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EXAMINATION**

From

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GENERAL STUDIES 2

1.1. POLITY & GOVERNANCE

1.1.1. WHY ARE GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS SHUTTING DOWN?

Context

Several Indian states—including **Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha, Maharashtra, Punjab, and Bihar**—have initiated **school rationalisation** by merging or closing government schools with very low enrolment. However, concerns have emerged regarding **children's access to education, increased dropouts, gender inequality, and the constitutional Right to Education (RTE)**.



Introduction

Education is not merely a welfare measure but a **fundamental right guaranteed under Article 21A of the Constitution**. The **Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act, 2009** seeks to ensure universal access to elementary education. While school rationalisation aims to improve efficiency by consolidating underutilized schools, indiscriminate closure of government schools—especially in rural, tribal and remote areas—may undermine **equity, inclusiveness and constitutional commitments**.

What is School Rationalisation?

School rationalisation refers to the **merging, relocation or closure of schools** with extremely low enrolment and redeployment of teachers and infrastructure to schools with better student strength.

Objectives

- Efficient utilisation of teachers
- Better pupil-teacher ratio
- Optimum use of infrastructure

Why Are Government Schools Being Shut Down?

1. Declining Student Enrolment

Government schools are witnessing continuous decline in enrolment because of:

- Preference for private schools
- Better English-medium education
- Perceived higher quality
- Migration towards urban centres
- **Government Findings**
- **UDISE+** data shows a gradual decline in enrolment in many government elementary schools while private school enrolment has increased over the last decade in several states.

2. Extremely Low Student Strength

Thousands of schools have:

- Less than 20 students
- Single-digit enrolment

3. Teacher Shortage and Unequal Distribution

Many schools have:

- Only one teacher
- Vacant teaching posts
- Subject teacher shortages

4. Fiscal Constraints

Governments face increasing expenditure on:

- Salaries
- Infrastructure
- Maintenance
- Administrative costs

5. Infrastructure Consolidation

Governments argue that larger schools provide:

- Science laboratories
- Libraries
- Digital classrooms
- Sports facilities
- Better extracurricular activities

Instead of maintaining multiple poorly equipped schools.

Implications of Government School Closures

1. Reduced Educational Access

Closure increases the distance to the nearest school. Consequences include:

- Higher transportation costs
- Safety concerns
- Irregular attendance
- Increased absenteeism

Remote and tribal children are disproportionately affected.

2. Increase in Dropout Rates

Longer travel discourages attendance, particularly among:

- Girls
- Tribal children
- Children with disabilities
- Economically weaker sections

This undermines the objective of universal elementary education.

3. Gender Inequality

Girls face:

- Safety concerns
- Social restrictions
- Lack of transport
- Early marriage risks

Parents may discontinue girls' education if schools are distant.

4. Impact on Marginalised Communities

Most affected groups include:

- Scheduled Tribes
- Scheduled Castes
- Minorities
- Forest dwellers
- Aspirational districts

Educational inequality may widen.

5. Violation of RTE Spirit

Although schools may technically be merged, practical accessibility may decline, weakening:

- Neighbourhood school concept
- Equity
- Inclusion
- Universal education

6. Teacher Displacement

Rationalisation may involve:

- Frequent transfers
- Administrative burden
- Reduced community engagement
- Teacher dissatisfaction

Government Reports and Findings on implication

1. UDISE+ (Unified District Information System for Education)

Highlights:

- Significant number of schools have fewer than 30 students.
- Teacher vacancies continue in many states.
- Infrastructure has improved but quality disparities remain.

2. ASER (Annual Status of Education Report)

Findings include:

- Persistent learning deficits in reading and arithmetic.
- Foundational learning gaps remain despite improved enrolment.
- School quality influences parental preference more than proximity.

3. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020

NEP recommends:

- **School Complex/Cluster Model**
- Sharing teachers
- Resource pooling
- Better academic support
- Improved governance

Importantly, NEP does **not advocate indiscriminate closure**, but strengthening access through school complexes while ensuring equitable availability.

4. NITI Aayog – School Education Quality Index (SEQI)

Highlights:

- Learning outcomes vary significantly across states.
- Governance reforms and teacher quality are central to improvement.
- Educational quality is as important as enrolment.

