

The Hindu Important News Articles For UPSC CSE
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The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) has released its annual Yearbook 2026, which assesses the state of global armaments, disarmament, and international security. According to this report, India marginally expanded its nuclear arsenal in the year 2025 and continued the development of new Nuclear Delivery Systems. This report sheds significant light on changing geopolitical equations, modernization, and military expenditure trends in South Asia, which are highly relevant to India's national security and foreign policy.

Key Points

1. Nuclear Arsenal Expansion and Modernization

- **Increase in Number of Warheads:** According to the report, India initially possessed around 180 nuclear warheads, which increased to approximately 190 by the beginning of the year 2026.
- **Shift in Strategic Focus:** India's ongoing nuclear modernization program is now increasingly focused on developing long-range weapons. The primary objective is to develop weapons capable of striking targets deep within China, while also addressing conventional security concerns with Pakistan.
- **Global Trends:** All 9 nuclear-armed countries in the world (USA, Russia, UK, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel) are modernizing their nuclear arsenals and increasing their reliance on nuclear weapons as a measure of national power.

2. 'Operation Sindoor' and India-Pakistan Military Confrontation

- **Severe Military Crisis:** SIPRI has mentioned the India-Pakistan military confrontation that took place in May 2025, named 'Operation Sindoor'. The report describes it as an "exceptionally serious military crisis" between the two nuclear-armed neighbors.
- **Targeted Strikes:** During the conflict, India conducted strikes on Pakistani air and missile bases that were suspected of being involved in nuclear-related roles.
- **De-escalation Efforts:** Despite severe tensions, both countries took strategic measures to prevent the situation from worsening further (Escalation), reflecting effective crisis management.

India expanded its nuclear arsenal in 2025, says SIPRI

The Hindu Bureau
NEW DELHI

India is estimated to have modestly expanded its nuclear arsenal in 2025 and continued developing new nuclear delivery systems, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Yearbook 2026 released on Monday.

The report estimated that India's nuclear stockpile had increased to around 190 warheads by early 2026. The country had around 180 such warheads in 2025.

SIPRI noted that New Delhi's ongoing nuclear modernisation programme is increasingly focused on developing longer-range weapons capable of reaching targets across China, while continuing to address security concerns arising from its long-standing rivalry with Pakistan.

The annual assessment of global armaments, disarmament and international security also highlighted the May 2025 India-Pakistan military confrontation, describing

The report estimates India's military expenditure at \$92.1 billion, an increase of 8.9% from last year

Operation Sindoor as an "unusually severe military crisis" between the two nuclear-armed neighbours.

According to SIPRI, India carried out strikes during the conflict against Pakistani air and missile bases that were likely to have nuclear-related roles. However, the institute observed that both countries took measures to prevent further escalation despite heightened tensions. The report further noted that India and Pakistan integrated cyberoperations into active military conflict for the first time during the crisis, underscoring the evolving nature of modern warfare and deterrence in South Asia.

Beyond the nuclear domain, India retained its position as the world's fifth-largest military spender in 2025. SIPRI estimated India's military expenditure

at \$92.1 billion, an increase of 8.9% over the previous year. The country ranked behind only the United States, China, Russia and Germany in defence spending.

India also remained the world's second-largest importer of major arms during the 2021-25 period, accounting for 8.2% of global arms imports. SIPRI identified Ukraine, India, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Pakistan as the five largest arms importers, collectively accounting for 35% of global imports during the period.

Modernising arsenals

The report said all nine nuclear-armed states – the United States, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, China, India, Pakistan, North Korea, and Israel – continued to modernise their arsenals and increasingly relied on nuclear weapons as instruments of national power. Globally, the nine countries possessed an estimated 12,187 nuclear warheads at the start of 2026, of which around 9,745 were held in military stockpiles for potential use.

- **Integration of Cyber Operations:** The most prominent feature of this crisis was that, for the first time in history, India and Pakistan integrated cyberoperations during an active military conflict. This underscores the changing nature of modern warfare and deterrence in South Asia.

