Date –07-May 2025

PM-USHA: PRADHAN MANTRI UCHCHATAR SHIKSHA ABHIYAN

WHY IN THE NEWS?

The Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA) was in the news due to a two-day National Workshop on Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERU) held on April 30–May 1, 2025, at ICAR, New Delhi. Attended by 64 Vice Chancellors and State Project Directors, the event focused on implementing NEP 2020 reforms. The Ministry of Education announced ₹100 crore each for 35 universities to execute 44 MERU-linked activities. Twelve sessions covered topics like UGC regulations, clustering, skill integration, and industry collaboration. The workshop emphasized strengthening accessibility, research, and quality in state-funded higher education institutions across India.

PM-USHA Portal Overview — PM-USHA Website, User Onboarding, User/Role Management, MoU Management, State Profile & Focus District Management, Component mapping and Configuration, MIS Report/Dashboards, Integration Services (AISHE, e-Sign, Email, SMS), RUSA & PM-USHA Progress Monitoring, RUSA & PM-USHA Fund Management, Proposal/Revised submission, Scoring, Shortlisting, Scrutiny, Approval, Sanction — PM-USHA Portal

WHAT IS PM-USHA?

The Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA) is a centrally sponsored scheme launched by the Government of India to strengthen and transform the higher education system in the country. It is the revamped version of the Rashtriya Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (RUSA), aligning with the vision of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. PM-USHA aims to improve access, equity, and quality in higher education through systemic reforms, infrastructural development, and academic excellence.

DATA ON HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

1. Rise in Total Enrolment: According to AISHE 2023–24 (released in early 2025), total enrolment in higher education crossed 4.5 crore students, up from 3.85 crore in 2019–20. This reflects consistent annual growth and expansion of access, particularly in semi-urban and rural areas.

2. Increased Participation of Marginalized Groups: Enrolment of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) has steadily improved. In 2023–24, SC student enrolment stood at 73 lakh, while ST enrolment reached 33 lakh, marking significant gains under inclusive schemes like PM-USHA.

3. Growing Presence of Women: Women now represent 49% of total enrolments in higher education. Female enrolment in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) courses has also risen, indicating success in gender-targeted initiatives and scholarships.

4. Expansion of Private Sector: Private institutions account for over 65% of colleges and nearly 50% of total enrolments. While they contribute to access, concerns remain about regulation, affordability, and consistent academic standards across private entities.

5. Disparities Among States: States like Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Himachal Pradesh report GER above 40%, while states like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh still lag behind with GER below 25%. This regional inequality in access to higher education continues to be a major policy challenge.

6. Faculty Shortages Persist: As of 2025, over 30% of faculty positions in public universities remain vacant. Ad-hoc hiring and contractual appointments have become common, affecting the quality of teaching and research output in state institutions.

7. Limited Global Recognition: In the 2024 QS World University Rankings, only 8 Indian institutions featured in the top 500 globally. Most state universities continue to struggle with research funding, international collaborations, and innovation ecosystems.
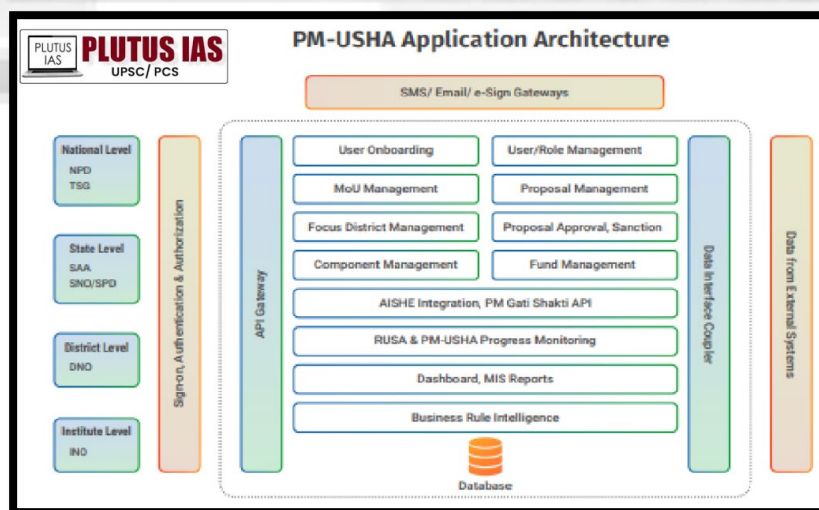
OBJECTIVES OF PM-USHA

1. Implementation of NEP 2020 in Higher Education: The NEP 2020 aims to transform India's higher education landscape by promoting multidisciplinary learning, research, and digital integration. As of May 2025, significant strides have been made in aligning higher education institutions with NEP objectives. For instance, the introduction of the Academic Bank of Credits (ABC) facilitates student mobility and flexible learning pathways across institutions. Additionally, the establishment of the National Digital University (NDU) provides accessible online education, catering to diverse learner needs.