Way Forward

1. Adopt NEP 2020 School Complex Model

Instead of closing schools, create:

- School clusters
- Shared teachers
- Shared laboratories
- Shared digital facilities
- Common administrative support

2. Distance-Based Rationalisation

Closure should never occur where students must travel beyond RTE neighbourhood norms or where geography creates access barriers.

3. Child Impact Assessment

Before any closure, governments should assess:

- Travel distance
- Dropout risk
- Gender impact
- Disability access
- Tribal implications

4. Strengthen Foundational Learning

Implement the **NIPUN Bharat Mission** to improve foundational literacy and numeracy, making government schools more attractive through better learning outcomes.

5. Improve School Quality

Focus on:

- Teacher training (NISHTHA)
- Smart classrooms
- Libraries
- Laboratories
- Sports infrastructure
- ICT-enabled education
- Regular teacher recruitment

6. Digital and Hybrid Education

Expand:

- PM eVIDYA

- DIKSHA Platform
- SWAYAM
- Digital classrooms

While ensuring adequate digital infrastructure and connectivity.

Conclusion

- Restructuring of government schools must uphold the constitutional guarantee under **Article 21A**, protect the **neighbourhood school principle**, and ensure that **no child—especially girls, tribal children, children with disabilities, or those from economically weaker sections—is deprived of access to quality education**.
- A balanced approach, combining **NEP 2020's School Complex model, data-driven planning, community participation, safe transportation, and sustained investment in learning outcomes**, can transform rationalisation into an instrument of educational inclusion rather than exclusion.

Q. To what extent would the right to education under Article 21A mean that every child of the age of 6–14 years has a right to receive education in a neighborhood school? Discuss. 15 marks

1.1.2. GOLD IN INDIA: FROM JEWELLERY TO FINANCIAL ASSET

Context

India is witnessing a structural shift in gold ownership. While **jewellery demand is declining due to high prices**, investment demand through **ETFs, bars and coins is rising**. At the same time, households increasingly prefer **pledging existing gold for loans rather than selling it**, indicating that gold is evolving from a traditional ornament into a **financial asset and collateral**.



Introduction

Gold in India is shifting from a **cultural ornament to a financial asset**, with high prices reducing jewellery demand while **ETFs, bars, coins and gold loans** gain popularity.

Key Data: India's Changing Gold Demand and Gold-Lending Trends

1. **Overall Gold Demand:** Gold demand rose **2% YoY to 282 tonnes** in H1, indicating continued investor interest despite high prices.
2. **Jewellery Demand:** Jewellery demand declined **17.1% to 141.2 tonnes**, reflecting affordability pressures from rising gold prices.
3. **Gold Loans:** Retail bank loans against pledged gold jewellery reached **₹4.3 lakh crore**, registering **124% YoY growth** by February 2026.
4. **Overall Gold-Lending Portfolio:** Gold loans across the banking system touched **₹5.4 lakh crore** by June 2026, growing nearly **94% YoY**.
5. **Gold ETFs:** Indian gold ETFs recorded a **record 20-tonne net demand in Q1**, signalling growing financialisation of gold investment.

6. **Bars and Coins:** Demand for bars and coins strengthened sharply, with **volume rising 21.3% and value 105.5%** in H1 FY27.

Significance of the Changing Gold Demand Pattern in India

1. Changing Nature of Household Savings
 - Gold is shifting from a **traditional jewellery asset to an investment and financial asset**.
 - This reflects the broader **financialisation of household savings** in India.
2. Better Monetisation of Household Wealth
 - Gold loans allow households to **unlock the value of existing gold without selling it**.
 - Thus, idle household wealth can be converted into **short-term productive liquidity**.
3. Boost to Financial Inclusion
 - Gold-backed credit provides relatively quick access to formal finance, particularly for **small borrowers and underserved households**.
 - It can reduce dependence on informal sources of high-cost credit.
4. Potential External-Sector Benefits
 - Greater recycling and mobilisation of domestic gold can reduce dependence on **imported gold**.
 - This can help moderate the **import bill and pressure on the Current Account Deficit**.
5. Diversification of Gold Investment
 - Rising demand for **ETFs, bars and coins** provides households with alternatives to physical jewellery.
 - This can improve **liquidity, transparency and portfolio diversification**.
6. Opportunity for Financial Innovation
 - India's vast privately held gold stock offers scope for **efficient gold monetisation, recycling and regulated financial products**.
 - With appropriate reforms, gold can move from **idle wealth to productive financial capital**.

