

The Hindu Important News Articles & Editorial For UPSC CSE

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The ASI is copying inscriptions from two temples in Srirangam and Manachanallur taluks, Tiruchi district.

ASI copying old stone inscriptions on temple walls in Tiruchi district

N. Sai Charan
CHENNAI

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has been involved in copying important stone inscriptions on the walls of two temples at Srirangam and Manachanallur taluks in Tiruchi district. It has also recently completed a similar exercise at two temples in Periyakulam taluk in Theni district.

Inscriptions in Tamil on the walls of Mattrurai Varadeswarar Temple at Thiruvashi in Manachanallur taluk, and Agneeswarar temple at Periya Karuppur village in Srirangam taluk in Tiruchi are being copied, B. Charumathi, Assistant Epigraphist, said.

These are copied onto maplitho papers – where the exact imitation of the inscription will be obtained. The inked paper will be used for further study.

The preliminary reading of the inscription at Thiruvashi temple revealed that it belonged to Kulothunga Chola period. The exact year would be ascertained only after further analysis, Ms. Charumathi added.

She further said that the inscriptions at Periya Karuppur date back to the Vijayanagara Kingdom of the



Preserving the past: Inscriptions that were copied recently at Mayapandieswarar temple at Melmangalam in Periyakulam taluk, Theni district. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

14th Century, and had references about donations made to temples.

In Theni, copying of the inscriptions on the walls of Mayapandieswarar temple and Varadharaja Perumal temple at Melmangalam in Periyakulam taluk were completed recently.

Official sources said these inscriptions were dis-

covered by a team of experts from the ASI, including Amarnath Ramakrishna, Superintending Archaeologist, Temple Survey Project (South Zone); M. Prasanna, Assistant Archaeologist, Chennai; and J. Veeramankandan, Assistant Epigraphist, Chennai.

Mr. Veeramankandan

said these inscriptions date back to the 12th Century, and had references to Pandiya king Sundarapandiyar and *Devadana* (land donated to temples).

The team also recently found inscriptions on nearly 30 pillars at Moolanathaswamy temple in Sholavandan taluk in Madurai district.

Inscriptions on temple walls in Tiruchi district:

- The inscriptions at Mattrurai Varadeswarar Temple, Thiruvashi, are believed to be from the Kulothunga Chola period, a significant era in South Indian history marked by Chola rule and temple construction.

- ▶ The Chola dynasty, particularly under Kulothunga, was known for its contributions to art, architecture, and temple endowments, reflecting the importance of religion and temple patronage during that time.
- ▶ Inscriptions at Agneeswarar Temple in Periya Karuppur village, dating back to the Vijayanagara Kingdom of the 14th century, highlight the continued tradition of temple donations and patronage by rulers.
- ▶ These Vijayanagara inscriptions often recorded grants of land or resources to temples, showcasing the strong connection between political power and religious institutions.
- ▶ Such inscriptions offer valuable insights into the socio-political and economic systems of mediaeval South India, especially the role temples played as cultural, religious, and economic hubs.
- ▶ The inscriptions also reflect the evolving temple architecture and religious practices across different dynasties.

The Indian government has issued new directives to recognize LGBTQIA+ couples for ration cards, healthcare rights, and financial services, following the Supreme Court's 2023 judgement on marriage equality.

- ➔ These interim measures aim to reduce discrimination and enhance access to social welfare, healthcare, and legal entitlements for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Ensure LGBTQIA+ couples get ration cards, says Centre

Treat partners as members of the same household, it tells States and Union Territories; calls for making provision to allow a person to claim the body of partner when next of kin is not available

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

The Union government on Sunday said LGBTQIA+ couples will be considered part of the same household for the purpose of ration cards, an advisory for which was recently issued by the Department of Food and Public Distribution.

All States and Union Territories have also been directed to take measures necessary to ensure that LGBTQIA+ couples are not discriminated against in the issuance of ration cards.

The Union government added that the Health Ministry had also written to all States and Union Territories and relevant stakeholders about making a provision that allowed partners in such relationships to be able to claim each other's body "when near relative/next of kin/family is not available".