2. Promotion of Equity, Access, and Excellence in State-Funded Institutions: To enhance inclusivity and quality in state-funded institutions, the Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA) was launched. With an outlay of ₹12,926.10 crore for 2023–26, the scheme supports infrastructure development, faculty recruitment, and academic reforms. By May 2025, 33 States and Union Territories have signed Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) under PM-USHA, leading to the approval of 440 projects with a total funding of ₹5,613.12 crore.

3. Facilitation of Multidisciplinary Education, Research, and Employability: NEP 2020 emphasizes the importance of multidisciplinary education to foster holistic learning and enhance employability. In alignment with this, the government has initiated the transformation of single-stream institutions into Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs). These institutions integrate diverse fields of study, encouraging interdisciplinary research and innovation. Furthermore, the establishment of research parks and innovation hubs in premier institutions like IITs and IISc supports industry-academia collaboration, driving research and skill development.

4. Encouragement of Digital Learning and Academic Reforms: Digital learning has been a cornerstone of NEP 2020's implementation strategy. Platforms like SWAYAM and DIKSHA have expanded their reach, offering a plethora of online courses and resources. As of May 2025, SWAYAM hosts over 1,900 courses, benefiting more than 1.56 crore learners. Additionally, the One Nation One Subscription (ONOS) scheme provides access to over 13,000 journals for more than 6,300 academic and research institutions, fostering a robust research ecosystem.

5. Support for Autonomous and Well-Governed Institutions: To promote institutional autonomy and effective governance, NEP 2020 advocates for the establishment of Independent Boards of Governors in higher education institutions. This initiative empowers institutions to make academic and administrative decisions, fostering innovation and accountability. Moreover, the National Accreditation Council (NAC) has been proposed to oversee the accreditation process, ensuring quality standards across institutions. These measures aim to create a more responsive and dynamic higher education system.

6. Integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Multilingual Education: NEP 2020 emphasizes the inclusion of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and the promotion of multilingual education. The University Grants Commission (UGC) has launched initiatives to integrate IKS into curricula, with a target to train 1.5 million teachers in IKS by 2025. Additionally, national-level entrance examinations like JEE (Main), NEET (UG), and CUET (UG) are now conducted in 13 languages, including regional languages, enhancing accessibility and inclusivity in higher education.

SCOPE AND COVERAGE

1. Comprehensive Coverage of State Institutions: PM-USHA encompasses all government and government-aided state universities and their affiliated colleges across India. The scheme targets over 300 state universities and 10,000+ colleges, aiming to enhance the quality and accessibility of higher education nationwide.

2. Focus on Aspirational and Underserved Districts: The scheme prioritizes Focus Districts, identified by states/UTs based on criteria such as low Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER), gender disparities, and high populations of SC/ST/OBC communities. Up to 50% of a state's districts can be designated as Focus Districts, ensuring targeted interventions in areas like Bhadrak, Kandhamal, Mayurbhanj, Nabarangpur, and Sambalpur in Odisha.

3. Support for Accreditation and Quality Enhancement: Institutions participating in national accreditation and ranking frameworks, such as NAAC, NBA, and NIRF, are eligible for support under PM-USHA. This encourages a culture of quality assurance and continuous improvement, aligning with the scheme's emphasis on enhancing educational standards.

4. Promotion of Multidisciplinary Education and Research: PM-USHA supports the transformation of traditional single-stream institutions into Multidisciplinary Education and Research Universities (MERUs). For instance, in Odisha, universities like Ravenshaw University and Sambalpur University received ₹100 crore each to develop multidisciplinary programs and research facilities.

5. Emphasis on Equity and Inclusion: The scheme places a strong emphasis on promoting equity and inclusion in higher education. Initiatives include the establishment of Gender Inclusion and Equity Initiatives

(GIEI), with districts like Bhadrak and Kandhamal receiving ₹10 crore each to support infrastructure and programs that enhance access for women and marginalized communities.

