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Centre signs tripartite pact to create Naga authority
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Major blast reported at illegal coal mine in Meghalaya

An explosion at an illegally operated rat-hole coal mine in Meghalaya's East Jaintia Hills district resulted in the death of 18 miners. According to officials, the incident occurred at an unauthorised mining site in the Thangsko area of Mynsyngat and is suspected to have been caused by the use of dynamite at an unspecified depth. One injured person was rescued and referred to a higher medical facility, while rescue and recovery operations were undertaken by teams from the National Disaster Response Force and the State Disaster Response Force.

This incident is among the most serious mining-related tragedies in the State since 2012. In 2014, the National Green Tribunal imposed a ban on rat-hole coal mining due to its hazardous nature, a decision later upheld by the Supreme Court. Despite the ban, illegal mining activities are reported to have continued. The State police registered a suo motu FIR under relevant provisions of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, and the Explosives Substances Act.



Past records indicate multiple mining accidents both before and after the ban, including a major incident in 2018 in the same district where several miners were trapped in a flooded mine. Rat-hole mining involves narrow tunnels that pose significant safety risks, though economic incentives continue to draw workers. Oversight mechanisms, including a committee constituted by the Meghalaya High Court, have reportedly had limited impact.

Army renames 246 roads, buildings, and facilities to shed colonial legacy

The Indian Army has renamed 246 roads, buildings, and facilities across its establishments to move away from colonial-era symbols and reinforce an identity rooted in India's military heritage. The revised nomenclature honours gallantry awardees, battle heroes, and distinguished military leaders, reflecting values of courage, sacrifice, and leadership. The exercise covers roads, residential colonies, buildings, training areas, and other facilities across multiple cantonments, replacing several British-era names with those drawn from India's military history.



This initiative aligns institutional spaces with national ethos and military traditions and represents a broader process of decolonising symbols by replacing colonial legacies with names reflecting national heroes and indigenous values.

Centre signs tripartite pact to create Naga authority

A tripartite agreement for the creation of the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority (FNTA) was signed between the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO), the Government of Nagaland, and the Union Ministry of Home Affairs. The agreement was concluded in the presence of the Union Home Minister and the Chief Minister of Nagaland. ENPO is an apex body representing eight recognised Naga tribes from the eastern region of the State. The agreement provides for the establishment of the FNTA covering six districts of eastern Nagaland, namely Tuensang, Mon, Kiphire, Longleng, Noklak, and Shamator. It also envisages the devolution of powers to the FNTA with respect to 46 subjects, indicating a move towards greater administrative autonomy and decentralised governance in the region.

At the same time, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs has clarified that the agreement does not affect the provisions of Article 371(A) of the Constitution of India in any manner. Article 371(A) provides special constitutional protections to Nagaland with respect to its customary laws, land and resource ownership, and social practices.

The agreement reflects an attempt to address regional administrative aspirations within the existing constitutional framework. It also highlights the use of negotiated arrangements and institutional mechanisms to manage diversity, regional demands, and governance challenges in India's North-Eastern States.



HAL plans to bid for licence production of fifth-generation AMCA



State-owned Hindustan Aeronautics Limited (HAL) has stated that it will participate in the bidding process for licence manufacturing of the indigenous fifth-generation fighter aircraft, the Advanced Medium Combat Aircraft (AMCA), when manufacturing is expected to commence around 2035. This participation will take place even if the consortium formed by HAL with two other companies is not shortlisted in the ongoing initial screening stage of the project.

According to HAL's Chairman and Managing Director, the AMCA programme is structured as a long-term, decade-long initiative. He clarified that non-selection in the initial phase—focused on building five prototypes and a structural test specimen—would not preclude HAL's participation in the later manufacturing phase. He emphasised that participation in the prototype development stage and the licence manufacturing stage are distinct phases of the programme.

The process of shortlisting consortia that bid for the AMCA project last year is still underway. While technical evaluations have reportedly shortlisted three of the seven bidding consortia, financial evaluations based on submitted cost bids are yet to be completed. HAL has indicated that it has not included AMCA-related revenues in its 10-year projections, given the programme's long gestation period.

