designed to compensate farmers for yield losses due to natural calamities, including drought**. However, enrolment gaps and delayed claim settlements remain persistent concerns.

- **Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY):** Focuses on "Har Khet Ko Pani" (Water for every farm) and "Per Drop More Crop" through micro-irrigation
- **MNREGA Integration:** The rural employment guarantee scheme acts as an automatic economic stabiliser in drought years, providing wage income to rural households when agricultural work declines.
- **National Water Mission:** Aims to **promote water-use efficiency and conservation**, with special emphasis on irrigation modernisation and groundwater regulation.
- **IMD's Agrometeorological Advisory Services:** Provides **district-level crop and weather advisories to farmers through SMS and Kisan Portals**, enabling informed decisions on sowing time, crop choice, and input use.
- **PM-KUSUM and Solar Irrigation:** The **Pradhan Mantri Kisan Urja Suraksha evam Utthan Mahabhiyan (PM-KUSUM)** aims to reduce dependence on diesel-powered irrigation by promoting solar pumps, thereby reducing operational costs for farmers in deficit rainfall years and curtailing groundwater over-exploitation.

Way Forward: Policy and Institutional Measures

A. Immediate Preparedness Measures

- **Strengthen Weather–Agriculture Advisory Systems:**
- Better integrate **IMD forecasts** with **extension services** at the block and panchayat levels so that farmers receive **tailored sowing, crop-choice, and water-management advisories**.
- Promote **short-duration and drought-resilient varieties** (e.g., short-duration paddy, millets, pulses) in regions where deficits are likely.
- **Ensure Timely Availability of Inputs:**
- **Shore up fertilizer stocks** and monitor **distribution channels** to prevent localised shortages.
- Ramp up **domestic production of nitrogen-based fertilizers** and **bio-fertilizers** to reduce dependence on imported gas-linked inputs.
- **Manage Water and Storage Prudently:**
- Prioritise **equitable water distribution** from reservoirs, especially in **inter-state river basins**.
- Enforce **summer irrigation restrictions, promote micro irrigation, and encourage community level water saving practices**.

B. Medium- and Long-Term Structural Reforms

- **Invest in Water-Harvesting and Groundwater Recharge:** Scale up **watershed development, pond and tank restoration**, and **artificial-recharge structures** to capture monsoon runoff and reduce dependence on groundwater.
- Promote **regulated well-spacing, aquifer-mapping**, and **community-level groundwater management**.
- **Diversify Cropping Patterns:** Gradually shift parts of **paddy dominant landscapes** towards millets, pulses, and oilseeds that are less water intensive and more climate resilient.

- Provide **price-support, market-linkage,** and **procurement mechanisms** for these crops so farmers are not discouraged by price risks.
- **Enhance Climate-resilient Infrastructure:** Improve **flood and drought-resilient rural infrastructure** (e.g., bunds, drainage channels, community-level storage).
- Integrate **climate-risk assessments** into **urban planning,** especially for **water-supply systems, stormwater drainage, and groundwater-management.**
- **Strengthen Forecasting and Early-Warning Systems:** Invest in **high-resolution models, satellite data,** and **AI-based tools** to improve the **spatial and temporal accuracy** of monsoon forecasts.
- Expand **real-time monitoring** of **soil-moisture, river-flow, reservoir levels, and groundwater** to support anticipatory decision-making and early-warning for droughts and floods.

Conclusion

India's monsoon, shaped by complex interactions such as **El Niño, La Niña and the Indian Ocean Dipole,** poses **significant risks when deficits arise, particularly for agriculture, water resources, and the broader economy.** Addressing these challenges requires a shift toward anticipatory governance that integrates scientific forecasting, institutional readiness and community resilience to effectively manage growing climate uncertainty.

Q. India's monsoon is increasingly influenced by complex ocean-atmosphere interactions rather than simple land-sea thermal contrast. Discuss and suggest a suitable way forward to enhance India's resilience to monsoon variability. 15 Marks

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2.1. POLITY & GOVERNANCE

2.1.1. DELIMITATION IN INDIA

Context:

- **Delimitation** serves as a foundational mechanism to **readjust parliamentary seats in line with population shifts after every census** so that the principle of one person one vote is upheld across India.
- While the **women's reservation** has already been constitutionally settled, the **real issue** lies in **conducting delimitation** in a manner that **remains politically equitable** and does not disturb the federal balance among states.



Background: Delimitation Commission in India

A. What is Delimitation?

- **Delimitation** refers to the process of redrawing parliamentary and assembly constituency boundaries and reallocating seats based on updated population data obtained from a Census.
- Its core objectives are: ensuring **equal representation (one vote, one value)**, reflecting demographic changes and maintaining fairness in electoral outcomes.

B. Key Constitutional Provisions

- **Article 82:** It mandates that after every Census, the **allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha to the States and the division of each State into territorial constituencies** shall be readjusted by such authority as **Parliament may by law determine**.
- **Article 170:** Similar to Article 82, this provision governs the composition of **Legislative Assemblies in States**, requiring readjustment of boundaries after each decadal Census.
- **Article 81:** Sets the maximum strength of the Lok Sabha at 550 elected members; any increase beyond this requires a constitutional amendment.
- **Article 55:** Governs the election of the President using population data, making delimitation indirectly relevant to Presidential election weightage of states.
- **Article 327:** Empowers Parliament to legislate on elections to Parliament, including the process of delimitation.
- **Article 329:** Bars **judicial review** of delimitation orders, they have the force of law and cannot be challenged in any court.

C. Evolution and Freezing of Delimitation

- **42nd Amendment Act (1976):** During the Emergency, the government froze the allocation of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies based on the **1971 Census** until the year 2000. This was a policy move to ensure that States' efforts in **family planning** did not lead to a reduction in their political representation.

