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KPR IAS Academy

Institute for IAS, IPS, IFS and TNPSC Exams

No. 5, AKS Nagar, Near Gandhi Park, Coimbatore - 641 001

GS Paper I – Geography

Date: 18.05.26

Question Corner

Clouds of ash

How do volcanoes affect the earth's atmosphere?

Volcanoes change the earth's atmosphere by releasing gases and particles in large quantities. When a volcano erupts, it blasts sulphur dioxide high into the sky. Since aerosols scatter sunlight, a powerful eruption can end up cooling the earth's surface for many years. Large eruptions also spew clouds of ash and dust that block sunlight around the eruption site, while most of the ash falls back down in a few weeks.

Eruptions also release carbon dioxide. While modern human activity produces much more

carbon dioxide than volcanoes, eruptions throughout history have helped drive long-term warming trends. They also emit compounds that can create acid rain or damage the protective ozone layer. Taken together, volcanic eruptions have influenced the earth's climate. Recently, researchers used satellites to study the 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai eruption. They found the volcano released quantities of methane into the stratosphere, where volcanic ash triggered chemical reactions that turned the methane into formaldehyde.

Readers may send their questions / answers to science@thehindu.co.in

A ND-NDE



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GS Paper I – History

Return of Chola-era copper plates should spark efforts for further repatriations, say Indian archaeologists

T.S. Subramanian
CHENNAI

The return of the Chola-era Anaimangalam copper plates charter from the Netherlands this week marks a watershed event in the history of the repatriation of India's invaluable bronzes, stone sculptures, and carved temple pillars, according to historians and archaeologists.

The artefacts, which have been in the possession of Leiden University for almost two centuries and are popularly known as the Leiden copper plates, were presented in a ceremony at the Hague on Saturday, in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Dutch counterpart, Rob Jetten.

"This is the first time that the Chola-period copper plates are being brought back to India," said V. Vedachalam, an archaeologist who specialises in the Pandya, the Pallava and the Chola copper plate charters, welcoming the development.

"We should make efforts to bring back the Velvikudi copper plates issued by



The Chola-era copper plates, which were handed back to India by the Netherlands on Saturday, and, right, the tower of the Buddha vihara, called Chulamanivarma Vihara, near Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu, which was demolished by Jesuit priests in 1867. PTI

the Pandya ruler Parantaka Nedunchadaiyan (regnal years 765-815 CE) from the British Museum, London, to Tamil Nadu," he added.

'Enduring history'

Former Tamil Nadu Archaeology Minister Thangam Thenarasu, who is also a scholar of Chola history, said the Anaimangalam copper plate inscriptions were "enduring records of Tamil history, culture, and the grandeur of the Chola era".

The late R. Nagaswamy, who was the director of the Tamil Nadu State Depart-

ment of Archaeology, had described the artefacts in this way in a 2009 lecture: "One of the most important copper plates of Raja Raja Chola I (regnal years 985-1014 CE) is from Anaimangalam near Nagapattinam."

The plates recorded Raja Raja Chola I's gift of land at Anaimangalam village to a Buddha *vihara*, he had said. This *vihara* was built by the king Sri Mara Vijayottunga Varman of Java in the name of his father Sri Chudamani Varman, and so was called the Chulamanivarma Vihara.

Unfortunately, the tow-



er of the *vihara* itself was demolished by Jesuit priests in 1867, with the permission of the colonial government of Madras.

Buddhist vihara

"The plates are an interesting example of how a Saivite king helped in building a Buddha *vihara*," Nagaswamy said, according to an article published in *The Hindu* on December 25, 2009.

While Raja Raja Chola I gave the order for building the Buddha *vihara*, it was his son Rajendra Chola I (regnal years 1014-1044 CE), who implemented the

command. This is mentioned in the larger Leiden plates, Dr. Vedachalam said.

The Chulamanivarma Vihara was also called the Raja Raja Cholan Perumpalli (or the big *vihara*), during the time of Rajendra Chola I.

"The Leiden copper plates... are a complete set of 21 large plates and three small plates. The large plates were committed to writing by Rajendra Chola I in five Sanskrit plates and 16 Tamil plates, honouring his father Raja Raja's oral commitment," says K. Kirubanidhi in the book titled *Epic saga of the Cholas: Their art, temples and heritage*, first published by *The Hindu* in August 2023.