The developments highlight the phased nature of large defence acquisition programmes and the evolving role of public sector entities within India's indigenous defence manufacturing ecosystem.

INTERNATIONAL

U.S. shuts down 200 'illegal' online pharmacies tied to an India-based criminal organisation

The U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) has announced the shutdown of more than 200 website domains linked to an India-based transnational criminal organisation allegedly involved in the illegal online sale of pharmaceuticals. The organisation is accused of supplying diverted and counterfeit medicines, resulting in at least six fatal and four non-fatal overdose cases in the United States. Four individuals have been arrested so far.

The operation was carried out in coordination with the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Eastern District of New York and followed investigations initiated by the DEA's Rocky Mountain Field Division in 2022. As part of the crackdown, searches were conducted across multiple U.S. locations, leading to enforcement actions against several DEA-registered pharmacies, including Immediate Suspension Orders and an Order to Show Cause. According to the DEA, the criminal network exploited the internet and posed as legitimate, U.S.-based, FDA-approved online pharmacies. In practice, these platforms allegedly worked with drug traffickers to distribute counterfeit pills or diverted pharmaceuticals without valid prescriptions. Many of these medicines were found to contain substances such as fentanyl or methamphetamine, posing serious public health risks.

The agency highlighted the role of international cooperation, including collaboration with Indian law enforcement authorities, in identifying and dismantling such networks. The case underscores emerging challenges related to cross-border drug trafficking, misuse of digital platforms, and regulatory oversight in the pharmaceutical supply chain.



Still ready to talk to US on limiting nukes, says Russia



Russia has expressed regret over the expiry of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), the last remaining nuclear arms control agreement between Russia and the United States, while indicating its continued willingness to engage in dialogue. Media reports suggested that discussions were held in Abu Dhabi, where both sides explored the possibility of continuing to observe key limits on missiles, launchers, and strategic nuclear warheads, despite the absence of a legal mechanism to formally extend the treaty.

Russian officials stated that Moscow remains open to negotiations if the United States responds constructively to a proposal by the Russian President to adhere to the core provisions of the treaty for an additional year. New START marked the culmination of over five decades of bilateral nuclear arms control efforts between the two countries. The United States has indicated interest in a revised framework that would also include China, though Beijing has declined participation, citing its comparatively smaller nuclear arsenal.

Separately, Ukraine and Russia concluded a second round of U.S.-brokered talks in Abu Dhabi aimed at addressing the ongoing conflict. The discussions resulted in a large prisoner exchange involving 314 prisoners of war and an agreement to continue negotiations. U.S. officials described the talks as productive, while Ukrainian authorities confirmed plans for further meetings in the near future.

India, GCC nations sign terms of reference for FTA

Representatives of India and the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have signed the Terms of Reference (ToR) for negotiations on a proposed free trade agreement (FTA), marking a formal step towards the commencement of trade talks. The ToR was signed by India's chief negotiator, Additional Secretary Ajay Bhadoo, and Raja Al Marzouki, representing the GCC Secretariat General. The signing of the ToR is a mandatory precursor for initiating structured negotiations on an FTA.

The GCC, comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, collectively constitutes India's largest merchandise trading partner, with trade volumes exceeding those with the European Union and the United States. The proposed FTA is expected to create a more robust and predictable trading framework, facilitate freer movement of goods and services, and enhance policy stability, thereby strengthening bilateral economic relations.

Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal highlighted that a comprehensive trade arrangement could deepen economic engagement and promote greater investment flows between India and the GCC countries. He also noted the potential benefits for India's workforce, both within India and in GCC countries, arising from expanded economic cooperation. From the GCC perspective, closer trade ties with India could support diversification efforts and investment engagement.

Overall, the signing of the ToR reflects a shared intent to elevate India-GCC economic relations through structured trade negotiations, with implications for trade, investment, energy cooperation, and labour mobility.