- **84th Amendment Act (2001):** The freeze on the total number of seats was further extended for another **25 years** (until 2026), with the justification that a uniform population growth rate had not yet been achieved across the country.
- **87th Amendment Act (2003):** While the total number of seats remained frozen based on the **1971 Census**, this amendment allowed for the **internal redrawing** of boundaries within States based on the **2001 Census** to account for **intra-state population shifts**.
- **Article 334-A** (inserted by the **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023**): Provides **one-third reservation for women in the Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabhas**, originally conditioned on **completion of the next Census-based delimitation**.

D. Delimitation Commission: Structure and Powers

- Constituted under the **Delimitation Commission Act**, the commission is headed by a retired Supreme Court Judge and includes the **Chief Election Commissioner of India** and the respective State Election Commissioners.
- Delimitation commissions were constituted after the Censuses of **1951, 1961 and 1971**; the current exercise will be based on **Census 2027**.
- The orders of the Delimitation Commission **have the force of law**, are final and cannot be challenged in any court under **Article 329**.

E. Relevant Supreme Court Judgements

- **Meghraj Kothari v. Delimitation Commission (1966):** The Supreme Court upheld that delimitation orders are **non-justiciable**; Parliament's intent for finality in electoral boundary-setting was clear.
- **Mohinder Singh Gill v. Chief Election Commissioner (1978):** Reaffirmed the independence of the Election Commission and the finality and binding nature of delimitation orders.
- In multiple rulings, the SC has held that the **right to free and fair elections** is a fundamental right under **Articles 19 and 21** indirectly tying the **fairness of delimitation to constitutional rights**.

Intersecting Delimitation with Women's Reservation

Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam (128th Constitutional Amendment) has introduced a new layer of complexity by making women's quota contingent upon the delimitation process.

- **Article 334-A (New Insertion):** This mandate states that the **33.3% reservation for women** will only come into effect after a fresh Census is conducted and the subsequent delimitation exercise is completed.
- **2027 Census and Implementation:** Current projections suggest that if the Census is conducted in 2027, the delimitation report might only be ready by 2028 or 2029, potentially pushing the **implementation of women's reservation to the 2029 General Elections**.

Key Challenges in Delimitation

The current debate surrounding the redrawing of India's electoral map is not merely a technical task but a profound challenge to the nation's **federal compact** and **social justice** framework.

1. The Federal Imbalance and the "Penalty for Progress"

- **Demographic Divergence:** States in **South India** (Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh) and parts of the **East (West Bengal)** successfully implemented aggressive **family planning** and social development programs decades ago.
- **Challenge of Relative Disadvantage:** A delimitation based purely on **raw 2027 population data** would reduce the relative share of Lok Sabha seats for these "stabilized" states. This creates a "**Penalty for Progress,**" where states are politically weakened for achieving national developmental goals.
- **Magnification of Influence:** Even with a proportionate increase in total seats, the absolute numerical gap between high-population and low-population states widens, leading to a decline in the **relative political influence** of southern and smaller states in the Union.

2. Erosion of Democratic Process and Inter-State Trust

- **Bypassing Consensus:** The notification of a **special session** (April 2026) without sharing official proposals or holding an **all-party meeting** undermines the tradition of consensus-building.
- **Challenge of Federal Trust:** India's stability rests on a **constitutional compact** an implicit assurance of equitable representation. Unilateral, rushed changes to seat allocation without interstate consultation can deepen regional alienation and reduce **interstate trust**.
- **Historical Contrast: 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993)** involved **five years of national debate**, which secured the legitimacy of women's reservation in local bodies.

3. Constitutional Integrity and the Census-Delimitation Link

- **Procedural Decoupling:** Articles **82 and 170** establish that delimitation must follow a **completed Census**. The **postponement of the 2021 Census** has created a data vacuum, and attempting to redraw boundaries before the **2027 Census** is fully published risks violating constitutional intent.
- **Impact on Entitlements:** The Census delay has **direct socio-economic costs**, such as depriving over **10 crore people** of benefits under the **National Food Security Act (2013)**.
- **Irreversibility Challenge:** Under **Article 329**, delimitation orders are **non-justiciable** (cannot be challenged in court). If the process is rushed or based on flawed data, the resulting errors become a **permanent constitutional reality** that cannot be corrected by the judiciary.

4. Social Justice and the Caste Census Conflict

- **Inclusion Deficit:** The **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023** provides a sub-quota for SC/ST women but excludes **OBC women**. Given that OBCs constitute nearly **50% of the population**, this is viewed as a significant gap in **substantive equality**.
- **Derailment of Data:** Critics argue that hurried delimitation may be a strategy to **delay or derail the Caste Census**.
- **Challenge of Social Empowerment:** Without updated caste data, the social justice agenda remains incomplete. Successful surveys in **Bihar and Telangana** prove that such enumeration is technically feasible and should not be used as an excuse to delay electoral reforms.

5. Institutional and Quality-of-Governance Hurdles

- **Deliberative Quality:** Expanding the Lok Sabha to **800+ seats** (as the new Parliament suggests) poses a challenge to the **deliberative quality** of the house. With more members, **individual speaking time decreases**, and the scrutiny of complex legislation may suffer.
- **Administrative Complexity:** Shifting to a **Digital Census** for the first time carries inherent risks of data gaps. Ensuring **arithmetic accuracy** while maintaining **political equity** requires a level of transparency that a rushed timeline may not afford.

Way Forward: Seeking a Harmonious Balance

1. Strengthening the Democratic and Consultative Process

- **Restoring Consensus-Based Governance:** The Union government should shift from a "special session" approach to a **formal all-party consultation** framework. No constitutional amendment affecting the state-wise distribution of seats should be passed without a consensus among major national and regional political stakeholders.
- **Inter-State Council Engagement:** Utilize the **Inter-State Council (Article 263)** as a platform for Chief Ministers to voice regional anxieties. A mandate of **50% state concurrence** for any change in the seat-allocation formula would ensure that the "Union of States" remains a cooperative reality.