The Health Ministry has also framed guidelines on required medical interventions for intersex children or infants or "infants/children with disorders of sexual differentiation" so that they can "have a medically normal life without complications", the govern-



The Centre has directed all States and UTs not to discriminate against LGBTQIA+ couples while issuing ration cards. A.M. FARUQUI

ment said. The Health Ministry is also working on guidelines for addressing issues of mental health and well-being of persons from the LGBTQIA+ community.

The Social Justice and Empowerment Ministry said these were among the "interim measures" the government had taken in the past week in keeping with the directions of the Supreme Court in the marriage equality case in October 2023.

Calls for suggestions

The Centre also called for suggestions from the public for further measures that could be taken, asking those interested to email abhishek-upsc@gov.in and mayank.b@gov.in.

In the judgment, the top

court refused to recognise same-sex marriages, but it noted the Centre's submission that it would form a committee to look into the scope of entitlements for LGBTQIA+ people and couples.

The government formed this committee, headed by the Cabinet Secretary, in April, following which multiple deliberations have taken place. A sub-committee was also formed under the chairmanship of the Home Secretary.

The sub-committee met on May 31 to discuss measures to address discrimination, especially in accessing social welfare benefits, healthcare, and public goods services; police action; and violence.

The Home Ministry has

also issued advisories to States and Union Territories on prison visitation rights of persons from the LGBTQIA+ community and on measures to be taken to ensure they do not face any threat of violence, harassment, or coercion.

The Department of Financial Services also issued a clarification last week, saying LGBTQIA+ couples cannot be prevented from opening joint bank accounts and that they can nominate each other as beneficiaries.

Apart from this, the Centre on Sunday said the Health Ministry's advisories to stakeholders, States and Union Territories also called for ensuring the LGBTQIA+ community's rights concerning healthcare, planning awareness activities, prohibition of conversion therapy, availability of sex reassignment surgery, changes in curricula, provision of teleconsultation, sensitisation and training various levels of staff.

The Directorate General of Health Services has also written to all State Health Departments to ensure healthcare access and reduce discrimination against people of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Analysis of the news:

- **Ration Cards:** LGBTQIA+ couples will now be recognized as part of the same household for ration card purposes. States and Union Territories have been directed to ensure non-discrimination in issuing these cards.

Health Ministry Directives:

- **Body Claim:** Partners in LGBTQIA+ relationships can claim each other's body if no next of kin is available.
- **Intersex Guidelines:** New guidelines for medical interventions for intersex children and those with sexual differentiation disorders aim to ensure normal health without complications.
- **Mental Health:** Guidelines are being developed to address mental health and well-being issues for the LGBTQIA+ community.
- **Social Justice Measures:** These actions are interim measures taken following the Supreme Court's directions in the marriage equality case of October 2023.
- **Committee Formation:** Following the Supreme Court's directive, a committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary was formed in April, with a sub-committee under the Home Secretary discussing discrimination and welfare issues.

Additional Measures:

- **Prison Visitation:** Advisories issued for LGBTQIA+ rights in prisons.
- **Financial Services:** LGBTQIA+ couples can open joint bank accounts and nominate each other as beneficiaries.

Healthcare:

- **Rights:** Advisories ensure rights concerning healthcare, including awareness activities and prohibition of conversion therapy.
- **Access:** The Directorate General of Health Services is working to reduce discrimination and improve healthcare access for the LGBTQIA+ community..

A study in Nature Cities reveals that cities, especially in Asia, are growing vertically faster than horizontally to accommodate increased populations.

- The research highlights the need for updated urban planning to address infrastructure, climate, and sustainability challenges.
- Vertical growth poses both opportunities and challenges for future urban development.

Cities in Asia are growing upwards more than outwards

Vertical growth can increase population density and, if the costs are reasonable, can house more people. Such growth needs to be supported with more jobs, public transport to reduce transport emissions, better walkability, decent sewage and water systems, and greater energy supply

Robini Subrahmanyam
BENGALURU

Cities around the world, but especially in Asia, are growing upwards faster than they are spreading outwards, a new study published in *Nature Cities* has found. In an increasingly urban and urbanising world, taller buildings can accommodate more people in less space but they can also negatively affect existing infrastructure, the local environment, and even the climate.

"Urban population, roughly from 1990 to 2020, increased by about two billion people," Steven Frohling, an earth scientist at the University of New Hampshire and the lead author of the current study, said. "So cities have had to grow in order to accommodate those two billion people. The question is, how have they grown?"