Procurement of minor forest produce dips 92% in 2024-25



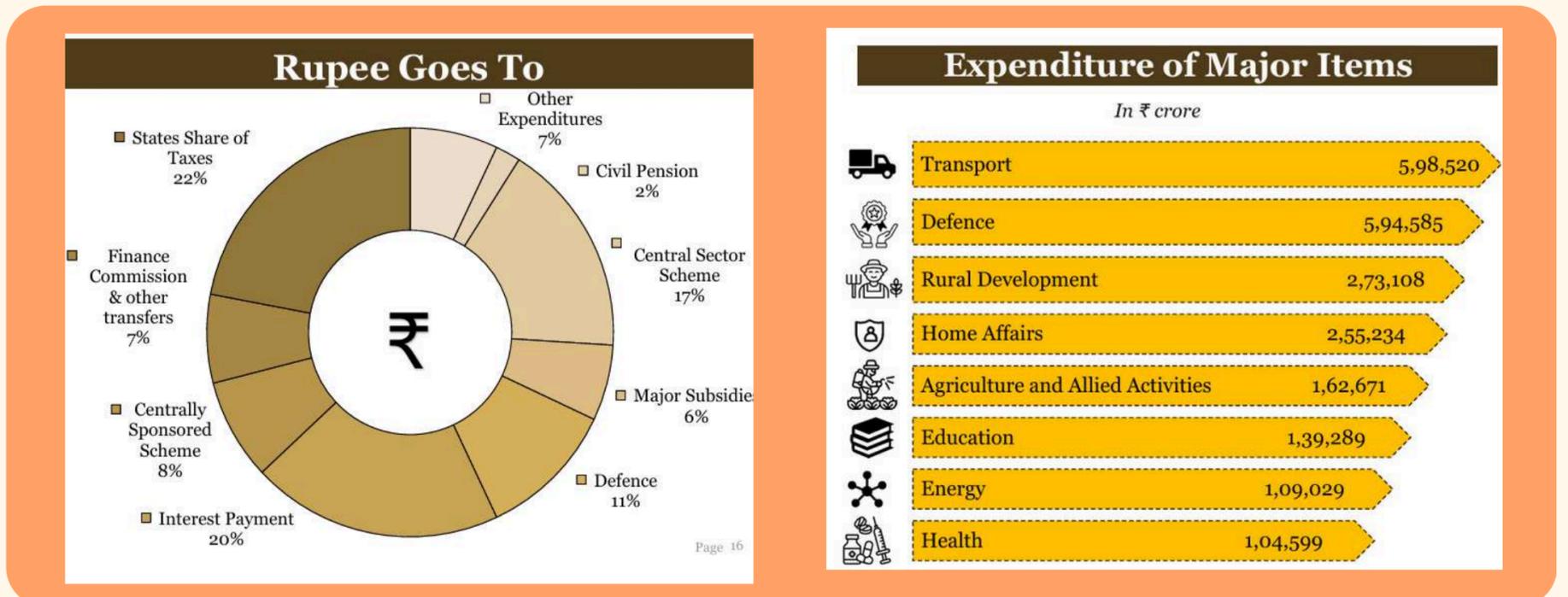
Government procurement of minor forest produce (MFP) at minimum support price (MSP) recorded a sharp decline in 2024-25 compared to the previous year. Data tabled in Parliament showed that procurement across 19 States fell by over 92% between 2023-24 and 2024-25. The information was presented by Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram in response to a parliamentary question on MFP procurement. He also stated that the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has, so far, released ₹319.65 crore to State governments for the procurement of MFP at MSP. The data highlights trends in the implementation of MSP support for forest-dependent communities.

The Central Government had introduced a Minimum Support Price (MSP) for a select list of MFP through "Mechanism for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce through Minimum Support price and development of Value Chain of MFP" Scheme in 2011 to provide a social safety net to these underprivileged forest dwellers, and to aid in their empowerment. Launched on 14th April 2018, the Van Dhan Yojana is a flagship initiative under the 'Mechanism for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) through Minimum Support Price (MSP) & Development of Value Chain for MFP' Implemented by TRIFED as the nodal agency, the scheme aims to generate livelihood opportunities for tribal gatherers by transforming them into entrepreneurs.

