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Uttarakhand opens Nanda Devi, 82 other Himalayan peaks for mountaineering
The Hindu : 04/02/2026 - Page 3



Russia sounds alarm as New START treaty is set to expire

The Hindu : 04/02/2026 - Page 16

Has the 16th Finance Commission sidelined the States?

The Hindu : 04/02/2026 - Page 9



Indian scientists make affordable dipstick test to track AMR in sewage

The Hindu : 03/02/2026 - Page 11



U.S. deal will not include sensitive sectors: Goyal

Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi, will exclude sensitive agricultural items and dairy, according to Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal, with full details yet to be disclosed. Under the agreement, the U.S. has agreed to reduce its 25% reciprocal tariffs on Indian goods to 18%, and to remove additional “penalty” tariffs of 25% previously imposed on India’s import of Russian oil. The Minister emphasised that India’s agriculture and dairy sectors have been protected in the arrangement.

The announcement brought positive reactions in financial markets, with Indian equity indices rising and the Indian rupee strengthening sharply following the tariff reduction news. Clarity on the trade deal had been awaited by markets, which had experienced volatility amid tariff uncertainty. The rupee’s rebound and equity gains reflect improved investor sentiment tied to reduced tariff barriers and expectations of enhanced trade relations.



A comprehensive understanding of the full terms and economic implications remains pending until official details are published. However, the agreement comes alongside India’s recent trade engagements with the European Union and the United Kingdom, signalling a broader strategy of market diversification.

Only 14% NCAP funds so far used by Delhi

Delhi has utilised only about 14% of the funds released under the National Clean Air Programme (NCAP) since its launch in 2019, amounting to ₹14.1 crore out of ₹99.77 crore. In contrast, neighbouring cities in the National Capital Region (NCR), such as Ghaziabad and Meerut, have spent over 80% of their allocated funds. This city-wise utilisation data was provided by the Union Minister of State for Environment in a written reply to the Lok Sabha. The disclosure followed the presentation of the Union Budget 2026–27, which allocated ₹1,091 crore under the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change’s “Control of Pollution” scheme.

NCAP, launched in January 2019, serves as the central framework for improving air quality in 130 cities, with city-specific targets aimed at achieving up to a 40% reduction in PM10 levels by 2025–26, or meeting national standards.



The National Clean Air Programme operates through multiple funding channels and inter-ministerial coordination, but persistent underutilisation of allocated funds limits its effectiveness. Maximising timely utilisation, improving administrative convergence, and ensuring targeted deployment of NCAP resources are essential for strengthening air quality management and delivering measurable pollution reduction outcomes.

Uttarakhand opens Nanda Devi, 82 other Himalayan peaks for mountaineering

With the objective of promoting adventure tourism, the Government of Uttarakhand announced the opening of 83 major Himalayan peaks for mountaineering expeditions. The newly opened peaks range in altitude from 5,700 metres to 7,756 metres and include some of the most renowned and technically challenging summits such as Mount Kamet, Nanda Devi East, the Chaukhamba and Trishul groups, Shivling, Satopanth, Changabang, Panchachuli and Neelkanth. These peaks are noted not only for their mountaineering difficulty but also for their scenic and symbolic importance to the Himalayan landscape, which forms a central part of Uttarakhand's identity and heritage.

The decision was described as a historic initiative aimed at providing global recognition to the State's adventure tourism potential. The policy seeks to encourage Indian youth to take up mountaineering as a sport, generate local employment opportunities and promote balanced regional development, while maintaining a strong emphasis on environmental conservation.

To reduce financial barriers for Indian mountaineers, the Uttarakhand Tourism Development Council waived expedition-related charges such as peak fees, camping fees and environmental fees, which were earlier collected by the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and the Forest Department. These costs will now be borne by the State government. For foreign mountaineers, all additional State-level fees have been abolished, leaving only IMF-prescribed charges applicable. Further, all expedition applications will henceforth be processed through the Uttarakhand Mountaineering Permission System, a fully digital and transparent online portal.