A soaring volume
A team of earth and urban scientists came together to answer this and look at more than 1,500 cities around the planet from the 1990s to the 2010s. They used remote-sensing satellite data to gather information about cities' vertical growth and two-dimensional (2D) outward spread.

To understand how cities grew, the team examined their footprint: the rate at which ground area was getting covered by buildings. They also used data from scatterometers – satellite-borne sensors that send out pulses of microwaves to the earth's surface and collect the data reflected back – to get a sense of how city structures have changed in volume.

"So by combining these two data sets, we thought we could get a better picture of how cities are growing both laterally and vertically," Mr. Frohling said.

They found that the rate at which the 2D spread was increasing wasn't as high: that is, cities weren't expanding as much as they used to. But the microwave data suggested the volume of city structures was soaring.

'Only paper in the literature'
"The microwave data is sensitive to both lateral growth and vertical growth, but we see it accelerating, growing at a more rapid rate in most cities over this three-decade period," Mr. Frohling explained. "So if the cities are not accelerating in the rate at which they cover the ground with buildings, but they're building volume – which is what we think the microwave correlates to most reliably – the implication of that is that it's vertical growth."

Based on their analysis, the researchers found an upward-growing trend of cities worldwide, with some east Asian cities, especially in China, in the lead. Cities with populations in excess of 10 million people had more prominent vertical growth, and this effect became more pronounced in the 2010s.

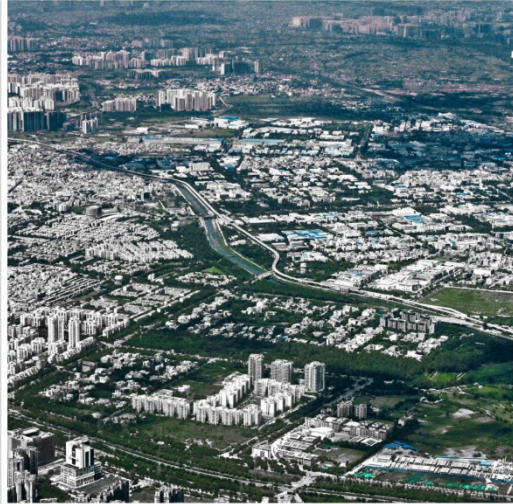
"This is the only paper in the literature looking at upward growth for such a long-time span and for this large sample of cities," Richa Maltra said in an email. A co-author of the paper, she is a Yale graduate student with Karen Seto, one of the world's leading experts on the topic and also a co-author of this study.

"3D urban growth could open a new paradigm for remote sensing research and its applications in advancing our understanding of urban growth and its impacts on local climate," Ms. Maltra said.

"Up to a certain extent, a city can grow, right? Beyond a point, it will start to densify," said H.S. Sudhira, who has a PhD



Reaching the sky: A view of Shanghai, China. Based on an analysis, the researchers found an upward growing trend in some east Asian cities, especially in China, in the lead. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature25027>



Clearly packed: An aerial view of Gurugram, Haryana, in New Delhi, the most expensive central real estate is well protected, leading most of the taller buildings coming up on the outskirts, for example in Noida and Gurugram. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nature25027>

in urban planning and governance from the Indian Institute of Science, Bengaluru, and is currently the director of Gabbi Labs.

'It's a nice attempt'
"What is critical from a more policy and pragmatic view is to understand the threshold at which it shifts from outward growth to densifying in a way that it goes vertical."

"It's a nice attempt to really look at it from a global context," he said.

Indian cities did not show a uniform upward growth, with only the large ones with more than five million people showing upward and outward or just outward growth, mostly in the 2010s.

"In India in particular, there's much more regulation compared to China, in building heights that cities will allow. So cities haven't been able to grow as rapidly vertically in India as they have been able to in, say, East Asia or Southeast Asia," Mr. Frohling said.

In Delhi, for example, most of the growth was outwards in the 1990s and 2000s, with some upward growth in the 2010s.

Surajit Chakravarty, an urban planner and policy scholar at IIT Delhi (speaking in a personal capacity), believes we must exercise caution before ascribing a global trend to cities in very diverse contexts.

