ASI Survey of Gyanvapi Premises

Why in news?

A three-judge bench of the Supreme Court upheld an order by the Allahabad High Court allowing the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct its investigation of the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi.

What is the issue about?

- The controversy erupted in 1991 when a group of local priests sought permission to worship in the Gyanvapi complex, claiming the mosque was built on a demolished portion of Kashi Vishwanath Temple.
- The matter was reignited after petitioners demanded an archaeological survey of the Gyanvapi complex.
- The Varanasi district court ordered the ASI survey of Gyanvapi complex on an application moved by four Hindu women in 2023.
- The Allahabad High Court had given its nod for the ASI to go ahead with the survey ordered by the Varanasi District Judge.

The mosque is not an ASI-protected site, and the ASI has no role in its maintenance or upkeep.

What is the Supreme Court's order?

- The Supreme Court allowed the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) to conduct its investigation of the Gyanvapi mosque in Varanasi.
- It has asked the expert body to use *only "non-invasive methodology*" throughout its survey.
- The survey is meant to determine whether the 17th century mosque had been constructed over a pre-existing Hindu temple.
- The Muslim side contend that the survey was a breach of the *Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act of 1991,* which was enacted to guard fraternity and secularism through protection of the religious character of religious places.
- They argue that the 1991 Act prohibited any attempts to convert the religious character of a place of worship as it had existed on the day of Independence.

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), Ministry of Culture, established in 1861 is the premier organization for the archaeological researches and protection of the cultural heritage of the nation.

What is the Places of Worship Act?

- **Aim-** The Places of Worship Act, 1991, seeks to *prohibit the conversion of a place of worship* and maintain its religious character as was at the time of India's Independence on August 15, 1947.
- **Features-** It bars the conversion, in full or part, of a place of worship of any religious denomination into a different religious denomination or even a different segment of the same religious denomination.
- Any suit or legal proceeding regarding the conversion of the religious character of any place of worship existing on *August 15, 1947,* pending before any court shall end and no fresh suit shall be instituted.
- **Exemptions**- Section 5 stipulates that the Act shall *not apply to the Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid cas*e.
- It exempts any place of worship, which is an ancient and historical monument or an archaeological site covered by the *Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958.*

Gyanvapi Mosque
• The Gyanvapi Mosque is believed to have been built in 1669 during the reign of Aurangzeb, who ordered the demolition of the existing Vishweshwar temple and its replacement by a mosque. • This is also mentioned in the 1937 book *History of Benares: From the Earliest Times Down to 1937* by AS Altekar. • The name of the mosque is said to have derived from an adjoining well, the *Gyanvapi, or Well of Knowledge.* • The plinth of the temple was left untouched, and served as the courtyard of the mosque. • One of the walls of the temple became the qibla wall, the most ornate and important wall in a mosque that faces Mecca. • Material from the destroyed temple was used to build the mosque. • An old sculpture of the Nandi bull inside the compound of the present Kashi Vishwanath Temple faces the wall of the mosque instead of the sanctum sanctorum of the temple. • It is believed that Nandi is in fact, facing the sanctum sanctorum of the original Vishweshwar temple.
Kashi Vishwanath Temple
• Details about the Shiva temple is described in the *Kashi Khanda of Skanda Purana.* • The temple was constructed by the *Hari Chandra* in the *11th century*. • The present Kashi Vishwanath Temple was built in the 18th century by *Rani Ahilyabai Holkar of Indore*, immediately to the south of the mosque. • The temple stands on the western bank of the holy river Ganga, and is *one of the twelve Jyotirlingas*, the holiest of Shivatemples. • The main deity is known by the name *Vishvanatha or Vishveshvara meaning Ruler of The Universe.* • The two domes of the temple were covered by the gold offered by the *Punjab Kesari Maharaja Ranjeet Singh* in 1839. • Many Hindus have long believed that the original lingam of the erstwhile Vishweshwar temple was hidden by the priests inside the Gyanvapi well during Aurangzeb's raid.

References

1. The Hindu | SC refuses to halt ASI survey at Gyanvapi mosque
2. Wire | SC Upholds ASI Survey of Gyanvapi Premises