2. Procedural Integrity: Synchronizing Census and Delimitation

- **Census-First Mandate:** In line with **Articles 82 and 170**, the **Census 2027** must be fully completed and the data officially published **before the Delimitation Commission begins its work**. This prevents the use of provisional or estimated data for permanent constitutional changes.
- **Comprehensive Data Collection:** The 2027 Census should include a **Caste Enumeration**. Updated caste data is not just a political demand but a functional necessity for defining "**quota within quota**" and ensuring that the women's reservation is socially inclusive.
- **Digital Transparency:** Given the transition to a **Digital Census**, the government must establish an independent audit mechanism to ensure data accuracy and prevent any "digital divide" from skewing seat distribution.

3. Implementing Federal Safeguards and Equity Formulas

- **Adopting a "Seat-Floor" Mechanism:** To protect the interests of states that have successfully stabilized their populations (like **Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and West Bengal**), a **Floor Rule** should be implemented. This ensures that no state sees a reduction in its **absolute number** of Lok Sabha seats, even if the total house strength increases.
- **Performance-Linked Representation:** The Delimitation Commission should move beyond raw population counts and adopt a **multi-weighted index**. This formula should factor in:
 - **Human Development Index (HDI)** scores.
 - **Success in Population Stabilization** (TFR rates).
 - **Literacy and Healthcare Performance**.

- **Weightage Adjustment:** By giving weightage to development indicators, the process rewards states for effective governance rather than penalizing them for demographic success.

4. Enhancing Social Justice and Substantive Equality

- **Inclusive Women's Reservation:** Amend the **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhiniyam, 2023** to include a **sub-quota for OBC women**. This fulfills the constitutional promise of **substantive equality** and ensures that the **33% reservation** reflects the actual social diversity of the Indian electorate.
- **Data-Driven Empowerment:** Use the findings of the 2027 Caste Census to redraw **Reserved Constituencies (SC/ST)** more accurately, ensuring that the most marginalized sections within these categories receive fair representation.

5. Long-Term Institutional and Parliamentary Reforms

- **Strengthening the Rajya Sabha:** To balance any population-based tilt in the Lok Sabha, the powers of the **Upper House (Council of States)** should be enhanced. The **Rajya Sabha** could be restructured to provide more **equitable weightage to states** as entities, acting as a "federal anchor."
- **Permanent Electoral Reforms Commission:** Instead of ad-hoc commissions, a **permanent body** could be established to provide ongoing, neutral oversight of electoral reforms.

Conclusion

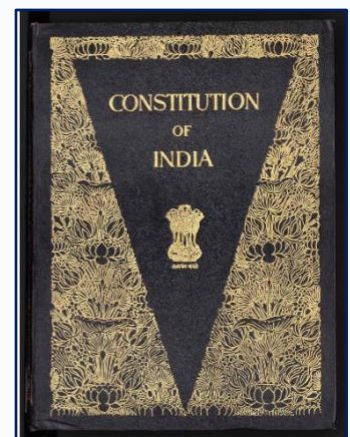
Delimitation represents a constitutional moment that will shape the **federal balance and democratic representation in India** for the coming decades. By prioritising consensus, political equity and long-term national interest the country can ensure that both women's reservation and delimitation reinforce rather than weaken the world's largest democracy.

Q. Delimitation in India is not merely a technical exercise but a test of federal equity. Discuss how a balanced approach can ensure democratic legitimacy, social justice and cooperative federalism in India. 15 Marks

2.1.2. CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT IN INDIA

Context:

The Constitution of India is a dynamic document that balances institutional stability with the necessity of evolving alongside societal shifts. Constitutional Amendment Bills serve as the essential mechanisms for this growth, allowing the nation to address emerging socio-economic and political realities. These amendments facilitate a critical dialogue between democratic will and the "Basic Structure," ensuring the law remains relevant without compromising its core values. Ultimately, they represent the ongoing evolution of India's governance, balancing parliamentary power with constitutional supremacy.



Procedural Architecture: How the Constitution is Amended

The amendment process, primarily governed by Article 368, reflects a nuanced blend of rigidity and flexibility. The framers ensured that while the Constitution could evolve, it would not be susceptible to transient political majorities.

Dual Approach to Amendment: The Constitution provides **two broad ways of making changes**

1. Amendment by Simple Majority (Outside Article 368)

Certain provisions are not considered formal constitutional amendments. These can be changed by Parliament through the **ordinary legislative process**, i.e., a simple majority of members present and voting.

Examples include:

- Creation or alteration of states
- Abolition or creation of Legislative Councils
- Salaries and administrative provisions

This reflects the framers' intent to make non-federal and less fundamental provisions easier to modify.

2. Amendment under Article 368 (Formal Amendment Process)

For more significant provisions, the Constitution prescribes a formal amendment procedure under **Article 368**. Here, amendments are categorized based on their importance:

I. Amendment by Special Majority

Most major provisions including **Fundamental Rights** and **Directive Principles of State Policy** require this **special majority in Parliament**, which requires:

- A majority of the total membership of each House, and
- A two-thirds majority of members present and voting

Once passed in both Houses, the Bill is sent to the **President**, who is bound to give assent. After assent, the Constitution stands amended.

II. Amendment by Special Majority + State Ratification

For provisions affecting the **federal structure**, an additional safeguard is required. After being passed by Parliament with a special majority, the amendment must be **ratified by at least half of the State legislatures**.

This applies to changes related to:

- Election of the President (Articles 54–55)
- Executive powers of the Union and States (Articles 73, 162)
- Supreme Court and High Courts
- Distribution of legislative powers (Part XI)
- Seventh Schedule (Union, State, Concurrent Lists)
- Representation of States in Parliament
- Article 368 itself

Only after such ratification is the Bill presented to the President for assent.