Challenges of the Changing Gold Demand and Gold-Loan Landscape in India

1. Risk of Over-Indebtedness
 - Easy availability of gold loans may encourage households to **borrow beyond their repayment capacity**.
 - This can increase financial stress, particularly among vulnerable borrowers.
2. Loss of Household Assets
 - Loan default can lead to **auction of pledged jewellery**, converting temporary financial distress into permanent loss of family wealth.
 - This is especially significant where gold has strong **social and emotional value**.
3. Gold Price Volatility
 - Gold-backed lending is dependent on the value of the collateral.
 - A sharp fall in gold prices can weaken **collateral coverage and lender security**.

4. Regulatory and Valuation Concerns

- Rapid expansion of gold lending can create risks of **aggressive lending, improper valuation and weak risk assessment**.
- Strong regulatory oversight is therefore necessary across banks and NBFCs.

5. Limited Productive Use of Credit

- Gold loans may be used for **consumption, medical expenses or debt repayment** rather than productive investment.
- This limits their contribution to **income generation and economic growth**.

6. Weak Gold Monetisation Ecosystem

- Taxation issues, procedural complexity, purity concerns and emotional attachment have limited the success of the **Gold Monetisation Scheme**.
- India's large household gold stock therefore remains **largely outside the formal financial system**.

7. Continued Import Dependence

- Rising investment demand for physical gold can continue to sustain **gold imports**, even as jewellery demand declines.
- This can keep pressure on the **trade balance and Current Account**.

Way Forward

1. Simplify Gold Monetisation: Streamline procedures, reduce transaction costs and ensure transparent valuation to make gold deposits more attractive.
2. Strengthen Gold Recycling: Build an organised ecosystem for collection, assaying, refining and recycling of domestic gold.
3. Promote Financial Gold: Encourage regulated instruments such as **Gold ETFs and other transparent gold-based products** for safer investment.
4. Ensure Responsible Gold Lending: Strengthen LTV norms, borrower disclosures, valuation standards and fair auction mechanisms to prevent over-leveraging.
5. Leverage Digital Technology: Use digital systems for gold valuation, loan documentation, collateral tracking and transparent auctions.
6. Expand Financial Inclusion: Integrate gold-backed credit with formal banking and MSME finance rather than allowing it to become a substitute for institutional credit.
7. Improve Awareness and Consumer Protection: Increase awareness about gold monetisation, loan risks, interest costs and repayment obligations to enable informed household decisions.

Conclusion

India's relationship with gold is **evolving from tradition to financialisation**. With efficient recycling, responsible lending and better monetisation, household gold can become **productive capital while reducing import dependence**.

Q. India's gold market is shifting from jewellery to investment and collateral-based lending. Discuss the **significance and challenges** of this transformation. Suggest measures to harness household gold for **financial inclusion and external-sector stability**. **15 Marks**

1.2. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

1.2.1. WHY HAS POK ERUPTED IN PROTESTS?

Context

Mass protests have erupted across **Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK)** against alleged electoral manipulation, lack of political representation and poor governance. The protests, led by the **Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JKJAAC)**, have been met with a severe security crackdown by Pakistani authorities.



Introduction

Initially triggered by rising inflation and economic hardships, the movement in PoK has evolved into a broader demand for democratic representation, accountability and political autonomy. The unrest highlights longstanding governance deficits and carries significant implications for regional stability and India-Pakistan relations.

Why Are the Protests Taking Place?

