

**The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC
 CSE**

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In the 2026 Assembly polls, the Vengaivayal hamlet in Pudukkottai district witnessed a near-total electoral boycott. Residents hoisted black flags to protest against the CB-CID (Crime Branch-Criminal Investigation Department) probe, which they allege has victimized the community twice over—first through a heinous act of untouchability and subsequently by framing three local Dalit youths as the perpetrators. This incident highlights the deep-seated challenges in the criminal justice system when dealing with caste-based atrocities and the efficacy of "electoral boycott" as a tool for political bargaining.

A majority of Vengaivayal's SC residents boycott T.N. Assembly poll over 2022 water contamination case

Nacchinarkkiniyan M.
 PUDUKKOTTAI

A majority of the residents of Vengaivayal, a Scheduled Caste hamlet in Pudukkottai district, boycotted the election on Thursday, alleging that members of their community had been falsely implicated in the 2022 incident in which human faeces were found in an overhead drinking water tank. Only eight of the 69 residents cast their votes.

Black flags were hoisted across the village. The residents reiterated their demand for action against the "real culprits". They maintained that the CB-CID, which probed the case, had wrongly named residents of the hamlet as the accused.

"They are framing us in



Sending a signal: Black flags were hoisted across Vengaivayal, including near the overhead water tank that was at the centre of the contamination incident in 2022. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

a case where we are the victims. In the last Lok Sabha election, when officials tried to persuade us to vote, we were promised that the real culprits would be arrested, and our infrastructure and livelihood needs would be addressed. None of the promises have been kept. So, we are determined not to vote," said

K.R. Murugan, a resident.

Polling, however, was peaceful in the neighbouring Eraiur, where the residents withdrew their election boycott call after talks with officials.

According to officials, peace talks were held ahead of polling by the Gandarvakottai Assistant Election Officer, the Ku-

lathur Tahsildar, and police officers. These efforts helped to persuade the Eraiur residents to vote, but not the Vengaivayal residents.

The polling booth, operated at the Vengaivayal Panchayat Union Government Primary School, had 549 voters, including 69 from Vengaivayal. None of them turned up to vote, sources said.

The contamination incident triggered tension at Vengaivayal and Eraiur. Following an inquiry, the CB-CID registered a case against some residents of Vengaivayal, drawing strong opposition from the hamlet.

In the run-up to the election, the residents of both villages announced a poll boycott. They installed banners listing their de-

mands, including the arrest of the "real culprits" in the contamination case. Eraiur residents also sought the withdrawal of cases filed under the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act against them; restoration of a government bus service between Pudukkottai and Kavari Nagar through Eraiur; and improved civic amenities.

No voting in LS poll

The villages had called for a boycott of the 2024 Lok Sabha election. However, after negotiations, the Vengaivayal residents took part in the voting, while the Eraiur residents abstained. This time, the Eraiur residents voted, while the Vengaivayal residents boycotted the election.

Key Issues & Analysis

1. Crisis of Judicial Credibility

- **Contradictory Narratives:** The CB-CID's charge sheet attributes the 2022 contamination (human excreta found in a drinking water tank) to "personal enmity" and "internal rivalry" among the SC residents.
- **The Victim's Dilemma:** The community argues that it is illogical for victims to contaminate their own only source of drinking water. This creates a **perception gap** where the state's scientific investigation (DNA, voice tests) clashes with the community's lived reality of systemic discrimination.

2. Electoral Boycott as Political Agency

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- **Strategic Dissent:** Unlike the 2024 Lok Sabha polls—where Vengaiyaval voted after administrative assurances—the 2026 boycott signals a breakdown in trust.
- **Divergent Outcomes:** The neighboring village, Eraiyur (where residents are mostly from dominant castes), withdrew their boycott after negotiations regarding infrastructure and the withdrawal of SC/ST Act cases against them. This highlights how different social groups leverage the "vote" to negotiate with the state for varied ends (justice vs. amenities).

3. Socio-Legal Implications

- **Persistence of Untouchability:** The original incident is one of the most visceral modern examples of "untouchability" (Article 17). The delay in securing a conviction that satisfies the community points to the "tardy investigation" noted by judicial commissions in the past.
- **Role of Special Acts:** The demand for the withdrawal of cases under the **SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act** in neighboring Eraiyur reflects the ongoing tension regarding the "misuse" vs. "enforcement" of protective legislation.

4. Governance Challenges

- **Failure of Peace Committees:** Despite multiple rounds of talks by Revenue and Police officials (Tahsildars and Election Officers), the inability to bring Vengaiyaval to the booth suggests that "peace" is often treated as "quietness" rather than "justice."
- **Infrastructure vs. Dignity:** The residents' statement that "promises of housing and livelihood were not kept" suggests that the state often tries to substitute substantive justice with material compensation, which fails to address the psychological trauma of caste-based violence.

Ethical Dimensions (GS-IV)

- **Social Justice vs. Rule of Law:** The case presents a dilemma where the state follows the "rule of law" (based on CB-CID evidence), but the community perceives a "failure of justice."
- **Administrative Neutrality:** The incident tests the neutrality of the district administration in mediating between two conflicting social groups during a high-stakes election.