Limitations on the Amending Power of Parliament

1. Basic Structure Doctrine

The amending power of Parliament is limited by the doctrine evolved in *Kesavananda Bharati v. State of Kerala* (1973), which states that Parliament cannot alter or destroy the **basic structure** of the Constitution (such as democracy, rule of law, judicial review and federalism).

2. Conditional Validity of Amendments

Amendments under Article 368 are valid only if they **do not violate the basic structure**. Thus, Parliament's power is wide but not unlimited.

3. Article 368 Itself is Limited

The Supreme Court has held that **Article 368 is part of the basic structure**, meaning Parliament cannot use it to expand its own amending power beyond constitutional limits.

4. Judicial Review Cannot Be Abolished

In *Minerva Mills v. Union of India* (1980), the Court ruled that Parliament cannot remove **judicial review**, as it is an essential feature of the Constitution.

5. Tribunals Cannot Replace Constitutional Courts

In *L. Chandra Kumar v. Union of India* (1997), the Court held that tribunals cannot substitute the **judicial review powers of High Courts and the Supreme Court**.

6. Ninth Schedule Laws Subject to Basic Structure

In *I.R. Coelho v. State of Tamil Nadu* (2007), the Court held that laws placed in the Ninth Schedule after 1973 can still be reviewed if they violate the basic structure.

7. Independence of Judiciary is Inviolable

In *Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association v. Union of India* (2015), the Court struck down the NJAC, reaffirming that **judicial independence** is part of the basic structure.

Significance of Constitutional Amendment Bills

1. Instrument of Constitutional Adaptability

Amendments ensure that the Constitution remains relevant in a rapidly transforming society. From land reforms in the early years to contemporary issues like economic restructuring and social inclusion, they allow the legal framework to evolve with time.

2. Vehicle for Social Justice

Constitutional amendments have historically been used to address structural inequalities. Provisions related to reservations, protection of marginalized communities, and welfare-oriented reforms reflect the transformative vision of the Constitution.

3. Deepening Democratic Participation

Amendments such as those strengthening local self-governance have broadened democratic participation. By decentralizing power and enhancing representation—including ongoing efforts to improve gender representation—they make democracy more inclusive.

4. Strengthening Institutional Frameworks

Amendments help correct institutional deficiencies and adapt governance mechanisms. Whether in taxation reforms or the creation of new constitutional bodies, they ensure administrative efficiency and resilience.

5. Reflecting Political Consensus and National Priorities

Given the requirement of special majorities and, in some cases, state ratification, constitutional amendments often reflect a wider political consensus. They serve as markers of national priorities at a given historical moment.

Impact of Constitutional Amendments

1. Transformation of Governance

Amendments have significantly shaped India's governance architecture. Reforms in taxation, anti-defection laws, and institutional restructuring have enhanced stability and clarity in administration.

Example: The **101st Amendment Act (2016)** introduced GST, creating a unified national market by replacing multiple indirect taxes.

2. Expansion of Rights and Duties

The scope of Fundamental Rights has evolved through amendments, alongside the introduction of Fundamental Duties. This reflects a more holistic understanding of citizenship—balancing entitlements with responsibilities.

Example: The **86th Amendment Act (2002)** made education a Fundamental Right for children aged 6–14 and introduced a corresponding duty for parents.

3. Federal Reconfiguration

Amendments have continuously redefined Centre-State relations. While some have strengthened cooperative federalism, others have sparked concerns about centralization. The evolving federal balance remains a defining feature of India's constitutional journey.

Example: The **73rd and 74th Amendment Acts (1992)** strengthened decentralization by establishing Panchayati Raj Institutions and Urban Local Bodies as a third tier of governance.

4. Emergence of the Basic Structure Doctrine

Perhaps the most profound impact is the development of judicial safeguards. The Supreme Court, through landmark rulings, has held that Parliament cannot alter the "basic structure" of the Constitution. This doctrine preserves core principles such as democracy, secularism, federalism, and the rule of law, acting as a constitutional check on amendment powers.

Example: In 2015, the Supreme Court struck down the **99th Amendment Act (NJAC)**, affirming that judicial independence is part of the Basic Structure.

5. Political and Ideological Contestation

Amendments often become arenas of ideological debate. While some command broad acceptance, others trigger political resistance and public discourse. This contestation, though sometimes contentious, reflects the vibrancy of Indian democracy.

Example: The **42nd Amendment Act (1976)** curtailed judicial powers during the Emergency, which was later corrected by the 44th Amendment Act (1978) to restore democratic safeguards.

Challenges and Concerns in the Contemporary Context

1. Expanding Scope and New-Age Challenges

Constitutional amendments today increasingly address issues like representation, delimitation, gender equity, and governance reforms, while also grappling with emerging areas such as digital governance, data protection, environmental sustainability, and artificial intelligence—raising questions about the adequacy of existing frameworks.

2. Risk of Majoritarianism and Overuse

A dominant parliamentary majority may push through amendments that weaken institutional checks or minority rights. Frequent amendments can also dilute constitutional sanctity and create legal instability.

3. Centralization vs Federal Balance

Certain amendments have been criticized for tilting the balance of power in favor of the Union, potentially undermining the spirit of cooperative federalism.

4. Limited Public Participation

The amendment process largely remains confined to Parliament, with minimal direct involvement of citizens, reducing transparency and broader democratic engagement.

5. Judicial Tensions and Constitutional Morality

Increasing friction between Parliament and the judiciary over the scope of amendment powers—especially concerning the basic structure—highlights the need for restraint, careful deliberation, and adherence to constitutional morality.

Way Forward

1. Deepening Deliberative Democracy

Constitutional amendments should be preceded by extensive debate, both within Parliament and through committee scrutiny. Strengthening the role of parliamentary committees can ensure informed decision-making.

2. Enhancing Public Participation

Given their far-reaching implications, amendments should involve wider public consultation. Transparency and civic engagement can enhance legitimacy and acceptance.

