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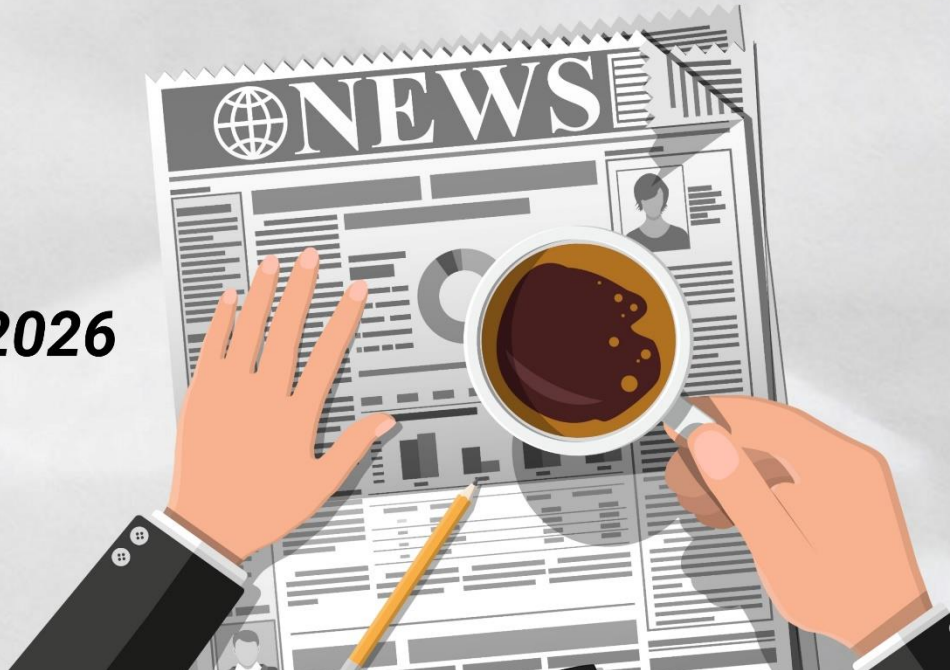
IAS Mains Examination

08th Jun to 13th Jun 2026



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GENERAL STUDIES 1

1.1. GEOGRAPHY

1.1.1. INDIA AND THE SOUTHWEST MONSOON: A SEASON OF CONCERN

Context

- The **southwest monsoon reached Kerala on June 4, 2026**, three days past its normal onset date and four days behind the India Meteorological Department's (IMD) own forecast. This is the **first onset misjudgement since 2015**.
- The northwest, central India, the peninsula and the **monsoon core zone** that sustains the bulk of India's rain-fed farmland are all forecast to fall short; only the northeast is expected to see normal rain.

About the Southwest Monsoon

- The **southwest monsoon**, active from June to September, is India's primary freshwater source, accounting for **70 to 80 percent of the country's annual rainfall**.
- With India receiving approximately **1,187 mm** of average annual precipitation, season determines **crop output, drinking water supply, reservoir levels, groundwater recharge and hydropower generation.** It is not merely a weather event but a **civilisational lifeline** for over a billion people.

Mechanism Associated with Southwest Monsoon

- **Differential heating:** India's landmass heats up faster than the Indian Ocean during summer, creating an intense **low-pressure zone** over the subcontinent that draws in warm, moisture-laden winds from the sea.
- **ITCZ migration:** The northward shift of the **Intertropical Convergence Zone (ITCZ)** around June 1 triggers monsoon onset over Kerala. Its arrival marks the official beginning of the **kharif growing season**.
- **Two branches:** The monsoon splits into the **Arabian Sea branch**, entering through **Kerala and the Western Ghats**, and the **Bay of Bengal branch**, advancing **westward across the Indo-Gangetic plains from the northeast**.
- **El Nino and ENSO:** Anomalously warm sea surface temperatures in the central Pacific, known as **El Nino**, weaken the pressure gradient between land and ocean, suppressing the moisture-transporting winds that feed the monsoon.
- **Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD):** A **positive IOD**, with **warmer western Indian Ocean waters,** can partly offset **El Nino's suppressive effect**. A neutral or negative IOD removes this safety valve entirely.
- **Long Period Average (LPA):** The LPA, currently **87 cm** for June-September, is calculated over a 50-year reference period. Rainfall below **90 percent of LPA** is classified as deficient and carries serious consequences for food production and water availability.

Causes Behind the Expected Deficient Monsoon

- **El Nino Near-certain through Peak Season:** Around **60 percent of El Nino years since 1951** have delivered deficient or below-normal rainfall over India. The droughts of **2002 and 2009** were the century's worst, with major shortfalls also in 2014 and 2015. With El Nino confirmed for 2026, the government must not count on a late redeeming swing of the IOD.
- **Weakened Walker Circulation:** El Nino disrupts the **Walker Circulation**, the large-scale convection system over the tropical Pacific. Its weakening reduces the wind-driven flow of water vapour into the subcontinent, directly suppressing convective rainfall over India.
- **Intra-seasonal Dry Spells:** Total seasonal rainfall conceals the critical issue of **distribution**. Prolonged dry spells within the season devastate crops sown on time that are then left unwatered at critical growth stages, making the pattern of rainfall as consequential as its volume.
- **Climate Change Intensifying Variability:** Research by the **Indian Institute of Tropical Meteorology (IITM)** confirms that warming is increasing the frequency and intensity of monsoon breaks. Even years with adequate total rainfall are recording more severe dry intervals, raising crop and water stress across the rain-fed belt.

Effects of a Deficient Monsoon

1. **Agricultural Distress and Crop Failure**
   - **Lower Kharif Production:** Deficient rainfall in the **Monsoon Core Zone** can reduce the production of **paddy, cotton, soybean, pulses, and oilseeds**, adversely affecting agricultural output.
   - **Livelihood Risks:** Reduced crop yields can threaten the livelihoods of nearly **600 million people** dependent on **agriculture and allied activities**.
2. **Food Security and Inflationary Pressures**
   - **Rising Food Prices:** Lower agricultural production can reduce the supply of essential food commodities, leading to higher prices of **cereals, pulses, vegetables, and edible oils**.
   - **Pressure on Household Budgets:** Rising food prices, coupled with higher **energy and import costs**, can significantly affect poor and vulnerable households.
3. **Water Resource Stress**
   - **Groundwater Depletion:** A weak monsoon reduces **groundwater recharge** while increasing dependence on extraction, worsening existing **water scarcity**.
   - **Reservoir Stress:** Lower reservoir inflows can affect **irrigation, drinking water supply, and hydropower generation**, with impacts extending beyond the monsoon season.
4. **Intensification of Heatwaves**
   - **Higher Heat Stress:** Dry soil conditions and reduced moisture availability can intensify **heatwaves** and increase **surface temperatures**.
   - **Socio Economic Impacts:** Severe heat can reduce **labour productivity**, affect **livestock health**, increase **electricity demand**, and create significant **public health challenges**.