UNION BUDGET 2026 : KEY TAKEAWAYS - SPECIAL FEATURE

Defence Budget Priorities and India's Evolving Security Preparedness

India's security preparedness today must be understood against a backdrop of a deteriorating global order, heightened geopolitical volatility, and expanding threat vectors across land, air, sea, cyber, and space. The recent defence budget, marked by a double-digit increase and allocations touching about 2% of GDP, signals strategic intent after years of relative stagnation. A notable feature is the renewed emphasis on capital expenditure, which has overtaken revenue spending, indicating a shift towards modernisation rather than maintenance.



Service-wise allocations reflect this ambition: significant hikes for the Army's heavy weapons and mobility platforms and for the Air Force point to preparedness for high-intensity and technology-driven warfare, while the Navy's modest increase reflects its relatively mature indigenisation capacity rather than diminished importance. However, higher allocations alone do not automatically translate into enhanced security capability. Structural challenges persist in the form of procurement delays, illustrated by decades-long timelines for submarines and fighter aircraft, rigid procedures like the L-1 tendering system that discourage innovation, and the inability of the Ministry of Defence to fully absorb capital funds, leading to lapses. Currency depreciation further erodes the real value of capital spending on imported platforms. Indigenisation has made progress, with a substantial share of procurement reserved for domestic industry and rising defence exports, yet R&D remains fragmented, underfunded, and weakly integrated with private industry, limiting technological self-reliance.

Therefore, India's security preparedness hinges on deep institutional reforms beyond headline budgetary increases, with research and development as a critical fulcrum. India's defence R&D ecosystem remains fragmented, with weak translation of dual-use research into deployable military capabilities, compounded by low overall research spending of about 0.66% of GDP and limited private-sector participation. In contrast, countries like Japan combine higher R&D intensity with strong industry leadership while simultaneously raising defence allocations. The challenge, therefore, is institutional rather than merely financial: unifying research direction, incentivising large private players to invest in mission-oriented defence innovation, and integrating R&D with acquisition and production pipelines. Equally important is a conceptual shift away from the narrow "guns versus butter" framework, which obscures the developmental multipliers of defence spending. Investments in border infrastructure through agencies such as the Border Roads Organisation support border development and national integration, while indigenous shipbuilding and defence manufacturing generate employment and industrial spillovers. When aligned with the vision of a \$30-trillion Viksit Bharat economy, defence spending emerges as a catalyst for growth, technological self-reliance, and strategic autonomy, enabling budgetary intent to translate into sustained and future-ready security capability.

Rethinking battery strategy in India: the case for sodium-ion technology

Once considered a low-performance alternative, sodium-ion batteries have emerged as a high-potential investment area as recent advances in layered oxide cathode chemistries have sharply narrowed their energy-density gap with lithium-ion batteries. Their performance is now approaching that of lithium iron phosphate batteries, which are already widely deployed in electric vehicles and stationary energy storage.

What are Sodium-Ion Batteries?

Sodium-ion batteries are rechargeable energy storage devices that operate on principles similar to lithium-ion batteries, but use sodium ions instead of lithium ions to store and release energy. Their cell design and manufacturing processes closely resemble those of lithium-ion batteries, making them easier to scale using existing infrastructure. Although sodium is heavier than lithium and offers lower energy density, recent advances in layered oxide cathodes have significantly narrowed this gap, bringing performance close to lithium iron phosphate batteries used widely today.

