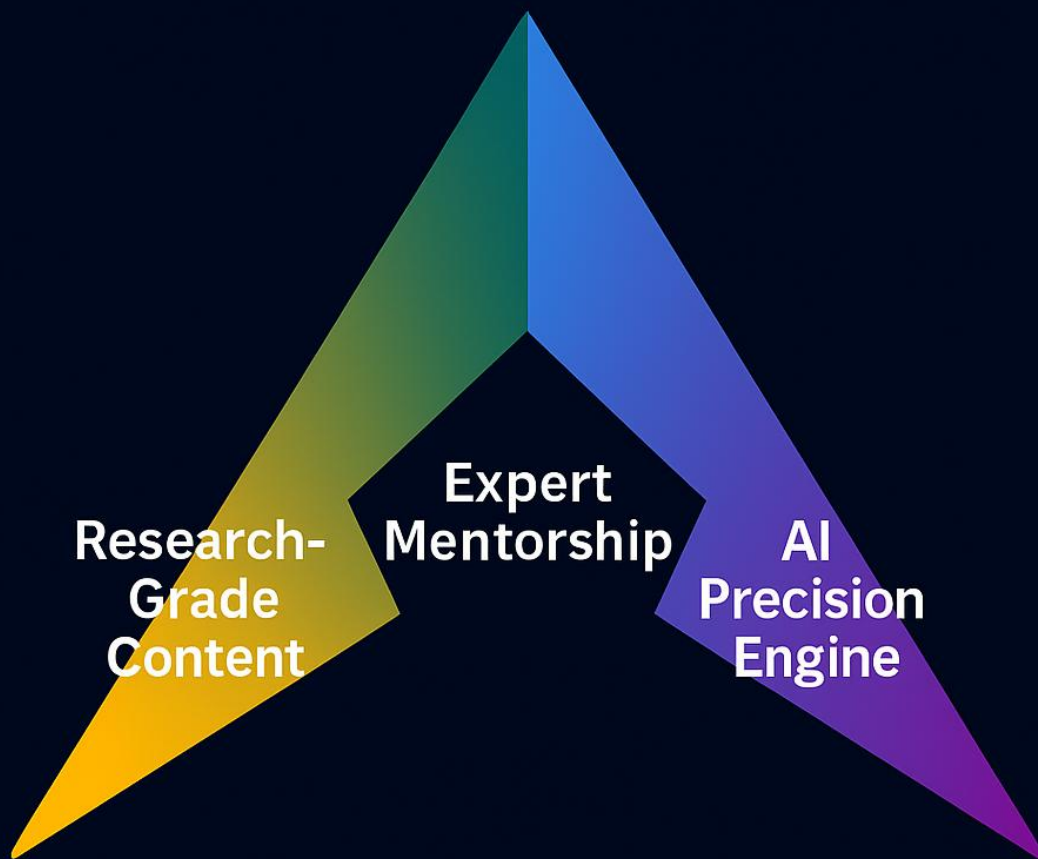


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DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS DATED 01.06.2026

GS Paper II: Current Affairs

1. Prison Overcrowding and the Undertrial Crisis in India

a. Introduction

Prison overcrowding in India has emerged as one of the most serious indicators of stress within the criminal justice system. The latest *Prison Statistics India* report of the National Crime Records Bureau shows that Indian prisons continued to remain overcrowded in 2024, with an all-India occupancy rate of 112.7 per cent. This means that prisons were housing more inmates than their officially sanctioned capacity.

The problem is not merely one of inadequate prison infrastructure. It is closely linked to the high number of undertrial prisoners, who constituted nearly 73 per cent of the total prison population. In other words, a large majority of persons lodged in Indian prisons had not yet been convicted by a court. This makes prison overcrowding a major issue of governance, judicial reform, human rights and constitutional morality.

This topic is directly connected with criminal justice administration, access to justice, rule of law, prison reforms, judicial delays and Article 21 of the Constitution, which protects life and personal liberty. Although prisons are a State subject, meaningful reform requires coordination between the Union and the States because criminal law, criminal procedure, policing and judicial administration are deeply interconnected.

Thus, prison overcrowding should be understood not merely as a prison-management problem, but as a wider failure of timely and fair criminal justice delivery.

PRISON STATISTICS COMPARISON

Indicator	Latest Position
 Occupancy Rate	112.7%
 Prison Capacity	~4.53 lakh
 Actual Prison Population	~5.11 lakh
 Undertrial Prisoners	72.6–73%
 Convicts	26.6%
 Delhi Occupancy	~194%
 J&K Occupancy	~148%

b. Key Data and Present Situation

- **Overall Prison Capacity and Occupancy:** According to the latest available prison data, India had around 1,333 jails with a total capacity of nearly 4.53 lakh inmates. However, the actual inmate population crossed 5.11 lakh, resulting in an all-India occupancy rate of 112.7 per cent.

- **High Share of Undertrial Prisoners:** Undertrial prisoners formed around 72.6 to 73 per cent of total inmates, while convicts accounted for nearly 26.6 per cent. This shows that the prison population is dominated not by convicted offenders, but by persons awaiting trial.
- **Inter-State Variation:** More than half of the States and Union Territories recorded prison occupancy above 100 per cent. Delhi had the highest occupancy rate, at around 194 per cent. Jammu and Kashmir also witnessed a sharp increase in occupancy, rising from about 78 per cent in 2015 to nearly 148 per cent in 2023–24. In Delhi and Bihar, the undertrial share was particularly high, with undertrials forming more than 87 per cent of the total inmate population.
- **Shortage of Prison Staff:** Another serious concern is the shortage of prison staff. Several States and Union Territories face large vacancies in sanctioned prison posts. Delhi and Jammu and Kashmir reportedly had nearly 60 per cent of sanctioned staff positions vacant. This weakens prison management, inmate supervision, rehabilitation services and overall institutional safety.