3. Military Expenditure

- **Global Ranking:** India remains the world's fifth-largest military spender with a defense budget of \$92.1 billion in the year 2025.
- **Budgetary Increase:** India's military expenditure registered an increase of 8.9% compared to the previous year.
- **Leading Countries:** In terms of defense spending, India lags behind only the United States, China, Russia, and Germany.

4. Arms Imports

- **Global Share:** During the 2021-25 period, India was the world's second-largest importer of major arms, accounting for an 8.2% share of global arms imports.
- **Top Importer Countries:** Ukraine, India, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Pakistan are the world's five largest arms importing nations, together sharing 35% of total global imports.

Administrative and Strategic Implications for UPSC

- **Two-Front Challenge:** India's nuclear modernization is no longer just Pakistan-centric; rather, it is aligned toward balancing China's growing military power (Credible Minimum Deterrence).
- **Hybrid Warfare:** The inclusion of cyber operations in military conflict demonstrates that future wars will not be limited to traditional borders. India needs to further strengthen its cyber security and 'Command and Control' systems.
- **Need for Self-Reliance (Atmanirbharta):** Being the world's second-largest arms importer is a challenge to India's Strategic Autonomy. This emphasizes the need to accelerate 'Make in India' and 'Aatmanirbhar Bharat' in the defense sector.

Conclusion

The SIPRI Yearbook 2026 report makes it clear that the security landscape in South Asia is becoming increasingly complex due to geopolitical tensions and technological advancements. The use of cyber technologies during crises like 'Operation Sindoor' is proof of the changing face of modern warfare. India's limited expansion of its nuclear arsenal and the increase in military expenditure is a necessary strategic compulsion to counter the dual security challenges posed by China and Pakistan. However, for long-term security and to emerge as a major power on the global stage, India must strengthen its domestic defense manufacturing and advanced technological capabilities (such as Cyber and AI) while reducing its import dependence.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: Consider the following statements regarding SIPRI Yearbook 2026:

1. India's estimated nuclear warhead inventory increased from about 180 to 190 by early 2026.
2. India was the world's largest arms importer during 2021–25.
3. SIPRI reported the integration of cyber operations during the India-Pakistan military crisis of 2025.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (c)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: SIPRI Yearbook 2026 highlights the growing role of nuclear modernization and cyber operations in contemporary conflicts. Examine the implications for India's national security strategy. (10Marks, 150Words)



Page 04 &08 : GS II :International Relations/ Preliminary Examination

According to recent Ministry of Defence officials, India plans to invest approximately ₹13,000 crore under the 'Great Nicobar Island Development Project' for the construction of a dual-use airport and runway for both civilian and naval operations. This comprehensive project, with a total estimated cost of ₹91,000 crore, aims to bolster India's maritime security, enhance its presence in the Indo-Pacific region, and transform the island into a major economic hub. However, the project is also at the center of intense policy and strategic debates regarding its massive cost, environmental impact, and tribal rights.

Nicobar project will enhance maritime security: officials

Saurabh Trivedi
NEW DELHI

Under the Great Nicobar Island Development Project, India plans to invest around ₹13,000 crore to build a dual-use airport and runway for both civilian and Navy operations, said a senior official with the Ministry of Defence on Monday.

According to sources in the Ministry, the project, expected to be completed within five years, will be jointly funded by the Ministry along with the Ministry of Civil Aviation. The government views the initiative as a strategic investment aimed at strengthening maritime security, boosting regional connec-

tivity and enhancing India's presence in the Indo-Pacific region.

Four components

Elaborating about the project, the official said the project comprises four major components – an International Container Trans-shipment Port (ICTP), a joint-user greenfield airport and Naval Air Station, a modern township, and a power plant. Together, these projects are expected to transform Great Nicobar into a key maritime and economic hub while enhancing India's defence capabilities in the strategically significant Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Located just 40 km from the Six Degree Channel,



The project comprises a port, airport, and power plant. AFP

one of the world's busiest sea trade routes connecting the Gulf of Aden and the Malacca Strait, Great Nicobar occupies a critical position along global shipping lanes. Government officials said the project

would reduce India's dependence on foreign trans-shipment ports and strengthen its ability to monitor and secure vital Sea Lanes of Communication.