When viewed together with the proposal in the Union Budget to develop thematic tourism trails in Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Jammu & Kashmir, this move by the state government indicate an integrated approach that links tourism infrastructure development with regional ecological and cultural landscapes.

Governor to start march for a 'drug-free' Punjab



The Governor of Punjab, Gulab Chand Kataria, announced the launch of an intensive anti-drug awareness campaign beginning February 9 across three border districts of the State—Tarn Taran, Ferozepur and Fazilka—which lie along the international border with Pakistan. The initiative aims to strengthen ongoing efforts to combat drug abuse in Punjab through increased public participation and awareness.

A key component of the campaign is a four-day awareness padyatra (foot march) across the identified districts, intended to mobilise community support against drug abuse. The campaign is being supported by the Punjab Red Cross Society and focuses on spreading awareness about the harmful effects of drug consumption. Emphasising a holistic approach, the Governor highlighted the importance of rehabilitation and employment generation as central pillars in addressing the drug problem, alongside strict law enforcement and sustained public awareness measures. He noted that drug abuse is not confined to a single region or State but represents a broader global challenge.

The campaign seeks to unite different sections of society towards the shared objective of making Punjab drug-free.

The anti-drug awareness campaign in Punjab complements the Union Government's multi-pronged approach under the National Action Plan for Drug Demand Reduction, which combines prevention, rehabilitation, enforcement and community participation.

From 126 in 2018, number of LWE-hit districts now 8: Govt

With one month remaining before the March 2026 deadline to eliminate Left Wing Extremism (LWE), the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) informed Parliament that the number of LWE-affected districts has declined significantly from 126 in 2018 to eight as of December 2025, with only three districts remaining most affected. This reflects a substantial contraction in the geographical spread of LWE.

In a related development, the MHA is learnt to have directed the Directors General of Police and the Ministry of Youth Affairs and Sports in the concerned States to transition from a crisis-management approach to a welfare-oriented strategy. The focus includes public outreach and the appointment of development-oriented officers to strengthen engagement at the grassroots level.

Presenting data in a written reply to the Lok Sabha, Minister of State for Home Affairs Nityanand Rai stated that incidents of LWE violence declined from a peak of 1,936 in 2010 to 234 in 2025, marking an 88% reduction. Civilian and security personnel deaths also fell from 1,005 to 100 during the same period. In 2025, security forces neutralised 364 LWE cadres, arrested 1,022, and recorded 2,337 surrenders.



Telangana witnesses steady rise in cancer cases; doctors stress early detection



Telangana has witnessed a steady rise in cancer cases over the past decade, with reported numbers increasing from 40,177 in 2015 to 52,334 in 2024, reflecting a growing public health challenge. Data shared in the Lok Sabha highlight not just a rise in incidence, but also changing patterns of diagnosis. Encouragingly, oncologists note that more patients are now seeking medical attention at earlier stages, indicating improved awareness and access to care. However, hospitals like the MNJ Institute of Oncology continue to register around 100 new cases daily, underscoring the scale of the burden. Tobacco-related head and neck cancers remain highly prevalent, while breast and cervical cancers continue to account for a significant share, with many women still presenting at advanced stages. This state-level trend mirrors the broader national picture. Across India, common cancers include breast, cervical, oral, lung, colorectal and prostate cancers, with variations by region, age and gender. Against this backdrop, World Cancer Day 2026, observed on 4 February with the theme "United by Unique", assumes particular relevance. The theme emphasises a shift from a disease-centric approach to people-centred cancer care—recognising the emotional, social and long-term impact of cancer on patients and families. For Telangana and India alike, the message is clear: strengthening early detection, prevention and personalised care is central to addressing the rising cancer burden.

INTERNATIONAL

Russia sounds alarm as New START treaty is set to expire

The Kremlin has warned that the impending expiry of the New START treaty could place the world in a more dangerous security environment. New START, the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between the United States and Russia, is set to expire this week, potentially removing restrictions on the nuclear arsenals of the two largest nuclear powers. Russia has proposed a one-year extension but stated that no response has been received from the United States. U.S. President Donald Trump had earlier indicated openness to an extension. Meanwhile, Russia launched a large-scale drone and missile attack on Ukraine ahead of U.S.-brokered talks, highlighting ongoing geopolitical tensions.