1. **Reservation of Seats for Refugees:** Of the **45 elected seats** in the PoK Assembly, **12 are reserved for refugees from the erstwhile Jammu & Kashmir residing outside PoK**, who vote from outside the region. Protesters argue that this reduces the political representation of local residents and enables Islamabad to exert greater influence over the region's democratic process.
2. **Allegations of Electoral Manipulation:** The ongoing **three-phase elections** have been criticised for lacking transparency, fairness and credibility. The **Jammu Kashmir Joint Awami Action Committee (JKJAAC)** alleges electoral irregularities and demands electoral reforms, claiming that the current process does not genuinely reflect the will of the local population.
3. **Governance Deficit:** Residents accuse Islamabad-backed governments of **poor governance, inadequate development, weak public services and limited political accountability**. Years of perceived neglect and centralised decision-making have deepened public dissatisfaction and strengthened demands for greater local autonomy and responsive governance.
4. **Economic Distress:** The protest movement initially emerged in response to **inflation, unemployment and the rising prices of essential commodities**, which severely affected people's livelihoods after the COVID-19 pandemic. Over time, these economic grievances evolved into a broader movement demanding political rights and structural governance reforms.
5. **Excessive Use of Force:** Pakistani security forces have reportedly responded to demonstrations with **live ammunition, sniper fire and large-scale crackdowns**, leading to numerous deaths and injuries. The use of disproportionate force has intensified public anger, transformed the protests into a wider civil rights movement and attracted international attention over alleged human rights violations.

Key Associated Issues

1. **Democratic Deficit:** Limited political representation and the perceived dominance of Islamabad in PoK's affairs have weakened the legitimacy of democratic institutions. The reservation of seats

for non-resident refugees has further fuelled demands for greater local representation and political autonomy.

2. **Human Rights Concerns:** Allegations of excessive use of force, including live ammunition and communication restrictions, raise serious concerns over the protection of civil liberties and the right to peaceful protest. The crackdown has also drawn criticism from international human rights organisations.
3. **Governance Failure:** Persistent economic neglect, inadequate public services and weak institutional accountability have eroded public confidence in the administration. The protests reflect broader dissatisfaction with governance rather than merely opposition to the ongoing elections.
4. **Electoral Credibility:** Allegations of electoral irregularities and lack of transparency have undermined public faith in the electoral process. Credible and representative elections are essential for ensuring democratic legitimacy and political stability.
5. **Regional Stability:** The protests are taking place in a strategically sensitive region along the **Line of Control (LoC)**, increasing security concerns for both India and Pakistan. Prolonged instability could escalate cross-border tensions and adversely affect regional peace and security.

India's Diplomatic and Strategic Response

- **Condemned the Crackdown:** India strongly condemned the use of excessive force against civilians and expressed concern over the reported deaths and injuries during the protests.
- **Criticised Pakistan's Actions:** The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) criticised Pakistan's handling of the unrest, accusing its establishment of suppressing democratic aspirations and violating the rights of PoK residents.
- **Reiterated India's Position:** India reaffirmed that **Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) is an integral part of India** and stated that Pakistan has no legal or moral authority over the territory.

International Human Rights Response

Amnesty International

- Amnesty International urged Pakistani authorities to exercise restraint, respect the right to peaceful assembly and avoid the excessive use of force against protesters.
- It also called for the **restoration of internet and communication services**, unhindered access for independent media and observers, and a transparent investigation into alleged human rights violations.

Overseas Kashmiri Diaspora

- Sections of the **Mirpuri Kashmiri diaspora**, particularly in the United Kingdom, launched campaigns highlighting the crackdown and urging Pakistan to respect democratic rights and civil liberties.
- The growing international attention has increased pressure on Pakistan to ensure accountability, transparency and adherence to international human rights standards.

Strategic Significance for India

1. Security of the Line of Control (LoC)

- The protests are concentrated in **Rawalakot, Muzaffarabad and Kotli**, areas located close to the **Line of Control (LoC)**, making the unrest strategically significant for India's border

security. Any prolonged instability in these regions could alter the security dynamics along the LoC and require heightened vigilance by Indian security forces.

2. Implications for Cross-Border Security

- Pakistan-occupied Kashmir has historically served as a base for **cross-border infiltration, terrorist launch pads and militant training camps** targeting India. Political instability and administrative breakdown could either weaken Pakistan's control or prompt increased military deployment, both of which have implications for India's internal and border security.