"The small plates in Tamil, later given effect to by Kulottunga Chola I (regnal years 1070-1120 CE), talk about the additional grants made to the *sangha* associated with the *vihara* in Nagapattinam," Mr. Kirubanidhi wrote.

Dr. Vedachalam added that two emissaries from the Javanese kingdom appealed to Kulottunga Chola I to ensure the implemen-

tation of Raja Raja Chola I's order.

Kulottunga not only gave them that assurance but made a grant of 4,500 *kalam* (an unit of measurement) of paddy plus land to the Chulamanivarma Vihara. This was in addition to Raja Raja Chola I's grant of 8,943 *kalam* of paddy.

Chola insignia

The Leiden plates were strung together by a ring bearing the royal insignia of the Chola dynasty. These included a tiger, the royal emblem of the Cholas, the two fish of the Pandyas, the bow of the Cheras, two *chamaras*, the royal parasol, lamps, and a swastika. The inclusion of the two fish and the bow signified that the Cholas had defeated the Pandyas and the Cheras.

The bigger Leiden plates carry the word "Anaimangalam" in Tamil on the royal emblem, and a short *sloka* in Sanskrit in praise of Rajendra Chola I, Dr. Vedachalam said. The small plates carry a brief *sloka* lauding Kulottunga Chola I.



GS Paper II – Polity

With ordinance, SC judge strength up from 33 to 37

President Droupadi Murmu has promulgated ordinance, which will be taken up by Parliament when it convenes; move is a step towards tiding over crisis of pendency plaguing the court

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

President Droupadi Murmu has promulgated an ordinance increasing the number of judges in the Supreme Court to 37 – excluding the Chief Justice of India.

The May 16 Gazette notification says “Parliament is not in session and the President is satisfied that the circumstances exist which render it necessary for her to take immediate action [issue of ordinance]”.

The Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Amendment Ordinance, 2026, has been promulgated in accordance with the powers of the President under Article 123 of the Constitution. The ordinance will be placed in

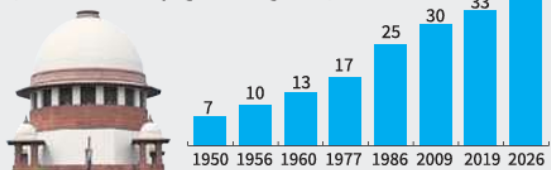
Judicial numbers

The top court currently has a backlog of over **93,000 cases**, which is threatening to reach six figures even as the court is going into summer recess, or ‘partial working days’, in June

The Framers of the Constitution had originally in Article 124(1) envisaged a Supreme Court consisting of the CJI and ‘not more than seven judges’ until ‘Parliament by law prescribes a larger number’

The Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Act, 1956 as originally enacted, provided for the maximum number of judges (excluding the CJI) to be 10

Graph shows increase in strength of the Supreme Court (Maximum number of judges excluding the CJI)



both Houses of Parliament when it convenes. It will cease to operate if six weeks expire without any resolution passed on it after the reassembly of Parliament or if resolutions are passed in both Houses

of Parliament disapproving the ordinance. The President can withdraw the ordinance at any time.

The ordinance has amended Section 2 of the Supreme Court (Number of Judges) Act, 1956 to re-

place the word “thirty-three” with “thirty-seven”.

The promulgation has happened nearly two weeks after the Union Cabinet approved the proposal to increase the number of Supreme Court judges. With the ordinance in place, the total sanctioned judicial strength in the Supreme Court, including the Chief Justice of India, will rise from 34 to 38.

The move is seen as a step towards tiding over the continuing crisis of pendency plaguing the court for years now, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, when the facility of e-filing of cases caught on.

The current backlog is over 93,000 cases.

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GS Paper II – Governance

One-horse races are no triumph for democracy

There was an industrialist whose company was doing exceptionally well. In a decade since its inception, it captured over 40% of the market share. When I asked him, "Having reached thus far, what do you perceive as your biggest challenge going forward?", he paused for a while, his eyes gazing into the distant future, and replied gravely: "Lack of competition."

Ask cricketing legends who have been successful batsmen and they will tell you that their finest innings were those played against formidable bowling attacks, not the centuries scored against minnows. Even spectators enjoy a seesaw, hard-fought contest more than a tame one-sided affair, even if it involves their favourite player trouncing a neophyte.