"This is a very interesting paper about the morphology of cities from a comparative international perspective," Mr. Chakravarty wrote in an email to this correspondent. "But cities are not like



Cities are less efficient
"In India, a large part of the urbanisation is occurring outside the study's parameters, in very small towns and through the process of villages turning into urban places," Mr. Chakravarty pointed out.

Vertical growth can increase population density, and if the costs are reasonable, can also house many more people (i.e. greater density). But such growth needs to be supported with more jobs and good public transport to reduce transport emissions and improve walkability. Strong infrastructure with decent sewage and water systems are also required to sustain a large number of people. Taller buildings will also need specialised resources and will have a greater energy demand.

While growth is important, how this is

achieved – keeping sustainability and climate resilience in mind – is crucial in this time of unprecedented climate change. Despite the rapidly rising rates of urbanisation, Mr. Sudhira is thankful that the majority of Indians are still in rural, dispersed settlements, which he said are more efficient and climate resilient.

"More tall buildings without any tree cover can also cause an urban 'heat island' effect, which can affect temperatures and rainfall in cities. A study published on June 11 in the *Journal of Advances in Modelling Earth Systems* studied Shanghai's growth and reported more built-up area could slow wind speeds by up to half."

"It's not easy to say doing it this way is better than that way. There are trade-offs in all of these things," said Mr. Frohling.

"We want to be able to know how cities are developing, have a way of looking at these trajectories, and see if there are patterns that can help us anticipate energy and resource use. 3D urban structure has implications for a whole bunch of factors, including disaster relief, sustainability, and livability."

Dated master plans
"We (India) seem to be following the trajectory that China is going through, at least some in terms of the population and to some extent some bit of industrialisation and economic growth as well," Mr. Sudhira said. "In that context, I would see this paper as an alarm call; we need to really step back at the drawing board and say, should we really allow for more high rise and what should be the policy on that?"

Most cities and States in India, including Bengaluru, are working with dated master plans, which decide how land will be occupied by different urban structures. Most existing planning laws don't even acknowledge transportation, energy, water, resources, waste water management, and solid waste, according to Mr. Sudhira. "We need to revisit and rewrite our master planning acts, with a more progressive one that is enforceable and can stand the test of time," he said.

"It should encompass all of these things and also aspects of climate change, because I think we're at a time where you can't ignore climate change."

"There is no one-size-fits-all approach with cities," Mr. Chakravarty added.

"India needs trained planners to make locally grounded decisions keeping in mind the needs and aspirations of the people, and the objectives of sustainability and livability."

(Robini Subrahmanyam is a freelance journalist in Bengaluru.)

Vertical vs. Horizontal Growth:

➤ A recent study published in Nature Cities highlights that cities, particularly in Asia, are expanding upwards faster than outwards.

- This shift is driven by the need to accommodate a global urban population increase of about two billion people from 1990 to 2020.

Study Methodology:

- The research analysed over 1,500 cities worldwide using remote-sensing satellite data to measure both vertical (building volume) and horizontal (ground area covered) growth.
- Data from scatterometers, which measure the volume of buildings, indicated that while horizontal expansion has slowed, vertical growth has accelerated.

Findings:

- The study shows a global trend of increased vertical growth in urban areas, with notable examples in East Asian cities, particularly China.
- Cities with populations exceeding 10 million have shown more prominent vertical expansion, especially in the 2010s.

International Context:

- The study is recognized for its extensive analysis of long-term upward growth across a broad sample of cities.
- Urban growth patterns differ globally, with some countries experiencing more vertical development due to fewer regulations.
- For example, Indian cities face more stringent height regulations compared to East Asian cities.

Regulations and Variations in India:

- In India, the growth pattern varies, with large cities showing significant vertical expansion, while others exhibit more horizontal growth.
- For instance, Delhi has primarily seen outward expansion, with some vertical growth in recent years.
- Urban growth is influenced by a combination of policies, regulations, historical patterns, and geographical factors.

Challenges and Considerations:

- Vertical growth can increase population density but also poses challenges related to infrastructure, climate resilience, and sustainability.
- It requires improved public transport, job opportunities, and essential infrastructure like sewage and water systems.
- Tall buildings contribute to the urban heat island effect, affecting local climate conditions such as wind speeds and rainfall.

