

PLACES IN NEWS: WEEK 7 &8 (13 july-26 july)

Topic 1: Sarnath, Uttar Pradesh

Context

In July 2026, Sarnath achieved global recognition by being named **India's 45th UNESCO World Heritage Site** during the 48th committee session held in Busan, South Korea. This designation makes it the fourth site in Uttar Pradesh to receive such an honor, following the Taj Mahal, Agra Fort, and Fatehpur Sikri. The Dhamek Stupa at Sarnath.

Location

Situated approximately 10 kilometers northeast of Varanasi, Sarnath lies near the junction of the Ganges and Varuna rivers. Historical records refer to the area as *Isipatana* (where sages descended) or *Mrigadava*, meaning Deer Park.

Religious Significance

Sarnath stands as one of the four primary Buddhist holy sites globally, alongside Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, and Kushinagar, representing the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, and passing, respectively.

- **Inaugural Discourse:** This is the site where Gautama Buddha first taught his five former associates after his enlightenment. This landmark event is referred to as the **Dharmachakra Pravartana**, or the first turning of the Wheel of Dharma.
- **Establishment of the Sangha:** The location is celebrated as the origin of the Buddhist monastic order.



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Historical Development

- **Mauryan Influence (3rd Century BCE):** Emperor Ashoka elevated the site's importance by commissioning various stupas and the iconic Lion Capital pillar.
- **Gupta Prosperity (4th–6th Century CE):** During the Gupta dynasty, Sarnath flourished as a major hub for art, spirituality, and culture.
- **Ruin and Recovery:** Following centuries of destruction by invaders, the site was forgotten until 1794, when Jagat Singh stumbled upon it while sourcing building materials. Later, Alexander Cunningham and F.O. Oertel conducted formal excavations, leading to the discovery of the Ashokan Pillar.

Art and Culture Aspect

The site is renowned for its grand architecture and a specific school of artistic expression.

- **The Sarnath School:** This tradition peaked during the Gupta era. It differs from the Mathura school by focusing exclusively on Buddhist iconography. Characteristics include **cream-colored sandstone**, serene expressions, and thin, transparent-looking attire on lithe figures.
- **Dhamek Stupa:** This 42-meter-high structure is believed to mark the spot of the first sermon and features sophisticated carvings from the Gupta period.
- **Chaukhandi Stupa:** This brick monument signifies where the Buddha initially reunited with his five disciples at Sarnath.
- **The Lion Capital:** Uncovered by Oertel, this artifact displaying four Asiatic lions back-to-back serves as the basis for India's National Emblem.

Topic 2: Black Sea

Key Facts about Black Sea

Indian authorities recently released a maritime advisory for ships sailing in the Black Sea that fly the Indian flag or employ Indian crew members.

About Black Sea:

- This is a major **landlocked sea** located at the **southeastern edge of Europe**.
- It sits at the geographical crossroads of **Europe and Asia**.
- It functions as a **marginal sea** connected to the **Atlantic Ocean**.
- **Bordering Regions:**

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- **West: Balkan**



Peninsula (Southeastern Europe).

- **East: Caucasus Mountains.**
- **North: East European Plains** (Russia & Ukraine).
- **South: Anatolia** (Turkey, Western Asia).
- The sea is **circumscribed** by **Ukraine** to the north, **Russia** to the northeast, **Georgia** to the east, **Turkey** to the south, and **Bulgaria and Romania** to the west. The **Crimean Peninsula** extends into it from the northern coast.
- Though far inland, it **connects with the Atlantic Ocean** through a **series of other waterways**.
 - The **Bosporus Strait**, the **Sea of Marmara**, and the **Dardanelles Strait** link the **Black Sea to the Aegean Sea**, the **Mediterranean Sea**, and finally, the **Atlantic**.
- To its east, the **Kerch Strait** links the **Black Sea** to the **smaller Sea of Azov**.
- **Major rivers** flowing into it include the **Danube**, **Dnieper**, **Southern Bug**, **Rioni**, and **Dniester**.
- **Ukraine** has the **highest number of islands** in the Black Sea, including the sea's largest island, **Dzharylhach**
- Due to limited mixing with the Mediterranean, the Black Sea has **lower salinity levels** compared to typical ocean water.

Topic 3: Ratle Hydroelectric Project

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Heavy monsoon rains in Jammu and Kashmir recently caused the Chenab River to swell, resulting in damage to the temporary cofferdam at the 850 MW Ratle Hydroelectric Power Project site.

About Ratle Hydroelectric Project:

- This 850 MW power station is being developed on the **Chenab River** within the Kishtwar District of **Jammu & Kashmir**.
- It is categorized as a **run-of-the-river hydroelectric scheme**.
- The site is situated **above the Baglihar project and below the Dulhasti facility**.
- Development is managed by the **Ratle Hydroelectric Power Corporation (RHPCL)**.
 - RHPCL was formed as a **joint venture (JV)** between **Jammu & Kashmir State Power Development Corporation (JKSPDC)** and India's state-owned **National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC)**.
 - NHPC and JKSPDC hold **51% and 49% equity ownership** in RHPCL, respectively.
- The **construction work** is being undertaken by **Megha Engineering and Infrastructure Limited (MEIL)**



Topic 4: Kawal Tiger Reserve

The National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA) has named the Kawal Tiger Reserve in Telangana as a key location for tiger population restoration efforts.