New START was signed in 2010 by U.S. President Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, an ally of Vladimir Putin who served a single term as Russia's president. At the time, relations between the two countries were undergoing a "reset". The treaty came into force the following year. The treaty sets limits on strategic nuclear weapons - the kind that each side would use to strike the opponent's vital political, military and industrial centres in the event of a nuclear war. It caps the number of deployed strategic warheads at 1,550 on each side, with no more than 700 deployed ground- or submarine-launched missiles and bomber planes, and 800 launchers.



The treaty included a system of short-notice, on-site inspections so each side could satisfy itself that the other was complying. But in 2023, Putin suspended Moscow's participation because of U.S. support for Ukraine in the war with Russia. That brought a halt to inspections - which in any case had been suspended during the COVID pandemic - and forced each side to rely on its own intelligence assessments of what the other was doing. However, neither has accused the other of breaching the warhead limits, which remain in force. The treaty text says it can only be extended once, and this has already happened in 2021, just after Joe Biden became U.S. president. With expiry looming, Putin proposed last September that each side should agree informally to stick to the warhead limits for another year. U.S. President Donald Trump has yet to respond formally to that suggestion. In the U.S., there are arguments for and against accepting it. Those in favour say it would demonstrate political will to avoid an arms race and buy time to figure out what happens next. Others say the U.S. should free itself now from the New START limits in order to boost its arsenal to take account of a rapid nuclear build-up by China, and that doing otherwise would send a signal of weakness.

What comes next? The possible cessation of mutual limits on U.S.–Russia long-range nuclear arsenals would end over five decades of arms control. The expiry of New START has created a strategic vacuum, with no successor negotiations underway, raising concerns among arms control experts about heightened nuclear risks amid ongoing global conflicts. While both sides could increase missile deployments and warhead numbers, technical constraints would delay rapid expansion. Over time, however, the absence of a regulatory framework may fuel an unrestrained arms race driven by worst-case threat perceptions. Negotiating a replacement treaty would be complex, requiring coverage of additional weapon categories and newer nuclear systems, making early consensus uncertain.

16th Finance Commission: Shaping Centre–State Finances

Has the 16th Finance Commission sidelined the States?

The 16th Finance Commission's (FC) recommendation retained the States' share in the divisible tax pool at 41%, a decision viewed as balancing competing demands from the Centre and States. However, the effectiveness of this devolution is shaped by the size of the divisible pool itself, which excludes cesses, surcharges, and collection costs and is therefore determined by the Centre's tax composition.

Table 7.2 Tax Devolution and Grants (percentage of GTR)

FC	Devolution	FC Grants	FC Transfers	Non-FC Grants	Total Transfers
FC-1	16.0	4.5	20.5	4.8	25.4
FC-2	19.8	7.0	26.8	14.0	40.8
FC-3	15.2	5.1	20.3	10.9	31.2
FC-4	17.6	7.0	24.5	11.7	36.3
FC-5	23.3	4.6	27.9	14.9	42.8
FC-6	19.9	6.8	26.7	12.2	38.9
FC-7	26.9	2.3	29.1	16.4	45.6
FC-8	25.1	3.1	28.2	18.4	46.6
FC-9	26.5	4.4	30.9	18.0	48.9
FC-10	27.0	3.1	30.2	14.4	44.5
FC-11	26.6	5.3	31.9	15.1	47.0
FC-12	25.9	5.3	31.2	15.7	46.9
FC-13	27.9	4.6	32.5	16.3	48.8
FC-14	34.0	5.4	39.4	17.0	56.4
FC-15	32.1	5.5	37.7	17.6	55.3

Table 7.3 Devolution and Grants (percentage of GDP)