5. **Farmer Vulnerability and Rural Distress**
    - **Financial Hardship:** Crop losses and rising **cultivation costs** can increase **indebtedness** among small and marginal farmers.
    - **Distress Migration:** Reduced agricultural incomes may force rural households to resort to **distress migration** in search of alternative livelihoods.
6. **Greater Fiscal Burden on the State**
    - **Higher Relief Expenditure:** Governments may need to increase spending on **drought relief, crop compensation, drinking water support, and welfare measures**.
    - **Pressure on Welfare Systems:** Greater demand for **credit support, relief assistance, and social protection measures** can strain administrative and financial resources.

Government Initiatives

- **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY):** Offers crop insurance at premiums of **1.5 to 2 percent** for kharif crops, with the actuarial balance shared between Centre and states. Satellite-assisted yield assessment must be accelerated for timely claim settlement during a drought year.
- **Per Drop More Crop under PMKSY:** Promotes drip and sprinkler systems that reduce water use by **40 to 50 percent per unit output**, providing a structural pathway to sustain productivity even under reduced monsoon rainfall.
- **Jal Shakti Abhiyan and Atal Bhujal Yojana:** These schemes promote decentralised **water conservation and community-level groundwater governance** across water-stressed districts, improving aquifer recharge and demand-side regulation during drought periods.
- **National Food Security Act and Price Stabilisation Fund:** The PDS backed by **FCI buffer stocks** covers over 800 million beneficiaries. The Price Stabilisation Fund enables procurement and release of pulses and onions to contain price spikes during monsoon-induced supply shocks.
- **NDMA Drought Management Manual:** Mandates **early warning triggers and pre-drought declarations** based on **district-level rainfall deviation data**, ensuring states act before seasonal assessments complete rather than after crop damage has already occurred.
- **Promotion of millets:** The push for **Shree Anna or millets**, which need far less water and are climate resilient, was strengthened during the **International Year of Millets in 2023** and builds long term resilience by reducing pressure on water heavy crops.

Way Forward

- **Coordinated Institutional Response:** The **Agriculture Ministry, Jal Shakti Ministry, Consumer Affairs Ministry, and National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)** must work in a coordinated manner by activating contingency crop plans, monitoring fertiliser availability, and preparing relief mechanisms well before the peak sowing season.

- **Promote Low Water Intensive Crops:** Farmers should be encouraged to shift towards **short duration pulses, oilseeds, and millets** instead of water intensive paddy, supported by assured **Minimum Support Price (MSP)** procurement and timely availability of quality seeds.
- **Ensure Efficient Use of Water Resources:** Reservoir operations should be recalibrated to account for lower inflows, while groundwater extraction in over exploited regions must be strictly regulated to prioritise drinking water and essential irrigation needs.
- **Ensure Timely Relief and Insurance Support:** Crop insurance coverage, institutional credit, and drought relief measures should be strengthened and made readily accessible so that affected farmers receive assistance without delays.
- **Expand Micro Irrigation and Forecasting Capacity:** Rapid expansion of **drip and sprinkler irrigation systems**, along with strengthening **IMD's forecasting infrastructure and climate modelling capabilities**, can improve water use efficiency and enhance preparedness against future monsoon variability.

Conclusion

A deficient monsoon in 2026 would fall on a farm economy whose **nutrients and fuel are both already scarce and costly**, so the government must hope for the best while it firmly prepares for the worst. With **timely planning, prudent water management and strong relief systems**, India can blunt the impact of a weak season and protect the food security and livelihoods of millions of its people.

Q. *The vulnerability of India's economy to monsoon variability reflects the continued dependence of agriculture and water resources on seasonal rainfall. Examine the challenges posed by a deficient monsoon and suggest a suitable policy response. 15 Marks*

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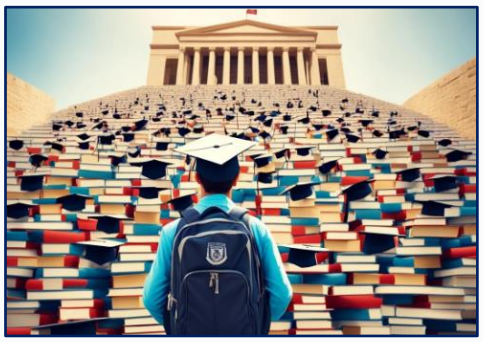
GENERAL STUDIES 2

2.1. POLITY & GOVERNANCE

2.1.1. NEGOTIATING FEDERALISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION



Context

- Higher education has become an important area where the changing nature of Indian federalism is clearly visible. Issues such as **control** over **regulations**, **language policy**, **curriculum design**, **funding**, and **digital education** have made higher education not just an educational matter but also a constitutional and political issue.
- As a result, the way higher education is governed now reflects wider **debates about** how powers should be shared between the Union and State governments.

The Constitutional Matrix of Education

The governance of education in India is a delicate constitutional balancing act:

- **The 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976:** Shifted 'Education' from the State List (List II) to the **Concurrent List (List III)**. This gave both the Union and State legislatures the authority to enact laws, with Union legislation prevailing in case of conflict (Article 254).
- **Union List Entries:** The Centre derives substantial control over higher education from **Entry 66 of the Union List (List I)**, which mandates the Union to handle the "coordination and determination of standards in institutions for higher education or research and scientific and technical institutions."

Importance of Higher Education in India

1. **Human Capital Development:** Higher education equips India's youth with advanced skills and knowledge, supporting innovation, productivity, and long-term economic growth.
2. **Expanding Access to Opportunities:** Higher education enrolment reached **4.33 crore students** in 2021–22 **(as per AISHE report),** reflecting growing access to educational and career opportunities.
3. **Promoting Social Inclusion:** Enrolment of SC, ST, OBC, and women students has risen significantly, making higher education a key instrument of social mobility.
4. **Strengthening Research and Innovation:** As per AISHE data, Ph.D. enrolment increased by over **81% since 2014–15**, helping build India's research, innovation, and knowledge economy.
5. **Enhancing Global Competitiveness:** India's Gross Enrolment Ratio in higher education reached **28.4%**, with NEP 2020 targeting **50% by 2035** to strengthen global competitiveness.