3. Preserving the Basic Structure

The judiciary's role in safeguarding core constitutional values must be respected. The basic structure doctrine remains a vital check against potential excesses.

4. Balancing Flexibility with Stability

While adaptability is essential, amendments should not be driven by short-term political considerations. A long-term constitutional vision must guide the process.

5. Reinforcing Federalism

Amendments affecting Centre-State relations must be approached with sensitivity and dialogue. Cooperative federalism should remain the guiding principle.

6. Addressing Emerging Right

Future amendments should engage with new-age challenges—such as digital rights, environmental protection, and technological governance—ensuring that the Constitution remains future-ready.

Conclusion

Constitutional Amendment Bills bridge the founding vision of 1950 with the evolving aspirations of modern India, ensuring the Constitution remains dynamic and relevant. Their true strength lies in being guided by constitutional morality, institutional balance, and the core ideals of justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. When exercised with wisdom and restraint, they transform the Constitution into a living promise of an inclusive, equitable, and democratic future.

Q. The power to amend the Constitution is a transformative tool, yet it is not an absolute power. In the light of the 'Basic Structure Doctrine,' discuss how Constitutional Amendment Bills balance the need for parliamentary sovereignty with the necessity of constitutional stability. 15 Marks

2.1.3. INDIA'S NATIONAL RURAL LIVELIHOOD MISSION (NRLM)

Context:

- In 2011, the **Government of India** launched the **National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM)** under the **Ministry of Rural Development**, built on the philosophy of **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**, financial inclusion, skill development and self-employment, with the ambitious objective of reducing multidimensional poverty in rural India.
- Fifteen years on**, the NRLM has not only exceeded its domestic targets but has emerged as a **globally admired model of rural development**, attracting interest from African nations and reshaping India's **South-South cooperation** framework.



About National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)

The **National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)**, a flagship programme under the **Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD)**, aims to reduce **multidimensional poverty** by promoting **self-employment, financial inclusion and skill development** in rural areas. It was launched in **2011** to replace the earlier **Swarnjayanti Gram Swarozgar Yojana (SGSY)**, which was criticised for being **fragmented and supply-driven**.

Unlike SGSY, NRLM follows a **demand-driven and institution-led approach**, focusing on building **strong grassroots institutions** and ensuring **sustainable livelihoods**.

A. Core Features and Programme Components

1. Social Mobilisation and Institutional Structure

- NRLM mobilises the rural poor, especially **women**, into **Self-Help Groups (SHGs)**, which are small, community-based groups promoting **collective savings, credit access and livelihood diversification**.
- These SHGs are further organised into a **federated structure** comprising **Village Organisations (VOs), Cluster Level Federations (CLFs) and Block Level Federations (BLFs)**, ensuring **participatory governance and sustainability**.

2. Financial Inclusion and Credit Support

- NRLM strengthens financial access through **Revolving Funds (RF)** and **Community Investment Funds (CIF)**, which enhance the **financial capacity of SHGs**.
- It facilitates **bank linkages under Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana – NRLM (DAY-NRLM)** and strengthens the **SHG-Bank Linkage Programme (SBLP)** to ensure **affordable and timely credit**.

3. Livelihood Promotion and Skill Development

- The mission promotes **farm livelihoods** through improved agricultural practices and allied activities, and **non-farm enterprises** such as dairy, handicrafts, and micro-enterprises.
- **Community Cadres: Over 1 crore trained community resource persons (CRPs), Community Mobilisers, Pashu Sakhis (livestock), Krishi Sakhis (agriculture), Bank Sakhis** deployed across India for last-mile service delivery.
- It also supports **skill development and employment** through **Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY)**, enabling rural youth to access **formal sector jobs**.

4. Last-Mile Delivery and Digital Inclusion

- NRLM ensures effective service delivery through **community cadres**, including **Business Correspondents (BCs)/Bank Sakhis**, who provide **last-mile banking and support services**.
- It promotes **digital literacy, mobile banking and digital payments**, and integrates SHGs with **social security schemes and financial inclusion initiatives** for improved outreach and transparency.
- **JAM Trinity Embedding: Rural women enrolled in formal financial systems** via **Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY — Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana) bank accounts, Aadhaar biometric identity and Mobile banking**
- Scheme Convergence: **NRLM SHG platform used for convergent delivery of:**
 - **MGNREGS — Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme** (wage employment)
 - **PM-KISAN — Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi** (farmer income support)
 - **PMJDY — Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana** (financial inclusion)
 - **PM-SVANidhi — Pradhan Mantri Street Vendor's AtmaNirbhar Nidhi** (micro-credit for street vendors)

- **PMAY-G — Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana – Gramin** (rural housing)

B. Key Achievements—Scale of Transformation

The NRLM's data (as of 2024-25) reflects **one of the largest social mobilisation programmes in the world**:

- **Mass Outreach:** NRLM has reached over **10 crore households across 742 districts**, making it one of the largest livelihood programmes globally.
- **Women-Centric Growth:** Over **9 million SHGs** have been mobilised, with **over 20 million women earning more than ₹1 lakh annually**.
- **Financial Inclusion:** Around **5 crore women have accessed institutional credit**, with total bank linkage exceeding **₹12 lakh crore**.
- **Community Cadre System:** Deployment of **community resource persons and banking correspondents** has ensured **last-mile delivery**, with presence in over **60% of Gram Panchayats**.
- **Budgetary Support:** The **Union Budget 2026–27 allocated ₹19,200 crore**, reinforcing NRLM's centrality in rural development.

Significance of National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)

1. Social Significance

- **Women's Empowerment: Collective agency through SHGs** has reduced domestic violence, child marriage, and enhanced financial decision-making.
- **Social Capital: Trust-based peer lending** and collective savings have rebuilt grassroots solidarity.
- **Health & Nutrition: NRLM-linked SHGs** have been instrumental in COVID-19 relief, mask production and nutrition gardens.
- **Financial Inclusion: Bank Sakhis and Business Correspondents** have brought banking to doorsteps of unbanked rural women.

