Syllabus subtopic: Indian culture will cover the salient aspects of Art Forms, Literature and Architecture from ancient to modern times.

Prelims and Mains focus: about the recent discovery by ASI and its significance; about Saptamatrikas; need for conservation of our culture and heritage

News: In a significant find, the Epigraphy Branch of the Archaeological Survey of India has discovered the earliest epigraphic evidence so far for the Saptamatrika cult. It is also the earliest Sanskrit inscription to have been discovered in South India as on date.

Background

So far the Nagarjunakonda inscription of Ikshavaku king Ehavala Chantamula issued in his 11th regnal year corresponding to the 4th century A.D. was considered the earliest Sanskrit inscription in South India.

About Saptamatrikas

- Saptamatrikas are a group of seven female deities worshipped in Hinduism as personifying the energy of their respective consorts.

About the discovered inscription

- It was discovered in Chebrolu village in Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh earlier this month.
- The inscription was first copied and studied and it transpired that it records the construction of a prasada (temple), a mandapa and consecration of images on the southern side of the temple by a person named Kartika for the merit of the king at the temple of Bhagavathi (Goddess) Saktimatrika (Saptamatrika) at Tambrapare; Tambrapare being the ancient name of Chebrolou.
- The inscription is in Sanskrit and in Brahmi characters and was issued by Satavahana king Vijaya in 207 A.D.
- The inscription came to light when some local villagers informed the authorities of the presence of a pillar with some engravings when they were restoring and repairing the local Bheemeshwara temple.
- There are references of Saptamatrika worship in the early Kadamba copper plates and the early Chalukyas and Eastern Chalukya copper.
plates. But the new discovery predates them by almost 200 years.

- The verification of all the available records proved that the Chebrolu inscription of Satavahana king Vijaya issued in his 5th regnal year – 207 A.D. — is also the earliest datable Sanskrit inscription from South India so far.
- According to Matsya Purana, Vijaya is the 28th king of the Satavahana dynasty and ruled for 6 years.

**Conservation**

Calling for conservation and preservation of the pillar given its historical importance, the ASI pointed out that there were many such ancient monuments and structures across the country that lacked protection but could contain a treasure trove of information.

**About the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI)**

- The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) is the premier organization for the archaeological researches and protection of the cultural heritage of India. It was established in 1861. It works under Ministry of culture.

- The major functions of Archaeological Survey of India include maintenance of ancient monuments and archaeological sites and remains of national importance.

- Under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act of 1958, the ASI has declared 3656 monuments to be of national importance in the country.

- ASI has also undertaken major conservation works abroad besides carrying out excavations, explorations, images and other studies in countries like Afghanistan, Nepal, Cambodia and Egypt.