Conclusion

The Vengaiyaval boycott is not merely an electoral statistic but a **symptom of a deeper institutional trust deficit**. For a healthy democracy, the "right to vote" must be accompanied by the "right to dignity." While scientific evidence is paramount in a court of law, the socio-political resolution of such cases requires a more empathetic administrative approach that addresses the historical baggage of caste discrimination. Until the "real culprits" are identified to the satisfaction of the victims, the black flags of Vengaiyaval will continue to challenge the narrative of social progress in the region.

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UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques:In the context of the Indian Criminal Justice System, the 'CB-CID' (Crime Branch-Criminal Investigation Department) typically functions under the jurisdiction of:

- A) The Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)
- B) The State Government's Police Department
- C) The Ministry of Home Affairs (Union)
- D) The National Investigation Agency (NIA)

Ans: B)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: How would you balance the "Rule of Law" with the need for "Social Justice" to restore institutional trust?(150 Words)



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Page 04:GS II : International Relations / Prelims Exam

The launch of the theme and logo for the 4th India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-IV) by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar underscores a strategic pivot in India's foreign policy. Amidst a "turbulent world"—marked specifically by the 2026 U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict and subsequent energy shocks—the India-Africa partnership is evolving from a historical, anti-colonial bond into a modern, pragmatic alliance centered on resource security, capacity building, and South-South cooperation.

Indian ties with Africa signal stability in a turbulent world

Jaishankar highlights that India-Africa partnership is rooted in shared anti-colonial history and strengthened through capacity building, development cooperation, and strategic engagement

Kallol Bhattacharjee
 NEW DELHI

India's relationship with Africa delivers a message of "stability in a turbulent world", External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar said on Thursday. Speaking at the launch of the theme, website and logo of the upcoming fourth India-Africa Forum Summit (IAFS-IV), Mr. Jaishankar said India's ties with Africa were rooted in the common struggle for freedom from colonial rule. He highlighted development partnership and capacity building as key areas of collaboration between the two sides.

"As the world navigates through complex geopolitical and geoeconomic challenges, our partnership assumes particular significance. It will be a message of stability in a turbulent world, of reliability in an uncertain one and of solidarity in difficult times," Mr. Jaishankar said, presenting the India-Africa partnership as a process that will strengthen institutions and empower people.



External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar with African Ambassadors and delegates at the India-Africa Forum Summit in New Delhi. ANI

The Minister made the remarks while launching the theme, logo and website of IAFS-IV, to be held from May 28 to 31. The event was attended by New Delhi-based heads of missions and Ambassadors of African countries. The third edition of the India-Africa Forum Summit was held in October 2015. The theme of the upcoming summit is "Enduring partnership – shared vision".

Mr. Jaishankar's remarks obliquely referred to the situation in the Gulf region, which has come into focus over the past two

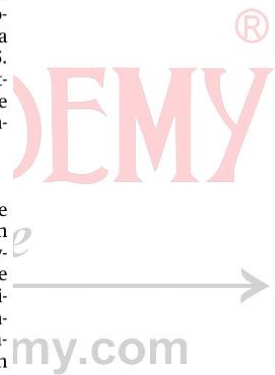
months due to the U.S.-Israel war on Iran that has triggered a global energy crisis. In view of disruptions in the supply of essential items such as petroleum, natural gas, and fertilizers, India is looking for stable alternative suppliers, with several African countries seen as potential partners. With disruptions in fertilizer supplies from Gulf countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, India is expected to focus on Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco to meet demand ahead of the next monsoon season.

Mr. Jaishankar highlighted India's long-term commitment, noting that the opening of 17 new diplomatic missions in Africa has taken the total to 46. With this, India's diplomatic footprint is now visible in "every region of the continent", he said.

'Living bridge'

He also referred to the three million-strong Indian diaspora in Africa as a "living bridge" connecting the two regions. He cited institutions such as the IIT, Zanzibar, the National Forensic Science University in Uganda, the Entrepreneurship Development Centre in Rwanda, and Centres of Information Technology in several African countries as examples of "people-centric cooperation".

Mr. Jaishankar said that outside the South Asian neighbourhood, Africa is the largest recipient of Indian overseas development support. "India has placed development cooperation and capacity-building programmes at the core of its partnership with Africa," he said.



Key Pillars of the India-Africa Partnership

1. Geopolitical Stability & Strategic Autonomy

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- **The "Stability" Message:** In the context of the 2026 global energy crisis, Africa is viewed as a "reliable" partner compared to the volatile West Asian (Gulf) corridor.
- **Institutional Strengthening:** India's support for the African Union's permanent membership in the G20 (achieved in 2023) continues to be the bedrock of this relationship, positioning India as the "Voice of the Global South."

2. Energy and Food Security (The Shift from the Gulf)

- **Diversification of Suppliers:** Due to disruptions in the Gulf (Qatar, Saudi Arabia), India is strategically pivoting toward North and West African nations.
- **The Fertilizer Nexus:** To secure the Indian agricultural cycle and the monsoon season, India is intensifying ties with **Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Morocco** for phosphates and fertilizers.
- **Energy Alternatives:** African nations like Nigeria, Angola, and Mozambique are critical to India's quest for stable petroleum and natural gas supplies.