2. Economic Significance

- **Poverty Alleviation: NRLM is India's flagship instrument** for reducing rural multidimensional poverty.
- **Boost to Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLFPR): Rose from 17% to ~37% (2018-2023)** partly driven by SHG-linked livelihoods.
- **Microenterprise Promotion:** SHG members entering non-farm livelihoods, handicrafts, food processing, agri-enterprises.
- **GVA Contribution: SHG-linked economic activities** contribute meaningfully to rural Gross Value Added (GVA).

3. Governance & Institutional Significance

- Decentralised delivery through **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)** and community federations.
- Accountability mechanisms embedded via **social audits, community monitoring and digital tracking**.

- Model for **convergent governance** — linking multiple ministries (Finance, Agriculture, Education, Health) through SHG platform.

4. Diplomatic Significance — NRLM as a Tool of Development Diplomacy

- Study delegations from **Ethiopia, Tanzania, Malawi, Kenya, Rwanda** have visited India to understand NRLM's operational mechanics.
- Aligns with India's philosophy of **South-South Cooperation (SSC)** — sharing developmental knowledge, not just capital.
- Complements India's **ITEC (Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation)** and **IAFS (India-Africa Forum Summit)** diplomatic frameworks.

NRLM Crossing Borders — India's Global Development Footprint

A. Why African Nations are Attracted

- **Women-Centric Focus:** SHG model resonates with Africa's agenda for deepening women's economic participation.
- **Cost-Effectiveness:** **Community-driven processes** reduce dependency on heavy capital investment — critical for resource-constrained governments.
- **Informality Compatibility:** NRLM suits large informal economies of Africa where livelihood diversification is essential.
- **Institution Building:** **Beyond a scheme** — NRLM strengthens local governance, accountability, and long-term community capacity.
- **Peer Learning:** **Global South nations prefer learning from peers** with similar structural realities over Western templates.

B. How India is Engaging

- **Delegations, Study Tours and Immersion Visits** to state livelihood missions (SRLMs)
- Technical capacity building through India's **ITEC programme**.
- Proposed **Rural Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Platform** linking Indian state missions with African government agencies.
- Joint **Pilot Projects** to adapt SHG-based models to African local contexts.

Challenges in Scaling and Adapting the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) Model

1. Domestic Challenges: Ensuring Depth and Quality

Despite massive quantitative success, the mission faces qualitative challenges in sustaining the momentum across India.

- **Regional Disparities in Institutional Strength:** There is a significant "North-South Divide" in SHG performance. While states like **Kerala (Kudumbashree)** and **Andhra Pradesh** have mature federations, the "social capital" in central and eastern India is still evolving, leading to uneven poverty reduction.
- **The "Credit-Limit" Ceiling:** While bank linkages have improved, many SHGs struggle to move beyond **consumption-oriented loans** toward **productive capital investment**. Banks remain hesitant to provide high-value loans to groups without physical collateral.

- **Sustainability of "Lakhpati Didis":** Moving from a subsistence income to a consistent annual profit of ₹1 lakh requires market intelligence and value-chain integration, which many primary SHGs currently lack.
- **Administrative Overburdening:** The **Community Resource Persons (CRPs)** and **Bank Sakhis** are often overburdened with multiple government schemes, which can dilute their core focus on **social mobilization** and financial mentoring.

2. Global Challenges: Cross-Border Adaptation Issues

Exporting a "**Social-Sector Institution**" to the **Global South (particularly Africa)** involves navigating complex external variables.

- **Socio-Political and Land Variations:** The Indian SHG model assumes a certain level of **local governance** and stable **land tenure systems**. In many African nations, differing tribal laws and land ownership patterns can hinder the formation of agri-based collective enterprises.
- **The Digital Divide and Infrastructure Gaps:** The "**Indian Miracle**" is now heavily reliant on **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** like Aadhaar and UPI. Countries with low digital penetration or erratic electricity struggle to implement the "**Fintech**" aspect (e.g., mobile banking and digital ledgers) of the model.
- **Credit Risk and Banking Underdevelopment:** The transition from **informal micro-credit** to **formal bank linkages** requires a robust, rural-facing banking sector. In many parts of the Global South, the lack of **Regional Rural Banks (RRBs)** or cooperative networks makes last-mile credit nearly impossible.
- **Institutional Gestation Period:** Social mobilization is not an "overnight" success. Developing a **trained cadre** (the human capital) requires years of state-funded investment. Partner nations often seek immediate results, which contradicts the slow, transformative nature of the **NRLM framework**.
- **Cultural Specificities:** Collective action models depend on **social trust**. Replicating the "**peer-pressure**" repayment model in societies with different **communal or individualistic value systems** requires significant **contextual customization**.

Way Forward: A Comprehensive Roadmap

To maximize the impact of this **diplomatic tool**, India must move toward a more formal and integrated structure of knowledge sharing.

- **Value Chain Upgradation and Market Linkages:** Move **SHG** members beyond subsistence by scaling micro-enterprises through integration with the **Open Network for Digital Commerce (ONDC)**, **Government e-Marketplace (GeM)** and **PM Vishwakarma**, ensuring rural products reach national and global markets.
- **Climate-Resilient and Holistic Convergence:** Integrate **agroforestry, solar energy enterprises** and **water conservation** into **livelihood portfolios** while strengthening the **NRLM-Health-Nutrition nexus** to ensure economic gains translate into improved **human development outcomes**.
- **Global Knowledge Exchange Infrastructure:** Establish a dedicated **Rural Livelihoods Knowledge Exchange Platform** under the joint aegis of the **Ministry of External Affairs (MEA)**

and **Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD)** to link successful state models like **Kudumbashree (Kerala)** or **JEEViKA (Bihar)** with international partners.