FC	Devolution	FC Grants	FC Transfers	Non-FC Grants	Total Transfers
FC-1	0.7	0.2	0.8	0.2	1.0
FC-2	1.0	0.4	1.3	0.7	2.1
FC-3	1.0	0.3	1.4	0.8	2.1
FC-4	1.2	0.5	1.6	0.8	2.4
FC-5	1.7	0.3	2.0	1.1	3.2
FC-6	1.7	0.6	2.3	1.1	3.4
FC-7	2.5	0.2	2.7	1.5	4.2
FC-8	2.5	0.3	2.8	1.9	4.7
FC-9	2.6	0.4	3.0	1.7	4.7
FC-10	2.4	0.3	2.7	1.3	3.9
FC-11	2.4	0.5	2.8	1.3	4.1
FC-12	2.8	0.6	3.4	1.7	5.1
FC-13	2.9	0.5	3.3	1.7	5.0
FC-14	3.7	0.6	4.2	1.8	6.1
FC-15	3.6	0.6	4.3	2.0	6.2

Commission's Analysis

The Finance Commission has justified the non-sharing of cesses and surcharges and the retention of 41% tax devolution to States by relying on constitutional provisions and the original design of India's fiscal federal structure. The Constitution does not allow the inclusion of non-tax revenues or cesses and surcharges in the divisible pool, as these arise from Union-exclusive activities or are levied for specific, earmarked purposes. This design was consciously retained even during later constitutional amendments that expanded tax devolution. Cesses and surcharges are constitutionally provided to enable the Union to mobilise resources swiftly during extraordinary situations such as war, famine, or pandemics. Since the scale and timing of such needs cannot be anticipated, the Commission viewed any statutory cap on these levies as imprudent. Further, including cesses in the divisible pool would conflict with their purpose, as they are meant to finance specific expenditures and would otherwise need to be replaced by regular taxes.

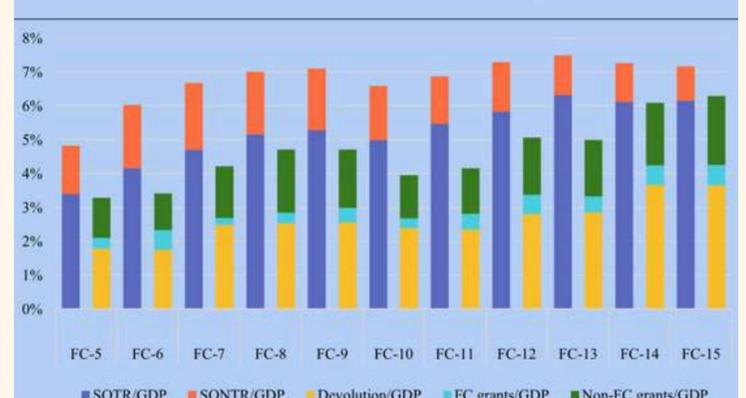
On the demand for higher devolution to offset rising cesses, the Commission observed that States already receive substantial resources through tax devolution and multiple transfers.

States' View

Post-2019, there has been a significant increase in the Centre's reliance on cesses and surcharges, which are non-shareable with States. While earlier these constituted a smaller proportion of gross tax revenue, recent data show a marked rise, leading to a relative contraction of the divisible pool despite stable devolution percentages. The Finance Commission itself notes that the non-shareable portion of revenue has doubled as a share of GDP over the last decade, while the divisible pool has grown only marginally.

Several States have demanded an increase in vertical devolution to 45–50%, citing fiscal pressures, while the Centre has argued for moderation. The Commission justifies its stance by highlighting constitutional provisions that do not cap cesses, the need for fiscal flexibility during emergencies, increased defence requirements, and the Centre's role in infrastructure creation. At the same time, it acknowledges that long-term dependence on cesses is undesirable and suggests a consensual shift towards regular taxation.

