

# THE PALA CIVIL TIMES



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## Menstrual health in schools is integral to right to life: SC

The Supreme Court has held that the right to menstrual health and access to menstrual hygiene management (MHM) measures in educational institutions form an integral part of the right to life and dignity under Article 21 of the Constitution. A Bench comprising Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan observed that dignity must translate into lived conditions free from humiliation, exclusion, and avoidable suffering. The Court noted that the absence of adequate MHM facilities exposes menstruating students to stigma, stereotyping, and indignity, thereby undermining their bodily autonomy and privacy. The judgment emphasised that lack of safe and hygienic menstrual facilities compels adolescent girls either to remain absent from school or to adopt unsafe practices, resulting in menstrual poverty.

Such deprivation, the Court held, impairs girls' ability to exercise their right to education on an equal footing, with long-term consequences for their personal development and social mobility. The ruling arose from a writ petition highlighting inadequate MHM infrastructure in schools nationwide. Issuing binding directions, the Court mandated States and Union Territories to ensure that all schools—government and private, urban and rural—provide functional, gender-segregated toilets and make oxo-biodegradable sanitary napkins freely accessible, preferably through vending machines within toilet premises.



## US museum to return 3 bronze sculptures 'removed illegally' from temples in TN

The Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art has decided to return three ancient Indian bronze sculptures after provenance research established their illegal removal from temple sites in Tamil Nadu. The sculptures include Shiva Nataraja (10th century, Chola), Somaskanda (12th century, Chola), and Saint Sundarar with Paravai (16th century, Vijayanagara), all originally used in temple rituals and processions. As part of a systematic review of its South Asian collection, the museum, in collaboration with the Photo Archives of the French Institute of Pondicherry, confirmed through archival photographs that the idols were present in Indian temples between 1956 and 1959. The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) subsequently verified that the sculptures were removed in violation of Indian law. In the case of Shiva Nataraja, the museum also found that falsified provenance documents were used by a New York gallery to facilitate its acquisition. While the sculptures are being returned, one idol will be placed on long-term loan to document its origin, removal, and repatriation, reflecting growing global emphasis on ethical museum practices and cultural heritage restitution.



## Voting reflects citizens' faith in elections, says President



**What happened** : National Voters' Day was observed with messages highlighting the importance of voting and democratic participation. The President emphasised that democracy's strength lies not only in the size of the electorate but also in the depth of democratic spirit, describing voting as both a political expression and a reflection of public faith in the electoral process. The Prime Minister extended greetings and focused on the role of youth, encouraging them to engage through a national youth platform and to actively participate in shaping outcomes. He described elections as a "festival of democracy", recalled the beginning of India's electoral journey in 1951, and underlined India's identity as both the world's largest democracy and the mother of democracy. He urged volunteers to support first-time voters and promote awareness about the value of voting, calling the voter the shaper of the nation's future and the indelible ink a badge of honour.

**Why it mattered** : At the same time, concerns were raised by critics about the state of the electoral process. They stressed that democracy depends on fair and fearless elections, clean electoral rolls, and a level playing field. It was argued that attempts to restrict voting rights and an unplanned special intensive revision of electoral rolls could harm the credibility of democracy. Concerns were also expressed about pressure on institutions responsible for conducting elections, with a call to protect their independence and integrity so that democracy does not merely survive but truly thrives.

## Constitution facing challenges from autonomous bodies: former SC judge

**What happened** : A former Supreme Court judge, Justice B. Sudershan Reddy, said that constitutional principles are facing pressure from several institutions, including the judiciary, whose duty is to uphold them. He said courts, like other institutions, are obliged to follow constitutional norms, and noted that several judgments have been perceived as weakening constitutional values. He also said that the process of judicial appointments and transfers has often been questioned and needs corrective measures. He criticised the conduct of Governors who refuse to read addresses prepared by elected governments or walk out of Assemblies, and pointed out that there is no clear constitutional mechanism to remove a Governor for misconduct. He also objected to the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls, raised concerns about delimitation due to its consequences, and criticised certain practices affecting the federal system.