3. Counter-Terrorism Dimension

- Several protest-affected areas, including **Muzaffarabad, Kotli and Rawalakot**, were among the locations that India claimed to have targeted during **Operation Sindoor (2025)** against terror infrastructure. The current unrest highlights the strategic importance of these regions in India's counter-terrorism and national security calculus.

4. India–Pakistan Relations

- The developments have added another point of contention in the already strained India–Pakistan relationship. India's criticism of Pakistan's handling of the protests reinforces its long-standing position on Pakistan's governance of PoK and may further complicate bilateral engagement.

5. Diplomatic and Legal Significance

- India has consistently maintained that **Pakistan-occupied Kashmir is an integral part of India** and has used the unrest to highlight issues of governance, democratic deficit and human rights in the region. The protests provide India with an opportunity to strengthen its diplomatic narrative on Pakistan's administration of PoK in international forums.

6. Regional Stability

- Continued unrest in PoK has the potential to increase tensions in a strategically sensitive region bordering **India, Pakistan and China**. Sustained instability could have wider implications for regional peace, border management and South Asian security

Way Forward

1. Continue Principled Diplomatic Engagement

- India should consistently highlight issues of **human rights, democratic governance and civil liberties in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK)** through bilateral engagements and appropriate international forums, while adhering to international law and its long-standing diplomatic position.

2. Strengthen Border and Internal Security

- Given the strategic location of the unrest near the **Line of Control (LoC)**, India should enhance border surveillance, intelligence sharing and counter-infiltration measures to prevent any spillover of instability or cross-border terrorism.

3. Reinforce India's Legal and Diplomatic Position

- India should continue to reaffirm that **Pakistan-occupied Kashmir is an integral part of India** and expose governance deficits, democratic shortcomings and human rights violations in PoK through credible diplomatic channels.

4. Promote Development in Jammu & Kashmir

- Sustained investment in infrastructure, connectivity, education, healthcare and employment in **Jammu & Kashmir** can strengthen public confidence and demonstrate the benefits of democratic governance and inclusive development.

5. Counter Misinformation through Strategic Communication

- India should proactively disseminate factual information on developments in PoK through official channels and public diplomacy to counter misinformation and strengthen its international narrative.

6. Build International Support

- India should engage with democratic partners, multilateral institutions and human rights organisations to encourage respect for fundamental freedoms and transparent governance in PoK without internationalising the bilateral dispute.

7. Pursue Peace with Vigilance

- While remaining committed to peace and regional stability, India should maintain a robust security posture along the LoC and continue to combat cross-border terrorism through a calibrated combination of diplomacy, deterrence and preparedness.

Conclusion

The PoK protests highlight the need for **democratic governance, political representation and respect for human rights**. For India, they reinforce the importance of **border security, regional stability and its consistent position that PoK is an integral part of India**.

Q. The protests in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK) underscore the link between governance, political representation and regional stability. Analyse in the context of India's neighbourhood policy. 15 Marks

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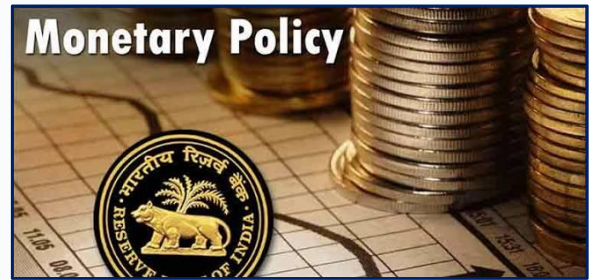
Prelims Test Series

2.1. ECONOMY

2.1.1. AN ANALYTICAL REVIEW OF RBI'S MONETARY POLICY STANCE

Context

The Monetary Policy Committee (MPC) of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) is convening for its bi-monthly review, where it is widely expected to maintain a status quo on policy rates while navigating significant domestic and global economic uncertainties.



Introduction

Monetary policy formulation in India operates under the statutory Flexible Inflation Targeting (FIT) framework, which mandates the Reserve Bank of India to anchor headline Consumer Price Index (CPI) inflation at 4% within a 2%–6% tolerance band. While headline inflation remains near the target, formulating policy requires evaluating forward-looking macroeconomic risks ranging from volatile global energy markets to uneven domestic growth dynamics.