These data points show that India's prison crisis is both quantitative and qualitative: prisons are overcrowded, undertrial-heavy and understaffed.

c. Why Prison Overcrowding Is a Deeper Criminal Justice Crisis

- **Structural Nature of the Problem:** Prison overcrowding reflects a structural crisis in India's criminal justice system. It cannot be understood only as a shortage of prison buildings or barracks. It is the result of excessive arrests, delayed trials, weak legal aid, slow bail decisions, limited use of non-custodial alternatives and inadequate coordination between police, prosecution, courts and prison administration.
- **Constitutional Concern:** The high share of undertrial prisoners raises serious constitutional concerns. An undertrial prisoner is a person who has been accused of an offence but has not yet been convicted. Therefore, prolonged imprisonment of undertrials weakens the principle that a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty. It also affects the right to life and personal liberty under Article 21 of the Constitution.
- **Punishment Before Conviction:** When an undertrial remains in prison for months or years due to slow trial, inability to secure bail, lack of sureties or poor legal representation, punishment begins before conviction. This is inconsistent with the idea of fair trial and due process.

Thus, the undertrial crisis shows that delays in justice delivery can convert legal process itself into a form of punishment.

d. Human Rights and Prison Conditions

- **Impact on Living Conditions:** Overcrowding directly worsens prison conditions. It reduces living space, puts pressure on sanitation facilities, affects access to healthcare and increases the risk of disease, violence and psychological distress.
- **Impact on Correctional Services:** Overcrowding also reduces the scope for counselling, education, vocational training and rehabilitation. The Parliamentary Committee on prison conditions and reforms has highlighted that overcrowding strains prison resources, lowers living standards and increases tensions among inmates.
- **Failure of Correctional Purpose:** In such conditions, prisons fail to function as correctional institutions and instead become spaces of further marginalisation. This is especially problematic because modern prison administration is expected to focus not only on custody but also on correction, reformation and reintegration.

A prison system that is overcrowded, understaffed and under-resourced cannot effectively prepare inmates for return to society.

e. Social Justice Dimension

- **Vulnerability of Poor and Marginalised Groups:** The undertrial crisis has a strong social justice dimension. A large number of undertrial prisoners come from poor, marginalised and socially vulnerable backgrounds. Many are unable to secure bail because they cannot arrange sureties, afford legal representation or understand legal procedures.
- **Unequal Access to Justice:** Thus, prison overcrowding also reflects unequal access to justice. Those with social and economic resources are often better able to secure bail and legal assistance, while the poor remain in custody for long periods.
- **Poverty as a Cause of Continued Imprisonment:** This creates a system where poverty itself becomes a reason for continued imprisonment. The problem is therefore not only legal or administrative. It is also a question of fairness, dignity and equality before law.

This social justice dimension makes prison reform an essential part of constitutional governance and inclusive justice delivery.

f. Why Infrastructure Expansion Alone Is Not Enough

- **Need for Capacity Expansion:** India has made some efforts to improve prison capacity through construction of new prisons, renovation of existing facilities and addition of barracks. These steps are necessary because overcrowded prisons cannot ensure humane living conditions.
- **Limits of Infrastructure-Based Reform:** However, infrastructure expansion alone is not sufficient. If the inflow of undertrials continues because of unnecessary arrests, delayed investigation, slow trials and restrictive bail practices, newly created capacity will also become overcrowded.
- **Need for Criminal Justice Reform:** Therefore, prison expansion must be accompanied by deeper criminal justice reforms. The core issue is not simply that India has fewer prison spaces. The deeper problem is that too many people are being sent to prison before conviction, and many of them remain there for unnecessarily long periods.

This shows that the real solution lies in reducing unnecessary incarceration, not merely increasing prison capacity.

g. Impact of Staff Vacancies

- **Role of Prison Staff:** Staff shortages further weaken prison administration. A prison requires not only guards but also trained correctional officers, medical personnel, counsellors, psychologists, legal aid coordinators, vocational trainers and welfare officers.
- **Administrative and Safety Risks:** When sanctioned posts remain vacant, the burden on existing staff increases. This affects discipline, monitoring of vulnerable prisoners, emergency response, rehabilitation programmes and mental health support. It also increases the risk of violence, neglect and custodial abuse.
- **Need for Correctional Mindset:** A humane prison system requires adequate staffing, professional training and a correctional mindset. Without these, prisons remain custodial spaces rather than institutions of reform.

Thus, prison reform requires investment not only in buildings, but also in trained human resources.

h. Way Forward

- **Reduce Unnecessary Arrests:** Police must treat arrest as an exception, especially in minor, petty and non-violent offences. Arrest safeguards laid down by law and judicial precedent should be followed strictly. Greater accountability is needed to ensure that arrest is used only where necessary for investigation, prevention of further offence or ensuring appearance before court.
- **Strengthen Bail Reform:** Bail must become the norm for undertrials in bailable, petty and non-heinous offences. Bail conditions should be realistic and should not punish poverty.

Courts should avoid imposing excessive surety requirements on poor prisoners. Periodic review of undertrial cases can help identify those eligible for release.

- **Speed Up Trials:** Judicial delays are a major cause of prolonged undertrial detention. Fast-track courts, better case management, increased use of video conferencing, filling of judicial vacancies and improved coordination between police and prosecution can reduce pendency. Time-bound trial of undertrial cases should be prioritised.
- **Improve Legal Aid:** District Legal Services Authorities must play a more active role in identifying undertrials eligible for bail, plea bargaining, release under statutory limits or other legal remedies. Legal aid should not remain merely formal. It must be accessible, timely and effective, particularly for poor and first-time offenders.
- **Promote Non-Custodial Alternatives:** India needs wider use of alternatives to incarceration, especially for minor offences. Community service, probation, restorative justice, supervised release and electronic monitoring in limited and carefully regulated cases can reduce the burden on prisons while still ensuring accountability.
- **Fill Prison Staff Vacancies:** States must urgently recruit and train prison staff. Recruitment should not be limited to security personnel alone. Correctional officers, counsellors, doctors, psychologists, social workers and rehabilitation professionals are equally important for a modern prison system.
- **Reform Prison Infrastructure:** Capacity expansion should be accompanied by improvements in sanitation, healthcare, mental health services, nutrition, legal aid facilities, skill training and reintegration programmes. Prison reform should not merely mean building more prisons; it should mean building a humane and correction-oriented system.