**Why it mattered** : The remarks highlight multiple areas where constitutional functioning is being strained. Concerns about judicial decisions and appointments suggest possible weakening of public confidence in constitutional processes. The conduct of Governors and the absence of a clear removal mechanism is described as a constitutional vulnerability. Objections to the revision of electoral rolls point to risks in excluding people on questionable grounds. The concerns about delimitation and federal practices indicate wider governance and financial implications. Together, these points underline challenges in ensuring that institutions consistently act within constitutional limits and spirit.

## Supreme Court stays new UGC Regulations on Caste Bias

**What happened :** On 13 January, the University Grants Commission (UGC) notified new regulations to address discrimination in higher educational institutions, including caste-based discrimination. These regulations were framed following the Supreme Court's intervention in a petition filed by the mothers of Rohith Vemula and Payal Tadvi, students who died by suicide in 2016 and 2019 respectively, allegedly due to caste-based discrimination. However, the regulations have triggered political and social controversy, with some groups arguing that they could enable harassment of general category students. On 29 January, the Supreme Court stayed their implementation, noting that they raise significant constitutional questions which, if left unexamined, could have far-reaching consequences and potentially divide society.

**Why it mattered :** The Supreme Court's scrutiny of the UGC's 2026 Equity Regulations highlights a deeper constitutional and social concern: how to address discrimination in higher education without creating new fault lines. The Court flagged the risk of selective or asymmetric grievance mechanisms, where allegations could escalate into criminal proceedings, potentially affecting academic freedom, due process, and campus harmony. Judges underlined that discrimination is not limited to caste alone and cautioned against frameworks that may institutionalise divisions rather than promote inclusion.

### UGC (Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions) Regulations, 2026

On 13 January 2026, the UGC notified the Promotion of Equity in Higher Education Institutions Regulations, 2026, applicable to all higher education institutions, replacing the 2012 rules with the objective of eradicating discrimination on grounds such as caste, gender, religion, and disability.

#### Core institutional mechanisms under the Regulations:

- **Equal Opportunity Centre (EOC):** Every institution must establish an EOC to oversee equity policies, coordinate with district authorities and police, and facilitate legal aid. It shall consist of five faculty members without category-wise reservation.
- **Equity Committee:** A ten-member committee under the EOC, chaired by the head of the institution, with at least five members from reserved categories. It must address complaints within strict timelines—meeting within 24 hours, reporting in 15 days, and action within seven days.
- **Equity Squads and support systems:** Institutions must form Equity Squads to prevent discrimination, operate a 24-hour Equity Helpline, and appoint Equity Ambassadors to promote inclusion.



### 2012 vs 2026 UGC Equity Regulations — Key Differences:

- **Nature:** The 2012 regulations were largely advisory, prescribing proportional punishment but lacking enforceability; the 2026 regulations are mandatory and enforcement-oriented.
- **Compliance mechanism:** The 2012 rules had no penalty for institutional non-compliance, whereas the 2026 framework empowers the UGC to monitor implementation through a national committee and impose sanctions, including denial of grants, schemes, and degree approvals.
- **Institutional framework:** While 2012 provided for Equal Opportunity Cells and an Anti-Discrimination Officer without procedural clarity, the 2026 regulations clearly define institutional bodies, timelines, and grievance procedures.
- **Scope of protection:** The 2012 regulations focused only on SCs and STs; the 2026 rules explicitly expand coverage to OBCs, EWS, women, and persons with disabilities.

## India 'appreciates' U.S. addressing Gaza crisis

**What happened** : India expressed appreciation to the United States at the UN Security Council for addressing the long-standing Gaza conflict and noted progress in implementing UNSC Resolution 2803. India welcomed the establishment of the Board of Peace, envisaged as a transitional administration with international legal personality, and the broader framework under the Comprehensive Plan aimed at ending the Gaza conflict, redeveloping Gaza, and ensuring it remains a deradicalised, terror-free zone. India reiterated its support for dialogue and diplomacy while condemning terrorism in all forms and calling for alleviation of Palestinian suffering.