About Kawal Tiger Reserve:

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- The reserve is located within the state of **Telangana**.
- It borders the **Godavari River** and is integrated into the **Deccan peninsula-central highlands** ecosystem.
- Geographically, the reserve is situated at the **southernmost tip of the Central Indian Tiger Landscape**, having **linkages with the Tadoba-Andhari (Maharashtra) and Indravati (Chhattisgarh) tiger reserves**.
- **Rivers:** It is a major catchment of the river **Godavari** and local **rivulets like Peddavagu and Kadam**.
- **Habitat:** It has diverse habitats comprising dense forests, grasslands, rivers, streams, and water bodies.
- **Vegetation:** **Southern Tropical Dry Deciduous Forest**.
- **Flora:** It consists of **teak along with bamboo** and other species like *Anogeissus latifolia*, *Mitragyna parviflora*, *Terminalia crenulata*, *Terminalia arjuna*, *Boswellia serrata*, etc.
- **Fauna:**
 - It has a faunal diversity which is **typical of the Deccan Plateau**.
 - The major wild animals include: **tiger, nilgai, chousinga, chinkara**, black buck, sambar, spotted deer, wild dog, wolf, jackal, fox, leopard, and the jungle cat.



Topic 5: Okinotori Island

A Chinese navy destroyer, alongside Russian vessels, recently conducted live-fire drills near Japan's Okinotori Island, marking the first such disclosure by Japan.

About Okinotori Island:

- Okinotori, which is sometimes called **Parece Vela**, is a **very small and vacant island** under **Japanese sovereignty**.
- It is situated in the remote **Philippine Sea**, a region within the **Pacific Ocean**.
- It's actually an **atoll**, which is a ring-shaped coral reef with a lagoon in the middle.
- **At high tide, only two tiny rocky outcrops remain above sea level.**

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- This atoll is **part of a long underwater mountain range** called the **Palau-Kyushu Ridge**.
- Okinotori is **part of a group called the Ogasawara Islands** governed by **Japan**.
- It is **Japan's southernmost island**.
- It is the **only Japanese territory south of the Tropic of Cancer** and lies to the south of Hong Kong and Taiwan.
- **Japan** says that the waters around Okinotori are its **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)**.
- However, some other **countries, like China, do not agree with Japan's claim** over this specific EEZ.
- It is in a very important spot for **military and shipping routes**.
 - It sits about **halfway between Taiwan and Guam** (island territory of the **United States**).
 - This makes its location strategic in the Pacific Ocean.



Topic 6: India's First Immersive Language Museum

The National Library recently debuted the Museum of Word, the first facility in India dedicated to an immersive language experience.

About India's First Immersive Language Museum:

- **Shabdlok**, or the Museum of Word, located on the **National Library grounds in Kolkata**, is the nation's inaugural immersive museum for languages.
- It was **developed** by the **National Library under the Union Culture Ministry**.

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- It showcases the **country's linguistic heritage** and **traces the evolution of oral and written traditions** through **interactive, technology-driven exhibits**.
- The first phase of the museum chronicles the diversity of Indian languages, scripts, and literature.
- Instead of being a conventional repository, it has been designed as an **immersive cultural experience** with **digital displays, holograms, and motion-sensor technology** to engage visitors.
- The museum has nine galleries that explore different facets of the history of languages and their influence on India's civilization and culture.
- Shabdlok **celebrates India's 22 official languages** and traces their journey from **oral traditions and ancient manuscripts** to **printed works** and **modern electronic texts**.
- One of its key attractions allows visitors to **trace the evolution of words over centuries**, illustrating how their pronunciation, meaning, and usage have changed over time.

Key Facts about Aral Sea

According to recent research, the recession of the Aral Sea has prompted the release of over 200 teragrams of carbon from its exposed floor, transforming it from a carbon sink into a greenhouse gas emitter.

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About Aral Sea:

- This **saltwater lake** is situated in **Central Asia**, sharing a **border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan**.
- It was **once a large saltwater lake in Central Asia** and the **world's fourth-largest body of inland water**.

