

Silencing academia, weakening democratic space

Prelims: General Studies Paper - 1
Current events of national and international importance

Mains: General Studies - 2
Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors and issues arising out of their design and implementation

1. Context: Global Concerns on India's Democratic and Academic Freedom

- The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute 2026 report classifies India as an **"electoral autocracy"**, ranking in the lower half globally.
- It notes decline in **free expression, media independence, and civil society**, placing India among **"worst autocratizers"**.
- The Scholars at Risk **Free to Think 2024** report labels India's academic freedom as **"completely restricted"**.
- It highlights **political interference, reduced university autonomy, and ideological influence in curricula**.
- Similar concerns are echoed by Freedom House, indicating broader democratic backsliding.

2. Shrinking Academic Space and Rising Controls

- Universities face **funding cuts, regulatory pressure, and self-censorship**, eroding autonomy.
- The **Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill** seeks **greater centralisation and conformity**.
- **The Wire** reports **62 academics (2014–26)** punished for views or political opinions.
- Faculty are treated as **"government servants"**, enabling disciplinary action for dissent.
- Yamini Aiyar (**Nature**, 2024) notes **event disruptions, arrests of faculty and students, and visa hurdles for foreign researchers**.

3. Institutional Failures and Legal Asymmetry

- Oversight bodies like complaints committees are often **"ornamental"**, weakening accountability.
- India has **not signed the First Optional Protocol to the ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights)**, limiting international remedies.
- Despite rights under **Articles 14, 19, 21**, enforcement gaps persist.
- Cases of Umar Khalid and Sharjeel Imam (5 years as undertrials) highlight delays in justice.
- Journalists like Irfan Mehraj and activists like Sonam Wangchuk face prolonged legal struggles.
- In contrast, some accused godmen receive **parole/furlough**, showing **legal asymmetry**.

4. Implications: Democratic Erosion and Loss of Pluralism

- Declining academic freedom weakens **civil society, debate, and evidence-based discourse**.
- Universities losing autonomy reduces **critical thinking and pluralism**.
- Authoritarian tendencies often emerge **gradually within democracies** through erosion of norms.
- Silencing dissent and politicising institutions undermines **democratic accountability**.
- The key question is whether institutions will **reclaim autonomy or continue decline**.
- **Requires strengthening institutional independence, protecting academic freedom, ensuring judicial accountability, and fostering a culture of pluralism and dissent**.

The Iran conflict and the future of Shia identity

Prelims: General Studies Paper - 1
Current events of national and international importance

Mains: General Studies - 2
Effect of policies and politics of developed and developing countries on India's interests, Indian diaspora.

1. Iran War and the Future of Shia Identity

- The **Iran war** is shaping the future of **Shia identity**.
- Since the **1979 Iranian Revolution**, Shia identity has become closely linked with **"political Shiism."**
 - ➔ It is a system in which **religious leaders hold supreme political authority** within the state and extend their influence abroad through **religious and political networks**.
- Iran projected itself as the **leader and protector of Shia communities** worldwide.
- The war may lead to two outcomes:
 - ➔ **Fragmentation** of Shia identity into national forms.
 - ➔ **Consolidation and radicalisation** through a shared feeling of oppression.

2. Fragmentation and Nationalisation of Shiism

- Iran's military and economic weakening has reduced its ability to support groups like:
 - ➔ **Hezbollah** in Lebanon
 - ➔ **Houthis** in Yemen
 - ➔ **Shia militias** in Iraq
- This may cause the **"nationalisation" of Shia identity**:
 - ➔ Shiism may become more of a **religious tradition** rather than a geopolitical movement.
 - ➔ Different countries may develop their **own forms of Shia politics**.
- In countries like **Iraq**, where Shias dominate state institutions, this trend may **become stronger**.

3. Karbala Narrative and Radicalisation

- Wars can also strengthen identities through **shared suffering**.

- Many Shia communities may see the war as an attack on **Shia identity itself**.
- The memory of **historical oppression** under Sunni empires plays a major role in Shia consciousness.
- The **Battle of Karbala (680 CE)** is central to this narrative:
 - ➔ **Imam Hussain's martyrdom by the forces of the Umayyad caliph Yazid** symbolises **sacrifice against injustice**.
 - ➔ Karbala remains a powerful symbol of **resistance, martyrdom, and moral struggle**.
- Israeli attacks in **South Lebanon** and U.S. involvement may deepen feelings of victimhood and strengthen calls for **"resistance"**.