3. Capacity Building & "People-Centric" Diplomacy

- **Educational Footprint:** The establishment of high-end institutions like **IIT Zanzibar** and **NFSU Uganda** represents a shift from "aid" to "empowerment."
- **The "Living Bridge":** The 3-million-strong Indian diaspora acts as a soft power tool, facilitating trade, investment, and cultural exchange.
- **Development Assistance:** Africa is now the largest recipient of Indian overseas development support outside the immediate neighborhood, primarily through Lines of Credit (LoCs).

4. Diplomatic Expansion

- India has significantly increased its diplomatic presence by opening **17 new missions**, bringing the total to **46**. This ensures that India's footprint is no longer restricted to Commonwealth Africa but extends to Francophone and Lusophone regions as well.

Strategic Challenges

- **Competition with China:** China's "Belt and Road Initiative" (BRI) and its heavy infrastructure investments in Africa remain a challenge to India's "capacity-building" model.
- **Security Concerns:** Maritime security in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the threat of piracy and terrorism in the Sahel region require deeper defense cooperation.

UPSC Relevant Concepts

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- **South-South Cooperation:** Collaborative ties between developing countries of the Global South.
- **IAFS (India-Africa Forum Summit):** The official platform for African-Indian relations, held periodically.
- **Energy Security:** The uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price.

Conclusion

The upcoming IAFS-IV (May 2026) with the theme "Enduring partnership — shared vision" signifies that India no longer views Africa through the narrow lens of historical solidarity alone. Instead, Africa is now a strategic necessity for India's economic resilience. By offering a model of cooperation that is "consultative, non-prescriptive, and transparent," India seeks to provide an alternative to the debt-trap diplomacy often associated with other global powers, thereby ensuring long-term stability in a fragmented global order.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: In the context of India's energy and food security, which region of Africa is most critical for the supply of phosphates and fertilizers?

- A) The Horn of Africa
- B) Southern African Development Community (SADC)
- C) North and West African nations (e.g., Morocco, Algeria)
- D) East African Community (EAC)

Ans:B)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: "While China builds the infrastructure of Africa, India builds the Africans." Critically analyze this statement in the context of South-South cooperation and India's quest for energy security. **(150 Words)**

Page 04 :GS II :International Relations / Prelims Exam

The 11th JDC meeting marks a significant progression in the India-Egypt Strategic Partnership (elevated in 2023). By outlining a robust Defence Cooperation Plan for 2026–27, both nations are moving beyond traditional buyer-seller dynamics toward a collaborative framework of co-production and maritime security. This engagement is crucial for India’s outreach in the West Asia-North Africa (WANA) region and its "Make in India" defence ambitions.

Key Pillars of the 2026–27 Defence Roadmap

1. Shift to Co-Development and Co-Production

- **Defence Industry Cooperation:** India showcased its \$20 billion manufacturing milestone and \$4 billion export portfolio. The focus has shifted to the **co-development** of hardware, potentially involving Tejas fighter jets or Akash missile systems, which Egypt has previously shown interest in.
- **Strategic Autonomy:** By partnering on production, both nations aim to reduce dependence on traditional Western or Russian suppliers, enhancing their strategic autonomy.

2. Maritime Security & the "Indo-Abrahamic" Logic

- **Inaugural Navy-to-Navy Staff Talks:** This is a milestone in bilateral ties. Egypt’s control of the **Suez Canal**—a chokepoint for 12% of global trade—makes it a vital partner for India’s "Freedom of Navigation" objectives.
- **Information Fusion Centre (IFC-IOR):** India’s highlight of the IFC-IOR suggests a push for real-time maritime domain awareness (MDA) sharing to counter piracy and illicit regional activities.

3. Military Interoperability

- **Exercise Complexity:** The agreement to increase the "scope and complexity" of military exercises builds on the success of **Exercise Cyclone** (Special Forces).
- **Air Force Synergy:** The meeting with the Egyptian Air Force Chief emphasizes the historical bond (dating back to the 1960s HF-24 Marut collaboration) and future training exchanges.

Strategic Significance for India

India, Egypt discuss plan to boost bilateral defence cooperation in Cairo meet

Saurabh Trivedi
 NEW DELHI

India and Egypt advanced their defence cooperation at the 11th Joint Defence Committee meeting held in Cairo from April 20 to 22, outlining a road map to deepen bilateral engagement.

According to the Ministry of Defence, the Indian delegation, led by Joint Secretary (International Cooperation) Amitabh Prasad, engaged with senior Egyptian defence officials to review progress since the previous meeting and identify new avenues of collaboration. Both sides agreed on a bilateral defence cooperation plan for 2026-27, focusing on expanding military engagements, intensifying joint training exchanges, boosting maritime security cooperation, and increasing the scope of military exercises.