Policy Implications:

- The study underscores the need for updated master planning in cities to address contemporary challenges.
- Existing planning laws are often outdated and do not adequately address modern issues like transportation and climate change.

and updated regulations to ensure sustainable and livable urban environments.

Conclusion:

- ▶ While vertical growth offers solutions for accommodating larger populations, it also requires a balanced approach considering sustainability, infrastructure needs, and climate impacts.
- ▶ Revising planning strategies and policies is essential for effective future urbanisation management..

UPSC Mains PYQ : 2016

Ques: With a brief background of quality of urban life in India, introduce the objectives and strategy of the 'Smart City Programme'.



Paris is nominating its iconic zinc roofs for UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage status, highlighting their historical and aesthetic value.

- The bid reflects efforts to preserve this traditional craft while addressing the challenges posed by climate change. The decision will be made in December.

Zinc Roofers of Paris:

- Zinc roofers have been a significant part of Paris's skyline for nearly two centuries, contributing to the city's distinctive grey appearance.
- Paris features approximately 128,000 roofs, with 21.4 million square metres covered in traditional zinc.
- Zinc roofs are known for their durability and distinctive appearance, contributing to the city's unique character.
- The craftsmanship involved includes both functional roofing and ornamental work.
- The profession is adapting to challenges posed by climate change, including the need for more resilient materials and techniques.
- Efforts are underway to ensure the continuation and preservation of this traditional craft in the face of modern challenges.



In process: A roofer and zinc worker on the roof of a building in Paris. AFP

Paris seeks UNESCO heritage status for its zinc roofers

Agence France-Presse
PARIS

The zinc covering the roofs of central Paris has given the French capital's skyline its distinctive grey hue for almost two centuries.

Now the roofs and the workers who create and care for them are aiming to enter a select heritage club to showcase a profession adapting to the challenges of climate change.

The French Culture Ministry has chosen the zinc roofers as the country's entry for the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage to be decided at the UN body's session in Paraguayan capital Asuncion in December.

The craftsmanship of roofers and other ornamentalists who have sculpted the capital's skyline will be among 67 candidacies vying to join other iconic heritage sites such as India's Taj Mahal.

According to the city's urbanism agency Apur, Paris has 1,28,000 roofs covering a surface area of 32 million square metres, of which 21.4 million are of the traditional zinc-covered variety.

"Paris seen from above, it's obvious you're not in another city," said an enthused Delphine Burkli, mayor of the capital's ninth district.

Ms. Burkli helped initiate the French bid and first proposed in 2014 to add the roofs to UNESCO's heritage list.

But the plan has since changed as it is "very complicated", said Gilles Mermet, coordinator of the bid.

The French candidacy aims to encourage thinking about the future of the city and a craft forced to adapt in the face of climate change, adds Burkli.

Term In News : Pilibhit Tiger Reserve (PTR)

- Poachers recently killed two chitals in the Pilibhit Tiger Reserve (PTR) and fled after stealing a rifle from a forest guard.



About Pilibhit Tiger Reserve (PTR):

- It is located in Pilibhit District, Lakhimpur Kheri District and Bahraich District of Uttar Pradesh.
- It lies along the India-Nepal border in the foothills of the Himalayas and the plains of the 'terai' in Uttar Pradesh.
- The river Gomti originates from the PTR, which is also the catchment of several others like Sharda, Chuka, and Mala Khannot.
- The Sharda Sagar Dam is on the boundary of the reserve.
- Vegetation: North Indian moist deciduous type.
- It has a dry and hot climate, which brings a combination of dry teak forest and Vindhya Mountain soils.

Flora:

- ▶ It is characterized by sal forests, tall grasslands, and swamps, maintained by periodic flooding from rivers.
- ▶ The sal woodland is very dense with good natural regeneration, amounting to almost 76% of the reserve area.

Fauna:

- ▶ It is home to a myriad of wild animals including the endangered tiger, swamp deer, Bengal florican, hog deer, leopard, etc.