Key Advantages of Sodium-Ion Technology

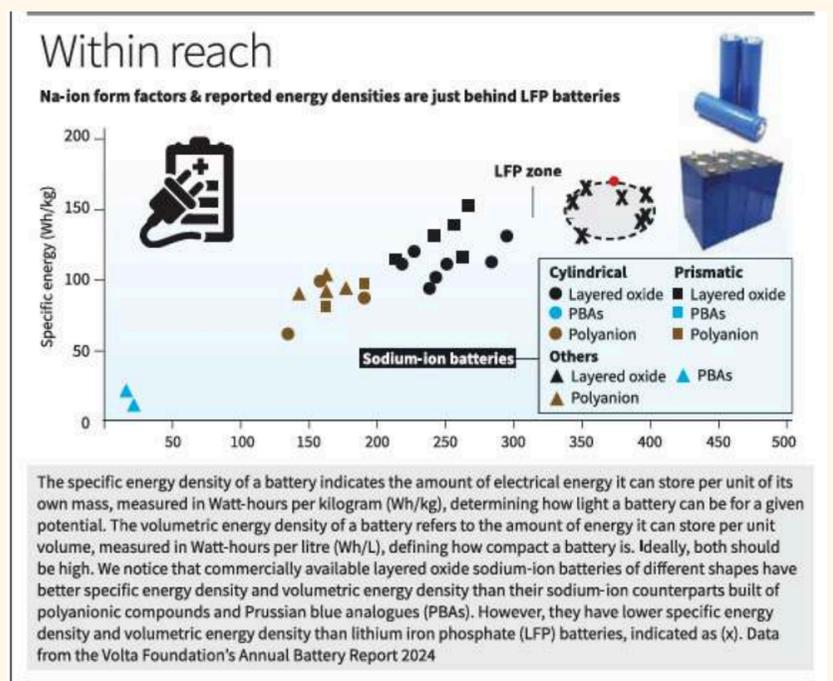
The most important advantage of sodium-ion batteries is safety. These batteries show much lower temperature rise during thermal runaway events compared to lithium-ion batteries. This makes them safer for storage, transport, and large-scale deployment, especially in densely populated areas.

Another major advantage is logistical flexibility. Lithium-ion batteries are classified as dangerous goods and must be transported at low states of charge, increasing costs and complexity. Sodium-ion batteries, by contrast, can be stored and transported safely at zero volts without degradation. This simplifies manufacturing, shipping, and installation.

Sodium-ion batteries also offer material security advantages. Sodium is abundant, widely available, and geographically well distributed. Unlike lithium-ion batteries, sodium-ion batteries do not depend on critical minerals such as lithium, cobalt, or nickel. This reduces exposure to price volatility, supply disruptions, and geopolitical risks.

From a manufacturing perspective, sodium-ion batteries are industry-ready. Existing lithium-ion production lines can be adapted with minimal changes, allowing manufacturers to scale up without large new capital investments. This lowers entry barriers and shortens deployment timelines.

India's battery manufacturing ambitions are constrained by limited domestic lithium availability and a weak upstream ecosystem, making import dependence likely as demand rises from electric mobility, renewable integration, and grid storage. In this context, sodium-ion batteries offer a strategic alternative aligned with India's resource profile and energy security goals. To mainstream them, policy support must explicitly include sodium-ion chemistries in upstream infrastructure and incentive frameworks such as the PLI scheme, while promoting flexible manufacturing. Updating safety standards and certification pathways, encouraging dual approval by EV manufacturers, and funding R&D and early deployments—especially in grid storage and two- and three-wheelers—can build market confidence and resilience.



BRAIN BOOSTERS #148 05-01-2026

Did You Know?

Electrolyte

Current Collector

Li-ion Battery

Lithium-ion battery is a rechargeable battery in which lithium ions move between the anode and cathode through an electrolyte during charge-discharge cycles.

- Key features:
- High energy and power density
- Long cycle life
- Low self-discharge
- Lower environmental impact at point of use.

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PRELIMS CORNER :

1) Consider the following events: (2018)