Separately, India signed a joint statement with the European Union, where both sides welcomed the adoption of Resolution 2803, endorsed the Board of Peace and the International Stabilisation Force, and encouraged full implementation of the resolution in line with international law, while stressing unhindered humanitarian access.

**Why it mattered** : India reaffirmed its long-standing position of supporting a sovereign, independent, and viable Palestinian state living in peace with Israel. By backing Resolution 2803 and reiterating dialogue-based solutions, India underscored its commitment to a just and lasting two-State solution, anchored in diplomacy, international law, and humanitarian considerations.



## India-Arab League meet : bridging cultures



**What happened** : India has set the stage to host the second India-Arab Foreign Ministers' Meeting on January 31, co-chaired with the UAE, bringing together all 22 Arab League member states.

**Why it mattered** : The upcoming India-Arab League meeting is significant as it builds on a long-standing but increasingly institutionalised partnership between India and the League of Arab States (LAS). While India's civilisational links with Arab countries span centuries, formal engagement began in 2002 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding that established structured dialogue through regular high-level interactions. Subsequent milestones—such as the creation of the Arab-India Cooperation Forum in 2008, India's designation of a Permanent Representative to the Arab League in 2010, and the first AICF meeting in 2016—reflect the steady deepening of ties.

As India emerges as a major economic, political, and military power, the Arab League region occupies a critical place in its global engagement matrix. For Arab states, India represents a stable and dependable partner. The meeting of LAS foreign ministers in Delhi therefore offers a timely platform to strengthen cooperation, expand engagement, and translate shared historical trust into forward-looking partnerships across political and economic domains.

## ECONOMIC SURVEY: SPECIAL FEATURES & KEY TAKEAWAYS

### The Resurgence of Economic Statecraft

Economic statecraft is the deliberate use of economic tools to achieve strategic, foreign policy, or national security objectives. Its resurgence is driven by geopolitical competition, technological rivalries, and vulnerabilities in global value chains.

**Economic policy vs Economic Statecraft:** Traditional economic policy uses fiscal, monetary, and trade tools to achieve domestic goals such as reducing deficits, controlling inflation, and promoting growth. Economic statecraft goes a step further by using economic instruments to achieve strategic ends. Example: In early 2026, China banned certain dual-use item exports to Japan, including materials crucial to the automotive and technology sectors, in response to diplomatic tensions.

**Historical roots:** Ancient examples include the Megarian Decree (Athens) and the Roman grain provisioning system, while Kautilya's Arthashastra systematically integrates economic governance with strategic imperatives.

Economic interdependence, once seen as a source of stability, is increasingly viewed as a potential vulnerability. Subsequently, countries are reassessing reliance on concentrated supply chains, critical materials, and key technologies.

#### Drivers of Economic Statecraft:

- 1. Ultra-nationalism:** Anti-immigrant, inward-looking policies reduce multilateral cooperation and constrain labour mobility.
- 2. Trade imbalances & global stress:** Scepticism of free trade and imbalances between surplus and deficit nations create systemic vulnerabilities.
- 3. Weak global norms:** Lack of updated rules on competition, investment, and subsidies fosters strategic distrust and institutional weakening.
- 4. Geopolitical tensions:** Armed conflicts in Europe/West Asia and rising defence spending heighten risks.
- 5. Trade wars:** Nations compete for critical minerals and technology resources, resembling a new colonial scramble.
- 6. Industrial risk aversion:** Companies manage supply chains to reduce geopolitical disruption; governments incentivise local supply chains, friend-shoring, and near-shoring.
- 7. State as economic player:** Focus on strategic sectors (renewable energy, EVs, semiconductors, AI) with state support for industrial players otherwise outside the benefit perimeter.