A meaningful way forward must therefore combine bail reform, faster trials, legal aid, staffing, non-custodial measures and humane prison administration.

Conclusion

India's prison overcrowding is primarily an undertrial justice problem. It shows that the criminal justice system often deprives people of liberty before guilt is established. Sustainable reform requires moving beyond the narrow solution of constructing more prisons.

A rights-based approach is needed, combining bail reform, speedy trials, effective legal aid, careful use of arrest, non-custodial alternatives and humane prison administration. Only then can India's prison system reflect the constitutional values of dignity, fairness and justice under Article 21.

In this sense, prison reform is not only a matter of correctional administration. It is a test of India's commitment to rule of law, due process and equal access to justice.

GS Paper II: International Relations

2. India–Canada Relations: Towards a Reset

a. Introduction

India and Canada are attempting to rebuild momentum in their bilateral relationship after a period of diplomatic strain. Recent high-level engagements, including Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney's visit to India and Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal's visit to Canada, indicate a renewed effort to restore political confidence and deepen cooperation in areas such as trade, technology, energy, investment and the Indo-Pacific.

The relationship has considerable long-term potential. Canada is a resource-rich, technologically advanced and investment-driven economy, while India is a large growth market with expanding demand for energy, infrastructure, technology, education and advanced manufacturing. At the same time, the relationship has also been affected by political sensitivities, diaspora-related issues and concerns over extremism. Therefore, the present reset must be understood as both an opportunity and a diplomatic test.

b. Strategic and Economic Context

- **Natural Complementarities:** India–Canada relations are built on several natural complementarities. Canada has strengths in natural resources, critical minerals, clean energy, agriculture, higher education, pension fund capital, advanced research and innovation. India, on the other hand, offers a large market, skilled human resources, rising consumption, digital capability, infrastructure demand and strategic relevance in the Indo-Pacific.
- **Importance for Canada:** For Canada, India represents a major growth partner and an important pillar of its diversification beyond traditional economic dependencies. India’s demographic scale, economic growth and expanding market make it a valuable long-term partner.
- **Importance for India:** For India, Canada can contribute to energy security, green transition, investment flows, research partnerships and resilient supply chains. These areas align with India’s domestic priorities of infrastructure expansion, technological upgrading and economic diversification.
- **Untapped Potential:** However, the relationship has not fully realised its potential. Trade and investment have remained below what the two economies are capable of achieving. This gap makes the revival of economic dialogue significant.

Complementarities Comparison			
Canada Offers		India Offers	
			
	Critical Minerals		Large Market
	Uranium		Skilled Workforce
	Clean Energy		Digital Economy
	Pension Fund Capital		Infrastructure Demand
	Advanced Research		Start-up Ecosystem
	Higher Education		Manufacturing Growth
	Innovation		Strategic Indo-Pacific Role

This strategic and economic context explains why both countries have an incentive to stabilise relations and rebuild cooperation.

c. Revival of Trade and CEPA Negotiations

- **Importance of CEPA:** The renewed discussion on the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement is an important development. A well-designed agreement can provide predictability to businesses, reduce trade barriers, improve investor confidence and create a more stable framework for long-term economic cooperation.
- **Trade Target:** Both sides have reportedly discussed an ambitious target of reaching 50 billion dollars in bilateral trade by 2030. This target reflects the scale of untapped potential in the relationship.
- **Promising Sectors:** The most promising sectors include services, clean energy, agriculture technology, critical minerals, digital innovation, education, life sciences and advanced manufacturing. India’s demand for technology, capital and resource security aligns well with Canada’s economic strengths. At the same time, Indian companies can benefit from access to Canadian markets, innovation ecosystems and investment opportunities.
- **Need for Realistic Sequencing:** A trade agreement, however, should be sequenced realistically. Instead of attempting an overly broad agreement at once, both sides can begin with areas where complementarities are clear and political resistance is limited.

Thus, CEPA can become a practical instrument for rebuilding trust, provided it is negotiated in a phased and realistic manner.

d. Energy Security and Critical Minerals

- **Emerging Pillars of Cooperation:** Energy and critical minerals are emerging as major pillars of India–Canada cooperation. India’s green transition requires secure and diversified access to resources such as uranium, lithium, cobalt, nickel and other minerals needed for clean energy technologies, batteries and advanced manufacturing.
- **Canada’s Resource Strength:** Canada has considerable resource wealth and expertise in clean energy. This makes it a potentially reliable partner for India as it seeks to reduce dependence on limited or concentrated supply sources. Cooperation in uranium, clean energy and critical minerals can support India’s long-term energy security and its transition towards a low-carbon economy.
- **Strategic Importance of Critical Minerals:** This area is strategically important because critical minerals are no longer merely commercial commodities. They are closely linked with electric mobility, renewable energy storage, defence technologies, semiconductors and future industrial competitiveness.

Therefore, energy and critical minerals cooperation can connect India–Canada relations with India’s larger goals of supply-chain resilience and strategic economic security.

e. Technology, Innovation and Knowledge Partnership

- **Areas of Technology Cooperation:** Technology cooperation provides another promising area for deepening ties. India and Canada can work together in artificial intelligence, digital innovation, advanced manufacturing, life sciences, biotechnology, agriculture technology and clean technologies.
- **Complementary Innovation Strengths:** Canada has strong universities, research institutions and innovation clusters. India has a large talent base, expanding digital infrastructure and a growing start-up ecosystem. Together, these strengths can support joint research, innovation partnerships and technology-driven economic growth.
- **Higher Education Linkages:** Higher education also remains a major bridge between the two countries. Indian students and researchers contribute to Canada’s academic and innovation ecosystem, while educational linkages create long-term social, professional and economic networks.