Key Challenges to Quality Higher Education in India

1. **Regulatory Overhauls and Legislative Restructuring**
    - **Replacing Legacies:** Legislative frameworks like the proposed **Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill** aim to restructure the regulatory architecture by replacing existing bodies like the University Grants Commission (UGC).
    - **State Apprehensions:** States view these central statutory structures as a gradual erosion of their legislative autonomy and a mechanism to enforce a homogenized curriculum.
    - **The Vice-Chancellor (VC) Tussle:** Friction frequently arises over the appointment of Vice-Chancellors and the powers of Governors (as Chancellors), as seen in disputes in states such as Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka, and West Bengal.
2. **National Education Policy (NEP) 2020**
    - **Language Impositions:** Recommendations within policies like the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020—such as the **three-language formula**—frequently face resistance. States like **Tamil Nadu** view centralized language directives as an infringement on regional identity and state autonomy.
3. **Financial Centralisation**
    - **Reform-Linked Funding:** States often receive central funding for higher education only if they implement reforms recommended by the Union government.
    - **Central Initiatives:** Schemes like the **Institutions of Eminence (IoE)** and funding through the **Anusandhan National Research Foundation (ANRF)** increase the Centre's influence over state universities by providing grants and research support.
4. **Digital Governance and Structural Homogenization**
    - **Technological Architecture:** Mandated mechanisms like the **Academic Bank of Credits (ABC)** and unified digital tracking frameworks centralize student data and academic mobility protocols.
    - While these platforms improve efficiency and student mobility, they also enhance central oversight of the higher education system.
5. **Inequality in Access and Regional Disparities**
    - **University Density (per 1 lakh eligible students): Highest in Sikkim (10.3), Arunachal Pradesh (5.6), Ladakh (5.2), etc.**
        - **In Bihar (0.2), UP (0.3), West Bengal & Maharashtra (0.6) the density is below national average.**
    - **Uneven Access:** Access to quality higher education remains highly unequal across regions and socio-economic groups, limiting educational opportunities for many students.
    - **Persistent Regional Gaps:** Despite the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) rising to 28.4% in 2021–22, enrollment remains concentrated in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Tamil Nadu, while states like Bihar and Odisha continue to lag behind.

6. **Suboptimal Research**
   - **Low Expenditure: There is low expenditure on R&D by Government (around 0.7% of GDP), far below the 2-3% benchmark seen in countries like the U.S. and South Korea.**

Key Initiatives for Quality Higher Education

Focus Area	Initiative / Scheme	Core Objective & Impact
1. Budget 2025–26 Initiatives	**PM Research Fellows (PMRF)**	Targets **10,000 fellows** to boost high-quality doctoral research and innovation.
	IIT Expansion	Adds **6,500 new seats** in second-generation IITs to expand access to premier technical education.
2. Assessment & Ranking	**NAAC** *(National Assessment & Accreditation Council)*	Evaluates and **accredits Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)** based on rigorous quality standards.
	NIRF *(National Institutional Ranking Framework)*	Ranks Indian institutions using a **standardized framework** to foster healthy competition.
3. Infrastructure Development	**HEFA** *(Higher Education Financing Agency)*	Provides financial leverage to fund **modern infrastructure** and advanced research facilities.
	NDEAR *(National Digital Education Architecture)*	Establishes and strengthens the nation's **digital education infrastructure** and ecosystem.
	PM-USHA *(Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan)*	Drives strategic funding and **quality improvement in State universities** and colleges.
4. Research & Innovation	**ANRF** *(Anusandhan National Research Foundation)*	Serves as an apex body to seed, grow, and **promote nationwide R&D** across institutions.
	SPARC	Facilitates academic excellence by encouraging **joint research collaborations with top global universities**.
5. Employability & Skills	**NCrF** *(National Credit Framework)*	Seamlessly **integrates academic, vocational, and experiential learning** into a unified credit system.
	PM Internship Scheme	Enhances youth employability by targeting **1 crore internships over a five-year period**.

Measures to Address Challenges

1. **Infrastructure, Academic and Faculty Reforms**
   - Upgrading infrastructure, improving curriculum, and strengthening faculty development can enhance educational quality.
   - Initiatives like **Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA)** support the modernization of higher education institutions.
2. **Greater State Representation in Higher Education Governance**
   - Increasing the participation of States in regulatory bodies such as the **University Grants Commission** can promote cooperative federalism and address regional concerns.
3. **Quality Learning Resources in Local Languages**
   - Providing quality textbooks and study materials in regional languages can improve accessibility and inclusiveness.
   - Institutions like **National Council of Educational Research and Training** have expanded educational resources in multiple Indian languages.
4. **Enhanced Financial Support**
   - Greater public investment and student financial assistance can make higher education more affordable and accessible.
   - Schemes such as **Pradhan Mantri Vidya Lakshmi Karyakram** help students access educational loans.
5. **Strategic Adaptation and Negotiated Federalism**
   - Centre–State relations in higher education are not solely marked by conflict.
   - Instead, many States have adopted a pragmatic approach by selectively implementing national reforms that align with their developmental priorities while opposing measures perceived to undermine State autonomy.
   - This demonstrates the emergence of **negotiated federalism**, where cooperation and accommodation coexist with disagreement.
6. **Internationalisation as a Common Goal**
   - The **internationalisation of higher education** has emerged as an area of convergence between the Centre and the States.
   - Several States are actively positioning themselves as regional education hubs by encouraging collaborations with foreign universities and research institutions.
   - Higher education is increasingly viewed as a driver of global competitiveness, economic development, and knowledge creation.
7. **Encouraging Public-Private Partnerships (PPP)**
   - Collaboration between the government and private sector can improve infrastructure, innovation, and educational outcomes.

- Successful PPP models have been adopted by institutions such as the **Delhi Public School Society**.

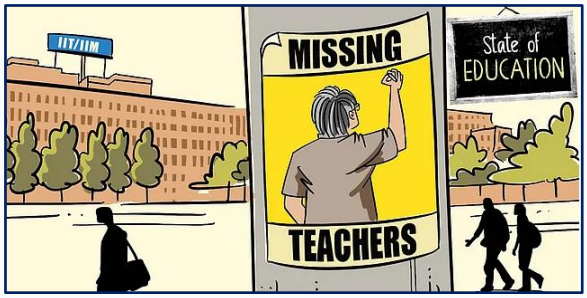
Conclusion

The higher education debate reflects the evolving nature of Indian federalism. A balanced approach that combines national standards with State autonomy through cooperation, consultation, and constitutional balance is essential for achieving both educational excellence and federal harmony.