COMPONENTS AND ACTIVITIES

1. Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environment: PM-USHA prioritizes faculty development through initiatives like the Annual Refresher Programme in Teaching (ARPIT), which has trained over 15 lakh higher education faculty via the SWAYAM platform. Additionally, the National Initiative for Technical Teachers Training (NITTT) offers eight-module online training for teachers in AICTE-approved institutions, enhancing pedagogical skills and curriculum delivery.

2. Accreditation and Quality Reforms: To improve institutional quality, PM-USHA supports higher education institutions (HEIs) in obtaining NAAC and NBA accreditations. Participation in national and international rankings, such as NIRF and QS, is encouraged. The Akhil Bhartiya Shiksha Samagam 2024 emphasized the importance of research output and data quality in enhancing rankings, aiming for 10 Indian HEIs in the top 100 globally by 2047.

3. Research and Innovation Support : The scheme allocates funds for establishing research centers and innovation hubs. Three Centers of Excellence focusing on health, sustainable cities, and agriculture have been approved with a financial outlay of ₹990 crore for 2023–28. Additionally, research parks have been established in institutions like IIT Delhi, IIT Kanpur, and IISc Bangalore to foster industry-academia collaboration.

4. Digital and Online Learning: PM-USHA enhances digital infrastructure by integrating platforms like SWAYAM and DIKSHA. SWAYAM PRABHA, a group of 32 DTH channels, broadcasts educational content 24/7, ensuring wider access to quality education.

5. Governance and Autonomy: The scheme promotes governance reforms by encouraging HEIs to adopt autonomous models, facilitating academic and administrative flexibility. Workshops and consultative meetings have been organized to discuss reforms in assessment, accreditation, and ranking, aiming to empower institutions with greater decision-making capabilities.

6. Equity and Inclusion Measures: PM-USHA emphasizes inclusivity by providing scholarships and support centers for marginalized groups. Platforms like DIKSHA offer accessible educational resources, including content in Indian Sign Language and materials compliant with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0, ensuring education for all learners.

ISSUES WITH HIGHER EDUCATION IN INDIA

1. Quality and Accreditation Deficit: As of January 2025, approximately 30% of India's higher education institutions remain unaccredited, indicating significant gaps in quality assurance and adherence to educational standards. The high costs associated with the accreditation process have been a barrier for many institutions, particularly in the public sector.

2. Persistent Faculty Shortages: Faculty vacancies are a pressing issue, with 40% of positions unfilled in Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and 31% in Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). This shortage hampers the quality of education and research output, particularly in public institutions.

3. Employability Concerns: The Economic Survey 2024–25 highlights that only 8.25% of graduates are employed in roles matching their qualifications, underscoring a significant skills mismatch. Over 50% of graduates are underemployed in low-skill jobs, reflecting inadequacies in vocational training and industry-aligned education.

4. Regional Disparities in Access: There is a stark contrast in Gross Enrolment Ratios (GER) across regions. For instance, Sikkim boasts a GER of 43.77%, while the East zone averages at 22.07%, significantly below the national average of 28.4%. These disparities highlight uneven access to higher education across different states.

5. Limited Research Output: India's contribution to global research publications has increased to 5.2% in 2024, up from 3.5% in 2017. However, this growth is primarily driven by elite institutions like IITs and select private universities, with many state universities lagging due to limited funding and infrastructure.

6. Governance and Autonomy Challenges: Recent regulatory proposals, such as the Draft UGC Regulations 2025, have raised concerns about increased centralization and potential erosion of academic freedom. Critics argue that such measures may stifle innovation and institutional autonomy.

7. Underinvestment in Education: India's public expenditure on education remains at approximately 3.5% of GDP, falling short of the 6% recommended by the Kothari Commission. This underinvestment affects the expansion and quality enhancement of higher education institutions.

WAY FORWARD

1. Ensure Timely Fund Release and Utilization: States must ensure prompt release and full utilization of central grants under PM-USHA. A real-time fund tracking system should be adopted to enhance accountability and minimize delays in project execution.

2. Promote Faculty Development: Recruitment of qualified faculty should be prioritized, along with continuous professional development programs. Incentives for research output, pedagogical innovation, and digital teaching proficiency can boost academic excellence.

3. Strengthen Accreditation Mechanisms: Institutions must be incentivized to secure NAAC accreditation and participate in NIRF rankings. Linking funding to performance metrics will create a culture of quality assurance and data-driven governance.

4. Foster Research Culture: Seed funding should support interdisciplinary and socially relevant research projects. Collaborations with industry and international institutions can help bridge India's research–innovation gap.