As in business and sports, competition is the haemoglobin of a democracy. It gives meaning to the precept of "rule by the people" by allowing citizens to "fire" incumbents and choose alternatives, thereby liberating them from the TINA ("there is no alternative") trap. However, that presupposes the existence of rivals with the capacity to contest, and challengers who aspire to win against the odds because they believe in the fairness of the system.

Mandates require genuine contests

It is ironic that the rules of the game, as far as elections are concerned, do not consider competition essential to an electoral outcome. Section 53(3) of the Representation of the People Act, 1951, provides for "unopposed" winners, which means that competition takes place only when enough players enter the fray. Otherwise, one can have a contestant but no contest, a winner without a game, and a people's representative without a single vote cast in his favour – a walkover "killing" both the game and its spirit.

For a player to tout his victory there should have been a contest. For a government to claim legitimacy, the electorate must believe that those elected "earned" (pun unintended) their position through a fair process. You can win power without a contest; not a mandate. Competition also gives 'losers' hope that they can try to win in the future, making them accept fair electoral outcomes. Peaceful transition of power is one of the healthiest achievements of any electoral democracy.

Competition and contestation enable differing ideologies and social classes to flourish. Going by the economic logic of competition breeding efficiency, it would be reasonable to expect political parties to refine their policies as opponents always look to highlight failures.



Ashok Lavasa

Former Election Commissioner of India and former Union Finance Secretary

Political scientist Robert Dahl referred to a system with high participation but low contestation (like one-party States with high voter turnout) as a "plebiscitary autocracy" rather than a true democracy.

However, competition also presupposes a level playing field and a neutral referee to ensure that. The absence of either tilts the scales against challengers, minimising their chances of success while also denting their morale and undermining the people's confidence. In fact, the partisanship of a referee tends to rob the victor of the sweet taste of success, even if deserved. One might be seeded higher, have played better than the opponent, enjoy spectators' support, and even deserve to win, but if the referee is seen as partial, the triumph appears tainted.

In West Bengal

Take the example of the West Bengal Assembly elections. Anti-incumbency could well have influenced the voters' choice, and the winning party may have run an effective campaign for its resounding victory. And yet, its performance stands tarnished by accusations of favouritism against the constitutionally designated umpire mandated to provide the "superintendence, direction, and control" of the electoral process.

The outcome is being linked to the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls (ER), and analysts have presented constituency-wise data showing deletions of electors that exceed the victory margins, suggesting that the result might have been different but for the SIR.

That the SIR was unwarranted is established by the inability of the process to identify those "ineligible" in terms of Article 326, which was the Election Commission of India (ECI)'s war cry when it commenced the SIR in Bihar in June 2025. Neither at the end of the Bihar SIR nor for the States in the second round has the ECI released figures on the "ineligible" electors weeded out for not meeting the eligibility conditions under Article 326. There have, no doubt, been deletions through the SIR, but these pertain to "permanently shifted, dead, or duplicate" entries, which could have been removed through the normal revision process mandated before every poll.

What we had instead in West Bengal was over 60 lakh electors included in the electoral rolls under the "under adjudication" category, with 27.16 lakh of them deleted after a lightning exercise carried out by judicial officers hastily appointed by the Supreme Court of India. Over 700 judicial officers sprinted through a marathon in their 'supreme' effort to accomplish the impossible task of disposing these cases in a short

span of time. Those whose claims were rejected were asked to appear before non-existent Appellate Tribunals.

How, when, and even whether their appeals will be heard is hard to tell, going by the experience of those placed on the doubtful voters (D-voter) list a few years ago in Assam. No official data is in the public domain to indicate whether their voting rights have been restored or whether they remain in limbo. Soon, the 27 lakh affected in West Bengal may join those "missing in action". The cruel irony is that the ECI excluded Assam from the current SIR process, even though the National Register of Citizens prepared there a few years ago classified over 19 lakh people as "non-citizens", yet their voting rights remain unaffected.