Q. *Higher education has emerged as a key arena for negotiating federalism in India. Examine the factors contributing to increasing central influence in higher education governance and discuss how cooperative federalism can be strengthened while maintaining national standards and State autonomy. (15 Marks, 250 Words)*

2.1.2. FACULTY VACANCIES IN INDIA'S PREMIER TECHNICAL INSTITUTIONS

Context



RTI data obtained from 79 Centrally Funded Technical Institutes (CFTIs) reveal that **35.2% of sanctioned faculty positions remain vacant**, raising concerns about the quality of higher education despite India's expanding technical education ecosystem.

Introduction

India's premier institutions such as the IITs, NITs, IIMs, IIITs, and IISERs play a crucial role in producing skilled human capital, driving innovation, and supporting economic growth. However, persistent faculty shortages threaten teaching quality, research output, and India's aspirations of becoming a global knowledge hub.

Key Findings from RTI Data

1. **Overall Vacancy Situation**
   - Out of **20,279 sanctioned faculty posts**, **7,132 posts (35.2%)** remain vacant.
   - Nearly **one in every three teaching positions** is unfilled.
   - **16 institutions** reported vacancy levels above 50%.
2. **Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs)**
   - **35% of 11,019 sanctioned posts** remain vacant.
   - **9 out of 20 IITs** reported vacancies exceeding 35%.
   - **IIT Kharagpur** recorded the highest vacancy level:
     - 824 vacancies out of 1,600 sanctioned posts (over 50%).
3. **National Institutes of Technology (NITs)**
   - **27.9% of 5,432 sanctioned posts** remain vacant.
   - **NIT Andhra Pradesh** reported the highest vacancy rate (68%).

- High vacancies also observed in:
  - NIT Srinagar
  - NIT Sikkim
  - NIT Tiruchirappalli

4. **Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs)**
   - **32.3% of 1,741 sanctioned posts** remain vacant.
   - Four IIMs reported vacancies above 50%.
   - **IIM Mumbai** reported nearly 59% vacancies.
5. **Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs)**
   - Highest vacancy ratio among all institutions.
   - **53.5% of sanctioned faculty posts** remain vacant.
   - Eight IIITs reported vacancy levels above 50%.
6. **Indian Institutes of Science Education and Research (IISERs)**
   - Around **32% of sanctioned posts** remain vacant.

Significance of Faculty Availability in Higher Education

1. **Quality of Teaching and Learning**
   - Adequate faculty availability ensures effective classroom instruction, academic mentoring, and personalized guidance for students.
   - Persistent vacancies increase the teacher-student ratio, reducing learning outcomes and overall educational quality.
2. **Research and Innovation**
   - Faculty members are the primary drivers of research, innovation, patents, publications, and technological advancement.
   - Shortages of qualified faculty weaken research productivity and limit India's capacity for knowledge creation.
3. **Achieving NEP 2020 Objectives**
   - The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 aims to build world-class multidisciplinary institutions and a vibrant research ecosystem.
   - Faculty shortages undermine these goals by affecting academic excellence, innovation, and institutional capacity.
4. **Global Competitiveness**
   - Strong faculty strength is essential for improving university rankings, attracting international collaborations, and enhancing academic reputation.
   - Large vacancies reduce institutional competitiveness and limit India's emergence as a global education hub.

5. **Human Capital Development**
    - Premier technical institutions play a crucial role in producing skilled engineers, scientists, managers, and entrepreneurs.
    - Inadequate faculty strength can compromise the quality of graduates, affecting employability and economic productivity.

Causes of Persistent Faculty Vacancies

1. **Lengthy Recruitment Processes**
    - Faculty recruitment often faces delays due to lengthy procedures involving advertisements, screening, interviews, and administrative approvals.
    - Bureaucratic bottlenecks result in prolonged vacancies and slow replacement of retiring or departing faculty members.

2. **Shortage of Qualified Candidates**
    - The supply of highly qualified PhD holders, particularly in emerging and interdisciplinary fields, remains inadequate.
    - Increasing global demand for skilled academics has intensified competition for talent across universities and research institutions.
3. **Attractive Private and Overseas Opportunities**
    - Better salaries, superior research facilities, and greater career prospects in the private sector and foreign universities attract talented academics.
    - This brain drain reduces the pool of qualified candidates available for recruitment in Indian institutions.
4. **Rapid Expansion of Institutions**
    - The establishment of new IITs, NITs, IIITs, and IISERs has significantly increased the demand for qualified faculty.
    - Recruitment efforts have not kept pace with institutional expansion, leading to persistent staffing shortages.
5. **Research Infrastructure Constraints**
    - Limited research funding, inadequate laboratory facilities, and insufficient institutional support discourage top academic talent.
    - Heavy administrative responsibilities often reduce the attractiveness of academic careers and affect faculty retention.
6. **Geographical Challenges**
    - Institutions located in remote or less-developed regions face difficulties in attracting and retaining quality faculty.
    - Concerns related to housing, schooling for children, healthcare facilities, and overall quality of life discourage potential recruits.

Implications of Faculty Vacancies in Higher Education

1. **Academic Implications**
   - Faculty shortages increase the teaching workload on existing staff, affecting the quality of instruction and mentoring.
   - Reduced faculty availability limits individual attention to students and slows curriculum revision, pedagogical reforms, and academic innovation.
2. **Research Implications**
   - A shortage of faculty adversely affects research productivity, resulting in fewer publications, patents, and technological innovations.
   - It also reduces participation in international collaborations, interdisciplinary research, and global academic networks.
3. **Institutional Implications**
   - Persistent vacancies make it difficult for institutions to maintain accreditation standards and prescribed faculty-student ratios.
   - They also hinder efforts to improve institutional reputation, attract talent, and achieve higher global rankings.
4. **Economic Implications**
   - Weak research and academic ecosystems can undermine India's innovation capacity and long-term knowledge economy goals.
   - Poor-quality human capital formation may reduce competitiveness in technology-driven and knowledge-intensive sectors.

Government Initiatives

1. **Mission Mode Recruitment Drive**
   - The Ministry of Education launched special **Mission Mode recruitment drives in September 2022 and October 2025** to accelerate the filling of vacant faculty positions in Central Higher Educational Institutions (CHEIs).
   - These drives aim to streamline recruitment processes and reduce long-pending vacancies across premier institutions.
2. **Continuous Recruitment Process**
   - The Ministry has emphasized that faculty recruitment is a **continuous and ongoing exercise**, undertaken regularly as vacancies arise.
   - Institutions are encouraged to initiate timely recruitment to ensure minimal disruption to teaching and research activities.
3. **Faculty–Student Ratio Norms**
   - To maintain academic quality, the government prescribes a **faculty-student ratio of 1:10 for IITs and 1:12 for NITs**.