5. Encourage Multidisciplinary Institutions: The restructuring of higher education institutions into large, autonomous multidisciplinary universities should be fast-tracked. This will improve academic flexibility, reduce fragmentation, and align with NEP 2020.

6. Digital Inclusion: Bridge the digital divide by providing subsidized devices, high-speed internet, and digital literacy training. This will empower students from rural and marginalized backgrounds to fully engage in hybrid learning models.

7. Strengthen State-Level Education Governance: States should establish dedicated higher education councils to oversee reforms, streamline regulation, and foster innovation. Effective state-level leadership is essential for the success of national schemes like PM-USHA.

CONCLUSION

PM-USHA is a timely and comprehensive initiative aimed at reimagining India's higher education landscape in line with global standards and NEP 2020. By focusing on quality, inclusivity, and innovation, it has the potential to transform state universities into vibrant centers of learning and research. However, effective implementation, political will, and stakeholder cooperation will be key to realizing its full impact.

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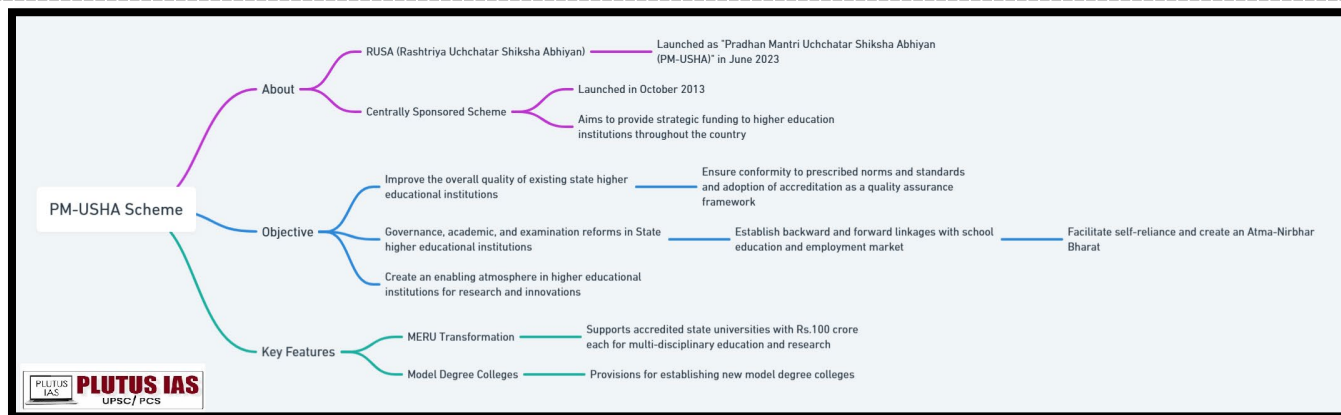
PRELIMS QUESTIONS

Q. Which of the following was not a topic covered in the PM-USHA MERU National Workshop sessions?
(a) UGC Regulations for NEP Implementation
(b) Holistic Education through Skill Integration
(c) National Health Policy Reforms
(d) Clustering and Collaboration for Multidisciplinary Education
Answer: C

MAINS QUESTIONS

Q. "India's aspiration to become a global knowledge hub requires transformation in public higher education." Discuss this statement in the light of PM-USHA and related initiatives.

(250 words, 15 marks)

TRADING AROMAS: THE RISE OF THE SPICE ECONOMY

WHY IN THE NEWS?

India, known as the 'Land of Spices', is the world's largest producer, consumer, and exporter of spices. Of the 109 spices recognised by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO), India cultivates over 60 varieties. The spice sector contributes approximately 9% to India's total agricultural exports and over 40% of horticultural exports. With a global footprint spanning over 200 countries, India exports 225+ unique spice products, reinforcing its position as a trusted global supplier of both raw and value-added spices. Historically valued for their medicinal properties, spices remain integral to both Indian heritage and global health-conscious markets.

INDIA SPICES ECONOMY

India is the largest exporter of spices and spice items. It retained its position as the leading global exporter, with exports reaching USD 4.45 billion in FY 2024–25. Between 2013–14 and 2024–25, spice exports increased by 88% in volume, and 97% in value (USD)—reflecting India's expanding presence in the global spice market. Gujarat led with 23.53% of total exports, followed by Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. In

comparison, during 2013–14, spice exports stood at 817,250 MT, valued at USD 2,267.67 million, showcasing a significant growth trajectory over the years.