This knowledge partnership can make the relationship more durable by creating linkages beyond government-to-government diplomacy.

f. Investment Flows and Economic Linkages

- **Role of Canadian Pension Funds:** Investment is a strong component of India–Canada relations. Canadian pension funds have shown interest in India’s infrastructure, real estate, renewable energy, logistics and financial sectors. These funds can provide long-term patient capital, which is important for India’s infrastructure and development needs.
- **Indian Firms in Canada:** At the same time, Indian firms are expanding their presence in Canada in sectors such as information technology, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing and services. This two-way investment relationship can strengthen business confidence and create a more durable economic partnership.
- **Requirements for Sustained Investment:** To sustain this momentum, both countries need predictable regulations, dispute-resolution mechanisms, sector-specific investment facilitation and stronger business-to-business engagement.

Thus, investment cooperation can become one of the strongest stabilising pillars of India–Canada relations.

g. Role of the Indian Diaspora

- **Diaspora as a Bridge:** The Indian-origin community is one of the most important bridges between India and Canada. Indian-origin professionals, entrepreneurs, students and academics contribute significantly to Canada's economy, politics, education and society. They also support trade, investment, innovation partnerships and cultural understanding between the two countries.
- **Positive Contribution:** The diaspora can help build trust, promote entrepreneurship, connect institutions and expand educational cooperation. It can also strengthen people-to-people relations and deepen social familiarity between the two countries.
- **Diaspora-Related Sensitivities:** However, diaspora politics can also create sensitivities. Issues linked with extremism, separatist mobilisation or misuse of democratic spaces can affect bilateral trust.
- **Need for Balanced Engagement:** Therefore, diaspora engagement must be constructive and balanced. It should promote business, education, research and cultural linkages while preventing the politicisation of sensitive issues.

This makes diaspora diplomacy both an asset and a sensitive area requiring careful management.

h. Indo-Pacific Dimension

- **Wider Strategic Context:** The Indo-Pacific gives India-Canada relations a wider strategic context. Both countries support a free, open, inclusive and rules-based Indo-Pacific. Their shared interests include maritime security, supply-chain resilience, climate action, economic connectivity and technology cooperation.
- **Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy:** Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy places India as a significant partner because of India's economic scale, demographic strength, strategic location and growing role in regional affairs.
- **Relevance for India:** For India, Canada's engagement in the Indo-Pacific can add diplomatic weight to wider efforts aimed at ensuring stability, open sea lanes, resilient supply chains and rules-based conduct.

This dimension can help move the relationship beyond bilateral trade and diaspora issues towards a broader strategic partnership.

i. Challenges in the Reset

- **Trust Deficit and Political Sensitivities:** The reset in India-Canada relations will require careful political management. In the past, relations have been affected by trust deficits, domestic political pressures, diaspora-linked extremism concerns and diplomatic tensions.
- **Security Concerns and Economic Cooperation:** Economic cooperation cannot remain fully insulated from political and security concerns. If core sensitivities are ignored, progress in trade, investment and technology may again become vulnerable to diplomatic setbacks.
- **Need for Institutional Dialogue:** Therefore, both sides need sustained dialogue and institutional mechanisms to manage differences. Mutual respect for sovereignty, non-interference, security concerns and democratic freedoms will be essential for rebuilding trust.
- **Avoiding Cycles of Breakdown:** The central challenge is to ensure that the relationship does not move in cycles of optimism and breakdown. It must be placed on a stable, predictable and mutually respectful foundation.

Thus, the success of the reset will depend not only on economic agreements, but also on the political maturity with which sensitive issues are handled.

j. Way Forward

- **Conclude CEPA with Realistic Sequencing:** India and Canada should revive the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement through a practical and phased approach.

Initial progress can be made in areas of clear complementarity such as services, clean energy, agriculture technology, critical minerals, investment and digital innovation.

- **Build a Critical Minerals Partnership:** Both countries should create long-term supply chains for minerals needed in renewable energy, electric mobility, batteries and advanced manufacturing. This would support India's green transition and reduce dependence on concentrated global supply chains.
- **Strengthen Security Dialogue:** India and Canada must address concerns related to extremism, misinformation and misuse of democratic spaces through regular institutional mechanisms. Security dialogue should be sustained, professional and insulated from short-term political pressures.
- **Leverage the Diaspora Constructively:** The Indian diaspora should be treated as a bridge for business, education, culture, research and innovation. At the same time, both sides must ensure that diaspora-related issues do not become a recurring source of diplomatic mistrust.
- **Deepen Indo-Pacific Cooperation:** India and Canada should expand cooperation in maritime security, resilient supply chains, climate action, artificial intelligence, emerging technologies and regional connectivity. This would give the partnership a stronger strategic direction.
- **Include Small and Medium Enterprises:** Trade and investment cooperation should not remain limited to large corporations and pension funds. Small and medium enterprises should be included through easier market access, business facilitation platforms, start-up partnerships and sector-specific investment support.
- **Sustain High-Level Engagement:** Regular ministerial meetings, strategic dialogues, business forums and institutional consultations are necessary to convert diplomatic goodwill into measurable outcomes. Continuity of engagement will be essential for preventing future misunderstandings.

A durable reset must therefore combine trade revival, strategic cooperation, security dialogue, diaspora management and sustained institutional engagement.

Conclusion

India and Canada have strong complementarities in trade, technology, energy, investment, education and the Indo-Pacific. The present reset offers an opportunity to transform shared democratic values and economic interests into a more stable partnership.

However, durable progress will depend on rebuilding trust, addressing security sensitivities and ensuring that economic cooperation produces tangible benefits for both sides. A successful reset will require not only renewed trade negotiations but also sustained political maturity, institutional dialogue and respect for each other's core concerns.

In this sense, India-Canada relations can move towards a more stable phase only if economic opportunity and political sensitivity are managed together.

GS Paper II: International Relations

3. India-Oman CEPA: Deepening Trade and Strategic Economic Partnership

a. Introduction

The India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement marks an important step in India's economic engagement with the Gulf region. The agreement is set to come into force from June 1 and aims to deepen bilateral trade, expand market access for Indian exporters and create new opportunities for micro, small and medium enterprises, farmers, fishermen, professionals and labour-intensive industries.