- These norms are periodically reviewed to align faculty strength with institutional expansion and student enrolment.

4. **Recruitment Progress**
   - As of **January 2026**, around **17,878 faculty positions** had reportedly been filled across Central Higher Educational Institutions under the Mission Mode recruitment initiative.
   - This reflects the government's efforts to strengthen teaching capacity and improve the quality of higher education in India.

Way Forward to Address Faculty Vacancies

1. **Fast-Track Faculty Recruitment**
   - Recruitment procedures should be simplified, digitised, and made more transparent to reduce delays in appointments.
   - Establishing fixed timelines for each stage of recruitment can ensure timely filling of vacant positions.
2. **Improve Faculty Incentives**
   - Competitive salaries, adequate research grants, housing support, and other benefits can help attract and retain quality faculty.
   - Performance-linked incentives can encourage excellence in teaching, research, innovation, and academic leadership.
3. **Strengthen the Research Ecosystem**
   - Greater investment in laboratories, research infrastructure, innovation hubs, and interdisciplinary studies is essential to attract top talent.
   - Stronger industry-academia collaboration can enhance research opportunities, funding, and practical relevance of academic work.
4. **Develop a Robust Academic Talent Pipeline**
   - Expanding doctoral and post-doctoral fellowships can increase the pool of qualified candidates for academic positions.
   - Encouraging young researchers to pursue academic careers can help meet the growing demand for faculty in higher education institutions.
5. **Address Regional Imbalances**
   - Special incentives should be provided to attract faculty to institutions located in remote and underserved regions.
   - Improving housing, healthcare, schooling, and other welfare facilities can enhance faculty retention in such areas.
6. **Leverage Global Talent and Expertise**
   - India should facilitate the recruitment of overseas Indian scholars and distinguished foreign faculty members.

- Promoting international academic exchanges and collaborative research can enrich the quality and global outlook of higher education institutions.

Conclusion

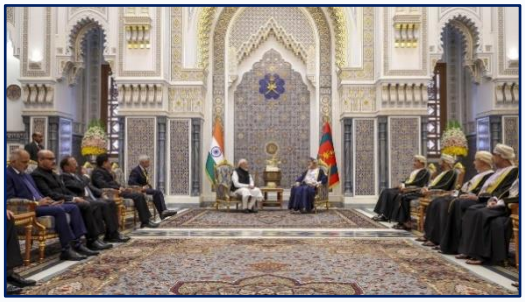
Faculty are the backbone of higher education. Addressing faculty vacancies is essential for improving educational quality, advancing research, achieving NEP 2020 goals, and strengthening India's knowledge-driven economy and global competitiveness.

Q. The quality of higher education depends not only on infrastructure but also on the availability of qualified faculty. Evaluate the challenges associated with faculty recruitment in India's premier institutions and suggest reforms. 15 Marks (GS- 2, Governance)

2.2. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

2.2.1. INDIA-OMAN CEPA

Context



- The **India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** came into force on **June 1, 2026**, marking a significant milestone in one of the world's oldest bilateral trade relationships, with commercial and maritime links stretching back thousands of years.
- **Bilateral trade** between **India and Oman** has already grown from **$8.94 billion in FY2023-24** to **$11.18 billion in FY2025-26**, reflecting **deepening economic complementarities even before the CEPA** came into effect.

Oman's Strategic Location: A Gateway, Not Just a Market

- **Oman occupies a unique geographical position** at the crossroads of the **Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa**, making it far more than a bilateral trade destination.
- Its **three major ports are Sohar, Duqm, and Salalah**, are rapidly emerging as **world-class logistics and industrial hubs**, connecting key shipping routes between Asia, the Gulf, and Africa.
- **For Indian businesses**, Oman serves as a **potential launchpad into the wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region** and **East African economies**, which are markets far larger than Oman itself — this is what elevates the CEPA well beyond a simple bilateral arrangement.
- Oman's strategic relevance is also tied to **India's energy security and maritime connectivity interests**, given the region's importance to the movement of goods, energy, and people.
- The CEPA also fits into India's broader **Act West policy**, complementing the **India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC)** and other **Indo-Pacific connectivity frameworks.**

Significance of the India-Oman CEPA: Sector-Wise Benefits

Before the CEPA, only **15.33% of India's exports** entered Oman at zero duty under the **Most Favoured Nation (MFN) regime**. The CEPA transforms this dramatically: Oman now offers **duty-free**

access on 98.08% of its tariff lines, covering **99.38% of India's exports by value**, giving Indian exporters an immediate and sweeping competitiveness boost.

1. **Textiles and Apparel**
   - India already holds a **dominant market position** in Oman, commanding **43% of woven apparel imports** and **31% of knitted apparel imports**.
   - The elimination of the existing **5% tariff** directly strengthens India's competitiveness against **China**, the other major supplier in this market, giving Indian manufacturers a clear pricing advantage.
2. **Chemicals**
   - India already supplies nearly **39% of Oman's inorganic chemical imports**, making it one of the leading players in this segment.
   - **Tariff-free access** will further amplify this already strong position, enabling Indian chemical manufacturers to deepen their market penetration.
3. **Engineering Goods**
   - This sector represents the **biggest opportunity**: Oman imports over **$3.7 billion in mechanical machinery** and **$3.3 billion in automotives** annually, yet India's current market share is only **5% and 2%** respectively, indicating enormous headroom for growth.
   - **Preferential market access** under the CEPA can help Indian engineering exports penetrate Oman's **infrastructure, construction, and industrial sectors**, all of which are growing rapidly.
4. **Pharmaceuticals**
   - India holds around **10% market share** in Oman's pharmaceutical market; here, the key benefit is not tariff reduction but **regulatory facilitation**.
   - Products approved by **leading international regulators** will receive **fast-tracked approvals** in Oman, reducing compliance costs and accelerating market entry as Oman's pharmaceutical market continues to expand.
5. **Food and Agriculture**
   - **Duty-free access** has been granted for products such as **meat, eggs, honey, butter, and processed foods**, strengthening India's position in Oman's consumer goods market.
   - Sensitive domestic sectors including **dairy, cereals, edible oils, and key agricultural commodities** have been kept **outside tariff concessions**, ensuring that domestic producers remain protected.
6. **Services and Professional Mobility**
   - Bilateral services trade stood at **$863 million in 2024**, with India enjoying a **surplus of nearly $447 million**; yet India's share in Oman's global services imports is just over **5%**, indicating substantial untapped potential.
   - Oman has made **binding commitments** for Indian professionals in **accounting, engineering, IT, healthcare, education, and consulting**, providing legally secure pathways for Indian talent.