India's **Spice Export Growth** (Numbers in USD Billion)
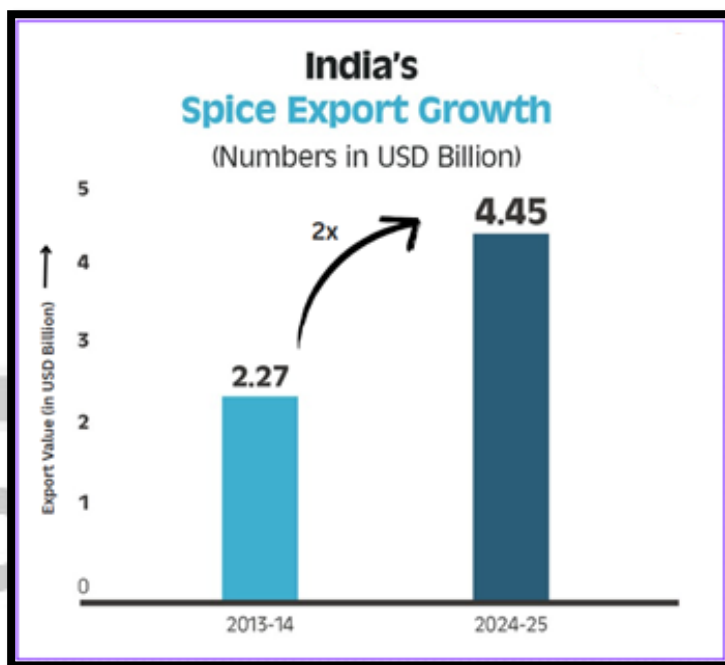
## STATUS OF THE SPECIES ECONOMY IN INDIA

Major Export Destinations

By December 2024, India had exported spices and spice products to 200 countries across the globe. The top 10 importers—namely China, the United States, the UAE, Bangladesh, Thailand, Malaysia, the UK, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, and Germany—together contributed to over 60% of India's total spice export revenue for FY25 (up to February 2025). Among these, the USA imported a wide range of Indian spices, including celery, cumin, curry powder, fennel, fenugreek, garlic, chilli, and mint-based products.
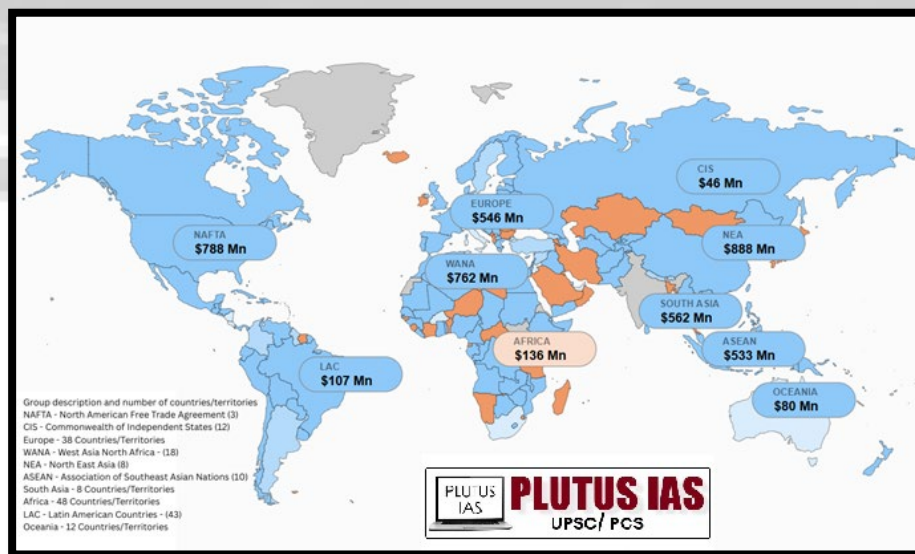
REGION-WISE TOTAL EXPORT FROM INDIA