A neutrality that faces scrutiny

The ECI has invited an indelible taint by engineering a system that made such omission possible under its 'superintendence'. What sanctity does its slogan, "No voter to be left behind", hold if 27 lakh electors were treated as jetsam? How could the ECI "direct" the use of the illogical "logical discrepancy" tool that created discrepancies of its own? Why did it allow the legitimate functions of the Electoral Registration Officer to be exercised by a system beyond its "control"? Why did it announce the election schedule if it was not confident of finalising the electoral rolls on time? Why did it abdicate the legal provision that allowed the existing rolls to remain valid in the case of "under adjudication" electors who could not go through the full process because of a paucity of time? Why did the ECI not seek the Court's permission to defer the schedule when a mandatory process could not be completed? That the Court did not think it worthwhile to ask the ECI to "tarry a little", and was willing to "suspend" the voting rights of 27 lakh electors, is inexplicable and unfortunate.

With the gradual fading away of political rivals in the States and at the national level, will we witness more "victories" without a fight because the arena is either bereft of competitors, the challengers are too weak, or the umpire's decisions tilt the balance? Interestingly, the umpire himself would become an "extra" if there were no competition. Neither the "pathbreaking" constitutional reform of One Nation, One Election nor the idea of an Opposition-mukt Bharat is aimed at fostering competition, and that does not augur well. There will be little thrill left in a one-horse race.

That it strikes at the very roots of the democratic character of the nation may be a minor matter.

Democracy demands not merely elections, but also meaningful and fair competition



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GS Paper III – Economic Development

Why is the Prime Minister advocating austerity?

What are the seven set of suggestions that Prime Minister Narendra Modi made for the public?

How has the war in West Asia impacted various sectors in India and how will these cutbacks help?

What measures is the government taking?

T.C.A. Sharad Raghavan

The story so far:

Over the past week, a series of nudges, policy changes, and public messages have sought to influence the behaviour of Indian consumers, companies, and farmers. At the heart of this push is an effort to reduce India's imports of oil and petroleum products, gold, and fertilizers, and involves everyone from the Prime Minister and his Cabinet colleagues to industry leaders and associations.

What was the Prime Minister's message?

On May 10, during a speech in Secunderabad, Prime Minister Narendra Modi laid out a seven-fold set of suggestions for the Indian public to help the economy and the government's finances weather the storm created by the war in West Asia.

The Prime Minister asked Indians to prioritise working from home; reduce petrol and diesel usage by using public transport and electric vehicles; reduce the use of cooking oil; stop buying gold for at least a year; buy Indian-made products rather than foreign ones; pause foreign travel; and adopt natural fertilizers instead of using imported chemical ones.

The Opposition, along with several other commentators, questioned the timing of his appeals, coming as they did right after the conclusion of Assembly elections in some key States. Neither the political leadership nor the bureaucracy mentioned any impending problems in the run-up to the elections. The critics point out that in fact, the Prime Minister and several of his Cabinet colleagues flew across the country to campaign in Tamil Nadu, Kerala,

India's Current Account Deficit is set to grow to about 2.5% of the GDP in this financial year, from 1.4% in the quarter ended December 2025

West Bengal, and Assam, where they also organised several road shows. These questions relate more to the timing of the message than to whether remedial action is needed at all.

Why are these cutbacks needed?

It is now well established that the war in West Asia has created a global energy crisis. One of the aspects of this crisis is that the prices of oil and gas have shot up. A year ago, the price of Brent Crude – one of the benchmarks for oil – stood at \$65 a barrel; it is now around \$110.

India imports 85-90% of its oil requirement. This means that any time the price of oil goes up internationally, the country's import bill increases. Oil alone makes up about 17% of India's total goods import basket. That is why three out of Mr. Modi's seven suggestions were aimed at reducing fuel usage and oil imports.

The war has also led to an increase in the price of gold as investors flock to it as a 'safe haven' asset in times of uncertainty. Indians have a cultural affinity for the yellow metal that defies any price movement. While the price of gold increased by 45-60% over the last year, the volume of India's gold imports fell only about 5% in the same period. The value of these imports increased 24%. In other words, the higher price only impacted the demand for gold at the margins; the bulk of purchases has continued.

A third major trend is the depreciation of the rupee. The currency breached the ₹96-to-a-dollar mark on May 15 before closing a little higher at ₹95.96. A year ago, the currency was trading at about ₹85 to a dollar. Throughout this period, the Reserve Bank of India has been stepping in to stabilise the fall of the rupee and reduce volatility, mainly by selling the dollars in its reserves and absorbing rupees in the market. As a result, the Reserve Bank of India's foreign exchange reserves fell to \$552.4 billion as of May 8, 2026, from \$581.4 billion a year earlier – a decline of about \$29 billion.