Key Facts about Chital:

- ▶ The spotted deer, or chital/cheetal is a deer species native to the Indian subcontinent.
- ▶ It is the most common deer species in Indian forests.
- ▶ Distribution: It is widely distributed in Asia, especially in India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Bhutan, and a small group in Pakistan.
- ▶ Habitat: Subtropical grasslands and forests

Features:

- ▶ With a lifespan of about 20 to 30 years, it stands at about 35 inches tall and weighs about 187 pounds.
- ▶ It is a slightly reddish brown with white spots on its body.
- ▶ Only males have antlers, and their bodies are larger than females.
- ▶ Spotted Deer are social animals. They commonly occur in herds of 10 to 50 individuals.
- ▶ They mainly feed on grasses throughout the year. Their diets include herbs, shrubs, foliage, and fruits.

India's neighbourhood watch, past and present

While India's neighbourhood seems to be in disarray, there are times when the country indulges in unwarranted self-flagellation if things go wrong primarily because it credits itself a bit too much in its ability to determine the outcome of events in its neighbourhood.

Change in a short span

Nearly 16 years ago, between 2008-10, in a span of just three years, epoch-making events unfolded in India's neighbourhood, ushering in democracy and promising much. This was a period which coincided with this writer's stint as Head of Division for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and Myanmar in the Ministry of External Affairs. India had played a positive catalytic role to further this process in its neighbourhood.

In December 2008 in Bangladesh, after military rule under General Moeen U. Ahmed, Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister (2009) riding on the strength of a massive mandate, especially from women and youth. In fact, then External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee played a quiet "catalytic" role in the holding of elections in Bangladesh, free of army interference. And, over 15 years, India and Bangladesh forged a mutually beneficial partnership, with Ms. Hasina's government displaying sensitivity to India's core interests.

In May 2009 in Sri Lanka, after 33 years of its existence, the group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was finally defeated in no small measure due to India's sustained engagement with Sri Lanka – a role which has not been adequately acknowledged. Without the sword of the LTTE over India's head, India could look forward to closer relations with a united Sri Lanka.

In October 2008 in the Maldives, after 30 years of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom's autocratic reign, the first multi-party democratic elections were held where Mohamed Nasheed took over as President. India did its bit to stabilise this nascent democracy. In spite of ups and downs, the last three consecutive elections have ushered in three different Presidents, showing the democratic maturity of the Maldives in nearly 16 years.

In 2010 in Myanmar, after 20 years of military rule, elections were held in which the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) came to power. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was freed after phases of imprisonment. Subsequently, her National League for Democracy (NLD) had landslide wins in 2015 and 2020, indicating a strengthening of democratic roots.

Even Pakistan elected a civilian government in 2008, sending President Pervez Musharraf into exile.

These developments gave hope that democracy, with all its imperfections, was taking root in India's neighbourhood. It is not a coincidence that the years 2008-10 also witnessed an exponential increase in India's



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development assistance to its neighbours, whether in the rebuilding of northern Sri Lanka or extending the biggest ever line of credit to Bangladesh, of \$1 billion, or in connectivity projects in Myanmar or as budgetary support to stabilise the fledgling democracy in the Maldives. For once, India could more than match China's "chequebook diplomacy" in its neighbourhood.

The present situation

Moving to 2024, the neighbourhood looks almost unrecognisable.

Just when one thought that four consecutive elections in Bangladesh would make democracy irreversible, Ms. Hasina's government collapsed in August 2024 under the weight of its own democracy deficit, an economic downturn and a violent quashing of student protests that anti-Hasina forces joined in later. India was caught flat-footed. Could India have prevented it? Maybe yes, given that this happened over a period of time. But it is difficult to decide how much a leader should be pressured to change course without seeming to interfere in a country's internal affairs, especially when there is appreciation of each other's national interests. While India's bias toward Ms. Hasina is under the scanner, let us be realistic. Individuals do matter in relations between countries as much as institutional links. But that did not preclude India from maintaining regular engagement with Bangladesh's Opposition, which it failed to do.

In 2022, Sri Lanka had its own "Bangladesh" moment when President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled Sri Lanka, unable to control a series of mass anti-government "Aragalaya" protests led mostly by apolitical irate public and youth. Its democracy and the economy took a severe beating, the after-effects of which are still being felt in Sri Lanka. Could India have anticipated it? It is very unlikely. But what India did in the aftermath was commendable. India's timely and generous bailout package of about \$4 billion saved the economy.