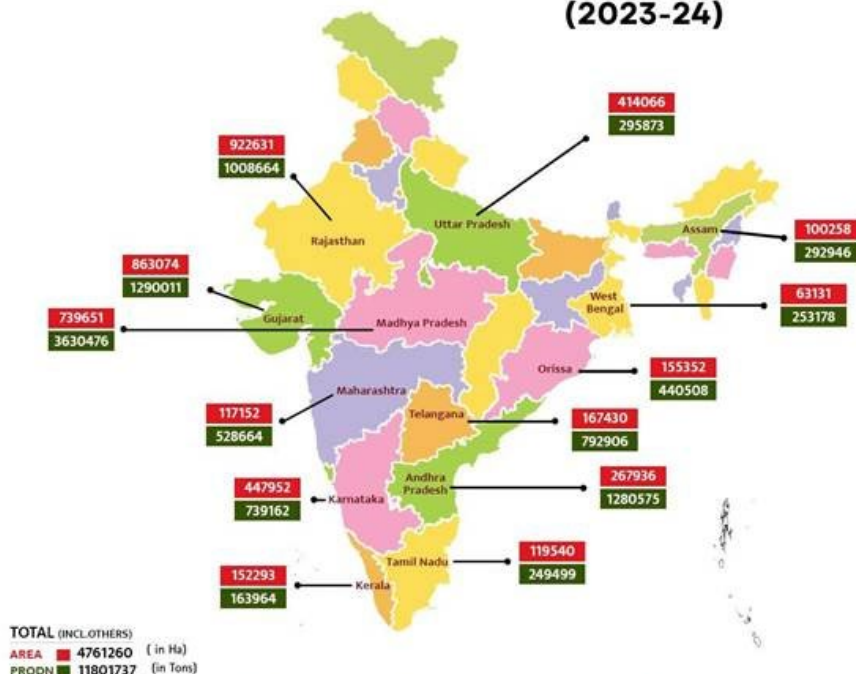### India's Most Exported Spices by Value

In the financial year 2023–24, chilli stood out as India's most exported spice, generating export earnings of USD 1,508.94 million. Cumin followed with USD 700.23 million, while spice oils and oleoresins contributed USD 498.01 million. Additionally, mint products, turmeric, and curry powders or pastes were among the key contributors to India's overall spice export performance.
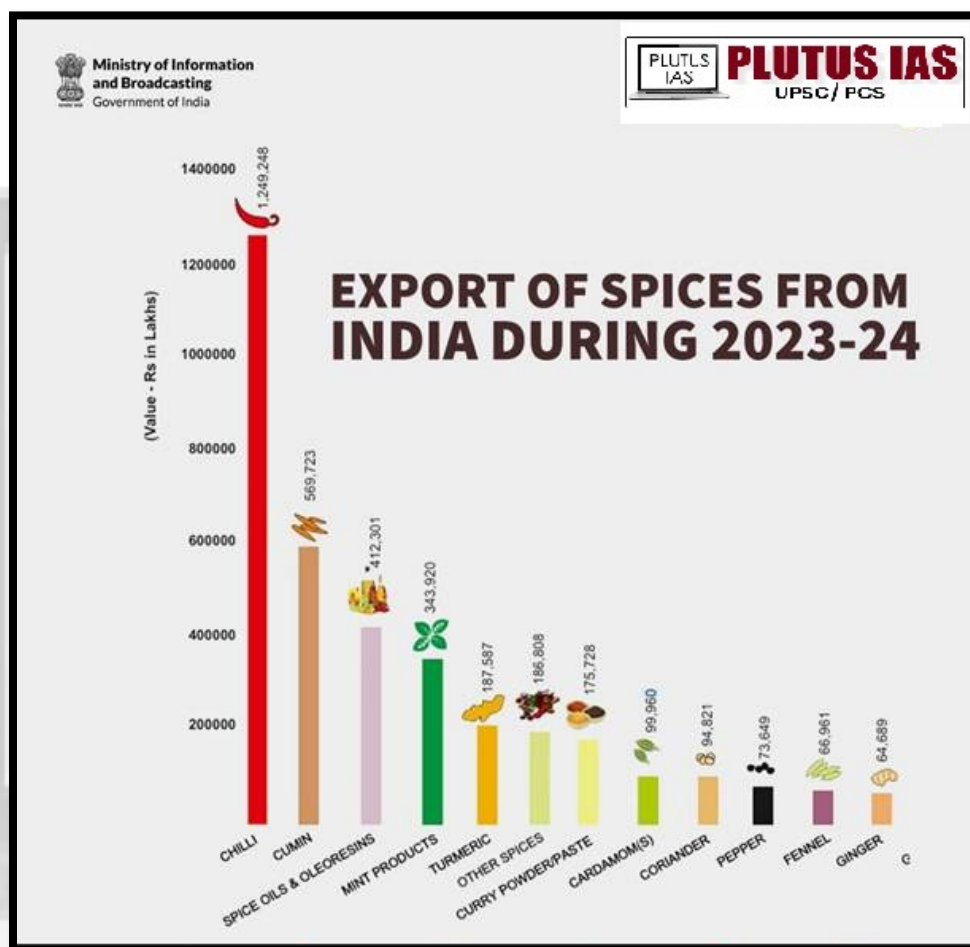
Top Spice-Producing States in India

In the 2023–24 period, Madhya Pradesh emerged as the top spice-producing state in India, contributing 3.63 million tonnes. It was followed by Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh, which produced 1.29 million and 1.28 million tonnes, respectively. Rajasthan and Telangana also registered notable outputs, exceeding 1 million tonnes and 793,000 tonnes. Collectively, these five states form the backbone of India's dominant position in the global spice industry.