Key Determinants & Macroeconomic Dynamics

1. The Dual Mandate Calculus: Anchoring Inflation vs. Nurturing Growth

- The repo rate acts as the primary signal rate; lowering it stimulates borrowing and investment during growth slowdowns, while raising it dampens excess aggregate demand when inflation surges.
- Maintaining inflation around 4% preserves consumer purchasing power without eroding producer profit margins, ensuring sustained long-term economic expansion.

2. Exogenous Energy Shocks and Geopolitical Vectors

- Volatility in global crude oil prices—exacerbated by US-Iran tensions and maritime security risks in the Red Sea and Strait of Hormuz—presents a direct threat to domestic stability.
- An 11% surge in crude oil prices since mid-June stresses India's Current Account Deficit (CAD), puts depreciative pressure on the Indian Rupee, and increases input costs across sectors.

3. Agrarian Vulnerabilities and Climate-Induced Risks

- Intensifying El Niño conditions, a 13% rainfall deficit, and depleted reservoir levels pose serious risks to agricultural output and Rabi sowing.
- With food inflation persisting above 5%, climate-driven supply disruptions threaten to spill over into generalized inflation, constraining the space for rate cuts.

4. Sectoral Divergence in High-Frequency Indicators

- Macroeconomic data presents a mixed picture of underlying growth momentum: airline passenger traffic, rail freight, and diesel consumption indicate slowdowns in specific service and industrial channels.
- Conversely, sustained growth in port cargo traffic, vehicle registrations, and GST collections highlights resilient consumption and external trade segments, requiring a cautious, non-disruptive rate environment.

5. Global Interest Rate Differentials and Capital Flow Dynamics

- Synchronized policy rate holds by major central banks—including the US Federal Reserve, European Central Bank, Bank of Japan, and Bank of England—reduce immediate pressure on the RBI to adjust rates to protect yield differentials.
- Maintaining stable rate differentials prevents sudden capital outflows from domestic debt markets without artificially inflating borrowing costs for the government.

Significance of the Monetary Policy Stance

1. Keeps retail inflation anchored near the 4% target to safeguard real consumer purchasing power.
2. Provides stability to long-term borrowing costs, encouraging sustained private sector capital expenditure.
3. Insulates domestic financial markets from global interest rate volatility and foreign portfolio outflows.
4. Prevents systemic liquidity oversupply that could trigger demand-pull inflationary pressures.
5. Balances interest rate structures to maintain fiscal debt sustainability for the sovereign.

Key Structural Challenges

Monetary policy tools are ineffective against supply-side shocks such as global crude oil spikes and geopolitical trade disruptions.

1. Climate-induced agricultural volatility like El Niño can cause sudden food price surges independent of domestic demand conditions.
2. Transmission delays hinder the rapid passthrough of policy rate changes to commercial bank lending rates.
3. Sectoral divergence makes it difficult to adjust policy rates without inadvertently hurting lagging economic sectors.
4. Global central bank policy shifts create persistent uncertainty for domestic exchange rate management and foreign capital flows.

Way Forward

1. Maintain a data-dependent, forward-looking monetary stance to preemptively address emerging inflationary risks.
2. Enhance supply-chain resilience and strategic food reserves to buffer against climate-induced agricultural shocks.
3. Improve monetary policy transmission mechanisms across commercial banks to ensure efficient credit delivery.
4. Strengthen fiscal-monetary policy coordination to support vulnerable economic sectors without expanding public debt.
5. Utilize foreign exchange reserve buffers to absorb currency volatility caused by fluctuating crude oil prices.
6. Expand high-frequency tracking systems to monitor sectoral divergence and refine disaggregated growth forecasting models.

Conclusion

The Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy review reflects a complex balancing act between curbing inflation and supporting economic recovery. In an environment marked by geopolitical friction, volatile commodity markets, and climate risks, maintaining a cautious and adaptable monetary framework remains essential for long-term macroeconomic stability.