Foreign Institutional Investors have been pulling out large sums from Indian markets. When they do this, they sell in rupees and are repatriated in dollars, creating another significant channel of dollar outflows.

Taken together, all this means that India's Current Account Deficit (CAD) – the amount by which its imports of goods and services exceed exports – is set to grow to about 2.5% of the GDP in this financial year from 1.4% as recently as the quarter ended December 2025.

A sustained high CAD has several serious knock-on effects for the economy and has led to several crises for the Indian government since Independence. It is therefore clear why the government is seeking to act now to prevent

such an outcome.

Has the government also taken some measures?

Over the last week, the government has taken several measures to support these efforts. Effective from May 13, it doubled the effective tax to be paid on the import of gold and silver to a total of 18.4% from the previous 9.2%. The Directorate General of Foreign Trade has also tightened the conditions under which gems and jewellery exporters can import gold duty-free. On May 16, the government also restricted the import of silver.

The prices of petrol and diesel were hiked on May 15 by ₹3 a litre each, in an attempt to reduce demand. The price of CNG was increased by ₹2 per kg. A rough calculation by *The Hindu* shows that this would earn oil marketing companies an additional ₹4,400 crore per month. However, this is not much when compared to the loss they are currently bearing, which the government said amounts to about ₹1,000 crore a day on petrol, diesel and LPG. This means further fuel price hikes could be imminent.

Notably, in a rare occurrence, Mr. Modi himself took to social media to deny a news report that the government was considering imposing a temporary cess on foreign travel.

Mr. Modi and several of his Cabinet ministers have also reduced the sizes of their convoys.

Will these steps work?

Several of the measures called for by the Prime Minister and implemented by the government might work at the margins, but some might lead to negative consequences as well. For instance, higher fuel prices may deter unnecessary travel, but unless offices implement a 'work from home' policy again, employees will have no option but to travel to work and bear the higher cost. Overall, higher fuel costs are inflationary in nature. Further, the diesel and CNG price hike is likely to make public transport costlier.

History has shown that higher gold prices do not necessarily deter purchases and can, in fact, lead to an increase in smuggling, as happened in 2013 when import duties were raised.

Asking farmers to switch to natural fertilizers and hold off on buying chemical ones is a workable medium-term strategy, but would be disruptive in the short term. Agricultural output, already expected to be under strain due to a below-normal monsoon and stronger El Nino this year, will suffer further.

An analysis by *The Hindu* has also shown that the growth in foreign spending by Indians is not on travel, which is contracting, but on foreign equity, debt, and immovable assets.

Short of draconian measures, there are few short-term measures that will effectively solve the CAD issue. Various governments have struggled to make India more competitive on exports. Unless that changes, and dollar inflows rise substantially, such crises are likely to recur.



A display board showing the rates of gold and silver in a jewellery showroom in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu, on May 14. R. VENGADESH



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GS Paper III – Disease

Ebola outbreak in Congo is a global emergency, says WHO

Associated Press

ABUJA

The World Health Organization on Sunday declared the Ebola disease outbreak caused by a rare virus in Congo and neighbouring Uganda a public health emergency of international concern, after more than 300 suspected cases and 88 deaths.

The WHO said the outbreak did not meet the criteria of a pandemic emergency like COVID-19, and advised against the closure of International Borders.

The WHO said on the social media platform X that a laboratory-confirmed case has also been reported in Congo's capital, Kinshasa, which is about



A staff member checking a visitor's temperature, before allowing her inside a hospital in Goma on Sunday. AFP

1,000 km from the outbreak's epicentre in the eastern province of Ituri, suggesting a possible wider spread.

Ebola is highly contagious and can be contract-

ed via bodily fluids such as vomit, blood or semen.

The disease it causes is rare, but severe and often fatal.

Risk of spread

By the WHO's standards, it shows the event is serious, there is a risk of international spread and it requires a coordinated international response.

Health authorities say the current outbreak, first confirmed on Friday, is caused by the Bundibugyo virus, a rare variant of the Ebola disease that has no approved therapeutics or vaccines. Congo accounts for all except two of the cases, both of which were reported in Uganda, the WHO said.