MAJOR STATE-WISE AREA AND PRODUCTION OF SPICES IN INDIA (2023-24)

Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India — PLUTUS IAS UPSC/ PCS

Uttar Pradesh: 414066 / 295873
Rajasthan: 922631 / 1008664
Gujarat: 863074 / 1290011
(Gujarat pointer): 739651 / 3630476
Assam: 100258 / 292946
West Bengal: 63131 / 253178
Orissa: 155352 / 440508
Maharashtra: 117152 / 528664
Telangana: 167430 / 792906
Andhra Pradesh: 267936 / 1280575
Karnataka: 447952 / 739162
Tamil Nadu: 119540 / 249499
Kerala: 152293 / 163964

TOTAL (INCL.OTHERS)
AREA 4761260 (in Ha)
PRODN 11801737 (in Tons)

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TO PROMOTE THE SPECIES ECONOMY

1. Export Development and Promotion of Spices: Launched by the Spices Board of India with a ₹422.30 crore outlay under the 15th Finance Commission (till FY 2025–26), the SPICED scheme aims to boost spice exports, improve cardamom productivity, and enhance post-harvest quality. It supports FPOs, SMEs, and SC/ST groups, promotes value addition, GI-tagged spices, and runs initiatives like Mission Value Addition and Mission Clean and Safe Spices to strengthen India's spice sector.

2. Setting up and Maintenance of Common Processing Infrastructure (Spices Parks): To strengthen processing and value addition in spices, the Spices Board has developed eight crop-specific Spices Parks across various states in India. These parks offer shared facilities for cleaning, sorting, grading, grinding, oil extraction, and packaging, catering to the needs of local farmers, exporters, traders, and other stakeholders.

Spices Park	State	Spices Covered
Chhindwara	Madhya Pradesh	Garlic and Chilli
Guna	Madhya Pradesh	Coriander
Guntur	Andhra Pradesh	Chillies
Jodhpur	Rajasthan	Cumin

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Spices Park	State	Spices Covered
Ramganjmandi	Rajasthan	Coriander
Puttady	Kerala	Cardamom and Pepper
Raebareli	Uttar Pradesh	Mint
Sivaganga	Tamil Nadu	Chillies and Turmeric

These parks also allocate plots to exporters, traders, and FPOs for establishing their own processing facilities. Their development aims to generate employment, both directly and indirectly, while accelerating the growth of the spice sector and enhancing India's export capacity.

SPICE ECONOMY CONTRIBUTIONS TO ECONOMIC GROWTH
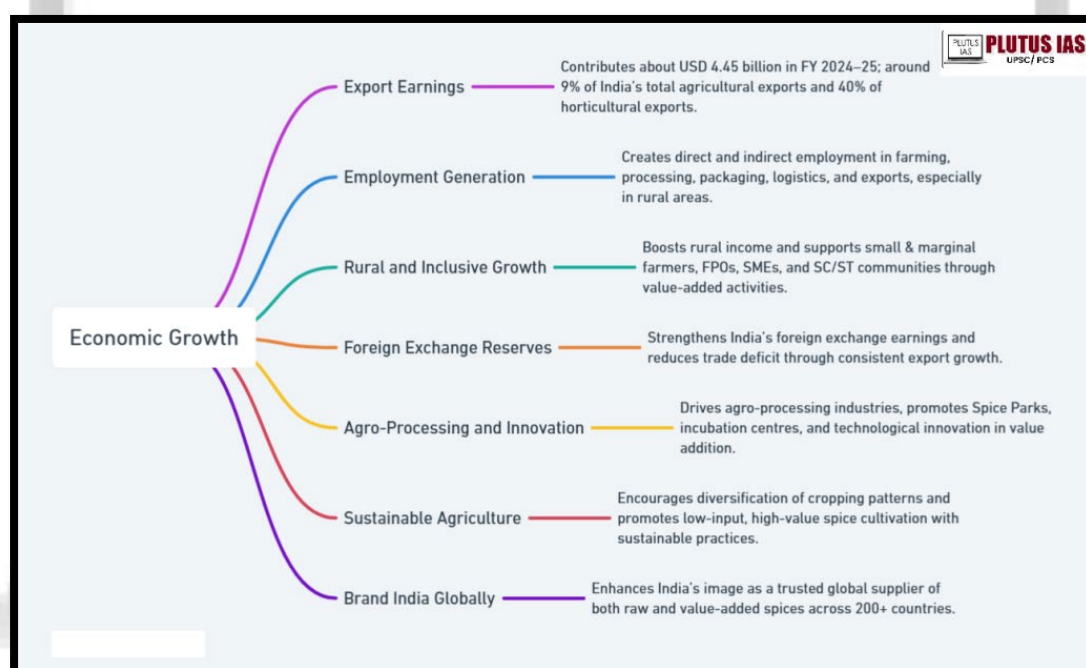
CHALLENGES IN THE SPICE ECONOMY SECTOR