Q. *The Flexible Inflation Targeting (FIT) framework requires balancing price stability with economic growth amidst severe external and climate-induced shocks. Discuss the factors influencing the Reserve Bank of India's monetary policy decisions and the associated challenges. 15 Marks*

2.2. ENVIRONMENT

2.2.1. THE ROAD AHEAD FOR THE ASIATIC LION

Context

According to recent conservation assessments, the **Asiatic lion (*Panthera leo persica*)** population has increased from nearly **100–150 individuals in the 1960s to over 1,000 today**, reflecting one of the world's greatest wildlife conservation success stories. However, **almost the entire global population remains confined to the Greater Gir Landscape of Gujarat**, exposing the species to risks such as **habitat fragmentation, disease outbreaks, climate-induced disasters, human-lion conflict, and genetic bottlenecks**.



Introduction

The **Asiatic lion**, once distributed from **Greece and the Middle East to northern India**, today survives only in the **Greater Gir Landscape of Gujarat**, making it one of the world's most geographically restricted large carnivores.

Efforts under **Project Lion**, community participation, and strong political commitment have revived its population, the continued confinement of the species to a **single ecological landscape** violates a fundamental principle of conservation biology—**avoiding concentration of an entire species in one location**.

Why is the Asiatic Lion Globally Significant?

1. Last Wild Population of Asiatic Lions

- Represents the **only surviving wild population** of the Asiatic subspecies.
- Extinction would mean the **global disappearance** of the Asiatic lion.

2. Flagship Species

- Protects the **dry deciduous forest ecosystem** of western India.
- Conserves numerous associated species through the **umbrella effect**.

3. Keystone Predator

- Maintains ecological balance by regulating herbivore populations.
- Supports healthy trophic interactions.

4. Cultural Significance

- Symbol of courage and royalty in Indian civilization.
- Associated with:
 - Goddess Durga
 - Ashoka Pillar (National Emblem)
 - Ancient Indian kingdoms

India's journey to lion conservation initiatives

Period	Conservation Focus	Key Achievements
Late 19th Century	Preventing extinction	Hunting ban by Nawab of Junagadh
1947–1972	Basic protection	Administrative protection and monitoring
1972–1990	Legal & habitat conservation	Wildlife (Protection) Act, Gir National Park, anti-poaching
1990–2010	Scientific & community-based conservation	Population monitoring, habitat restoration, Maldhari participation
2010–2020	Landscape-level conservation	Expansion beyond Gir, conflict mitigation, disease surveillance
2020–Present	Ecological resilience & species security	Project Lion, technology-driven conservation, climate resilience, focus on second wild population

Reasons Behind India's Success in Asiatic Lion Conservation

1. Expansion of Lion Distribution Beyond Gir: From Protected Area to Landscape-Level Conservation

- Reduced population pressure and overcrowding within Gir National Park.
- Enabled natural dispersal into suitable habitats, lowering competition for food and territory
- Example: Gir National Park, Gir Wildlife Sanctuary.

2. Community Participation: Transforming Local Communities into Conservation Partners

- Built trust between local communities and the Forest Department.
- Ensured long-term sustainability of conservation through **community stewardship**.
- Example: The **Maldhari pastoral community** has actively contributed through traditional coexistence with lions.

3. Improvement in the Wild Prey Base: Ensuring Ecological Sustainability

- Ensured a stable and adequate food supply for lions.
- Reduced dependence on livestock, thereby lowering human–lion conflicts.
- Example: significant increase in wild herbivore populations, including Chital, Nilgai

4. Strong Protection Measures and Reduction in Poaching

- Significantly reduced illegal hunting and wildlife trafficking.
- Strengthened enforcement of the **Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972**, creating a strong deterrent against wildlife crimes.

Why Does the Asiatic Lion Continue to Face Serious Threats?

1. Single Population Risk: The Greatest Threat to Long-Term Survival

- Although the lion population has increased significantly, **more than 95% of the world's wild Asiatic lions remain concentrated within the Greater Gir Landscape of Gujarat**. This makes the species highly vulnerable because **its entire global population is dependent on a single geographical region**.
- **Potential Catastrophic Threats are** Epidemic disease outbreaks, Large-scale forest fires.

2. Disease Outbreaks: An Emerging Biological Threat

- High population density and close proximity among lions significantly increase the risk of infectious diseases spreading rapidly through the population.
- In **2018**, approximately **23 Asiatic lions died** in Gir due to **Canine Distemper Virus (CDV)** and associated protozoan infections.