4. Possible Future Consequences

- Different regions may respond differently:
 - ➔ **Iraq** may move toward moderation and nationalisation.
 - ➔ **Lebanon, Bahrain, and Iran** may experience stronger radicalisation due to perceived oppression.
- Although there is a possibility of both **fragmentation and unity**, the shared suffering of **Shia communities** across countries may strengthen **consolidation and radicalisation**.
- This could motivate many **Shias** to act together beyond **national boundaries**.
- The war against **Iran** may unintentionally lead to the rise of a **radical Shia militant organisation**, similar to **al-Qaeda**.
 - Such a group could view the **United States** as its main enemy.
- A weak and unstable **Lebanon** could become a safe haven for such organisations, similar to how **Afghanistan** sheltered **al-Qaeda** in the past.
- The conflict highlights how wars can produce far-reaching and **unintended consequences** with unpredictable global impacts.

India's energy security amid conflicts

Prelims: General Studies Paper - 1
Current events of national and international importance

Mains: General Studies - 3
Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization, of resources, growth, development and employment.

1. Context: Geopolitical Shocks and India's Energy-Economy Link

- The West Asia conflict has shown how **geopolitical shocks rapidly transmit to India's domestic economy**.
- The International Energy Agency calls the current crisis **more severe than the combined shocks of 1973, 1979, and 2022**.
- Brent crude rose to **\$109.03/barrel**, touching **around \$120 during the conflict**.
- India's growth is projected to slow from **7.4% (FY26) to 6.5% (FY27)**, while inflation may rise from **2.3% to 4.4%**.
- Energy security now depends on **resilience, diversification, and macroeconomic stability**, not just low prices.

2. Breakdown of Global Energy Market Order

- The Russia-Ukraine War exposed risks of **energy dependence**.
- Europe reduced reliance on Russian gas from **45% to 12% (by 2025)** and cut gas consumption by **20% (2021-24)**.
- Combined imports of gas and LNG(Liquified Natural Gas) fell **18%**, even as LNG terminal utilisation was only **52% (first half of 2025)**, reflecting a **security-over-efficiency approach**.
- The Strait of Hormuz carries **~25% of global crude oil**, making it a key vulnerability.
- China secured **25 MMT(Million Metric Tons) LNG/year**, South Korea **273 million barrels**, and Japan **470 million barrels (254 days)** of reserves.
- The IEA(The International Energy Agency) projects **global oil demand contraction (-80 kb/d(kilo barrels per day) in 2026)**, while **non-OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) demand rises (152 kb/d)**, increasing India's strategic importance.

3. India's Strategic Position: Gains and Flexibility

- India imports **over 85% of crude**, with **roughly 45% passing through the Strait of Hormuz**.
- It is now the **world's third-largest oil consumer**.
- OPEC projects demand at **5.74 mb/d(million barrels per day) (2025) and 5.99 mb/d (2026)**.
- The IEA estimates India's demand growth at **130 kb/d vs China's 80 kb/d**, making India a key demand driver.
- Russia's share rose from **barely 2% (pre-2022) to around 36% (FY25)**, becoming India's largest supplier.
- India diversified imports across **Russia, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, UAE, and the U.S.**, gaining **optionality in a fragmented market**.

4. Risks, Constraints and Way Forward

- India's crude dependence is **89.4% (FY25)**, with domestic output only **28.7 MMT**, exposing it to price and currency shocks.
- Chokepoint risks persist; during 2026 tensions, LPG shipments (**97,000 MT**) needed naval escort under **Operation Sankalp**.
- Energy transition creates new risks via dependence on **lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper, and rare earths**.
- China controls **over 91% of rare-earth production**, while India processes **<5% of projected 2035 battery mineral needs**.
- India's current strategy offers **tactical flexibility but not long-term security**.
- The way forward lies in **expanding strategic reserves, reducing oil intensity (especially in transport), strengthening maritime security, and building domestic capacity in critical mineral supply chains to ensure future shocks impose lower economic costs**.

Industrial heat pumps and the case for cleaning industrial heat

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Mains: General Studies - 3
Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.

1. Industrial Heat and Emissions

- **Industrial decarbonisation is often associated with future technologies** such as green hydrogen and carbon capture.
- However, **most industries currently depend on low- and medium-temperature process heat produced through fossil fuel combustion.**
- **Industry accounted for nearly 50% of India's final energy consumption** in 2025.
- **Industrial process steam alone generates about 182 million metric tonnes of CO₂ annually.**
- It **also emits 595 kilotonnes of Sulphur Dioxide, 520 kilotonnes of particulate matter, and 516 kilotonnes of Nitrogen Oxide**
- Therefore, industrial heat is a major challenge for climate, air quality, energy security, and public health.

