Mahabalipuram's China connection

What is the issue?

- Prime Minister Narendra Modi will meet China's President Xi Jinping on October 11 & 12 informally in Mahabalipuram.
- India had ancient links with Buddhism and China through the maritime outreach of the Pallava dynasty.

What happened in the Pallava's rule?

- Mahabalipuram or Mamallapuram is on the Tamil Nadu coast, 56 km south of Chennai.
- **Narasimhavarman I** - The name Mamallapuram derives from Mamallan (great warrior), a title by which the Pallava King Narasimhavarman I (630-668 AD) was known.
- It was during his reign that Hiuen Tsang, the Chinese Buddhist monk-traveller, visited the Pallava capital at Kanchipuram.
- The Descent of the Ganga/Arjuna's Penance, a rock carving with its depiction of the Bhagirathi flowing from the Himalayas was commissioned by him.
- This may serve as a reminder of the geography of India-China relations and their shared resources.
- **Narasimhavarman II** (700-728 AD) - He built on the work of earlier Pallava kings to consolidate maritime trade links with South-East Asia.
- He sent a mission to the Tang court in 720 with a request that would seem unusual in the context of India-China relations today.
- The emissaries sought the permission of Emperor Xuangzong to fight back Arab and Tibetan intrusions in South Asia.
- The Chinese emperor was pleased with the Indian king's offer to form a coalition against the Arabs and Tibetans.
- He also bestowed the title of 'huaide jun' (the Army that Cherishes Virtue) to Narayansimha II's troops.
- The offer of help by the Pallava ruler had furthered the trade and brought the prestige of association with the Chinese emperor.

What happened in the Chola's rule?

- Tamil-Chinese links flourished under the Cholas as the Coromandel Coast became the entrepot between China and the Middle East.

- The links extended to a wider area beyond Mahabalipuram, through a layered history that has left a rich tapestry of society, culture, art and architecture and reaches up to modern times.
- India's secularism and diversity wouldn't be on the agenda of the two leaders.
- However, their meeting ground is in a part of the country where this ethos is a lived reality.
- Hindu- and Muslim-majority villages alternate along that coast, each community having lived next to the other for centuries.
- By the time Islam arrived on south India's east coast in the 9th century, Muslims had already started trading with China by maritime routes.
- The trading missions that the Cholas sent to the Song court included Muslims.
- It is possible that these Muslims were members of the Tamil-speaking Muslim community, Ilappai on the Coromandel Coast.
- Today, the ancient port of Marakanam is a fishing village, known for its Muslim boat makers.

What are the Continuing connections?

- In later centuries, the Coromandel Coast retained its importance for trade between China and the west.
- In the 17th and 18th centuries, it was a staging post for the Europeans for control of the seas between South Asia and Southeast Asia.
- This is because they fought to protect their trade routes with China and other countries in the region.
- **French** - The ancient port city of Pondicherry (80 km south of Mahabalipuram), a former French colony is famous for its Chinese exports known as Coromandel goods.
- Today the Union Territory, with its French legacy, Tamil residents, Bengali and international devotees of Sri Aurobindo, is among the most diverse and cosmopolitan of cities in South India.
- **British** - After establishing their writ on the Coromandel Coast, they expanded eastward and established control over the Straits of Malacca.
- This was done essentially to protect their trade routes to China and the rest of the region.
- **Dutch** - Among the colonial outposts on this coast is Sadras (Sathurangapattinam), where the Dutch East India Company built a fort.
- Sadras became a huge centre for the Dutch-controlled manufacture of cotton and muslin.
- The Dutch presence in the region grew rapidly after they established themselves in Java in 1603.

- They traded within Asia, importing and exporting between India, China and Japan, to keep the spice trade going.

Source: The Indian Express