Figure 7.2 States' Own Revenues, Devolution and Grants (percentage of GDP)



Source: RBI DBIE

FC-5 covers period from 1970-71 to 1973-74; FC-15 covers period from 2020-21 to 2023-24

UNION BUDGET 2026 : KEY TAKEAWAYS - SPECIAL FEATURE

Union Budget 2026: Experiences, medical tourism, job creation part of big tourism push

The Union Budget 2026 placed renewed emphasis on the travel and tourism sector, recognising its contribution to economic growth, employment generation, and foreign exchange earnings. Presenting the Budget on February 1, the Finance Minister announced a set of measures aimed at strengthening institutional capacity and skill development within the sector.

The Economic Survey, released on January 29, highlighted the sector's improving performance. Foreign exchange earnings from tourism rose to \$35 billion in 2024, registering an annual growth of 8.8 per cent. This growth has been attributed to the sector's labour-intensive character and its strong linkages with transport, hospitality, trade, and allied services. Tourism demand continues to be driven primarily by domestic travellers, whose visits increased by about 17.5 per cent in 2024 and by 52.7 per cent during January–September 2025 compared to the corresponding period of the previous year.

Heritage and Culture Tourism

- ▶ National Destination Digital Knowledge Grid to be established to digitally document all places of significance - cultural, spiritual and heritage
- ▶ Development of 15 archeological sites including Lothal, Dholavira, Rakhigarhi, Adichanallur, Sarnath, Hastinapur, and Leh Palace into vibrant, experiential cultural destinations
- ▶ Development of an Integrated East Coast Industrial Corridor with a well-connected node at Durgapur, creation of 5 tourism destinations in the 5 Purvodaya States, and the provision of 4,000 e-buses
- ▶ Scheme for Development of Buddhist Circuits in Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura

2/2

Expanding Economy through Strengthening Tourism

- ▶ To launch a Scheme to support States in establishing Five Regional Medical Hubs, in partnership with the private sector
- ▶ These Medical Hubs to have AYUSH Centres, Medical Value Tourism Facilitation Centres and infrastructure for diagnostics, post-care and rehabilitation
- ▶ To set up a National Institute of Hospitality by upgrading the existing National Council for Hotel Management and Catering Technology
- ▶ Pilot scheme for upskilling 10,000 guides in 20 iconic tourist sites through a standardized, high-quality 12-week training course in hybrid mode, in collaboration with an IIM

1/2

At the same time, International Tourist Arrivals, including foreign tourists and non-resident Indians, reached 20.57 million, reflecting an 8.9 per cent increase over 2023 and a 14.8 per cent rise compared to pre-pandemic levels in 2019. According to the Ministry of Tourism, the travel and tourism sector contributed 5.22 per cent to GDP in FY24, approaching pre-pandemic levels, and supported 8.46 crore direct and indirect jobs, accounting for around 13.3 per cent of total employment. To support long-term capacity building, the Budget announced the establishment of a National Institute of Hospitality, upgrading the existing National Council for Hotel Management and Catering Technology.

In addition, a pilot scheme to upskill 10,000 tourist guides across 20 iconic tourist sites was proposed. The programme will involve a standardised 12-week hybrid training course, implemented in collaboration with an Indian Institute of Management. The proposed measures are expected to strengthen human capital in tourism, improve service quality, and enhance visitor experience. Over time, these initiatives may support higher employment, improved competitiveness, and sustained growth in domestic and international tourism, contributing to broader economic and regional development objectives.

DISCOVERY

Bending the Arc : Suborbital tourism



On January 31, Blue Origin, the private space company owned by Jeff Bezos, announced the suspension of its New Shepard suborbital space tourism programme for a minimum period of two years. The decision was taken to allow the company to redirect its focus towards developing its lunar capabilities.

Suborbital space tourism refers to space travel in which passengers are taken to the edge of space but do not complete a full orbit around the Earth. Such flights generally reach an altitude of about 100 kilometres, corresponding to the Kármán line, which is widely accepted as the boundary between Earth's atmosphere and outer space. Unlike orbital missions, including those to the International Space Station, suborbital vehicles do not attain the velocity required to remain in orbit. Instead, they follow a parabolic trajectory, comparable to the motion of a projectile.