1. Quality and Contamination Issues: Spices often face problems like pesticide residue, aflatoxins, and microbial contamination, affecting export quality and global competitiveness.

2. Post-Harvest Losses: Inadequate post-harvest infrastructure and improper handling lead to significant losses and reduced market value of spices.

3. Fragmented Supply Chain: The spice value chain remains unorganised, with limited farmer access to markets, grading, and value addition facilities.

4. Price Volatility: Spices are highly sensitive to climate, pests, and global demand, leading to unstable prices and income uncertainty for farmers.

5. Low Productivity: Traditional cultivation methods, limited access to quality planting material, and poor irrigation result in low yield per hectare in many regions.

6. Inadequate R&D and Innovation: Limited investment in research for developing climate-resilient and high-yielding spice varieties hinders long-term sector growth.

7. Export Barriers and Compliance: Exporters face challenges in meeting the stringent quality and phytosanitary standards imposed by importing countries, especially in the EU and the US.

8. Climate Change Impact: Unpredictable weather patterns, rising temperatures, and irregular rainfall adversely affect spice crop productivity and quality.

WAY FORWARD

1. Enhance Quality Control: Strengthen testing labs, enforce quality standards, and promote organic and residue-free spice farming under initiatives like "Mission Clean and Safe Spices."

2. Improve Post-Harvest Infrastructure: Invest in modern drying, grading, storage, and packaging facilities to reduce post-harvest losses and maintain export quality.

3. Strengthen Farmer Collectives: Encourage the formation of Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs) to improve bargaining power, market access, and adoption of value-added practices.

4. Ensure Price Stability: Develop price forecasting systems, provide crop insurance, and explore Minimum Support Price (MSP) models for key spices to reduce farmer vulnerability.

5. Increase Productivity: Supply quality seeds and planting materials, promote Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), and expand farmer training and extension services.

6. Boost Research and Innovation: Support spice-specific R&D through public-private partnerships, and foster innovation via Spice Incubation Centres under the SPICED scheme.

7. Facilitate Export Compliance: Train exporters and farmers on international standards (such as EU and US norms) and improve access to certification and testing services.

8. Address Climate Risks: Promote climate-resilient spice varieties, adopt water-efficient methods like drip irrigation, and encourage crop diversification to adapt to weather variations

CONCLUSION

India's spice economy stands as a pillar of the nation's agricultural and export sectors, deeply rooted in its cultural heritage and global trade legacy. With rising global demand for natural, organic, and health-enhancing products, Indian spices hold immense potential to drive inclusive rural growth, employment, and foreign exchange earnings. Government initiatives like the SPICED scheme and Spices Parks, coupled with technological upgrades and quality enhancement, are strengthening the sector's foundation. Going forward, a focus on innovation, sustainability, and global market integration will be key to securing India's leadership in the global spice economy.

PRELIMS QUESTIONS

Q. With reference to India's spice economy, consider the following statements:

1. India cultivates more than half of the spices recognised by the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO).
2. Chilli was the top spice exported from India in terms of value in FY 2023–24.
3. The SPICED scheme is implemented by the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA).

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

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

Answer: A

MAINS QUESTIONS

Q. India's spice economy is not only a reflection of its agricultural strength but also a gateway to global markets." Discuss the significance of the spice sector in India's economic development. Highlight recent initiatives taken by the government to enhance its export potential.

(250 words, 15 marks)