Defence industry collaboration emerged as a key pillar during the discussions. The Indian side India highlighted the rapid growth of its defence manufacturing sector, noting that production had sur-



Both sides agreed on a defence cooperation plan focused on expanding structured military engagements. @SPOKESPERSONMOD

passed \$20 billion, with exports worth approximately \$4 billion to over 100 countries. The two nations agreed to work towards a defence industry cooperation plan, exploring opportunities for co-development and co-production, it added. The inaugural Navy-to-Navy staff talks were held, underlining the importance of maritime cooperation. India showcased the role of its Navy in ensuring freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean Region and highlighted the contribution of the Information Fusion Centre in enhancing maritime security.

The delegation also met

Lieutenant General Amr Abdel Rahman Saqr, Commander of the Egyptian Air Force, expressing appreciation for the growing cooperation between the two air forces.

Paying tribute to shared history, the Indian delegation laid a wreath at the Heliopolis War Memorial, honouring Indian soldiers who sacrificed their lives during the World Wars.

The meeting builds upon the momentum generated by the 2022 MoU on defence cooperation and the elevation of bilateral ties to a Strategic Partnership in 2023, reinforcing a shared commitment to regional peace and stability.

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Daily News Analysis

Feature	Strategic Value
Gateway to Africa	Egypt serves as a bridge between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, facilitating India's "Extended Neighbourhood" policy.
Defence Exports	As one of the world's largest arms importers, Egypt is a "tier-1" target for Indian indigenous defence platforms.
Multilateralism	Collaboration with Egypt—a key member of the AU, Arab League, and OIC—helps India build consensus on counter-terrorism and UN reforms.

UPSC Main Focus Point

Analyze the role of Egypt in India's 'SAGAR' (Security and Growth for All in the Region) vision, particularly in the context of the evolving security architecture in the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean.

Conclusion

The 2026 Cairo meet transforms the India-Egypt relationship from a "historic friendship" into a "functional security alliance." For India, Egypt is not just a market for arms but a strategic anchor in the Mediterranean. As global supply chains remain turbulent, the "Defence Industry Cooperation Plan" serves as a blueprint for South-South cooperation, ensuring that two ancient civilizations lead the security discourse in the Global South.



UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques: Egypt is strategically significant to global trade and Indian maritime interests primarily due to its control over which geographical chokepoint?

- A) Strait of Hormuz
- B) Bab-el-Mandeb
- C) Suez Canal
- D) Strait of Malacca

Ans:c)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: The transition from a 'historic friendship' to a 'functional security alliance' with Egypt is a cornerstone of India's West Asia-North Africa (WANA) outreach. **(150 Words)**

Page 06:GS II :Social Justice / Prelims Exam

DNT communities, historically marginalized under the colonial-era **Criminal Tribes Act (1871)**, continue to face "administrative invisibility" in post-independent India. The 2025-26 Ministry report underscores a decade-long struggle to persuade states to formalize DNT identities. With only **seven states** currently issuing DNT certificates, the majority of these "Vimukta Jatis" (liberated tribes) remain unable to access targeted central benefits, reinforcing their cycle of poverty and stigma.

State support key for tribal welfare, says Social Justice Ministry report

Abhinav Lakshman
NEW DELHI

Support from State governments has been lacking in efforts to extend welfare measures to denotified, nomadic, and semi-nomadic tribes (DNTs), the Union government has said, adding that even now only seven States are issuing DNT community certificates. In its annual report for 2025-26, the Union Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry said support from States was awaited despite letters and advisories issued for close to a decade.

In the report, the Ministry said that State and Union Territory governments were yet to share lists of eligible DNT beneficiaries awaiting housing allotments under the Centre's PMAY-G. Further, the Ministry said it had requested the States to share other



DNT communities have raised the issue of not getting community certificates, which affects their ability to claim benefits. FILE PHOTO

details such as population estimates of DNTs and lists of these communities residing in each State, and had urged them to issue DNT certificates and set up grievance redress mechanisms in letters written since as far back as 2015.

Over the past few years, DNT communities across various parts of the country had repeatedly raised the issue of community

certificates not being provided, which, in turn, affected their ability to claim benefits targeted at them.

Nearly 1,200 such communities, which were tagged as "criminal" by the colonial administration, were denotified in 1952 when the Criminal Tribes Act was repealed. Since then, a majority have been classified under the Scheduled Castes, the Sched-

uled Tribes or the Other Backward Classes lists, though nearly 300 communities are yet to be classified.

Community leaders have argued that the lack of community certificates and their "misclassification" into SC, ST and OBC lists has further marginalised them within these respective groupings. Sections of DNT communities have taken this argument further to mobilise for a separate classification for DNTs on a par with SC, ST, and OBC classifications.

However, even as the Ministry has maintained that there are no proposals under consideration for creating a new classification for DNTs, government officials have said that the ongoing Census 2027 exercise will count the population of these communities during the enumeration phase.

Core Issues & Administrative Bottlenecks

1. The Documentation Deadlock

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Daily News Analysis

- **The Certificate Crisis:** Community certificates are the "gateway" to welfare. Without them, DNTs cannot access the **SEED (Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs)**, which provides coaching, health insurance, and housing.
- **State Apathy:** Despite Union advisories since 2015, most states have failed to establish grievance redressal mechanisms or provide lists of eligible beneficiaries for schemes like **PMAY-G (Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Gramin)**.