The total duration of a suborbital flight is typically 10 to 15 minutes. Near the highest point of the trajectory, the engines shut down, enabling passengers to experience brief weightlessness and observe the Earth's curvature against the backdrop of space. As the vehicle lacks sufficient speed for orbital insertion, it eventually descends back through the atmosphere under the influence of gravity.

Companies such as Blue Origin and Virgin Galactic have been key participants in this sector. Suborbital flights require relatively lower energy and less complex heat shielding, making them a more accessible form of private space travel.

Indian scientists make affordable dipstick test to track AMR in sewage

Scientists from the Translational Health Science and Technology Institute (THSTI), Faridabad, have developed an affordable dipstick-based assay to detect antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in sewage. The findings, published in *Nature Communications* on December 29, are based on the analysis of sewage samples from 381 sites across six Indian states, examining antibiotic residues, microbial diversity, and resistance genes. The study confirmed that urban sewage in India functions as a significant reservoir of AMR.

The dipstick assay operates on principles similar to rapid diagnostic tests. Sewage samples are processed to isolate genetic material, resistance genes are amplified using methods such as PCR, and the amplified material is applied to a dipstick. The presence of resistance genes produces visible coloured bands, allowing results to be interpreted with the naked eye. Each dipstick can detect 16 resistance genes within two hours and can be updated quickly to include newly identified genes.

A key advantage of the assay is its low cost, estimated at ₹400–550 per unit, compared to over ₹9,000 for methods such as shotgun sequencing. While advanced genomic techniques offer deeper insights, they are not suitable for routine surveillance. The dipstick assay is positioned as a rapid, scalable early-warning tool, particularly suited to low-resource settings.

Sewage-based surveillance provides an ethically acceptable and economically feasible method to monitor AMR trends, offering public health authorities a means to identify risk hotspots and guide upstream interventions in India's AMR landscape.



PRELIMS CORNER :

1) Who among the following rulers advised his subjects through this inscription? (2020)

“Whosoever praises his religious sect or blames other sects out of excessive devotion to his own sect, with the view of glorifying his own sect, he rather injures his own sect very severely.”

- (a) Ashoka
 (b) Samudragupta
 (c) Harshavardhana
 (d) Krishnadeva Raya

2) According to Kautilya’s Arthashastra, which of the following are correct ? (2022)

1. A person could be a slave as a result of a judicial punishment.
2. If a female slave bore her master a son, she was legally free.
3. If a son born to a female slave was fathered by her master, the son was entitled to the legal status of the master’s son.

Which of the statements given above are correct ?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
 (b) 2 and 3 only
 (c) 1 and 3 only
 (d) 1, 2 and 3

HERITAGE**Asoka the Great (273 – 232 B.C.)**

Ashoka the Great (273–232 BCE) was the most remarkable ruler of the Mauryan Empire, distinguished not by territorial expansion alone but by moral and administrative innovation. Ashoka’s reign reached a decisive turning point with the Kalinga War (261 BCE). While Kalinga was annexed, the immense human suffering led Ashoka to renounce aggressive warfare.

Following this, Ashoka embraced Buddhism, though his conversion was gradual. More significantly, he evolved the concept of Dhamma, a secular and ethical code rather than a religious doctrine. Ashoka’s Dhamma emphasized ahimsa, tolerance of all sects, respect for elders, humane treatment of servants and prisoners, social welfare, and compassion towards animals. To implement it, he introduced innovative administrative measures such as special officers called Dharma Mahamatras to spread Buddhism and Dhammayatras to check social welfare, ensuring direct state engagement with the people.

Ashoka remains unique in history for advocating “conquest by Dhamma” instead of war, making him an enduring symbol of ethical governance and benevolent kingship in Indian history.

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Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) Answer is option a

The given statement reflects the policy of religious tolerance and respect for all sects, which is a hallmark of Emperor Ashoka's rule.

This inscription is part of Ashoka's Dhamma (moral code), as expressed in his Rock Edicts.

Ashoka advocated for harmony among different religious groups and discouraged sectarianism.