The agreement is significant because Oman is not merely a trade partner for India. It is also a long-standing strategic partner in West Asia, a major destination for the Indian diaspora and an important link in India's broader engagement with the Gulf. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership

Agreement therefore combines economic diplomacy with energy security, export diversification, employment generation and regional strategic outreach.

This issue connects with India's West Asia policy, free trade agreements, services trade, food security, energy-linked partnerships, diaspora diplomacy and India's efforts to make trade policy more employment-oriented.

Thus, the India–Oman CEPA should be understood not only as a trade agreement, but as a strategic economic instrument within India's wider Gulf engagement.

Major Beneficiaries of India–Oman CEPA



b. India–Oman Relations: Strategic and Economic Context

- **Historical and Strategic Linkages:** India and Oman share a historically close relationship shaped by maritime links, trade, energy cooperation and people-to-people ties. Oman's location near the Arabian Sea and the Strait of Hormuz gives it strategic importance for India's energy security and maritime outreach. It also acts as a natural bridge between India and the Gulf region.
- **Economic Complementarities:** The economic relationship has considerable potential. Oman is a food-importing and resource-rich economy, while India is a large supplier of pharmaceuticals, textiles, engineering goods, food products, marine products, services and skilled professionals. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement seeks to convert these complementarities into structured economic gains.
- **Relevance in the Present Global Trade Context:** At a time when global trade is facing protectionism, supply-chain disruptions and uncertain demand in traditional markets, the agreement gives India an opportunity to diversify its export destinations and strengthen its presence in West Asia.

c. Key Provisions and Expected Gains for India

- **Wide Market Access:** The agreement provides wide market access for Indian exporters. Oman will offer duty-free access to 98 per cent of its tariff lines, covering more than 99 per cent of India's exports to Oman. This can benefit sectors where India has strong production capacity and employment potential.
- **Gains for MSMEs and Labour-Intensive Clusters:** Micro, small and medium enterprises are expected to gain from improved access in areas such as textiles, leather, auto components, industrial equipment, iron and steel. Labour-intensive clusters such as Tirupur, Surat, Ludhiana, Panipat, Coimbatore and Ahmedabad may benefit from greater demand for textiles and apparel.

- **Leather, Footwear and Gems and Jewellery:** The leather and footwear industry may also gain, especially in manufacturing hubs located in Tamil Nadu, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and other States. These sectors are important because they employ a large number of workers and are closely linked with small enterprises, artisans and export-oriented production chains. The gems and jewellery sector may benefit from the removal of tariff barriers, improving India's competitiveness against European and Asian suppliers.
- **Marine and Fisheries Exports:** Marine exports such as shrimp and frozen cuttlefish may also receive a boost, supporting fishermen, seafood processors, cold-chain operators and export logistics.
- **Pharmaceutical Market Access:** In pharmaceuticals, the agreement contains a particularly important provision. Indian medicines approved by major global regulators such as the United States Food and Drug Administration, the European Medicines Agency, the United Kingdom Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency and Australia's Therapeutic Goods Administration will receive automatic marketing authorisation in Oman within 90 days. This can reduce regulatory delays and expand India's pharmaceutical presence in West Asia.
- **Services and Mobility:** The services chapter also improves access for professional services, information technology, education, healthcare, tourism, research and development and environmental services. Temporary entry provisions for professionals, contractual service suppliers, business visitors and intra-corporate transferees can benefit India's skilled workforce.

Taken together, these provisions show that the agreement is designed to support both merchandise exports and services-led economic engagement.

d. Significance for Employment-Intensive Sectors

- **Labour-Intensive Export Potential:** The agreement is especially important for employment-intensive sectors. Textiles, apparel, leather, footwear, food processing, gems and jewellery and marine products employ a large number of workers and support several layers of economic activity.
- **Wider Economic Spillover:** When export demand rises in these sectors, the benefits are not limited to large firms. They also reach small manufacturers, workers, artisans, packaging units, transport providers, warehouses, cold-chain operators and port-linked services.
- **Inclusive Growth Dimension:** Therefore, the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement has the potential to support employment generation in manufacturing and allied services. This is important for India because export-led growth in labour-intensive sectors can help absorb semi-skilled and skilled workers, strengthen regional industrial clusters and support the broader objective of inclusive economic growth.

This makes the India-Oman CEPA relevant not only for trade policy, but also for employment-oriented industrial growth.

e. Importance for MSMEs

- **Potential Benefits for Smaller Firms:** For micro, small and medium enterprises, the agreement can be transformative, but only if market access is supported by institutional assistance. Many small firms are unable to take advantage of free trade agreements because they face difficulties related to compliance costs, quality certification, packaging standards, logistics, export documentation and lack of market information.
- **Need for Institutional Support:** Therefore, the real success of the agreement will depend on how effectively India supports its smaller exporters. Export promotion councils, Indian missions abroad, State governments and industry bodies must help firms understand Omani market requirements, connect with buyers and meet regulatory standards.
- **From Domestic Markets to Regional Exports:** If supported properly, the agreement can help Indian MSMEs move from local or domestic markets to regional export markets in the Gulf.

Thus, CEPA gains will depend not only on tariff concessions, but also on the ability of Indian institutions to prepare MSMEs for export competitiveness.

f. Balancing Liberalisation with Domestic Protection

- **Protection of Sensitive Sectors:** A notable feature of the agreement is that India has balanced trade liberalisation with protection of sensitive domestic sectors. India has not offered tariff concessions on major sensitive agricultural products such as wheat, rice, maize, millets, dairy products, fruits, vegetables, edible oils, oilseeds, tea, coffee and honey.
- **Safeguarding Farmers:** This protects vulnerable farmers and avoids sudden import pressure on politically and socially sensitive agricultural sectors. At the same time, India can gain in selected products such as butter, honey, biscuits, eggs, confectionery and organic produce.
- **Calibrated Free Trade Approach:** This approach shows that free trade agreements need not be purely liberalising instruments. They can also be designed to protect domestic livelihoods while creating export opportunities in carefully selected areas.