3. Habitat Fragmentation: Shrinking and Isolated Habitats

- Rapid developmental activities like expansion of road networks, railway lines, mining activities are fragmenting the Greater Gir Landscape, affecting the movement and survival of dispersing lions.

4. Rising Human–Lion Conflict

- As lion numbers have increased, their distribution has expanded beyond protected forests into **agricultural fields, grazing lands, villages, and coastal areas**.
- Today, **nearly half of the Asiatic lion population lives outside Protected Areas**, increasing interactions with humans

5. Climate Change: A Growing Threat to Habitat Stability

- Climate change has emerged as a major challenge by altering habitat conditions and increasing the frequency of extreme weather events across western India.
- Rising temperatures and prolonged heatwaves, increased frequency and severity of droughts are affecting survival of Asiatic lions in protected landscapes.

International Best Practices

African Lion Conservation

- Multiple protected populations
- Landscape connectivity
- Transboundary conservation areas

IUCN Guidelines

Recommend:

- Multiple viable populations
- Meta-population management
- Long-term genetic monitoring

Way Forward

1. Adopt a Meta-population Approach

- Establish multiple, geographically separated yet interconnected lion populations.
- Facilitate **scientific translocations** between habitats to maintain genetic exchange.

2. Establish a Second Free-Ranging Wild Population

- Implement the **Supreme Court's 2013 judgment** directing the translocation of Asiatic lions.
- Develop **Kuno National Park (Madhya Pradesh)** or other scientifically suitable habitats as a second wild population.

3. Strengthen Wildlife Disease Surveillance through a 'One Health' Approach

- Conduct routine health screening of all lion populations establish dedicated **Wildlife Epidemiology and Disease Surveillance Units**.
- Developing an integrated **One Health surveillance system**, linking wildlife, livestock, and human health agencies.

4. Promote Community-Centric Conservation

- Strengthen and expedite livestock compensation mechanisms.
- Promote eco-tourism with equitable benefit-sharing for local communities.

5. Strengthen Scientific Population Management

- Maintain demographic viability by balancing age and sex structures.
- Use **GIS, Artificial Intelligence (AI), drones, GPS collars, camera traps, and real-time telemetry** for monitoring.

6. Strengthen Institutional Coordination and Cooperative Governance

- Enhance collaboration among **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA), Wildlife Institute of India (WII), Central Zoo Authority (CZA)** for improving policy coherence and implementation.

7. Government Initiatives

Several initiatives including Project Lion (2020), Integrated Development of Wildlife Habitats (IDWH), National Wildlife Action Plan (2017–2031), Wildlife Health Monitoring for conservation of lion population.

Conclusion

- The recovery of the **Asiatic lion** is a testament to India's successful model of **science-based conservation, strong legal protection, and community participation**.
- Going forward, the focus must shift from **population recovery to long-term species security** by ensuring habitat connectivity, establishing multiple viable populations, and building climate-resilient conservation systems.

Q. *Conservation success cannot be measured merely by an increase in species population. In the context of the Asiatic lion, critically examine why habitat connectivity, genetic diversity, and the establishment of multiple wild populations are essential for long-term species conservation. 15 Marks*

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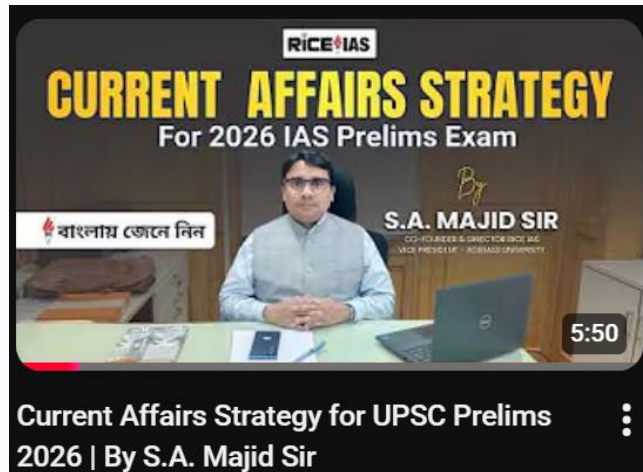
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