- **Technological Bundling (DPI Integration):** Offer a "plug-and-play" development package to the Global South by bundling **SHG institutional training** with India's **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** expertise, specifically in **UPI** and **Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT)** systems.
- **Capacity Building and Immersion Fellowships:** Expand **ITEC-linked training** and offer **extended immersion fellowships** for foreign bureaucrats and community leaders to provide a deep, hands-on understanding of the **social engineering** and micro-level mechanics of the Indian mission.
- **Professionalization through Global Certification:** Standardize the training and accreditation of **Community Resource Persons (CRPs)** to create a **globally recognized workforce** of certified rural development experts capable of mentoring projects across diverse geographies.
- **Strategic Trilateral and Multilateral Partnerships:** Collaborate with global financial institutions like the **World Bank** or **African Development Bank (AfDB)** to create a framework where India provides **technical expertise** while multilateral agencies provide the **scaling capital** for pilot projects in partner nations.

Conclusion

The **NRLM** has proven that India can generate grassroots solutions that are universally applicable, turning rural transformation into a powerful **diplomatic asset**. By institutionalizing this knowledge-sharing, New Delhi is defining a **new paradigm for global development**—one that empowers the most vulnerable through collective action and self-reliance.

Q. The success of NRLM lies not only in poverty alleviation but in building sustainable community institutions. Critically Examine and suggest a comprehensive roadmap for its effective expansion. 15 Marks

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GENERAL STUDIES 3

3.1. ECONOMY

3.1. INDIA'S VULNERABLE MIDDLE CLASS: GROWTH WITHOUT TRUE MOBILITY

Context:

- India has made impressive strides in reducing **poverty**, lifting millions above traditional **poverty lines** through targeted welfare schemes. However, this progress hides a critical issue, many remain stuck in a **vulnerable middle**, facing **low incomes, job instability, and limited upward mobility**.
- A recent **World Bank policy paper** urges shifting focus from mere headcounts below poverty thresholds to measuring distances from a decent **standard of living**, revealing deeper economic fractures.



Background: Limits of Poverty-Based Measurement

The **share of Indians** below the **World Bank's lower middle-income poverty line** has **fallen sharply** from **over 50% a decade ago to roughly 30%** today aided by **welfare programs** covering subsidised food, **direct benefit transfers (DBT)** and financial inclusion reaching hundreds of millions. **However, the Poverty Line tells only a partial story**, i.e, despite this progress, the **poverty line is a limited measure of well-being**.

- Poverty line only indicates whether individuals have crossed a **minimum survival threshold**, but does not reveal their **living conditions above that line**. Many households just above the poverty line continue to face **income instability, low savings and high vulnerability**, making their economic position fragile.
- **World Bank's New Framework:** To address this limitation, the World Bank suggests moving beyond the traditional "**poor vs non-poor**" classification. It proposes a **spectrum-based approach**, where welfare is assessed based on how far individuals are from achieving a **reasonable standard of living**, thereby capturing varying degrees of economic security and vulnerability.

About the Middle-Income Class (MIC)

India's **middle-income class (MIC)** lacks a single definition but is generally seen as socio-culturally secure groups with low poverty risk. **OECD** pegs them at **US\$10-100 per day** earnings, while **PRICE (People Research on India's Consumer Economy)** defines households earning **Rs. 5-30 lakhs annually** (2020-21 prices).

- **Lower Middle Class Traits:** This subgroup spends heavily on essentials like private **healthcare, education**, non-essential durables, vehicles, and basic appliances, leaving little for savings.

- **Upper Middle Class Traits:** They add discretionary spending on luxury items like computers and air conditioners, enjoying more financial flexibility.
- **Vulnerability in Practice:** **94.11%** of informal workers on the **e-Shram portal** earn under **Rs. 10,000 monthly**, making incomes unreliable and insufficient for sustained **living standard** improvements.

Growth Trajectory of India's Middle Class

- **Pre-Independence origins:** The MIC was initially a narrow elite, educated, upper-caste, English-speaking professionals shaped by British colonial education policy, with little societal breadth.
- **Post-Liberalisation expansion (1990s):** The **LPG reforms, Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation** opened India to multinational investment and created a surge of jobs in the IT and services sectors, dramatically expanding the urban MIC and making it a defining force in Indian society.
- **Projected trajectory (PRICE):** India's middle class constituted 31% of the population in 2021 and is projected to reach **38% by 2031** and **60% by 2047** a scale of demographic transition with profound economic consequences.

Implications of the Evolving Middle Class Across Different Sectors

A. Impact on the National Economy

- **Engine of Consumption Growth:** **Rising middle-class incomes** are reshaping **India's consumer landscape, driving incremental spending on apparel, communication, personal care and lifestyle products**. PRICE estimates that middle-class and affluent households will fuel nearly **\$2.7 trillion in incremental consumption** by 2030–31.
- **New Market Creation and Entrepreneurship:** The **urban MIC functions** as a **vast, aspirational market for both domestic and global businesses**, while simultaneously stimulating demand for start-ups, digital services and platform-based enterprises making it a driver of innovation.
- **Foundation for Inclusive Growth:** A **prosperous and stable middle class** invests in **education and health, strengthens institutional accountability** and **reduces tolerance for corruption**, creating the social capital necessary for long-run inclusive development.

B. City Infrastructure and Urban Development

- **Unlocking Tier II and III Cities:** Expanding **middle-class purchasing power** is making smaller cities economically viable, consumption centres attracting retail, hospitality and real estate investment beyond the metropolitan core.
- **Rise of Aspirational Urban Spaces:** Middle-class consumption patterns have driven the proliferation of shopping malls, multiplexes, coffee shops and recreational facilities in emerging cities, transforming their economic and cultural character.
- **Democratisation of Residential Living:** Gated residential communities, once reserved for upper-class urban elites, have now spread to Tier II cities, reflecting rising housing aspirations across the MIC spectrum.