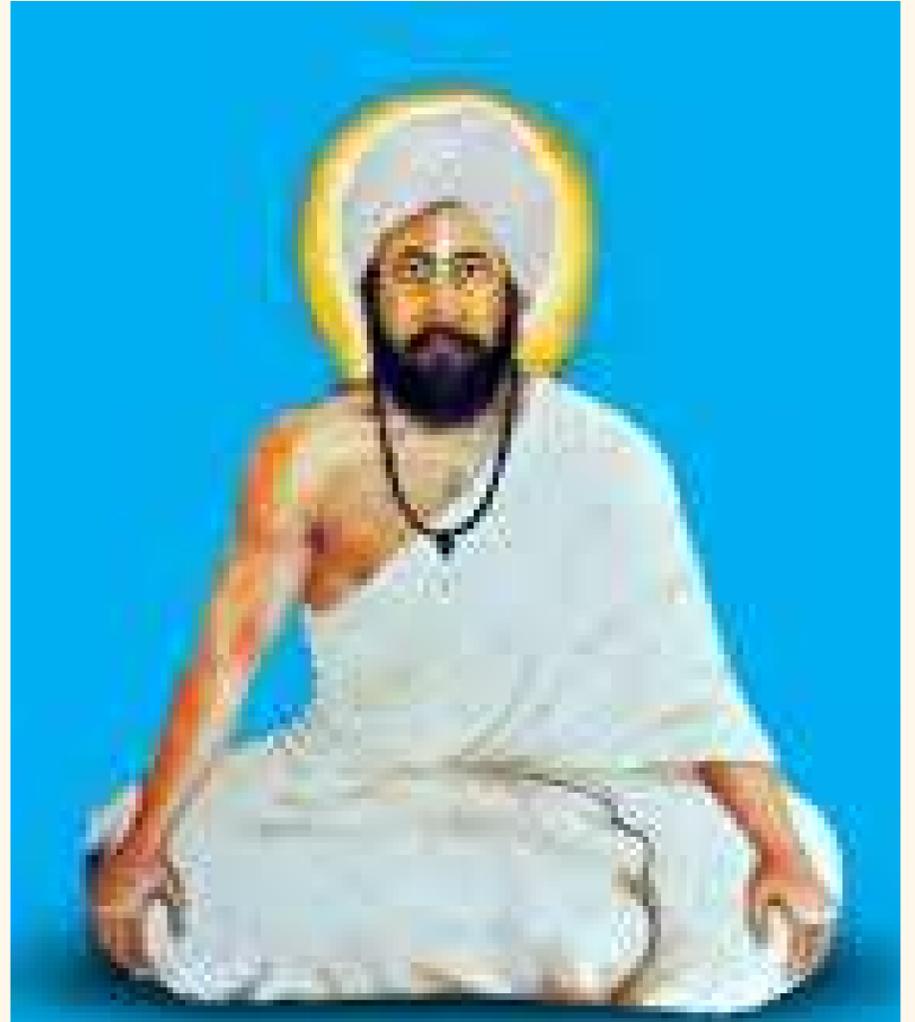
1. The first democratically elected communist party government formed in a State in India.
2. India's then largest bank, 'Imperial Bank of India', was renamed 'State Bank of India'.
3. Air India was nationalised and became the national carrier.
4. Goa became a part of independent India.

Which of the following is the correct chronological sequence of the above events?

- (a) 4 - 1 - 2 - 3
- (b) 3 - 2 - 1 - 4
- (c) 4 - 2 - 1 - 3
- (d) 3 - 1 - 2 - 4

2) Who among the following is associated with 'Songs from Prison', a translation of ancient Indian religious lyrics in English? (2021)

- (a) Bal Gangadhar Tilak
- (b) Jawaharlal Nehru
- (c) Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi
- (d) Sarojini Naidu

HERITAGE**AYYA VAIKUNDAR (1809-1851)**

Vaikundaswamikal stands as a towering figure in the social and spiritual history of South India, remembered for his uncompromising stand against inequality and injustice. In 1836, he founded Samathwa Samajam, regarded as the first organised socio-reform movement in India, with the aim of establishing a society based on equality and human dignity. He openly criticised oppressive power structures, referring to British rule as "Ven Neechan" and the rule of the Travancore king as "The Neechan of Ananthapuri," thereby challenging both colonial and local domination.

In a radical spiritual act, he became the first in South India to install a mirror for worship in 1851, symbolising self-respect and the divinity inherent in every human being. He established inclusive places of worship known as Nizhal Thangal and emerged as the exponent of a new spiritual path called Ayya Vazhi, which combined devotion with social reform. His vision was captured in the powerful ideal of "One caste, One religion, One clan, One world, One God." Through practices such as Sama Panthi Bhojan, he broke caste barriers in everyday life. His teachings and worldview are preserved in his seminal work, Akhila Thirattu, which remains central to his legacy.

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Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) Answer is option b

1. Air India was nationalised and became the national carrier (1953): The Government of India nationalised Air India under the Air Corporations Act, 1953. It became the national carrier and was operated under the newly formed Air India International Limited.