The India–Oman CEPA therefore reflects a calibrated model of trade liberalisation with safeguards for vulnerable sectors.

g. Agriculture, Organic Products and Food Security Linkages

- **Oman as a Food-Importing Economy:** Oman is a major food-importing country, which creates opportunities for Indian agricultural and processed food exports. The recognition of India's National Programme for Organic Production can open new markets for Indian organic farmers and exporters.
- **Quality and Certification Requirements:** However, agricultural exports require strict attention to quality, traceability, packaging, sanitary standards and certification requirements. Indian farmers and exporters can benefit only if they are supported through testing facilities, certification systems, cold-chain logistics and buyer linkages.
- **Food Security Partnership:** The agreement also fits into a broader food security partnership. India can become a reliable supplier of food and processed products to Oman, while Oman can offer India a stable market in the Gulf region.

This agricultural dimension links trade policy with food security, farmer incomes and export diversification.

h. Pharmaceutical Gains and Health Diplomacy

- **Importance of Automatic Marketing Authorisation:** The pharmaceutical provision is one of the most strategically useful elements of the agreement. Automatic marketing authorisation within 90 days for Indian medicines already approved by major global regulators can reduce delays, lower compliance uncertainty and improve market access.
- **India as Pharmacy of the World:** India is already known as a reliable supplier of affordable and quality medicines. Easier access to the Omani market can strengthen India's pharmaceutical footprint in West Asia. It also supports India's broader image as the "pharmacy of the world," especially for affordable generic medicines.
- **Health Diplomacy Dimension:** This provision can also contribute to health diplomacy by improving access to medicines in partner countries while creating export opportunities for Indian pharmaceutical firms.

Thus, pharmaceutical cooperation under CEPA connects commercial gains with India's broader health diplomacy.

i. Services, Mobility and Skilled Workforce

- **India's Services Advantage:** The agreement's services and mobility provisions add a strategic layer to the partnership. India has a comparative advantage in services exports, especially in information technology, professional services, healthcare, education, consulting, engineering and construction-related services.
- **Opportunities for Skilled Workers:** Improved access for professionals, business visitors, contractual service suppliers and intra-corporate transferees can create opportunities for India's skilled workforce. This is particularly relevant because the Gulf region remains an important employment and services market for Indian workers and professionals.
- **Need for Fair Implementation:** At the same time, mobility provisions must be implemented carefully so that Indian professionals benefit from transparent entry rules, fair working conditions and recognition of qualifications where applicable.

This services dimension can strengthen India's people-centric economic engagement with the Gulf.

j. Diaspora and Business Linkages

- **Indian Community in Oman:** The people-to-people dimension gives India-Oman relations a strong foundation. Oman hosts nearly seven lakh Indians, receives around two billion dollars in annual remittances from the Indian community and has more than 6,000 Indian enterprises.
- **Diaspora as an Economic Bridge:** This diaspora and business presence can act as a bridge for trade, investment and services expansion. Indian enterprises already present in Oman can help new exporters understand local demand, consumer preferences, regulatory requirements and distribution networks.
- **Commercial Value of Diaspora Networks:** Thus, the diaspora is not only a social or cultural asset. It is also an economic bridge that can help convert the agreement's formal market access into actual commercial gains.

This makes diaspora networks an important implementation tool for the India-Oman CEPA.

k. Challenges in Realising the Benefits

- **Export Competitiveness Challenges:** The benefits of the agreement will not be automatic. Indian exporters must improve product quality, packaging, branding, delivery timelines, standards compliance and after-sales support. In sectors such as food products, marine exports and pharmaceuticals, regulatory compliance will be especially important.
- **Difficulties for Smaller Firms:** Smaller firms may find it difficult to navigate export procedures unless they receive handholding. Without institutional support, the advantages of market access may be captured mainly by larger firms.
- **Monitoring Import Surges:** There is also a need to monitor import surges in sensitive sectors and ensure that domestic producers are not adversely affected.
- **Logistics Constraints:** Another challenge is logistics. To take full advantage of the agreement, India must improve port connectivity, cold-chain infrastructure, warehousing, testing facilities and export documentation systems. Without these, tariff gains may not translate into market success.

These challenges show that CEPA implementation requires domestic preparedness as much as external market access.

1. Way Forward

- **Support MSME Exporters:** India should provide market intelligence, export credit, quality certification support, digital trade facilitation and buyer-seller platforms for smaller firms. State governments and export promotion councils should identify district-level and cluster-level export opportunities linked to the Omani market.

- **Strengthen Logistics and Cold Chains:** Cold-chain networks, port connectivity, packaging facilities and warehousing must be improved, especially for marine products, food exports and pharmaceuticals. Efficient logistics will help Indian exporters compete on cost, quality and delivery reliability.
- **Protect Vulnerable Sectors:** India should continuously monitor import trends after the agreement comes into force. If any sensitive sector faces sudden import pressure, appropriate safeguard measures and policy support should be considered.
- **Leverage Diaspora Networks:** Indian enterprises and community networks in Oman should be used to support market entry for Indian firms. Diaspora-led business chambers, professional associations and trade platforms can help bridge information gaps.
- **Promote Services Exports:** India should create sector-specific pathways for information technology, education, healthcare, tourism, environmental services and professional services. Recognition of qualifications and smoother temporary mobility should be pursued through sustained dialogue.
- **Ensure Standards Compliance:** Exporters must be helped to meet Omani regulatory, sanitary, phytosanitary and certification requirements. This is particularly important for agriculture, organic products, marine exports, processed food and pharmaceuticals.
- **Link CEPA with India's Gulf Strategy:** The India–Oman agreement should be used as a stepping stone for deeper economic integration with the wider Gulf region. It can complement India's engagement with the Gulf Cooperation Council, strengthen West Asia policy and support India's ambition to become a more competitive trading economy.

A successful way forward must therefore combine market access, export readiness, diaspora networks, logistics capacity and strategic Gulf engagement.

Conclusion

The India–Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement is more than a tariff-reduction arrangement. It is a strategic economic instrument that can strengthen India's export diversification, support micro, small and medium enterprises, expand services trade, improve pharmaceutical access, promote agriculture-linked exports and deepen India's Gulf engagement.