#### Tools of Economic Statecraft:

- 1. Hinder rival capabilities (US):** Export controls on NVIDIA H200 chip limit China's access to next-gen AI and chip tech using end-use and foreign-product rules.
- 2. Constrict strategic supply chains (China/Russia):** Dual-use and critical mineral export restrictions; sanctions and blacklists target foreign firms (e.g., Russian entities, Japan).
- 3. Tariffs (EU):** EU CBAM (2023–26) imposes tariffs on high-emission imports like steel and cement to protect industry and achieve climate goals.
- 4. Fiscal policy:** Strategic allocation of expenditures, deficit management, and global infrastructure investments (e.g., BRI) influence domestic stability and economic dominance abroad.

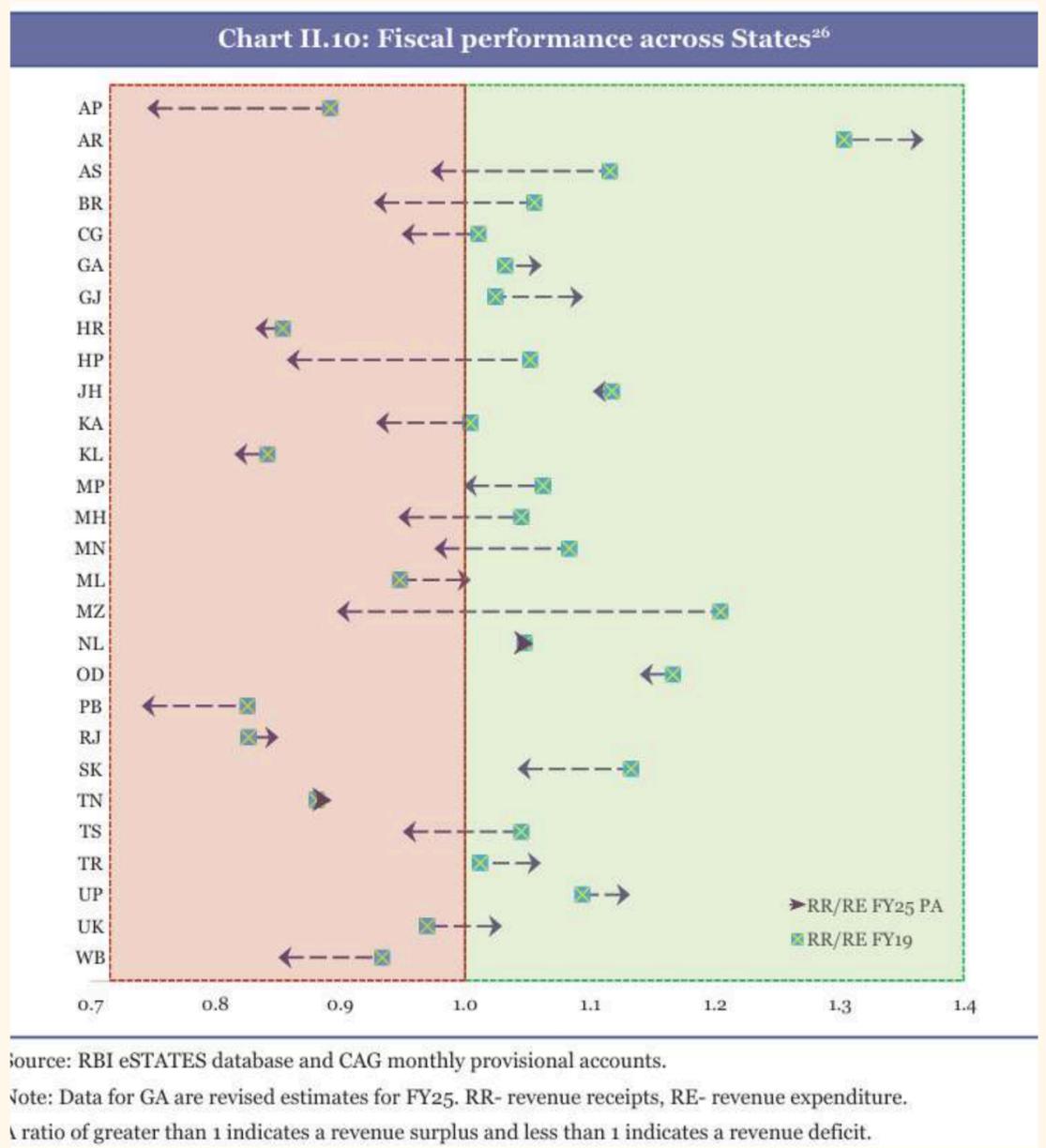
To withstand external economic statecraft, India must cultivate strategic indispensability by producing goods, services, and capabilities critical to global value chains. Leveraging its scale, diversity, and domestic strengths, and by shaping rules and standards, India can turn global integration into a source of influence and resilience. This approach safeguards growth, policy space, and economic sovereignty in an era of rising geopolitical and economic competition.