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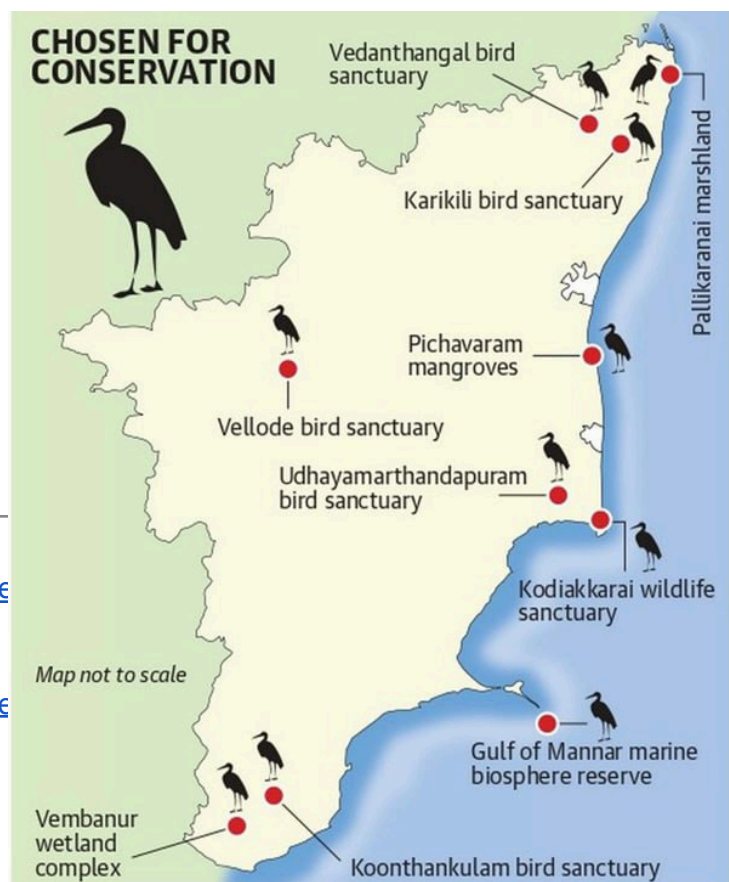
- The remnants of it nestle in the climatically inhospitable heart of Central Asia, to the **east of the Caspian Sea**.
- **Formation:**
 - The Aral Sea depression was formed toward the end of the Neogene Period.
 - It was **made by waters** from the **Syr Darya and the Amu Darya** rivers that were dependent on glacial melt.
- **Climate:**
 - The Aral Sea is located within the **harsh climate region** of Central Asia.
 - The area experiences a **desert-continental climate**, characterized by hot summers, cold winters, and varying diurnal air temperature.
- **Reason for its Disappearance:**
 - The lake **once covered large area** between the Kyzylorda and Aktobe regions in Kazakhstan and the Karakalpakstan region of Uzbekistan.
 - However, the lake **started shrinking** in the **1960s**, when the **Soviet government** decided to **divert the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya**, to irrigate the **surrounding desert region**.
 - **By the 1980s**, the Aral Sea had **shed 80% of its volume**, resulting in the **extinction of native fish species** and severe ecological degradation, including the **emergence of the Aralkum Desert**.
 - Today it is on the **verge of complete disappearance**.

Pallikaranai Marshland

Long-term urban growth and reckless waste disposal have significantly diminished the size of the Pallikaranai marsh.

About Pallikaranai Marshland:

- **Geographic Context:** This **freshwater and brackish wetland** is located roughly 20 kilometers south of Chennai, Tamil Nadu.



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- It serves as an aquatic buffer of the flood-prone **Chennai and Chengalpattu districts**.
- It encompasses many wetlands, through two outlets, viz., Okkiyam Madavu and the Kovalam Creek, and falls into the Bay of Bengal.
- On its eastern periphery, the **Marsh is flanked by the Buckingham Canal**.
- It is one of the **Ramsar sites in India**.
- **Biodiversity**
 - The diverse ecosystem of the marshland supports bird species, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, molluscs, crustaceans, and butterfly species.
 - These include notable species such as **Russell's viper** (*Daboia siamensis*) and birds such as the glossy ibis (*Plegadis falcinellus*), grey-headed lapwings (*Vanellus cinereus*), and Pheasant-tailed jacana (*Hydrophasianus chirurgus*).
- **Threats:** It continues to face significant anthropogenic pressures, including encroachments and sewage discharge.

Falkland Islands

During celebrations of their semi-final win over England at the 2026 FIFA World Cup, Argentina caused a stir by displaying a sign asserting their claim over the Falkland Islands.



About Falkland Islands:

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- **Setting:** This **archipelago** is positioned in the **southwestern Atlantic Ocean** near the southern tip of South America.
- It is also **known as the Malvinas Islands**, the Falkland Islands is an internally self-governing overseas **territory of the United Kingdom**.
- It lies about 480 km northeast of the southern tip of South America and a similar **distance east of the Strait of Magellan**.
- It consists of two main islands, **East Falkland and West Falkland**, together with smaller islands.
- The two large islands are separated by the **Falkland strait**.
- The islands are positioned both in the southern and western hemispheres of the Earth.
- **Capital:** The capital and major town is **Stanley, on East Falkland**.
- **Climate:** A cool temperate oceanic climate that is characterised by its lack of extremes.

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