2. The "Misclassification" Trap

- **Diluted Benefits:** Many DNTs are categorized under existing SC, ST, or OBC lists. Community leaders argue this is "political misclassification" as it forces them to compete with relatively more advanced groups within those categories, leading to their further marginalization.
- **The Demand for a Separate Schedule:** There is a growing movement for a distinct constitutional classification (a "Third Schedule") specifically for DNTs to ensure ring-fenced budgetary and representational support.

3. Data Deficit & Census 2027

- **Statistical Invisibility:** The exact population of DNTs remains unknown (estimated between 10–12 crore).
- **The Census 2027 Pivot:** The government has confirmed that the **Census 2027** (beginning with house-listing in 2026) will include **caste enumeration**. While the Supreme Court recently (March 2026) rejected a plea for a *separate* DNT column, officials state the digital enumeration phase will capture these communities to bridge the data gap.

Key Commissions & Schemes

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Entity/Scheme	Focus Area
Renke Commission (2008)	First to recommend a permanent commission and 10% reservation for DNTs.
Idate Commission (2018)	Highlighted that 269 communities were not covered under any existing reservation.
DWBDNC	Development & Welfare Board for DNTs , established in 2019 to oversee welfare implementation.
SEED Scheme	Flagship scheme launched in 2022. In FY 2025-26, it saw a 402% surge in educational empowerment spending.

About Denotified Tribes (DNTs):

Who they are?

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Daily News Analysis

- Denotified Tribes, also known as Vimukta Jatis, are communities that were collectively branded as criminal tribes during British rule. These groups are largely nomadic or semi-nomadic, historically dependent on occupations such as pastoralism, salt trading, acrobatics, snake charming, transport services, and artisanal work.

Historical background:

- In 1871, the colonial government enacted the Criminal Tribes Act, declaring entire communities as addicted to crime by birth.
- Members were subjected to constant surveillance, restricted movement, forced registration, and social ostracisation.
- The law was repealed in 1952, after Independence, and the communities were officially denotified, giving rise to the term Denotified Tribes.
- However, the Habitual Offenders framework replaced the colonial law, allowing police to continue targeting these groups, perpetuating stigma.

Key characteristics:

- Extreme social exclusion: Persistent stigma of being born criminals continues in policing and society.
- Administrative invisibility: Many DNTs lack caste certificates, domicile records, or land titles.
- Educational deprivation: In several regions, entire communities have negligible secondary-level education.
- Economic precarity: Seasonal migration, informal labour, and absence of stable livelihoods dominate.

Political misclassification:

- Most DNTs have been absorbed into SC, ST, or OBC lists, where they are unable to compete with relatively advanced groups.
- Around 260 communities are not classified anywhere, leaving them outside reservation and welfare frameworks.

Conclusion

The 2025-26 report serves as a "call to action" for **Cooperative Federalism**. While the Union government has increased financial outlays—evidenced by the record disbursement of ₹26.75 crore for DNT education this year—these funds cannot reach the "last mile" without state-level identification. True de-notification will only be complete when the administrative stigma is replaced by a verifiable legal identity, ensuring that these "invisible citizens" are finally counted and cared for.

UPSC Prelims Exam Practice Question

Ques:With reference to Denotified Tribes (DNTs) in India, consider the following statements:

- 1.The Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952 based on the recommendations of the Idate Commission.
- 2.The term 'Vimukta Jatis' refers to tribes that were liberated from the colonial branding of 'criminal by birth'.
- 3.All Denotified Tribes are currently classified under the Scheduled Tribes (ST) category to ensure uniform welfare.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Ans : B)

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques:Discuss the recommendations of the Idate Commission regarding the welfare of Denotified, Nomadic, and Semi-Nomadic Tribes. To what extent has the 'SEED' scheme addressed the administrative invisibility of these communities? (150 words)

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Page :10: GS II :Governance/ Prelims Exam

The tragedy and public health concerns surrounding the 2025-26 festival season in Kerala have ignited a serious debate on the future of traditional fireworks. The shift towards safer alternatives is no longer just an environmental preference but an urgent administrative necessity.

What are safer fireworks alternatives?

How loud do fireworks at Thrissur Pooram get? What do India's noise rules permit? What risks do fireworks pose to hospitals? What is cold spark technology? Are they safer than traditional fireworks? Why are noiseless alternatives not widely used yet? What transition is being proposed for Thrissur Pooram?

EXPLAINER
Divya Gandhi

The story so far:
As hundreds gathered to experience the grand fireworks display at the Thrissur Pooram festival in Kerala last year, a heavily caparisoned and disoriented elephant, Uttoly Raman, suddenly ran amok, leaving 42 people injured. The previous day, another parading elephant, Chirakkara Sreeraman, had attacked its mahout. "Elephants, like other animals, get disoriented not just by decibel levels, but also by the structure and frequency of noise," said Manjari Jain, Associate Professor, Department of Biological Sciences, IISER Mohali. In response to an RTI request filed by *The Hindu*, the Kerala State Pollution Control Board stated that noise levels during the 2025 festival peaked at as much as 122.4 decibels in one area. This was just under the Central Pollution Control Board's 'Noise Standards for Firecrackers', which prohibit "the manufacture, sale or use of fire-crackers generating noise level exceeding 125 [decibels]... at 4 metres distance from the point of bursting."