Significance of the Edict:

The specific message is found in Rock Edict XII, where Ashoka emphasizes that one should respect other religious sects and avoid glorifying one's own sect at the expense of others.

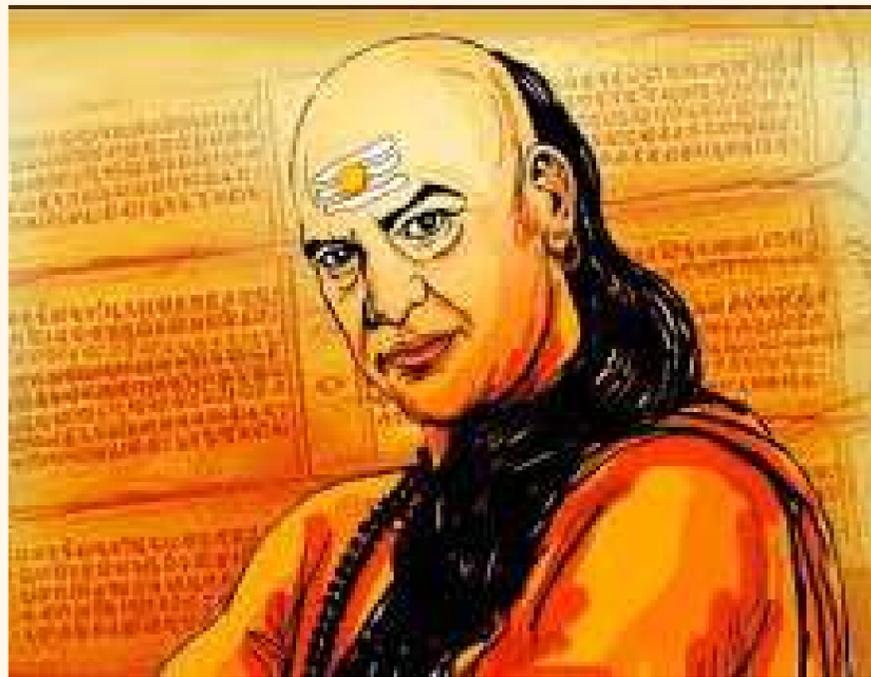
This was part of Ashoka's broader policy to promote social and religious harmony in his empire.

Asoka's Dhamma

Asoka's Dhamma as mentioned in his various Edicts may be summed as follows:

1. Service to father and mother, practice of ahimsa, love of truth, reverence to teachers and good treatment of relatives.
2. Prohibition of animal sacrifices and festive gatherings and avoiding expensive and meaningless ceremonies and rituals.
3. Efficient organization of administration in the direction of social welfare and maintenance of constant contact with people through the system of Dhammayatras.
4. Humane treatment of servants by masters and prisoners by government officials.
5. Consideration and non-violence to animals and courtesy to relations and liberality to Brahmins.
6. Tolerance among all the religious sects.
7. Conquest through Dhamma instead of through war.

2) Answer is option b.



Statement 1: A person could be a slave as a result of a judicial punishment.

This statement is incorrect. According to Kautilya's Arthashastra, slavery was primarily associated with economic or social circumstances, such as being born into slavery, voluntary enslavement due to debt, or being captured in war. Judicial punishment leading to enslavement is not explicitly mentioned in the Arthashastra.

2. Statement 2: If a female slave bore her master a son, she was legally free.

This statement is correct. The Arthashastra specifies that if a female slave bore her master a son, she would attain her freedom. This provision reflects a degree of legal protection for female slaves and their offspring.

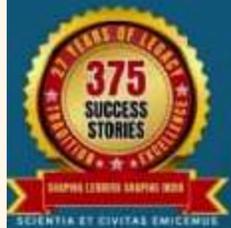
3. Statement 3: If a son born to a female slave was fathered by her master, the son was entitled to the legal status of the master's son. This statement is correct.

The Arthashastra grants the son born of a master and a female slave the legal rights of a legitimate heir if the master acknowledged paternity. This was a significant legal recognition in ancient Indian law.

PRELIMS 2026 COUNTDOWN



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