## ECONOMIC SURVEY: SPECIAL FEATURES & KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Economic Survey raises concerns over unconditional cash transfers

In a politically sensitive year with Assembly elections in four major States—West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Assam—the Economic Survey 2025–26 has taken a strong position against the rapid expansion of unconditional cash transfers (UCTs), including schemes targeted at women. While acknowledging their short-term benefits, the Survey flags serious concerns regarding fiscal sustainability and medium-term economic growth.

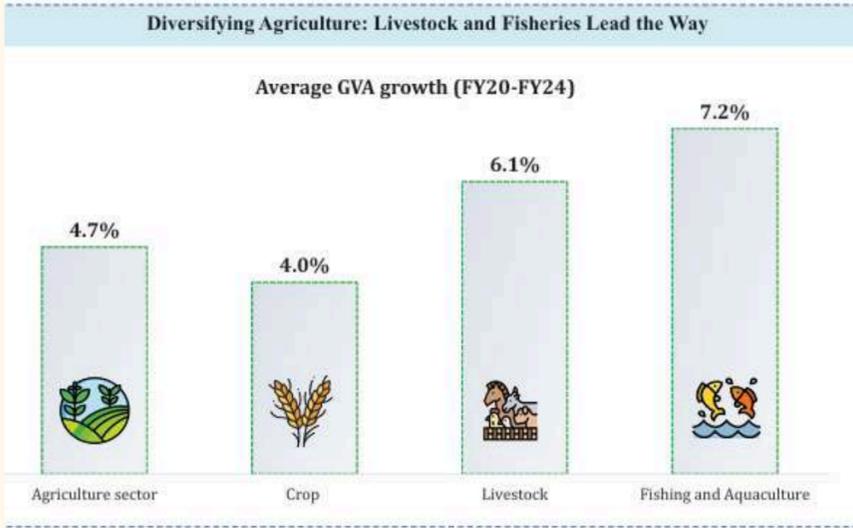
The Survey notes that aggregate spending on UCT programmes is estimated at ₹1.7 lakh crore in 2025–26, with the number of States implementing such schemes rising more than five-fold between 2022–23 and 2025–26. Alarming, around half of these States are in revenue deficit. A cited study estimates that UCTs constitute 0.19–1.25% of State GDP and 0.68–8.26% of total State budgetary expenditure. While cash transfers provide immediate income support, helping women meet unmet health and personal needs—and are sometimes viewed as compensation for unpaid economic contributions—the Survey cautions that their rapid scale-up and persistence,



