Rationalizing Monuments of National Importance

Why in news?

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) has started the rationalization process for delisting monuments of national importance.

What are Monuments of National Importance (MNI)?

- **Monuments** - They are remains of our prestigious past, representing culture, art architecture and structural technology of bygone days.
- **MNI** – India has declared ***3695 monuments and sites*** as of national importance.
- Majority of these were inherited from a colonial-era list of protected monuments, along with others from the princely states.

> ***Article 49*** *of the Constitution enjoins the State to protect the historical and cultural heritage of the country.* ***Article 51A*** *of the Constitution stipulates that it shall be the duty of every citizen of India "to value and preserve the rich heritage of our composite culture.*

- **Declaration** - *Central Government issues a notification* of its intention to declare any ancient monument as MNI by giving *2 months' notice, inviting views/objections* from public.
- After considering the views/objections, the Central Government may declare by publishing a notification in the official gazette.
- **Administration** – It is ***managed by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)*** under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, ***1958 (AMASR Act***).

> *The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was founded in 1861 by Alexander Cunningham, who is also regarded as the first Director General of ASI.*
>
> *The Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958 provides for the preservation of ancient and historical monuments, archaeological sites, and remains of national importance.*

- **Regulation** – The *100 metre radius* of the monument is then considered a *'prohibited area'* where there is a ban on construction activities.
- Further *200 meters (i.e. 100+200 meters) is considered a 'regulated area'* where there are regulations on construction.

What are the issues in the current MNI list?

- The *Economic Advisory Council to the Prime Minister (EAC-PM)* in its report in 2023, recommended to rationalise the MNI list.
- The three major problems in current list are
    - *Selection Errors*
    - Geographically *Skewed Distribution* of Monuments
    - *Inadequate* and Geographically *Skewed Expenditure* on Upkeep of Monuments
- **Selection errors** - A large number of MNI seem not to have national importance or historical or cultural significance.
- The 3 significant errors are
    - *Minor monuments* considered as monuments of national importance.
    - *Movable antiquities* treated as monuments of national importance.
    - *Untraceable monuments* still being considered as monuments of national importance.

92 monuments and sites that were declared as monuments of national importance were untraceable as per the 2013 report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG).

- **Geographically skewed distribution** – Though MNI are spread across the country, there is an imbalance in their geographical distribution.
    - *Over 60% of them are located in 5 states* of Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.
- Other culturally and historically significant states like Bihar, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Kerala have disproportionately fewer MNI.
- **Inadequate expenditure** - India's expenditure on monuments of national importance is woefully little and inadequate.
    - In 2019-20 the budgetary allocation for 3695 MNI was only INR 428 crores that is a sum of *INR 11 lakhs per MNI*.
- **Lack of definition** - Neither the AMASR Act, 1958 nor the National Policy for Conservation (2014) have defined what the term 'national importance' means.
- **Lack of set criteria's** - The 1958 Act also *does not have a substantive process/criteria prescribed* for identifying a monument as a monument of national importance.

What is delisting of monuments and why it is recommended?

- **Delisting of monuments** – It refers to the process of removing a monument or heritage site from an official list of MNI.
    - In March 2024, ASI began delisting starting with *18 that could not be located.*
- It does *not necessarily mean the destruction* of a monument but rather a reduction in its protection and conservation efforts.
- **Reasons for delisting** – The monument might *have lost its historical or cultural significance* or for changes in heritage laws or policies.
- If a monument is deemed irreparable or if *preservation efforts are deemed unsustainable*, it might be delisted.

- **Significance of delisting** – Removing MNI of colonial remnants can help in *modernizing the list* to better reflect current values and historical perspectives.
- It can help in *rationalising the restriction* imposed around the MNI as it can stifle development and create bureaucratic hurdles.
- It helps by enabling *more flexible use of space and resources*.
- Thus, it can indeed *address both symbolic and practical concerns*.

What lies ahead?

- ASI should come up with substantive criteria and a detailed procedure for declaring monuments to be of national importance.
- ASI should publish a book of notifications with detailed information about the provenance of MNI.
- Monuments with local importance should be handed over to the respective states for their protection and upkeep.
- Allocation of funds for the protection of MNI should be increased.

References

1. Swarajyamag | Rationalizing Monuments of National Importance
2. EACPM| Reasons for Delisting Monuments

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