Since India has built bridges across the political spectrum in Sri Lanka, it is in a much better position, irrespective of who comes to power in the forthcoming elections. India has even made peace with the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, a right-wing party which has usually been anti-India in its stand.

In 2024, the results of elections in the Maldives caught India on the wrong foot as it nearly made the same mistake as in Bangladesh – not anticipating President Mohamed Muizzu's huge win and not having engaged with him earlier. India is now making amends. However, what is noteworthy is that after Maldives' first elections when President Nasheed (2008-12) was in trouble without a majority in the Majlis, India did not hesitate to "counsel" him on the importance of respecting the "coalition mantra". However, he was not persuaded and ended up losing his presidency. So much for India turning a blind eye to the "mistakes" of its friends.

In Myanmar, after three consecutive elections,

the military took over yet again in February 2021, despite the 2020 elections having given the NLD a huge mandate. Now, Myanmar's military is riding a tiger and unable to dismount, with the Opposition and ethnic groups gaining ground. The conflict is spilling over into India's north-east. It has renewed India's dilemma on whether to stay with the military to protect itself from insurgents using Myanmar soil or to side with the rejuvenated Opposition forces fighting for change, since India cannot afford to lose Myanmar in this balancing act.

In August 2021, the Taliban forcibly captured power after two decades, turning the clock back in Afghanistan. India had anticipated this and even cautioned the United States, but the U.S. kept its "strategic" partner India out of its engagement with Taliban for fear of offending Pakistan. Now, India is fending for itself from the fall-out.

And Pakistan saw its civilian government toppled in 2022, widely seen as at the army's behest as in the past.

New Delhi's response as key factor

Hence, in some cases, India's missteps and misjudgments have cost it to an extent, while in others, for no fault of India's, events have spiralled out of control. The crux is on how India has reacted to these developments.

India has not done too badly considering that it bailed out Sri Lanka financially when Colombo needed India the most; extended friendship and patience with the new Maldivian government to get back on its democratic feet. In both cases, going along with forces trying to keep democratic space open is India's best bet. In Myanmar, used as India is to an uneasy alliance of the army and NLD, India needs a different approach with ethnic groups getting into this mix. With Bangladesh, India needs a new understanding with parties, not all of whom are favourable to India and keep out external anti-India forces waiting to take advantage of the situation.

But Myanmar and Bangladesh, given their centrality to India's interests, pose serious challenges – Myanmar is veering toward a possible civil war and Bangladesh is struggling to get back on its democratic feet. In both cases, going along with forces trying to keep democratic space open is India's best bet. In Myanmar, used as India is to an uneasy alliance of the army and NLD, India needs a different approach with ethnic groups getting into this mix. With Bangladesh, India needs a new understanding with parties, not all of whom are favourable to India and keep out external anti-India forces waiting to take advantage of the situation.

In the midst of these upheavals, the importance of India's robust developmental support becoming the bedrock for fostering closer relations with its neighbours and their peoples is underestimated. Even the Taliban hesitated to attack Indian projects over the last two decades since it benefited the people.

All these point to the fact that India requires more sustained engagement with its neighbours and in the region, which is discovering that once the genie of democracy has been freed, it is difficult to put it back in the bottle.

In some instances, it was New Delhi's missteps that affected it, while in others, it was a case of events spiralling out of control

GS Paper 02 : International Relations – India and its neighbourhood.

(UPSC CSE (M) GS-3 : 2014) The diverse nature of India as a multi religious and multi-ethnic society is not immune to the impact of radicalism which has been in her neighbourhood. Discuss along with the strategies to be adopted to counter this environment. (250 w/15m)

UPSC Mains Practice Question Discuss India's evolving role in supporting democratic transitions in its neighbourhood from 2008 to 2024. How should India recalibrate its diplomatic strategies to address recent political upheavals in the region? (150 w /10 m)

Context :

- Between 2008-2010, India played a crucial role in fostering democracy in its neighbourhood.
- However, by 2024, political upheavals in countries like Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Myanmar have challenged India's regional influence, prompting the need for sustained engagement and recalibration of its diplomatic strategies.

Shift in India's neighbourhood dynamics (2008-10)

- Epoch-making events unfolded between 2008-2010, coinciding with the author's stint as Head of Division for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Maldives, and Myanmar in the Ministry of External Affairs.
- During this period, India played a catalytic role in fostering democratic transitions in its neighbouring countries.