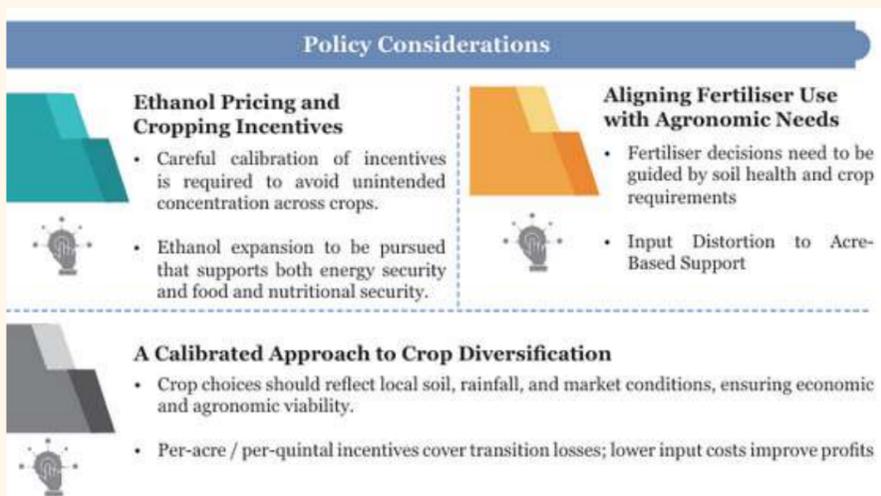
While cash transfers provide immediate income support, helping women meet unmet health and personal needs—and are sometimes viewed as compensation for unpaid economic contributions—the Survey cautions that their rapid scale-up and persistence, without parallel investments in employment, skills, and human capital, weaken growth prospects. A key fiscal concern highlighted is the changing composition of State expenditure. Revenue expenditure accounts for 84% of total State spending (2023–24), and within it, there is a growing tilt towards UCTs and other committed liabilities. This shrinks fiscal space for capital expenditure, which has a stronger and more durable growth impact.

The Survey underscores a clear fiscal trade-off: increasing UCTs either crowds out spending on social and physical infrastructure or worsens State deficits—both of which undermine fiscal health. The absence of sunset clauses and periodic reviews in many schemes further increases rigidity, making capital expenditure the primary casualty during fiscal stress, with adverse implications for medium-term growth.

## Agricultural growth slows down to 3.5% in 2025-26



The Economic Survey 2025-26 highlighted that the agriculture and allied sector in India has recorded an average annual growth of 4.4% at constant prices over the past five years. However, in the second quarter of 2025-26, growth slowed to 3.5%, slightly below the recent five-year average. The Survey noted that the decadal growth (2015-16 to 2024-25) of 4.45% is the highest compared to previous decades, driven primarily by strong performance in livestock (7.1%) and fisheries and aquaculture (8.8%), with crop production contributing a moderate 3.5%. India's foodgrain production continued to rise steadily, reaching an estimated 3,577.3 lakh tonnes in 2024-25, despite various challenges. Growth in foodgrains was largely supported by higher output of rice, wheat, maize, and coarse cereals. The Survey underscores that allied sectors such as livestock and fisheries are increasingly becoming key drivers of agricultural growth, complementing crop production and enhancing the resilience of India's rural economy.



## The impact of India-EU FTA for AI and semiconductor tech



India and the European Union have concluded the India-EU Free Trade Agreement alongside a Comprehensive Strategic Agenda for 2030, marking a shift from supply-chain resilience to co-development of critical technologies. The agreement operationalises joint R&D in advanced semiconductors, especially heterogeneous integration and chip design, and formally links the European AI Office with India's IndiaAI Mission to develop safe, human-centric AI.

This partnership represents the maturation of three phases: initial strategic dialogue (pre-2022), the creation of the India-EU Trade and Technology Council, and the 2023 Semiconductor MoU, which has now evolved from supply-chain security to active technology creation. Recognising India's lag in cutting-edge fabrication, the deal focuses on advanced packaging for AI-specific chips, combining India's design talent with Europe's research infrastructure. The creation of Blue Valleys aligns Indian manufacturing with EU standards, integrating India into European supply chains.