2. MSMEs and Conventional Heating Systems

- MSMEs are the **backbone of India's manufacturing sector.**
- They **account for nearly 17% of industrial emissions.**
- Major sectors: textiles, food processing, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and paper.
- **Depend on coal, biomass, gas, firewood, and furnace oil.**
- Many systems are **old, oversized, and inefficient.**

3. What are Heat Pumps?

- Heat pumps are **devices that transfer and upgrade heat instead of generating heat by burning fuel.**
- They **use electricity to move heat from one source to another.**
- Industrial heat pumps generally have a Coefficient of Performance (COP) of 3–5.

Coefficient of Performance (COP) is a measure of a heat pump's efficiency. It shows how much useful heat is produced for each unit of electricity consumed.

- This means they **can provide 3-5 units of heat for every unit of electricity consumed.**
- They are **more efficient than electric resistance heating systems.**
- Heat pumps are considered a practical solution for industrial decarbonisation and electrification of heat.

4. Energy Efficiency and Industrial Applications

- **Conventional systems waste energy by producing excess high-temperature steam.**
- **Heat pumps provide only the required heat, improving efficiency.**
- This can **reduce energy use by 40–60%.**
- Therefore, **heat pumps are highly useful for applications such as hot-water supply, dyeing, washing, drying, and waste-heat recovery.**

5. Health, Environmental, and Economic Benefits

- Heat pumps can **provide heating and cooling simultaneously, improving process efficiency.**
- They **help reduce workplace heat exposure** and improve worker comfort.
- Over 2.4 billion workers globally are exposed to excessive workplace heat.
- Fossil-fuel-related air pollution caused nearly 1.72 million premature deaths in India in 2022.
- **Heat pumps reduce greenhouse gas emissions and harmful air pollutants** by eliminating on-site combustion.
- Their **large-scale adoption requires affordable renewable electricity, better integration, and MSME-friendly financing models.**

KEYWORDS

South Coast Railway (SCoR) Zone

- The South Coast Railway (SCoR) will become **operational on June 1, 2026, as the 18th railway zone of Indian Railways.**
- Its **headquarters will be situated in Visakhapatnam.**
- The new railway zone has been **formed through the reorganization of the South Central Railway and the East Coast Railway.**
- SCoR will comprise four divisions : **Visakhapatnam, Vijayawada, Guntur, and Guntakal** mainly serving Andhra Pradesh and nearby regions.

- The creation of SCoR is **expected to improve railway administration, operational efficiency, and regional connectivity in southern India.**
- The new zone is also aimed at strengthening freight movement, port connectivity, and passenger services along the eastern coast.

UDGAM Portal

- The **UDGAM portal** is a **centralized web platform** developed and launched by the **Reserve Bank of India (RBI)** to enable **depositors and legal heirs** to **search for unclaimed deposits across multiple banks** through a **single interface.**
- It specifically targets **“unclaimed deposits”**, i.e., funds in **savings/current accounts inactive for 10 years**, or **term deposits unclaimed for 10 years after maturity.**
- These funds are transferred to the **Depositor Education and Awareness (DEA) Fund** under the **Banking Regulation Act, 1949**, and the portal acts as a **gateway to identify such deposits.**
- As of **May 2026**, the portal integrates **30 banks**, covering around **90% of total unclaimed deposits** in the DEA Fund.
- The portal is only a **search and identification tool** and **not a claims settlement mechanism**; users must approach the **concerned bank** to complete **KYC and claim procedures**

Species in news

Indian Tiger (Panthera tigris tigris)

- The **Bengal Tiger (Panthera tigris tigris)** is the **national animal of India** and is found across the **Indian subcontinent** including **India, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh.**
- It is classified as **Endangered (IUCN Red List)**, listed under **Appendix I of CITES**, and protected under **Schedule I of the Wildlife (Protection) Act, 1972.**
- **Project Tiger (1973)** is a **centrally sponsored scheme** aimed at **in-situ conservation** of tigers through **designated tiger reserves.**

- The **National Tiger Conservation Authority (NTCA)** is a **statutory body (established in 2005)** under the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC)** for **oversight and implementation of Project Tiger.**
- **M-STRIPES (Monitoring System for Tigers – Intensive Protection and Ecological Status)** uses **GPS and GIS technology** for **tiger monitoring and assessment every four years.**



Places In News

Teesta River

- The **Teesta River** is a **transboundary river** shared by **India and Bangladesh.**
- It is a major **tributary of the Brahmaputra River** and forms part of the **Brahmaputra sub-basin** in the **Eastern Himalayan region.**
- The river originates in the **glacial mountains of Sikkim** in northeast India and flows through **Jalpaiguri** before entering **Bangladesh’s Rangpur Division.**
- In Bangladesh, the **Teesta** finally merges with the **Brahmaputra River** at **Fulcherry.**