Democratic transitions across neighbouring countries

- Bangladesh (2008):
- Sheikh Hasina became Prime Minister after the end of military rule in 2009, following the efforts of Indian External Affairs Minister Pranab Mukherjee to ensure free elections.
- Over the next 15 years, India and Bangladesh strengthened their partnership, especially around sensitive national interests.

Sri Lanka (2009):

- India's engagement played a crucial, albeit under-acknowledged, role in the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).
- The absence of LTTE enabled India to work closely with Sri Lanka to foster stronger bilateral ties.

Maldives (2008):

- The Maldives held its first multi-party democratic elections after 30 years of autocratic rule under President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, with Mohamed Nasheed taking power.
- India helped stabilise the country's nascent democracy, which demonstrated its maturity with three different Presidents elected in the last 16 years.

Myanmar (2010):

- India engaged with Myanmar after 20 years of military rule, facilitating elections where the military-backed USDP won.
- Aung San Suu Kyi's release from imprisonment and her party's subsequent electoral victories signaled the strengthening of democracy.

Pakistan (2008):

- Pakistan saw the election of a civilian government, which pushed General Pervez Musharraf into exile, symbolising hope for democratic development in the region.
- India's role in regional development
- Between 2008-2010, India significantly increased its development assistance to its neighbours.
- India contributed to the rebuilding of northern Sri Lanka, extended a \$1 billion credit line to Bangladesh, worked on connectivity projects in Myanmar, and provided budgetary support to the Maldives.
- This helped India to compete with China's "chequebook diplomacy."

Challenges in the Neighbourhood (2024)

- Bangladesh's collapse (2024)
 - In August 2024, Sheikh Hasina's government collapsed due to a combination of economic downturn, a democracy deficit, and violent suppression of student protests.
 - India was caught off-guard, having failed to engage sufficiently with Bangladesh's Opposition despite having a strong relationship with Ms. Hasina.
- Sri Lanka's crisis (2022)
 - President Gotabaya Rajapaksa fled Sri Lanka amidst mass anti-government protests in 2022, leading to severe economic and democratic deterioration.
 - Although India did not anticipate this, its \$4 billion bailout was instrumental in stabilising Sri Lanka's economy.
 - India built political bridges across the Sri Lankan political spectrum, which now ensures strong ties regardless of electoral outcomes.
- Unexpected results in the Maldives (2024)
 - India misjudged the 2024 Maldivian elections, failing to anticipate President Mohamed Muizzu's victory due to insufficient engagement with him earlier.

- India is now working to rectify this mistake and continues to extend support, having counselled former President Nasheed in 2008 on the importance of coalition politics.
- **Military takeover in Myanmar (2021)**
 - After three elections, Myanmar's military reasserted control in February 2021, despite the National League for Democracy's significant victory in 2020.
 - India faces challenges as the conflict spills over into its northeast, complicating its relations with both the military and Opposition groups.
- **Afghanistan and Pakistan's instability**
 - The Taliban regained power in Afghanistan in 2021 despite India's warnings to the U.S.
 - India was sidelined during U.S.-Taliban engagements, and now India is navigating the fallout from the Taliban's return.
 - Pakistan's civilian government collapsed in 2022, with the military continuing to assert influence.

India's Reaction and Lessons Learned

- **India's response to neighbourhood upheavals**
 - India played a key role in stabilising Sri Lanka with a timely financial bailout.
 - India has extended a hand of friendship to the new Maldivian government, engaged with the Taliban to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan, and re-established ties with Nepal after past tensions.
- **Complexities in Myanmar and Bangladesh**
 - Myanmar's situation, with the military clinging to power and ethnic groups gaining strength, poses a significant challenge. India must recalibrate its approach to engage with all forces, including the Opposition and ethnic groups.
 - Bangladesh remains crucial to India, but India must diversify its engagement with political parties to prevent external anti-India forces from exploiting the situation.

Need for sustained regional engagement

- India's developmental support has been crucial in building strong relationships with its neighbours.
- As regional democracies face crises, India must focus on sustained, multi-level engagement with all political forces in its neighbourhood.