The agenda also envisages a common AI market, shared safety testing standards, and potential mutual recognition of AI certifications. Financial support is proposed through possible Indian association with Horizon Europe and startup funding via the European Innovation Council, strengthening India's position in strategic technologies.

**PRELIMS CORNER :**

1) If you travel by road from Kohima to Kottayam, what is the minimum number of States within India through which you can travel, including the origin and the destination? (2017)

- a) 6  
 b) 7  
 c) 8  
 d) 9

2) Consider the following statements: (2023)

1. Jhelum River passes through Wular Lake.
2. Krishna River directly feeds Kolleru Lake.
3. Meandering of the Gandak River formed Kanwar Lake.

How many of the statements given above are correct?

- a) Only one  
 b) Only two  
 c) All three  
 d) None

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**HERITAGE**  
**Bulleh Shah**

Bulleh Shah was one of Punjab's greatest Sufi poets and is often likened to Rumi for his emphasis on "ishq" (universal love) as superior to religious formalism. He rejected divisions based on caste, creed, religion, and gender, emerging as a secular and humanist voice in Punjabi Sufi literature. As noted by Dr. Gurbhajan Gill, Bulleh Shah's philosophy is powerfully expressed in his famous kafi, which urges the destruction of rigid religious structures but warns against breaking a human heart, as God resides within it.

*'Masjid dha de, mandir dha de, dha de jo kujh dhainda. Par kisi da dil na dhavin, Rabb dilan vich rehnda.'*

Born in 1680 in Kasur (present-day Pakistan), his real name was Abdullah Shah. His spiritual journey deepened under his teacher Shah Inayat Qadri, who explained enlightenment as a shift from the worldly to the spiritual. Bulleh Shah's legacy continues to shape literature and popular culture, inspiring filmmakers such as Mani Ratnam, Imtiaz Ali, Farah Khan, and Gulzar. Songs like "Bulla Ki Jana Main Kaun" and "Chhaiyya Chhaiyya" reflect his enduring relevance.

# Prelims Corner: Explanations



1) Answer is option b

The minimum number of States you would pass through is 7.

One shortest feasible route (road-wise) is:  
 Nagaland (Kohima) → Assam → West Bengal → Odisha → Andhra Pradesh (or Telangana) → Karnataka → Kerala (Kottayam)

Counting including the origin and destination:

1. Nagaland
2. Assam
3. West Bengal
4. Odisha
5. Andhra Pradesh / Telangana
6. Karnataka
7. Kerala

Questions like this are designed not to test rote memorization, but to evaluate applied geographical awareness. They require candidates to mentally trace state boundaries and visualise India's political map, linking distant regions such as the North-East with the southern peninsula. Such questions assess understanding of state contiguity, regional linkages, and connectivity, rather than just recalling isolated facts.

2) Answer is option b

**Jhelum River passes through Wular Lake: Correct.** Wular Lake, one of the largest freshwater lakes in Asia, is fed by the Jhelum River in Jammu and Kashmir.

**Krishna River directly feeds Kolleru Lake: Incorrect.** Kolleru Lake, located in Andhra Pradesh, is primarily fed by the Budameru and Tammileru rivers, not the Krishna River.

**Meandering of the Gandak River formed Kanwar Lake: Correct.** Kanwar Lake in Bihar is formed by the meandering of the Gandak River.

Thus, only two statements are correct.

Classification of Indian Drainage Basins (Based on Catchment Area)

Major River Basins

- Catchment area exceeds 20,000 sq. km
- Include 14 river basins such as Ganga, Brahmaputra, **Indus, Krishna**, Narmada and Tapi
- **Jhelum**, as part of the Indus river system, falls under a major river basin

Medium River Basins

- Catchment area ranges between 2,000–20,000 sq. km
- Comprise 44 river basins
- Examples include Periyar, Kalindi and Meghna

Minor River Basins

- Catchment area is less than 2,000 sq. km
- Include a large number of short rivers
- Mostly found in regions of low rainfall

