Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)

Why in news?

Recently, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture has presented the '359th Report on the Functioning of ASI' before the Parliament.

What is ASI?

- Premier organization for the archaeological researches and protection of the cultural heritage of the nation.
- **Ministry -** Ministry of Culture
- **Prime functions** – Custodian of all *Centrally Protected Monuments (CPM)* in India.
- Maintenance of ancient monuments, archaeological sites and remains of national importance.
- The recently added Hoysala Temples in Karnataka and Santiniketan in West Bengal in UNESCO World Heritage List were conserved and protected by ASI.

India has a total of 3,693 Centrally Protected Monuments or Sites with Uttar Pradesh having the largest number in the country at 743, followed by Tamil Nadu which has 412.

- **Regulating functions** – It regulates all archaeological activities in the country as per the provisions of the,
  - Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958.
  - Antiquities and Art Treasure Act, 1972.
  - Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains (AMASR) (Amendment) Act, 2010.
- Takes actions against encroachments and issues demolition orders to the Collector requesting for the demolition of the encroachments.

ASI's Conservation Measures in Foreign Countries

- Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan
- Ta Prohm and Preah Vihear temples in Cambodia
- My Son Group of Temples in Vietnam
- Friday Mosque in Maldives
- Authorities in Fayaztepa and Karatepa Buddhist Sites in Uzbekistan are interested in giving their conservation work to ASI

What are recommendations of the parliamentary committee?

- **To rationalise the list** – Centrally Protected Monuments (CPM)_list should be categorised on the basis of their national significance, unique architectural value and specific heritage content.
- This is based on *government's decolonisation agenda* where monuments glorifying colonial era would be taken out while that reflecting Indian ethos will be included in the list.
- Deletion of some of the *kosminars (milestones of Mughal era)* may also be considered in the way of road-widening exercises.
- **Ease restrictions around monuments** – The provision of 100-metre prohibited area and 300-metre regulated area around ASI protected monuments leads to public inconvenience.
- In some cases, the entire village is within a radius of 300 metres, making it difficult for them to repair their residential houses.

The ASI through AMASR Act, prohibits and regulates all activities like mining and construction around 100 metres and 300 metres of all the protected monuments.

- **Fixing ASI's core mandate –** The committee recommended the ASI to
  - Develop preservation plans for all its work, especially before excavations.
  - Establish clear strategies for documenting findings, conserving artefacts, and restoring structures to ensure minimal impact on the site's integrity
  - Focus on areas that have the potential of historical significance and contribute to a deeper understanding of India's rich past
  - Use advanced technologies such as LiDAR, ground-penetrating radar and 3D scanning
- Some of these techniques were recently used inside the Gyanvapi complex in Varanasi by the ASI for its court-mandated non-invasive survey.
- It also advised *bifurcation of the ASI* where the ASI can look after the core mandate while the *India Heritage Development Corporation (IHDC)* can deal with ASI's revenue.
- **Prioritising conservation** – On the backdrop of the *CAG report which had declared 92 CPMs as missing*, the committee recommend ASI to prioritise the physical security of all CPMs.
- It said that ASI should *maintain digital log books* that include textual and photographic/ video records with location coordinates to check encroachment of any CPMs at an early stage.
- **Enhance financial resources** – The panel said that India spends a little amount on the protection and upkeep of monuments.

India spends around Rs 11 lakh per monument of national importance (Rs 428 crore for 3693 monuments) in 2019-20.

- **Strengthen human resources** – There is an issue of shortage of human resources when it comes to conservation.
- Outsourcing some work has its own limitations as such expertise is not available even outside.
- **Preference to original relevance** – Some restoration is being done without taking cognizance of the original design/beauty of the monument.
- Indigenous traditional practices and sustainable practices such as using eco-friendly materials, energy-efficient techniques need to be emphasised.
- **Engagement with other stakeholders** – It recommended that only experienced Monument Mitras (under Adopt a Heritage scheme) may be hired as lack of experience in this arena have resulted in avoidable damage or destruction.

Monument Mitras are businesses (Private firm or PSU) that enter into agreements with the Union Ministry of Culture to adopt and maintain State-owned archaeological sites or monuments.

Quick Facts

National Monuments Authority (NMA)

- It is under the Ministry of Culture which has been setup as per the AMASR Act, 2010.
- Composition - 1 chairperson, up to 5 whole time and 5 part time members each and a Member Secretary.
- The Director General of ASI is an ex officio Member.

National Mission on Monuments and Antiquities

- It was launched in 2007 for the preparation of a database of the Indian antiquities.
- Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is the nodal agency for the implementation.

References

1. IE| Parliamentary committee recommendation on ASI
2. ASI web| Archaeological Survey of India

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