C. Social Impact

- **Shift in Social Values:** As individual wealth increases, **middle-class populations** tend to embrace **democratic norms**, prioritise **free speech** and **civil liberties**, and show greater **environmental consciousness**, thereby reinforcing a **progressive social feedback loop**.

Key Challenges Affecting the Middle-Income Class in India

A. Economic and Financial Stresses

- **The Inflation Squeeze:** The rising cost of privatized healthcare and education is eating away at disposable income. For many, one major medical emergency is enough to push a middle-class family back into poverty.
- **Rising Debt Burden:** Household financial savings have plummeted to roughly **5% of GDP**, while unsecured borrowing is on the rise. Increasingly, credit is used for basic consumption and "volatility smoothing" rather than wealth creation.
- **Taxation without Benefit:** The middle class remains the primary taxpayer base but perceives a lack of direct social security or specialized incentives in return, unlike the bottom deciles who receive targeted welfare.

B. Structural and Technological Hurdles

- **Job Displacement via Automation:** The rise of AI and automation is threatening traditional middle-class roles in banking, IT and manufacturing, leading to a "hollowing out" of mid-level professional jobs.
- **Unemployment Crisis:** Youth unemployment remains high (around 45%) and the unemployment rate among graduates (nearly 29%) suggests that education is no longer a guaranteed ticket to upward mobility.
- **Reverse Migration to Agriculture:** Due to the **stagnation of the manufacturing sector**, which shed **24 million jobs between 2016 and 2021**, many workers are returning to low-productivity agricultural work, where the average household earns just over ₹10,000 a month.

C. Social Challenges

- **Human Development Deficits:** India's **child wasting rate** the **highest in the world at 18.7%** and a **child stunting rate of 35.5% among under-fives** signal not just present deprivation but severely constrained future mobility for families already at the margins of the middle class.
- **Social Constraints:** **Patriarchal norms continue to restrict professional progression** for middle-class women, narrowing the household income base and perpetuating inequality within the MIC itself.

Factors Behind Policy Neglect of the Middle Class

- **Myth of Self-Sufficiency:** Policymakers widely assume that the **middle class is economically resilient** and requires no targeted support a **misconception** that ignores mounting pressures from **indirect taxation, inflation, and income volatility**.
- **Heterogeneous and Hard-to-Target Composition:** The **Middle-Income Class (MIC)** spans a wide spectrum from salaried public servants to **gig workers, informal traders, and skilled**

artisans making it structurally difficult to design effective, **targeted interventions** for the group as a whole.

- **Low Political Mobilisation and Voice:** The **middle class** rarely organises into **cohesive pressure groups**, exhibits **lower voter turnout** than other socio-economic groups, and lacks strong **ideological representation** rendering it **politically invisible** and easy to deprioritise.
- **Structural Failure in Employment Generation:** With **12 million young people** entering the labour force annually, many have been pushed back into **agriculture**, a sector that employs **46% of the workforce** yet contributes only **18% of national output**.
- **Wealth Concentration at the Top:** India's **271 billionaires** hold wealth equal to roughly **one quarter of net national income**, and the **top 1% captures over 22% of national income** structurally limiting the **political attention and fiscal space** available for middle-income concerns.
- **Underrepresentation in Policy Architecture:** Policymaking bodies are disproportionately shaped by **organised business lobbies** and **rural-centric electoral imperatives**, leaving middle-class concerns consistently **marginalised** in the design of fiscal and social policy.

Way Ahead: Restoring the Link between Growth and Mobility

To prevent the middle class from becoming a permanent "vulnerable layer," a shift in policy direction is required:

- **Scaling Productive Employment:** The government should aggressively expand **manufacturing** under initiatives like **Make in India** and **PLI (Production Linked Incentive) schemes** to absorb the annual influx of **12 million** labor force entrants, while enforcing wage-productivity linkages through minimum wage revisions and sector-specific incentives.
- **Strengthening Formal Job Creation:** Formal employment must rise beyond the current **<10%** by simplifying labor laws via **Labour Codes (Code on Wages, Industrial Relations, Social Security, and Occupational Safety)**, promoting **MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises)**, and incentivizing firms to provide **social security** like **EPF (Employees' Provident Fund)**, **ESI (Employees' State Insurance)**, and health insurance for informal workers registered on **e-Shram (Electronic-Shram Portal)**.
- **Tailored Policy Incentives for MIC:** Introduce **MIC-specific tax rebates** on education and healthcare spends, subsidize **affordable housing** through **PMAY (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana)** expansions, and enact **labor market reforms** to reduce compliance burdens, ensuring direct benefits without populist dilutions.
- **Adopting Advanced Welfare Metrics:** Shift to the **World Bank's well-being spectrum** model in **NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India)** assessments and **Economic Surveys**, measuring distances from aspirational living standards to better track **mobility** and guide resource allocation beyond binary poverty lines.
- **Combating Automation and Skill Gaps:** Launch nationwide **reskilling programs** under **Skill India** and **PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana)** targeting **automation-vulnerable sectors** like IT, banking, and manufacturing, focusing on emerging fields such as AI, green tech, and digital services.

- **Reducing Debt and Building Resilience:** Promote **financial literacy** via **RBI (Reserve Bank of India)** campaigns and **PMJDY (Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana)** expansions, cap unsecured lending through regulatory tweaks, and boost household savings with **tax incentives** on long-term deposits to counter the rising **38% GDP household debt**.

Conclusion

India's development must now move beyond poverty reduction to strengthening a **resilient and secure middle-income class**, which is crucial for long-term stability. Restoring the link between **growth, employment, and upward mobility** is essential to prevent the rise of a vulnerable middle and to ensure truly inclusive and sustainable development.

Q. India's growth story has reduced poverty but failed to ensure upward mobility. Examine in the context of the emerging 'vulnerable middle class'. 15 Marks

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