The proposed greenfield airport, approved by the Union Cabinet and to be operated by the Indian Navy, is expected to significantly improve maritime domain awareness, logistics support, and rapid deployment capabilities. The airport is also expected to promote tourism, officials said. It is understood that five sites, including INS Baaz at Campbell Bay, were assessed before Galathea Bay was selected for the airport. Technical constraints, limited expansion possibilities, and environ-

mental concerns reportedly made the expansion of INS Baaz unviable.

Extensive studies

Addressing concerns over environmental impact and tribal rights, officials said the project has undergone extensive environmental assessments involving institutions such as the Zoological Survey of India, Wildlife Institute of India and the Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History. Of the island's total area, only 166.1 square kilometres have been earmarked for development, while more than 81% will continue to remain under forests, biosphere reserves, national parks and tribal conservation zones.

A dedicated conservation package worth ₹2,220 crore over 30 years has been planned to protect wildlife, including leather-back turtles, Nicobar megapodes and crocodiles, as well as coral reefs and mangrove ecosystems. The official confirmed that no physical displacement of tribal communities is proposed and that consultations were conducted with tribal welfare authorities and representative bodies.

Besides strategic gains, the project is expected to generate over one lakh direct and indirect employment opportunities, providing a significant economic boost to the island region.

Key Points

1. Four Major Components of the Project

- **International Container Trans-shipment Port (ICTP):** The construction of a massive port at Galathea Bay, which will reduce India's dependence on foreign trans-shipment ports.
- **Greenfield Airport and Naval Aviation Station:** An airport jointly funded by the Ministries of Defence and Civil Aviation, which will be operated by the Navy.
- **Modern Township:** The development of a smart and modern city on the island.
- **Power Plant:** A dedicated power plant to supply energy to the infrastructure.

2. Strategic and Economic Significance

- **Geographical Location:** Great Nicobar Island is just 40 km away from the 'Six Degree Channel'. This is one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes, connecting the Gulf of Aden to the Malacca Strait.

Daily News Analysis

- **Maritime Security:** The airport and military infrastructure will significantly improve India's Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), logistics support, and rapid military deployment capabilities in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).
- **Job Creation:** The project is expected to generate over 100,000 direct and indirect employment opportunities in the region.

3. Environmental Concerns and Conservation Package

- **Ecological Loss:** According to critics and scientists, the project will require the felling of vast tropical rainforests, leading to irreversible damage to rare coral reefs and mangroves.
- **Threat to Wildlife Habitat:** This region is the primary habitat for leatherback turtles and the endemic Nicobar Megapode bird, both of which face the risk of habitat destruction.
- **Government Measures:** The government has announced a dedicated ₹2,220 crore package spread over 30 years for the conservation of wildlife and the environment. The government claims that over 81% of the island will still remain protected under forests and biosphere reserves.

4. Tribal Rights and Social Concerns

- **Tribal Conservation:** According to official statements, there will be no physical displacement of indigenous tribes (such as the Shompen and Nicobarese tribes).
- **Lack of Transparency:** Local tribal councils allege that their consent for the project was taken without sharing full details, and that this could violate their ancestral land rights.

5. The Strategic Dilemma and Financial Discrepancies

- **PIB Observation:** In August 2024, the Public Investment Board (PIB) under the Ministry of Finance noted that this commercial port "lacked strategic objectives." The 'strategic' tag was later assigned to it by the Ministry of Defence.
- **Financial Viability:** The Public-Private Partnership Appraisal Committee (PPPAC) refused to grant ₹12,230 crore in Viability Gap Funding (VGF) for this project and asked the Ministry of Ports to find funds from its own budget. This raises serious questions about the project's commercial profitability.