2. India's largest bank, 'Imperial Bank of India,' was renamed 'State Bank of India' (1955): The State Bank of India Act, 1955 was passed, renaming the Imperial Bank of India as the State Bank of India (SBI), with the aim of expanding banking services in rural areas.

3. The first democratically elected communist party government in a State in India (1957): In 1957, Kerala elected the first communist government in India, led by E.M.S. Namboodiripad of the Communist Party of India (CPI).

4. Goa became a part of independent India (1961): In 1961, the Indian Armed Forces conducted Operation Vijay to liberate Goa, which was under Portuguese rule. Goa became part of India following the success of this operation.

1953 (Air India nationalised)



1955 (Imperial Bank renamed SBI)

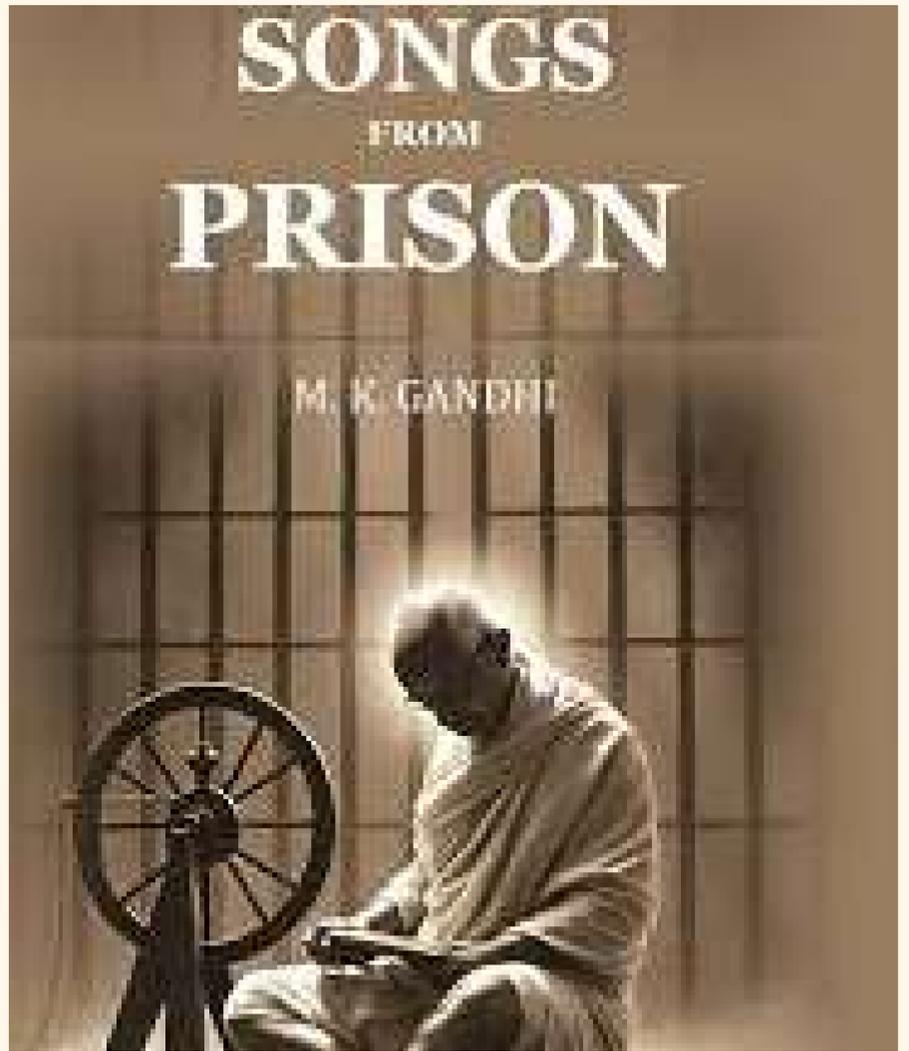


1957 (Communist government in Kerala)



1961 (Goa's liberation)

2) Answer is option c



Songs from Prison is a collection of translations of ancient Indian religious lyrics into English by Mahatma Gandhi. • The book reflects Gandhi's deep interest in Indian spiritual traditions and his effort to share India's cultural and philosophical heritage with the world.

