CURRENT AFFAIRS

Date: 28 March 2024

ASI TO DELIST 18 PROTECTED MONUMENTS

THIS ARTICLE COVERS 'DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS' AND THE TOPIC DETAILS OF "ASI TO DELIST 18 PROTECTED MONUMENTSMAINS PRACTICE QUESTIONS". THIS TOPIC IS RELEVANT IN THE "HISTORY" SECTION OF THE UPSC CSE EXAM.

WHY IN THE NEWS?

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has chosen to remove 18 centrally protected monuments from its list, determining that they lack national significance. These 18 monuments were previously categorised by the ASI as untraceable on an earlier list.

DELISTING OF MONUMENTS

- The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), operating **under the Union Ministry of Culture**, holds responsibility for safeguarding and preserving specific monuments and archaeological sites deemed of national significance.
- This **duty is outlined in The Ancient Monuments Preservation Act of 1904** and The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act 1958 **(AMASR Act).**
- Delisting a monument entails its exclusion from ASI's conservation, protection, and maintenance efforts. **According to the AMASR Act**, **construction-related activities are prohibited around protected sites.** Once delisted, the area becomes open to regular construction and urbanisation endeavours.
- The list of protected monuments undergoes changes through additions and removals. **Presently, ASI oversees 3,693 monuments**, which will decrease to 3,675 after the ongoing delisting process concludes in the coming weeks. This marks the first significant delisting endeavour in several decades.
- According to **Section 35 of the AMASR Act**, **if the Central Government deems that any ancient or historical monument** or archaeological site and remains previously declared as nationally significant **no longer holds such importance, it reserves the right to declare** through official notification in the Official Gazette **that the said monument or site has ceased to be of national importance** for the purposes **outlined in the AMASR Act.**

RATIONALE BEHIND DELISTING

The rationale behind delisting stems from two primary challenges:

- **Enigma of Untraceable Monuments**: Over time, some monuments, particularly smaller or lesser-known ones, have vanished due to the relentless march of urbanisation, neglect, or the

construction of dams and reservoirs. In some cases, the precise location or current state of these monuments remains a mystery, making preservation efforts impractical.

- **Haunting Absence of Missing Monuments**: A report from the Ministry of Culture submitted in December 2022 painted a concerning picture. It revealed that a staggering 50 of India's 3,693 centrally protected monuments were missing. This highlights the immense challenges faced in safeguarding historical sites across the vast expanse of the country.

DEVELOPMENT VS. PRESERVATION

- The delisting exercise, however, has triggered concerns that extend far beyond mere numbers. Critics argue that delisting signifies a potential loss of irreplaceable historical treasures. These monuments, even the smaller ones, represent invaluable threads in the tapestry of India's rich heritage. Losing them would be akin to erasing a part of the nation's collective memory.
- The delisting exercise also underscores the ongoing tension between development and heritage conservation. As India strides towards progress, infrastructure needs and rapid urbanisation often create pressure on historical sites. Striking a harmonious balance between these competing priorities remains a complex challenge.

CHARTING A COURSE FOR THE FUTURE: BEYOND DELISTING

The delisting exercise serves as a stark reminder of the multifaceted challenges in safeguarding India's cultural heritage. To navigate this complex landscape effectively, a multi-pronged approach is necessary:

- **Strengthening Documentation**: Creating and maintaining comprehensive records of monuments, including their location, historical significance, and current condition, is crucial. Robust documentation can aid in better tracking and protection of these historical treasures.
- **Resource Allocation**: Preserving historical sites requires adequate funding for security personnel, conservation efforts, and restoration projects. Prioritising budgetary allocation for ASI's activities is essential for safeguarding these irreplaceable monuments.
- **Public Awareness and Community Engagement**: Raising public awareness about the importance of preserving cultural heritage is vital. Fostering a sense of community ownership and encouraging public participation in protecting historical sites can create a powerful bulwark against neglect and destruction.

ABOUT ANCIENT MONUMENTS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES AND REMAINS ACT, 1958 (AMASR ACT)

- **Preserves Historical Sites**: The AMASR Act aims to protect ancient and historical monuments, archaeological sites, and remains considered nationally important.
- **Regulates Archaeological Activities**: The Act regulates archaeological excavations to ensure responsible exploration and preservation of historical artefacts.
- **Protects Sculptures and Artefacts**: It safeguards sculptures, carvings, and other objects of historical significance.
- **Establishes ASI as Custodian**: The Act establishes the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) as the official custodian responsible for managing and maintaining protected monuments.
- **Limits Construction Around Monuments**: To prevent damage from development activities, the Act prohibits construction within a 100-metre radius of protected monuments (known as

the "prohibited area"). This restriction applies even to public works projects, with limited exceptions.

- **Safeguarding Iconic Monuments**: The AMASR Act provides protection to iconic Indian monuments like the Taj Mahal, Ajanta Caves, Sanchi Stupa, and Konark Sun Temple.

MAINS PRACTISE QUESTIONS

Q1. In what ways do monuments provide insights into the socio-economic structures, religious beliefs, and political systems of ancient civilisations?

Q2. What are the potential economic repercussions of neglecting or failing to adequately preserve historically significant monuments, both in terms of tourism revenue and broader economic development?

Himanshu Mishra