Implications for UPSC (Administrative & Strategic)

Strategic afterthought

The government must be transparent with the Nicobar project

For a project so often invoked as a matter of national security strategy, the ballooning Great Nicobar Island development, now estimated to be at ₹91,000 crore, rests on a remarkably thin strategic record. The Centre has long cited the "strategic" character of its centrepiece – a transshipment port at Galathea Bay – to withhold information on its environmental clearances. Yet, the Public Investment Board (PIB), a Finance Ministry body, found in August 2024 that the port "lacked strategic objectives". That label arrived only afterwards, from the Ministry of Defence and seems less like a founding rationale and more of an afterthought, retrofitted to a balance sheet. Both the PIB and the Public-Private Partnership Appraisal Committee (PPPAC) cleared the proposal, yet the PPPAC refused ₹12,230 crore in Viability Gap Funding, telling the Ports Ministry to find the money within its own budget – an unusual rebuke for a venture sold as nationally vital. If the port cannot stand on commercial returns, and if its real purpose is military, the case for a commercial transshipment hub dissolves.

Great Nicobar sits at the southern tip of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, wrapped in tropical rainforest and ringed by reefs of rare ecological value. The project – port, international airport, power plant and township – would clear vast tracts of that forest, much of it primary, and disturb the nesting beaches of the leatherback turtle and the habitat of the endemic Nicobar megapode. Scientists who have studied the island warn that the loss would be irreversible, and that no afforestation elsewhere can replace what is felled here. The island's indigenous inhabitants have objections of their own, running alongside the ecological ones but not reducible to them. Tribal councils have said that consent was secured without full disclosure, and asked that ancestral land and the resettlement promised after the 2004 tsunami not be overridden by the project. Their criticism is not a refusal of all development. The quarrel is with scale, secrecy and sequence – a project conceived at a magnitude the island cannot absorb. The remedy is transparency. The Centre should release the High-Powered Committee report in full, account openly for the true cost to the public exchequer, and weigh it against an environmental loss that the exchequer can never reimburse. A project of this scale owes the country at least that much.

- **Security vs. Environment:** This project highlights the classic dilemma between "Sustainable Development" and "Internal Security" in the UPSC syllabus (GS Paper 3). To what extent environment can be sacrificed for strategic gains remains a major policy question.
- **Strategic Autonomy and Indo-Pacific Policy:** Given China's 'String of Pearls' strategy and India's own 'Malacca Dilemma', a robust military presence in Nicobar is imperative for India.
- **Governance and Transparency:** Questions raised over the project's transparency (such as the non-disclosure of the High-Powered Committee's report) reflect a gap in administrative accountability. In a democratic setup, completely withholding information in the name of national security is often deemed contentious.

Conclusion

The Great Nicobar Island project is undoubtedly a vital step toward India's future maritime security and geopolitical dominance in the Indian Ocean. The strategic location of Galathea Bay provides India with an unparalleled capability to monitor the Malacca Strait. However, questions surrounding its financial viability and the presentation of 'strategic necessity' as an afterthought reveal gaps in its policy planning.

The government must balance this national security requirement with environmental sustainability and tribal rights. The only solution lies in 'absolute transparency'; the government should make the relevant reports public while actively addressing the concerns of environmentalists and tribal councils. This will ensure that the project does not turn into a mere financial burden but becomes a genuine strategic and ecologically sustainable asset for the nation.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: Which of the following best describes the strategic significance of Great Nicobar Island?

- (a) It overlooks the Strait of Hormuz.
- (b) It is located near major sea lanes connecting the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean.
- (c) It lies adjacent to the Suez Canal.
- (d) It serves as India's westernmost military outpost.

Answer: **(b)**

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: The Great Nicobar Island Development Project reflects the growing intersection of national security, economic development, and environmental sustainability. Critically examine.(10Marks, 150 Words)

Page 09 : GS II :International Relations / Preliminary Examination

Even after more than 100 days since the formation of the Tarique Rahman government in Bangladesh, the expected improvement in India-Bangladesh relations has not materialized. The bitterness that crept into bilateral ties following the fall of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina (August 2024) and during the subsequent interim government led by Muhammad Yunus largely persists under the current elected government. This analysis highlights the diplomatic stalemate between the two nations, its root causes, domestic pressures, and its strategic implications.