Context of Writing:

Gandhi translated these works during his imprisonment in Yerwada Jail in 1930-1931. The collection includes verses from Indian scriptures and devotional songs that emphasize themes of spirituality, morality, and nonviolence, aligning with Gandhi's philosophy.

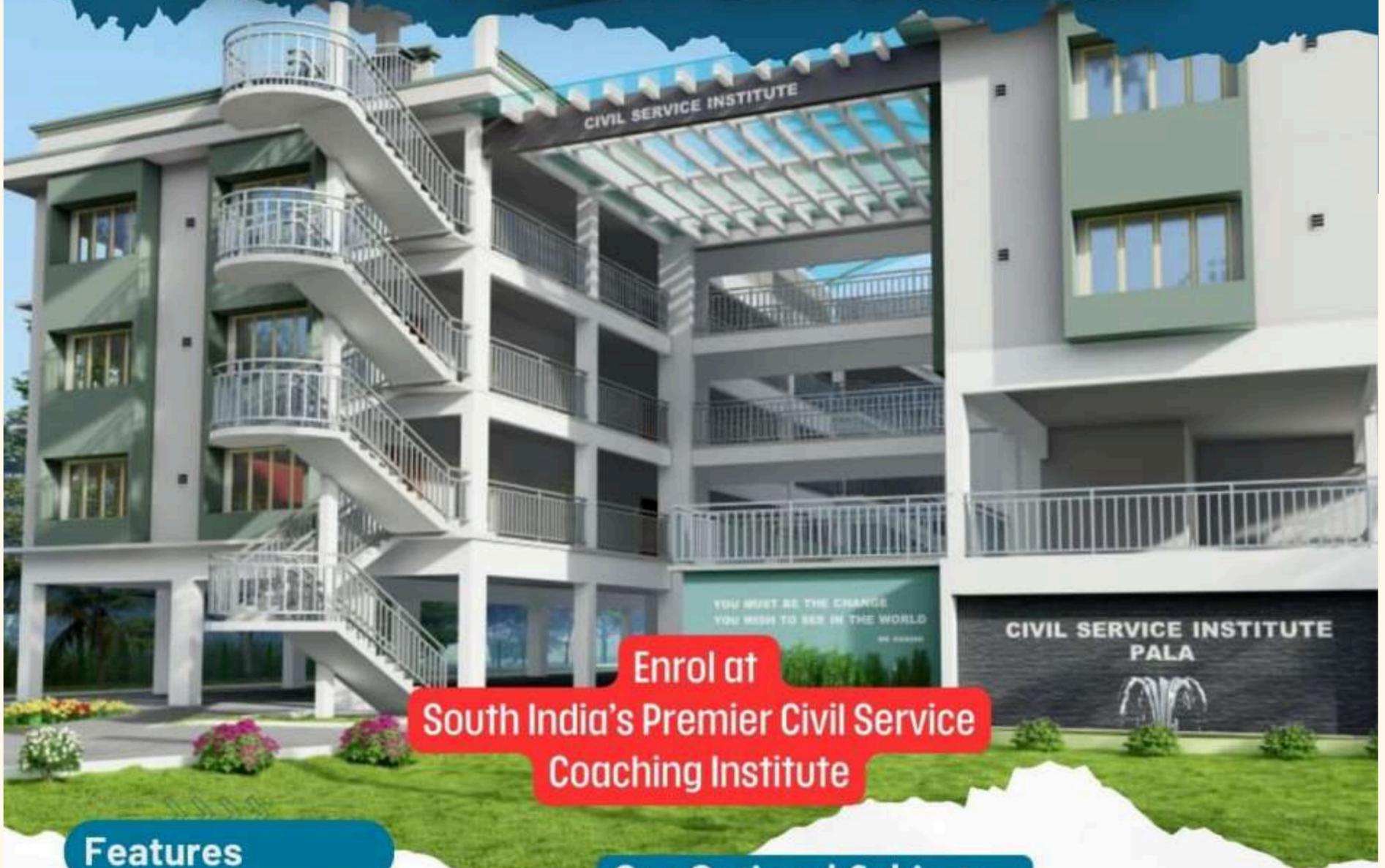
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