What are the risks to hospitals?
As for permissible ambient noise levels, the National Ambient Noise Monitoring Network recommends 45-55 decibels in residential areas and 40-50 decibels in "silence zones" such as hospitals and educational institutions – far lower than the legal cap of 125 decibels for fireworks. Eminent social scientist Rajan Gurukkal has raised concerns about the proximity of Thrissur's fireworks to hospitals, especially those with neonatal intensive care units, and their impact on infant brain development. "The way the



Firefighters douse a blaze at a fireworks unit in Mundathikode, Thrissur, Kerala on April 21. PTI

festival is conducted in Thrissur violates ICU norms. Many facilities do not have soundproof windows, and the district hospital is minutes away from the fireworks," he told *The Hindu*. The World Health Organization notes that noise pollution is the third most hazardous environmental threat to human health, after air and water pollution.

What are the noiseless alternatives?
"It is time to go noiseless," said Professor Gurukkal, on April 21, when 13 people were killed and 40 injured in a blaze at a fireworks manufacturing unit in Mundathikode near Thrissur. "We do not need to reinvent the wheel, cold spark technology is available, but not yet scaled up."

This technology, unlike traditional fireworks, uses a chemical combustion reaction of very fine granulated metal

alloy powders of titanium and zirconium, explained Samrat Ghosh, Assistant Professor at the Frugal Innovation Lab for Societal Benefit, Department of Chemical Sciences.

The 'cold sparkular', for instance, is a gun-like device equipped with a heater and a fan. The heater warms the fine alloy powder to increase its activation energy, while the fan blows the fine granulated metal alloy powders out. "When these fine powders eject out of the barrel of the hand-held gun, the heated fine powder reacts with the oxygen in the air and undergoes a rapid exothermic reaction that emits light with a sparkler-like effect as seen in traditional fireworks – but with no noise," Dr. Ghosh explained.

They can prevent burn injuries. While traditional sparklers emit temperatures of around 1,200 °C, cold sparkulars and cold anars operate at 60-100°C, he added.

Though already available commercially online, these pyrotechnics remain expensive – a single 'cold anar' can cost around ₹400 – and are largely manufactured in China. "We have plenty of scope in India as the technology is well known and one can indigenously make these nano-powders," Dr. Ghosh said.

Prof. Gurukkal emphasised that what is needed is "professionalism and management." Contemporary stage technologies show that we can create in-house spark fountains and colourful spark-circles on the floor, he said, adding that televisions routinely employ cold spark systems that generate bright, upward jets of sparkling light without explosive combustion, heavy smoke and high-decibels "but giving the same, if not a superior, visual effect".

"It is possible to deploy arrays of dozens or hundreds of spark units across open grounds, arranged linearly, radially, or in clusters, with sequential triggering of waves, expanding bursts, and cascading effects," he said. These could even be mounted on temporary towers to extend the visual field, "creating the illusion of vertical expansion into the night sky".

What is the way forward?
Delhi, which celebrated its loudest Diwali in three years, could also benefit from cold spark technology. As for Thrissur, Prof. Gurukkal said there should be an incremental transition strategy in Kerala, but that it would be ideal "to start with the Thrissur Pooram, the greatest among occasions that use parasols of intense air pollution with sound and smoke".

Initial integration of large-scale cold spark-based displays should be tested in Thrissur, the district famed in the country for its high-quality air, he said. "It is the responsibility of the Thrissur Corporation to substitute the existing method."

THE GIST

Noise levels at Thrissur Pooram peaked at 122.4 decibels – close to the legal cap – raising concerns over risks to animals, hospitals, and infant brain development.

Experts call for a shift to noiseless alternatives like cold spark technology, which can deliver similar visual effects without high decibel levels, smoke, or burn injuries.



1. Thrissur Pooram: Noise Levels vs. Legal Limits

While the visual spectacle of the Pooram is world-renowned, the auditory impact is staggering.

- **Measured Intensity:** During the 2025 festival, noise levels peaked at **122.4 decibels (dB)**.
- **Indian Legal Threshold:** The Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) permits a maximum of **125 dB** at a distance of 4 meters from the point of bursting.

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Daily News Analysis

- **The Disconnect:** While technically within the "firecracker" legal limit, these levels are nearly **triple** the recommended ambient noise levels for residential areas (**45-55 dB**).

2. Risks to Hospitals and Silence Zones

The proximity of high-decibel displays to healthcare facilities poses severe biological and structural risks:

- **Neonatal Impact:** Experts warn that intense noise can hinder infant brain development. Many hospitals in Thrissur, including the District Hospital, lack specialized soundproofing.
- **ICU Standards:** High-decibel explosions violate the "Silence Zone" norms (40-50 dB) required for Intensive Care Units, potentially causing physiological stress to critical patients.
- **Animal Distress:** As seen with the elephant **Uttoly Raman** running amok in 2025, noise frequencies cause severe disorientation in animals, leading to public safety hazards.