Its success will depend on converting formal market access into actual market penetration. For this, India must combine the agreement with institutional support, logistics improvement, quality compliance, industry readiness and active use of diaspora networks.

If implemented effectively, the agreement can become a model for employment-oriented and strategically aligned economic diplomacy.

GS Paper III: Environment

4. Aravalli Range as a Natural Barrier Against Thar Dust

a. Introduction

The Aravalli Range is one of India's oldest mountain systems and performs a crucial ecological role in north-western India. Recent dust storms in parts of Rajasthan, including Churu, Bikaner, Sikar and Alwar, have once again highlighted the importance of the Aravallis as a natural barrier against dust-laden winds from the Thar Desert.

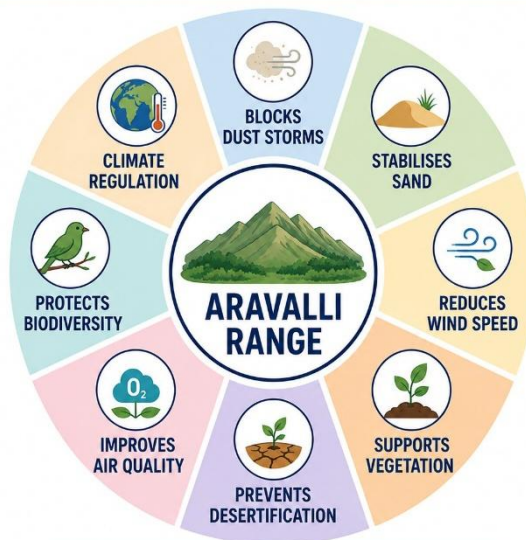
The significance of the Aravallis lies not only in their geological antiquity but also in their environmental function. They act as a climatic and ecological buffer between the Thar Desert and the densely populated Indo-Gangetic plains. By slowing down hot and dust-bearing winds, stabilising sand movement and supporting vegetation cover, the range helps protect Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, western Uttar Pradesh and adjoining areas from greater dust exposure.

Thus, the Aravallis should be understood not merely as a geographical feature, but as a living ecological defence system for northern India.

b. Geographical and Ecological Context

- **Location and Landscape Role:** The Aravalli Range extends across north-western India and forms an important landscape between the desert region of Rajasthan and the northern plains. It influences local winds, sand movement, vegetation patterns and land stability.
- **Dust Storm Conditions in North-West India:** Dust storms are common in north-west India during the pre-monsoon months from April to June. During this period, intense heat, dry surface conditions and strong westerly or south-westerly winds create favourable conditions for the lifting and transport of dust. These winds often carry sand and fine dust particles from the Thar Desert and, at times, from farther west.

ECOLOGICAL FUNCTIONS OF THE ARAVALI RANGE



Natural Ecological Barrier of North India

- **Barrier Function of the Aravallis:** The Aravallis help interrupt this movement. Their slopes and vegetation reduce wind speed and force dust and sand to settle before they can move deeper into the Indo-Gangetic plains. On the western slopes of the range, deposits known as obstacle dunes provide evidence of this barrier function. These dunes are formed when sand-bearing winds meet a physical obstruction and deposit their load.
- **Dust-Storm Vulnerability of North-West India:** The India Meteorological Department's Climate Hazards and Vulnerability Atlas places parts of north-west India in the highest dust-storm frequency class. Delhi and its surrounding districts already fall in a high-exposure dust storm zone, making the protective role of the Aravallis even more significant.

This geographical context shows why the Aravallis are crucial for regulating dust movement from the desert towards densely populated plains.

c. The Aravallis as an Ecological Shield

- **Natural Barrier Against Dust-Laden Winds:** The Aravalli Range performs what may be called an ecological shield function. It slows down hot, dry and dust-laden winds arriving from the west. This reduces the movement of dust and sand towards the Indo-Gangetic plains, where population density, urbanisation and pollution levels are already high.
- **Role of Vegetation Cover:** The range also supports vegetation that adds a natural filtering effect. Trees, shrubs and grasses trap dust particles, reduce wind erosion and stabilise loose soil. In this sense, the Aravallis do not merely act as a physical wall; they function as a living ecological barrier.
- **Importance for Delhi-NCR:** This protective role is especially important for Delhi-National Capital Region and nearby areas. These regions already face severe particulate pollution due to vehicular emissions, construction dust, industrial activity, crop-residue burning and unfavourable meteorological conditions. Greater dust transport from Rajasthan can further increase particulate matter levels, especially PM10 and PM2.5, thereby worsening respiratory stress and public health risks.

Therefore, the ecological health of the Aravallis has direct implications for air quality and public health across northern India.

d. Degradation of the Aravallis and Its Consequences

- **Causes of Degradation:** The ecological role of the Aravallis has weakened due to long-term degradation. Mining, hill cutting, deforestation, urban expansion, construction activity, land-use change, pastoral pressure and encroachments have damaged the continuity and vegetation cover of the range.
- **Disappearance of Aravalli Hills:** A Forest Survey of India assessment found that 31 out of 128 Aravalli hills in Rajasthan had disappeared due to anthropogenic pressures. This reflects the scale of human-induced damage. The Environment Ministry's Aravalli restoration framework has also identified mining, deforestation, urbanisation, construction, land-use change and encroachments as major drivers of degradation.
- **Expansion of Ecological Gaps:** Such degradation creates gaps in the range. Studies, including those associated with the Wildlife Institute of India, have pointed out that these gaps have expanded due to poor forest cover and ecological disturbance. Once gaps are created, dust-bearing winds can pass more easily towards Haryana, Delhi and western Uttar Pradesh.
- **Wider Regional Consequences:** Thus, degradation of the Aravallis does not remain a local environmental issue. It has wider regional consequences for air quality, land stability, public health and climate vulnerability.