- **Quotas for intra-corporate transferees** have been raised, enabling greater mobility of Indian specialists and professionals employed by multinational companies.
- Dedicated provisions for **AYUSH and traditional medicine** create fresh opportunities for Indian healthcare and wellness services in the Gulf's growing wellness sector.

Streamlining Procedures in Place: Cutting Red Tape

- Oman will accept certificates issued by India's **Export Inspection Council (EIC)**, eliminating duplicative testing and inspections that previously added time and cost to export processes.
- India's **NPOP organic certification** and **halal certification systems** are now formally recognised by Oman, simplifying compliance for Indian food and organic product exporters.
- Dedicated provisions on **Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) measures** and **Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT)** will improve regulatory transparency and cooperation between both countries.
- **Fast-track customs clearance for perishables** will **reduce costs and improve efficiency** for **time-sensitive agricultural and food exports**, which are among India's key export categories.
- Together, these facilitation measures address **non-tariff barriers**, which are often more significant obstacles to trade than tariffs themselves, particularly for food, pharmaceuticals, and organic products.

Challenges in Realising the Full Potential

- **Low Utilisation of Trade Agreements: Low utilisation of trade agreements** has historically been a concern in India; many small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are unaware of the concessions available, leading to under-utilisation of preferential tariff rates.
- **Complex Rules of Origin (RoO): RoO compliance** can be complex and costly for exporters to verify and document, potentially deterring smaller manufacturers from claiming CEPA benefits.
- **Competition in Engineering Goods:** In **engineering goods**, where India's current market share is very low, breaking into Oman's established supply chains dominated by European, Chinese, and Japanese suppliers will require **consistent quality standards and competitive pricing**.
- **Services Trade Barriers: Services trade barriers** beyond tariffs such as visa restrictions, professional degree recognition, and licensing requirements in Oman may still limit the mobility of Indian professionals despite binding commitments.
- **Risk of Trade Deflection**: The risk of **trade deflection** remains, where goods from third countries enter India or Oman through the other to take advantage of preferential rates, undermining the intent of the agreement.
- **Geopolitical Volatility in the Gulf: Geopolitical volatility** in the **Gulf region**, including disruptions in the Strait of Hormuz or regional conflicts, can affect the reliability of Oman as a transit and logistics hub for Indian businesses.

Way Forward

- **Awareness and Outreach for Exporters: Awareness and outreach campaigns** must be conducted for Indian exporters, particularly SMEs in textile clusters, pharmaceutical hubs, and engineering sectors, to ensure they understand and actively use CEPA benefits.

- **Strengthening Export Facilitation Infrastructure**: India should invest in **export facilitation infrastructure**, including digital platforms for Rules of Origin certification and EIC inspection, to reduce the transaction costs of claiming preferential access.
- **Effective Institutional Mechanisms: Bilateral Joint Committees** must be activated promptly to operationalise services commitments, resolve early-stage disputes, and ensure the smooth implementation of SPS and TBT provisions.
- **Development of Joint Industrial Zones**: India should explore **joint industrial zones** in Oman's Special Economic Zones, particularly at **Duqm**, to enable Indian manufacturers to access GCC markets and East Africa through Oman.
- **Mutual Recognition of Professional Qualifications: Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs)** for professional qualifications in engineering, medicine, and accounting should be prioritised to fully unlock the services commitments embedded in the CEPA.
- **Deepening Value Chain Integration**: India must pursue **value chain integration** with Oman, particularly in sectors like chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and food processing, to move beyond simple export relationships toward deeper industrial partnerships.

Conclusion

The India-Oman CEPA is not merely a tariff agreement but a **comprehensive economic framework** that reimagines an ancient maritime partnership for the 21st century, opening a strategic gateway to the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa. Its **true value will be measured not in its text but in how boldly Indian businesses, policymakers, and institutions choose to walk through the door it has.**

Q. *Trade agreements are increasingly becoming instruments of strategic and economic diplomacy. In this context, analyse how the India–Oman CEPA can contribute to India's trade diversification, connectivity ambitions, and export-led growth strategy. 15 Marks*

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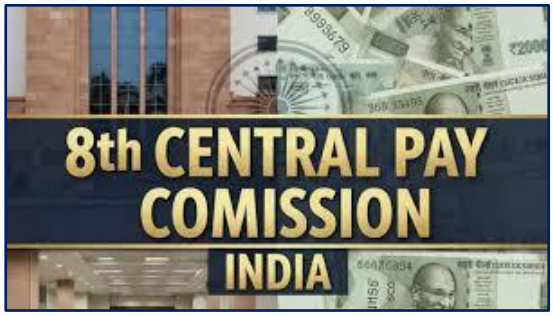
GENERAL STUDIES 3

3.1. ECONOMY

3.1.1. THE 8TH CPC: A CHANCE TO REFORM PAY COMMISSIONS

Context:



- As India moves towards the 8th Central Pay Commission (CPC), public attention has largely focused on salary revisions, fitment factors, and arrears, while the more fundamental question of whether the framework for determining public sector compensation remains equitable, transparent, and fiscally sustainable has received far less scrutiny.
- The manner in which the state structures salaries, allowances, and pensions is not merely an administrative matter but reflects broader institutional priorities, influences public trust in governance, and carries significant long-term fiscal consequences for the nation.

Challenges in the Existing Compensation Framework

1. **Absence of a Common Evaluation Framework**
    - **Narrow and time-bound process:** Pay Commissions operate as small, time-bound bodies tasked with evaluating a diverse ecosystem of civil, military, and technical services, largely on the basis of representations from the services themselves, without recourse to independent or standardised assessments.
    - **No universal benchmark for comparison:** The system lacks a uniform mechanism for assessing risk, responsibility, technical expertise, and career progression across different public services, resulting in compensation decisions that seek parity without clearly defining its basis.
    - **Institutional incoherence:** Different services operate under distinct career structures and working conditions, yet compensation is often aligned without transparent and consistently applied principles, creating perceptions of inequity and weakening the credibility of the entire framework.
2. **Civil Services versus Armed Forces: Structural Differences Ignored**
    - **Pyramidal military career structure:** Military careers involve a sharply pyramidal hierarchy with limited promotion opportunities, significant operational risks, and mandatory early retirement, making direct compensation comparison with civilian services structurally flawed.
    - **Civilian services offer broader advancement:** In contrast, civilian services generally provide longer career tenures and wider avenues for progression and promotion, which must be transparently accounted for when aligning compensation across these two very different institutional systems.
    - **Need for objective criteria:** Aligning compensation across such structurally different systems requires clear, evidence-based, and publicly explainable criteria that account for differences in career trajectory, risk, responsibility, and service conditions.