. Cold Spark Technology: The Safer Alternative

Cold spark technology (often used in "Sparkular" machines) is being proposed as the primary successor to traditional pyrotechnics.

How it Works

Unlike traditional gunpowder-based fireworks, this uses a chemical combustion of fine **titanium and zirconium** alloy powders.

- **The Mechanism:** A heater increases the activation energy of the metal powder, and a fan ejects it. As the powder hits the oxygen in the air, it creates a rapid exothermic reaction.
- **Visuals:** It produces the same bright, upward jets of light as a traditional "Anar" or fountain.

Safety Comparison

Feature	Traditional Fireworks	Cold Spark Technology
Temperature	~1,200°C	60°C – 100°C
Noise	High (120+ dB)	Silent / Near-silent
Smoke	Heavy chemical smoke	Negligible
Safety	High fire/explosion risk	No explosive combustion

4. Barriers to Adoption

If the technology is safer and silent, why is it not yet the standard?

- **Cost:** A single "cold anar" costs approximately ₹400, significantly higher than mass-produced traditional crackers.
- **Supply Chain:** Currently, manufacturing is dominated by China. India has the chemical expertise to produce these nano-powders indigenously but has not yet scaled up production.
- **Perception:** There is a cultural attachment to the "thundering" sound of the Pooram, which many traditionalists feel is essential to the festival's identity.

. The Proposed Transition for Thrissur

Social scientists and environmental experts are proposing an **incremental transition strategy**:

1. **Pilot Displays:** Deploying arrays of hundreds of cold spark units across the grounds to test visual impact.
2. **Vertical Expansion:** Using temporary towers to mount these units, creating the illusion of height and "sky-bursts" without the need for explosive projectiles.
3. **Administrative Substitution:** Tasking the Thrissur Corporation with phasing out traditional explosives to preserve the city's air quality and public health.

Conclusion

The 2026 fire tragedy at Mundathikode has accelerated the call for "professionalism in pyrotechnics." Moving toward cold spark technology offers a way to preserve the **visual heritage** of India's festivals while eliminating the **auditory and physical trauma** associated with traditional gunpowder.

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question

Ques: Analyze the conflict between cultural traditions and the Right to a Healthy Environment (Article 21) in the context of high-decibel festivals in India. (250 Words)

Scaling climate adaptation from policy to grassroots

India is the ninth most climate-vulnerable country globally, with 430 extreme weather events recorded between 1995 and 2024, causing losses of \$170 billion and impacting 1.3 billion people. India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for 2031-35 acknowledge these risks and emphasise the mainstreaming of climate resilience and adaptation into the country's development strategy.

The updated NDCs strengthen adaptation across coastal resilience, infrastructure, disaster preparedness, heat mitigation, biodiversity conservation and sustainable livelihoods. This aligns with global commitments to triple adaptation finance by 2035 and the adoption of Belém Adaptation Indicators at COP30. However, achieving these goals will require sustained financing and institutionalising adaptation from national to the grass-root levels.

Among key adaptation efforts, the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)'s National Innovations in Climate Resilient Agriculture (NICRA) pilot spans 448 villages across 151 climate-vulnerable hotspots and maps risks in 651 districts, focusing on climate-smart agriculture and farmer capacity-building.

A model to watch

India's Economic Survey for 2025-26 recognises Tamil Nadu's Climate Resilient Villages (CRV) programme as a good practice. Under the Tamil Nadu Climate Change Mission (TNCCM), with support from the World Resources Institute (WRI) India, the CRV takes a holistic approach across 11 vulnerable districts, in consultation with local communities and administration. Interventions span water management, flood/drought mitigation, waste management, renewable energy, biodiversity conservation, alternate livelihoods and climate information.

Scaling up such models can help build adaptive capacity throughout the country. However, India's efforts towards adaptation have been scattered which makes financing these



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Arivudai Nambi Appadurai

Director of the Climate Resilience Practice programme at the World Resources Institute India

Adaptation can be advanced through coordinated governance, finance and local efforts

efforts difficult. While India's Economic Survey 2025-26 estimates adaptation and resilience spending at 5.6% of GDP in FY22, the Union Budget 2026-27 remains skewed toward mitigation.

Financing adaptation action

Developing countries face an annual financing gap of \$284-\$339 billion through 2035, as per the United Nations Environment Programme's (UNEP) Adaptation Gap Report, 2025. As India looks to sharpen its adaptation focus, domestic resource mobilisation will be key – requiring a clear typology for adaptation finance (which is prioritisation of sectors and assessment of the resources required for each vulnerable sector). However, India's Draft Framework of Climate Finance Taxonomy (2025) remains largely mitigation-focused and looks at emission avoidance, emission intensity reduction (with possible adaptation co-benefits) and activities supporting transition in hard-to-abate sectors.

It is vital to quantify adaptation benefits such as avoidable losses and socio-economic and environmental benefits including mitigation co-benefits. A WRI study estimates a ten-fold return on adaptation investment, making a case for leveraging private and international investment towards adaptation. Adaptation facilities at the state-level can help identify bankable adaptation projects that map benefits and widen the resource base.