This makes Aravalli conservation a regional ecological-security concern rather than a narrow forestry or mining-control issue.

e. Link with Air Pollution and Public Health

- **Additional Dust Load in Northern India:** The weakening of the Aravalli barrier has direct implications for air pollution. Dust from the Thar Desert and surrounding drylands can add to the existing pollution load of northern India.
- **Delhi-NCR's Existing Pollution Burden:** Delhi-National Capital Region already suffers from multiple pollution sources. These include vehicular emissions, construction dust, industrial emissions, road dust, crop-residue burning and stagnant winter air. In such a situation, additional dust transport from the west can intensify particulate pollution.
- **Health Risks:** Fine particulate matter can enter the respiratory system and aggravate asthma, bronchitis, cardiovascular disease and other health problems. Dust storms also reduce visibility, disrupt transport and increase risks for children, elderly persons and those with pre-existing health conditions.

Therefore, conserving the Aravallis is not only an environmental concern. It is also a public health necessity for northern India.

f. Link with Desertification and Land Degradation

- **Role in Controlling Desertification:** The Aravalli Range also plays an important role in controlling desertification. Desertification refers to the degradation of land in dry and semi-dry regions due to climatic variations and human activities.
- **Impact of Vegetation Loss:** When the Aravallis are degraded, vegetation cover declines, soil becomes more exposed and local hydrological systems weaken. This increases the risk of soil erosion, loss of fertility, water scarcity and gradual spread of desert-like conditions.
- **Vulnerability of Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi:** The concern is particularly serious because parts of Rajasthan, Haryana and Delhi are already vulnerable to heat stress, water scarcity and ecological decline. If the Aravalli buffer weakens further, the eastward movement of desert-like conditions may intensify over time.

In this sense, the Aravallis are closely linked with India's broader efforts to combat land degradation and protect ecological security in dryland regions.

g. Climate Dimension

- **Dust and Atmospheric Processes:** The Aravalli issue also has a climate dimension. Dust-carrying winds can influence the amount of sunlight reaching the Earth's surface, affect surface temperatures and interact with local atmospheric processes. Dust particles can also influence cloud formation and rainfall patterns, though the precise long-term impact of Aravalli degradation on rainfall requires deeper scientific study.
- **Degraded Landscapes and Climate Stress:** What is clear, however, is that degraded landscapes are more vulnerable to climate stress. Loss of vegetation increases surface heating, reduces moisture retention and weakens ecological resilience.
- **Aravalli Restoration as Climate Adaptation:** In a warming climate, conserving natural barriers such as the Aravallis becomes even more important. Thus, Aravalli restoration should be seen as part of climate adaptation, not merely as a forestry or mining-control issue.

This climate dimension strengthens the case for treating the Aravallis as a strategic ecological asset.

h. Governance Concerns

- **Weak Enforcement:** The degradation of the Aravallis reflects weaknesses in environmental governance. Despite judicial directions, policy frameworks and official restoration plans, illegal mining, unplanned real estate expansion, fragmented land records and poor enforcement continue to damage the range.
- **Inter-State Nature of the Aravallis:** A major difficulty is that the Aravallis spread across several States, including Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi and Gujarat. Since ecological systems do not follow administrative boundaries, isolated State-level actions are inadequate. A common landscape-level conservation strategy is needed.
- **Departmental Silos:** Weak coordination between departments is another challenge. Forest departments, mining departments, urban development authorities, local bodies and revenue authorities often operate in silos. This allows ecological damage to continue through fragmented approvals and weak monitoring.

Therefore, conservation of the Aravallis requires not only restoration work but also stronger regulation, inter-State coordination and long-term ecological planning.

i. Way Forward

- **Adopt Landscape-Level Restoration:** The Aravallis should be restored as one ecological landscape rather than as isolated patches. Restoration must include native vegetation, soil conservation, assisted natural regeneration and protection of degraded hill slopes. Native species are important because they are better adapted to local climate, soil and water conditions.
- **Control Mining and Encroachment:** Illegal mining, hill cutting and unauthorised construction must be strictly controlled in ecologically sensitive zones. Environmental clearances, land-use conversions and mining permissions should be subject to strong scrutiny. Violations must attract timely penalties and restoration obligations.
- **Close Ecological Gaps:** Identified gaps in the Aravalli range should be treated as priority restoration zones. These gaps allow easier movement of dust-bearing winds towards the plains. Restoring vegetation and stabilising soil in these areas can strengthen the barrier function of the range.
- **Strengthen Inter-State Coordination:** Rajasthan, Haryana, Delhi and Gujarat should adopt a shared Aravalli conservation strategy. This must include common mapping standards, joint monitoring mechanisms, coordinated action against illegal mining and regular review of restoration outcomes.
- **Use Scientific Monitoring:** Satellite mapping, dust transport modelling, air quality data, land-use change studies and ground-level ecological surveys should guide restoration. Scientific evidence can help identify high-risk zones, track degradation and measure the success of restoration efforts.
- **Promote Community-Based Conservation:** Local communities, pastoral groups and panchayats should be included in conservation efforts. Afforestation, grazing regulation,

protection of common lands and water conservation can succeed only when local communities are treated as partners rather than obstacles.

- **Link Restoration with Climate Adaptation:** Aravalli restoration should be integrated with India's broader strategy for combating desertification, heat stress, air pollution and land degradation. It should also be linked with schemes and missions related to afforestation, watershed development, urban ecology and climate resilience.

A meaningful way forward must therefore combine ecological restoration, strict regulation, scientific monitoring, community participation and inter-State cooperation.

Conclusion

The Aravallis are not merely an ancient geological formation. They are a vital ecological defence line for northern India. By slowing down dust-laden winds, stabilising sand movement, supporting vegetation and reducing desertification risks, the range protects the Indo-Gangetic plains from deeper environmental stress.

Their degradation can intensify dust transport, worsen air pollution, accelerate land degradation and increase climate vulnerability. Protecting the Aravallis is therefore essential for environmental security, public health and climate resilience.

A strong conservation strategy must combine ecological restoration, strict regulation, scientific monitoring and inter-State coordination. In this sense, conserving the Aravallis is not only about protecting hills; it is about safeguarding the ecological stability of north-western and northern India.

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