3. **Career Progression, Experience, and the Efficiency Trade-off**
    - **Accelerated promotions raise governance concerns:** The reduction in experience required for senior administrative positions reflects a push for efficiency, but effective governance also depends on institutional memory, accumulated expertise, and mature judgment that only experience can provide.
    - **Risk of shallow leadership:** When complex policy challenges are handed to officials with insufficient field experience, the quality of decision-making and implementation suffers; a balanced approach that values both dynamism and administrative depth is essential.
    - **Allowances lack a transparent framework:** Allowances are intended to compensate for hardship, remoteness, or operational risk, but the absence of a standardised and transparent assessment framework results in disparities across services that are difficult to justify and generate perceptions of inconsistency.
4. **Non-Functional Upgradation (NFU): Equity and Accountability at Stake**
    - **Financial advancement without responsibility:** Non-Functional Upgradation (NFU) allows officers to receive financial benefits equivalent to a higher pay grade without a corresponding increase in duties or accountability, which fundamentally weakens the link between role, performance, and compensation.
    - **Introduced to address promotion bottlenecks:** While NFU was originally introduced to compensate for slow promotion avenues in certain services, it continues to generate debate regarding inter-service equity and the institutional rationale for decoupling financial progression from actual responsibility.
5. **The Growing Pension Challenge**
    - **Multiple coexisting pension systems:** India currently operates several parallel pension arrangements, including legacy defined-benefit schemes for older employees, the contributory National Pension System for newer entrants, and separate provisions for elected representatives, creating concerns about uniformity and fairness.
    - **Fiscal sustainability under pressure:** According to the **Reserve Bank of India's State Finances Report (2023),** rising expenditure on salaries, pensions, and interest payments consumes a large share of government budgets, leaving limited fiscal space for developmental and social investments.
    - **Inter-generational equity concerns:** A compensation system that locks in unsustainable long-term pension liabilities shifts the fiscal burden onto future generations, making inter-generational equity a central concern that any reform of the CPC framework must squarely address.
6. **Fragmentation Across Government Institutions**
    - **Different processes for different branches:** Compensation frameworks for the executive, legislature, and judiciary evolve through entirely separate mechanisms, which, while constitutionally necessary, creates inconsistencies and reduces overall transparency in how public functionaries are compensated.

- **Public trust depends on explainability:** In a democratic system, compensation structures must not only be financially sustainable but also publicly explainable; fragmented frameworks that operate opaquely erode public confidence and weaken the accountability of state institutions.

Global Best Practices

- **United Kingdom – Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB):** Independent Pay Review Bodies provide annual, evidence-based recommendations for public servants, ensuring regular pay revisions and avoiding large periodic fiscal shocks.
- **Australia – Remuneration Tribunal:** An independent body determines compensation using **transparent criteria**, including responsibilities, market benchmarks, and public interest considerations.
- **Singapore – Performance-Linked Pay System:** Public sector salaries are **benchmarked with private-sector earnings** and linked to performance, strengthening accountability and talent retention.
- **New Zealand – Pay Transparency:** Mandatory **public disclosure of pay bands** enhances transparency, accountability, and citizen trust in compensation decisions.

Way Forward

- **Establish a National Compensation Authority:** A permanent, independent National Compensation Authority should replace the decadal Pay Commission model, providing a continuous, institutionalised mechanism for reviewing public sector compensation based on clear benchmarks, regular periodic assessments, and transparent principles.
- **Develop a common evaluative framework:** A universally applicable framework for assessing responsibility, risk, technical complexity, hardship, and career progression across all services must be developed, ensuring that compensation decisions rest on objective and consistently applied criteria rather than service-specific lobbying.
- **Transparent criteria for civil-military parity:** The structural differences between military and civilian careers must be formally acknowledged and quantified, with clear and publicly stated principles governing how compensation is aligned across these distinct service systems.
- **Rationalise NFU and allowances:** Non-Functional Upgradation should be comprehensively reviewed with a view to strengthening the link between accountability and financial progression, while allowances must be standardised through a transparent hardship assessment matrix applicable uniformly across services.
- **Address pension sustainability:** The government must work towards harmonising multiple pension systems, building actuarially sound long-term projections into every compensation revision, and ensuring that fiscal sustainability and inter-generational equity are treated as non-negotiable parameters.
- **Respect India's federal structure:** Any national compensation reform must uphold the autonomy of State governments in implementation while providing a common framework grounded in fiscal discipline, transparency, and accountability that promotes comparability and strengthens institutional credibility across the federation.

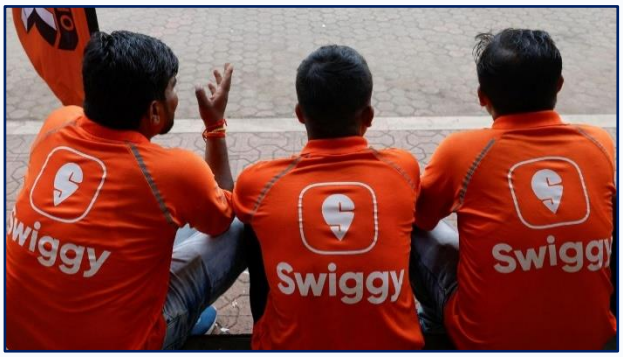
Conclusion

- The 8th CPC should evolve from a periodic pay revision exercise into a framework for ensuring equity, transparency, accountability, and fiscal sustainability in public compensation.
- A fair and sustainable compensation system is essential not only for employee welfare but also for strengthening institutional credibility and public trust in governance.

Q. *The existing decadal Pay Commission model is increasingly viewed as inadequate for a modern and complex public administration system. Evaluate 15 Marks*

3.1.2. IMPLEMENTATION COMPLETE, BUT WORKERS STILL VULNERABLE

Context



- India's four Labour Codes, enacted during 2019–20, recently had their implementation rules notified, completing the legislative framework after nearly six years of delay.
- Trade unions and academics had hoped that these Rules which lay down standard operating procedures (SOPs) for implementing a law, would moderate the more contentious provisions of the Codes, but those expectations have been belied.