Additionally, domestic public finance should be streamlined by tracking adaptation activities within State budgets, following which the Ministry of Finance can mandate climate budgeting through State Finance Departments. This can be integrated within annual budgetary planning processes through a budget circular. Such a mandate must incorporate timeframes for prioritisation of adaptation action with a monitoring framework. This should be complemented with cross-department consultative approaches and capacity building at

nodal departmental levels. NDCs are expected to be operationalised through a National Adaptation Plan, national missions and State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs). While most States drafted an initial SAPCC, only a few States submitted revisions in tune with NDC updates until 2030. Institutionalising planning requires regular climate vulnerability assessments at the State, district, and block levels, integrating socio-economic and livelihood factors. This calls for robust methodologies, updated data, capacity-building, and standardised monitoring, with periodic reviews and continuous data collection.

Adaptation strategies should ideally go beyond resilient infrastructure to encompass skill development, alternative livelihoods and guidelines for rehabilitation of affected populations. This can be done by leveraging existing State and district climate change cells or setting up new functional cells with a dedicated workforce. Clear reporting channels can further support cross-learning and timely interventions.

Facilitating locally led adaptation

Institutional mechanisms should extend to the level of urban local bodies and panchayati raj institutions to scale adaptation action. Locally Led Adaptation (LLA) was stressed at COP30. Co-developing resilience planning with communities – from planning and implementation to management, ownership, and leadership of needs-based interventions – is central to people-centric climate action. Applying place-based and context-specific approaches, such as extending the CRV initiative to different geographies, not only helps raise climate awareness but also enables communities to be a part of decision-making processes.

Preparedness for future climate impacts requires capacity-building and behavioural change across multiple levels. A whole-of-systems approach to adaptation is needed, where national commitments are met through grassroots action.

GS Paper III: Environment

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Question: Analyze the significance of the 'Climate Finance Taxonomy' in bridging the adaptation gap in India. How can 'Locally Led Adaptation' (LLA) transform India's disaster preparedness from reactive to proactive? (150 Words)

Context : India remains one of the most climate-vulnerable nations, facing losses of \$170 billion over the last three decades. While India's Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) for 2031–35 emphasize resilience, the core challenge lies in "Institutionalizing Adaptation"—moving from high-level international commitments (like COP30) to block-level implementation. The current focus is shifting toward **Locally Led Adaptation (LLA)** and closing the massive "Adaptation Finance Gap."

1. The Model of Success: Climate Resilient Villages (CRV)

The **Economic Survey 2025-26** specifically highlights Tamil Nadu's CRV program as a benchmark for the country.

- **Holistic Approach:** Unlike scattered projects, CRV integrates water management, renewable energy, and waste management.
- **Consultative Governance:** Interventions are co-developed with local communities, ensuring that the technology (e.g., flood mitigation) matches the local geography.
- **Scalability:** By using **State Climate Change Cells**, this model can be replicated across different agro-climatic zones, moving beyond the 448 villages currently covered by ICAR's **NICRA** pilot.

2. The Financing Paradox

Despite the high stakes, climate finance in India remains heavily skewed toward **mitigation** (reducing emissions) rather than **adaptation** (coping with impacts).

- **The Taxonomy Gap:** The **Draft Framework of Climate Finance Taxonomy (2025)** is criticized for focusing on "hard-to-abate" sectors and emission intensity rather than creating a clear "Adaptation Typology."
- **Investment Returns:** Studies suggest a **ten-fold return** on adaptation investments (avoided losses + socio-economic benefits). However, attracting private capital requires making these projects "bankable" through state-level adaptation facilities.
- **Budgeting:** Experts propose a mandate for **Climate Budgeting** at the state level, integrated via State Finance Departments to ensure funds are tracked and utilized specifically for resilience.

3. Scaling to the Grassroots: Locally Led Adaptation (LLA)

The transition from policy to action requires a "whole-of-systems" approach:

- **Decentralization:** Institutional mechanisms must extend to **Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)** and **Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)**.
- **Community Ownership:** LLA ensures that adaptation isn't just about building sea walls but about **skill development** and **alternative livelihoods** for those displaced by climate events.
- **Data-Driven Planning:** Revisions of **State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCCs)** must be based on block-level vulnerability assessments that include socio-economic factors, not just meteorological data.

4. Strategic Roadblocks

- **Scattered Efforts:** Most adaptation projects are currently fragmented across departments, leading to administrative silos and inefficient fund utilization.

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- **Lagging Revisions:** While NDCs have been updated to 2030-35, many states have yet to revise their SAPCCs to align with these new national targets.

Conclusion

For India, climate adaptation is not a luxury but a developmental necessity. The transition from **mitigation-centric** finance to **adaptation-centric** budgeting is the next frontier. By leveraging models like Tamil Nadu's CRV and empowering local bodies through the **National Adaptation Plan**, India can transform its climate vulnerability into "Adaptive Capacity," ensuring that the 1.3 billion people impacted by weather extremes are protected by a bottom-up resilience framework.