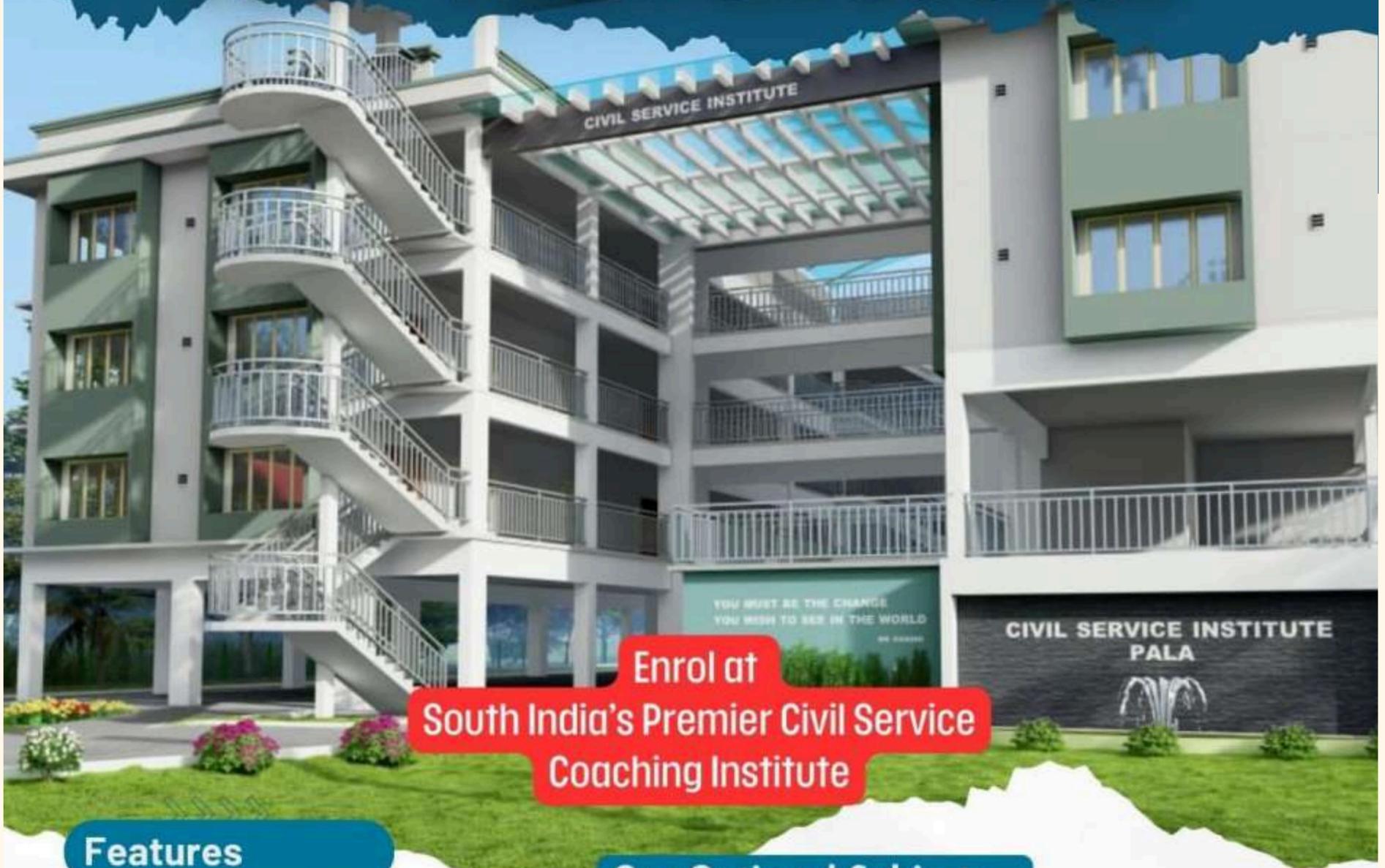
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