Significance of India's Labour Reforms

- **Consolidation of fragmented law:** The four Codes — **The Code on Wages (2019), The Industrial Relations Code (2020), The Code on Social Security (2020), and The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (2020)** — consolidate over 29 central labour laws into a simpler, unified framework.
- **Ease of compliance for employers:** The unified framework reduces the multiplicity of returns, inspections, and procedures that businesses had to follow under the old laws, signalling India's intent to improve its ease-of-doing-business ranking.
- **Extension of social security coverage:** For the first time, gig workers, platform workers, and unorganised sector workers are formally acknowledged within the social security architecture of the Codes, even if their protections remain inadequate.
- **Standardisation of definitions:** The Codes introduce uniform definitions of key concepts such as 'worker', 'wages', and 'employer' across all four legislations, reducing interpretive ambiguity that plagued earlier labour law.
- **Role of Rules in implementation:** Rules cannot contradict the parent legislation, but they become critical wherever a law is broad or open-ended — they fill gaps, define procedures, and protect against misuse; this is precisely why the new Rules have drawn criticism.

Issues Highlighting Critical Gaps in the Labour Codes

1. **Fixed-Term Employment: A Door Left Wide Open**
   - **Formal introduction without safeguards:** The Industrial Relations Code formally introduced Fixed-Term Employment (FTE) into India's labour law framework, although such arrangements had already been widely used for decades.
   - **No minimum tenure specified:** Neither the Code nor the Rules specify a minimum tenure for FTE contracts; a minimum period of one year could have protected workers from exploitatively short-term engagements.
   - **Unlimited renewals permitted:** The Rules remain silent on any cap for the number of contract renewals, opening the possibility that even permanent regular positions could be converted into FTEs with unlimited renewals — a significant regression in job security.
2. **Minimum Wages: Vague Standards and Embedded Gender Bias**
   - **Unclear floor wage definition:** The Code on Wages (Central) Rules provide only a vague definition of 'floor wage' without clearly distinguishing it from the minimum wage, leaving room for ambiguity in actual wage fixation.
   - **Symbolic consultations:** While the Rules require consultation with State governments before fixing wages, they specify no framework for such consultations, raising fears that the process will remain largely symbolic.
   - **Gender bias entrenched in wage-fixing:** The Rules perpetuate a gender bias baked into existing convention — a four-member family is treated as comprising three consumption units, where an adult female is assigned a weight of 0.8 against 1.0 for an adult male, yet the Rules do nothing to correct this discriminatory practice.
   - **Flawed hourly wage formula:** The Rules define the hourly wage as simply the daily wage divided by eight — a conceptually flawed approach, since workers may not find work for the remaining hours of the day; internationally, minimum hourly wages are fixed independently of daily wages, which is especially important for domestic workers and the growing gig economy.
3. **Gig Workers: Left in a Legal Grey Zone**
   - **Employment status unresolved:** The Social Security Code (Central) Rules make no attempt to clarify the employment relationship of gig and platform workers; they continue to be treated as self-employed and remain part of the unorganised workforce, outside the protective ambit of formal labour law.
   - **Mandatory gratuity insurance undefined:** The Rules are silent on the modalities for mandatory gratuity insurance envisaged under the Code — a safeguard meant to protect workers from employers who fail to pay gratuity — leaving this important worker protection undefined in practice.
4. **Trade Union Recognition: A Higher Bar, Less Bargaining Power**
   - **30% membership threshold introduced by Rules:** The Industrial Relations Code (Central) Rules require that a sole registered trade union must have at least 30% membership to be formally recognised — critically, this threshold does not appear in the Code itself and has been introduced unilaterally through the Rules.

- **Weakening of collective bargaining:** In large establishments, smaller or newly formed unions may struggle to meet this 30% bar, further eroding workers' collective bargaining power at a time when union membership has already been declining for decades.
- **Ambiguity in FTE renewal terms:** The Rules also fail to provide clarity on the conditions for engaging and renewing fixed-term employees, leaving significant scope for ambiguity and potential misuse by employers.

5. **Missing Safeguards in Occupational Safety and Contract Labour**
    - **Plantation workers' welfare omitted:** The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (Central) Rules omit certain occupation-specific welfare measures — notably housing and medical facilities for plantation workers — leaving a historically vulnerable workforce without adequate statutory protection.
    - **Core versus non-core activity undefined:** The Rules do not specify which activities may be performed by contract labour, nor do they distinguish between core and non-core activities, facilitating the growing informalisation of the labour market through the use of contract labour even in core operations of an establishment.

Way Forward

- **Amend Rules to cap FTE renewals:** The government should revisit the Industrial Relations Code Rules to introduce a minimum tenure of one year for fixed-term contracts and a ceiling on the number of renewals to prevent abuse of the FTE mechanism.
- **Reform the wage-fixing methodology:** The wage-fixing convention must be revised to eliminate the gender-weighted consumption unit approach; an independent expert body should determine minimum hourly wages separately from daily wage rates, in line with international best practices.
- **Clarify gig worker classification:** A clear legal definition of the employment relationship for gig and platform workers must be provided through subordinate legislation, along with mandatory notification of gratuity insurance modalities under the Social Security Code.
- **Revise trade union recognition threshold:** The 30% membership threshold for union recognition should be reconsidered or its rationale explained transparently; where multiple unions exist, a graduated recognition framework would better protect workers' right to collective bargaining.
- **Define core and non-core activities:** The Occupational Safety Code Rules must specify a clear list of core activities in which contract labour cannot be deployed, curbing the informalisation of permanent jobs and providing legal certainty to both workers and employers.
- **Inclusive tripartite consultations:** Wage fixation and rule-making processes should involve meaningful consultation with trade unions and civil society organisations, not merely state governments, to ensure that worker perspectives are genuinely incorporated.

Conclusion

- Labour reform must balance the ease of doing business with the dignity of work, and when rules that could have protected millions are left deliberately vague, it is not a legislative oversight but a policy choice that the working class will live with for years.

- The notification of Labour Code Rules marks the completion of a legal process, but it is also a missed opportunity to address long-standing structural inequities and the government must urgently undertake targeted amendments to ensure that the promise of 'labour reform' translates into genuine worker protection.

Q. Labour reforms should balance economic efficiency with social justice. In the light of the recently notified Labour Code Rules, discuss whether India's labour reforms adequately protect workers' rights. 15 Marks

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