Key Points

1. India's Diplomatic Outreach vs. Bangladesh's Expectations

- **India's Diplomatic Initiatives:** India made two major diplomatic efforts before and after the formation of the new government. First, External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar's visit to Dhaka (December 2025), and second, the high-level presence of Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla (February 2026).
- **BNP's Dissatisfaction:** The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) believes that symbolic diplomatic gestures alone are insufficient. Dhaka demands that India roll back the punitive or restrictive measures implemented during the tenure of the interim government, such as:
 - Resuming transshipment services for Bangladeshi goods.
 - Restoring full visa services, including business and medical visas.
 - Eliminating restrictive market access for Bangladeshi products.

2. Impact of Domestic Politics and Rhetoric

- **The Issue of Illegal Immigration:** The aggressive rhetoric surrounding 'illegal immigration' in political statements and official communication within India (particularly in West Bengal and Assam) has created a 'sense of betrayal' in Dhaka.
- **The Sheikh Hasina Factor:** Although the BNP has adopted a pragmatic stance, stating that Sheikh Hasina's presence in India will not hinder bilateral relations, Dhaka is disappointed by the lack of a positive response from India. Furthermore, interviews given by the exiled Sheikh Hasina in India have caused discomfort to the new Bangladeshi government.

The trust deficit in India-Bangladesh ties



Kallol Bhattacharjee

More than hundred days have passed since the Tarique Rahman government took charge in Bangladesh. However, contrary to early expectations from his leadership, India-Bangladesh relations have remained more or less the same as in the difficult months of the interim government.

Actions, not rhetoric
India reached out twice before Mr. Rahman became the Bangladesh Prime Minister. The first outreach was by External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar who visited Dhaka on December 31, 2025 to condole the passing of Mr. Rahman's mother, former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. The second time was through Foreign Secretary Vikram Misri, who carried Prime Minister Narendra Modi's invitation letter, and Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla who on February 17 participated in the swearing-in ceremony of Mr. Rahman. But sources in the ruling Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) say such gestures in themselves are insufficient. An influential segment within the BNP feel that as a goodwill gesture towards the new government, India should have reversed some of the retributory steps that it had taken during the interim government's rule under Muhammad Yunus. These steps included the restarting of transshipments for goods from Bangladesh, full restoration of visa services including business and medical visas, and stopping the restrictive market access for Bangladeshi goods. None of these measures have been implemented so far, as per Dhaka. They argue that, by not reversing these decisions, India has not delivered any advance incentives to Mr. Rahman who will have to engage with the Jamaat-e-Islami and several anti-India student outfits before normalising ties with India. On its part, the BNP's veteran leaders have tried to smoothen the relationship by creating greater public acceptability of the position that the presence of the deposed Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in India will not hold ties back, a departure from the headline stance that the interim government had taken. Here also, Dhaka feels that such attempts have not found appreciation from the Indian side.

As proof they refer to the aggressive use of 'illegal immigration' in official communication from Delhi following the victory of the Bharatiya Janata Party in West Bengal and Assam. Bangladeshi diplomats have pointed out that Dhaka expected less rhetoric on sensitive issues such as illegal immigration, and more focus on issues such as visa restoration and the renewal of the 1996 Ganga Water Treaty.

Dhaka had sent Foreign Minister Khalilur Rahman to Delhi on April 7-8 for a brief visit, to test the waters, where he met National Security Adviser Ajit Doval and Mr. Jaishankar. However, the election campaign in Assam and West Bengal around Bangladesh-related issues and a flurry of interviews by exiled PM Sheikh Hasina have displayed that Mr. Rahman's BNP, despite winning a landslide majority in Bangladesh, has not managed to impress India. While a senior diplomat in Dhaka said that Bangladesh was assured that the language around State elections would not reflect New Delhi's foreign policy, the Ministry of External Affairs' strident position on illegal immigration have generated 'a sense of betrayal' in Dhaka's secretary.

According to reports, Mr. Rahman, sensing that the window for restoration of ties with India is not opening as per expectations, is in the final stages of considering visits to Malaysia and China that are likely to take place in the last week of June.

Bangladesh's dilemma
This turn to China however cannot hide the fact that it is incumbent on Bangladesh, as much as it is on India, to repair bilateral ties.

Bangladesh's ties with India remain broken because of the 2024 uprising and the subsequent interim rule whereas its ties with China, the U.S. and other players have prospered since August 2024. Further, a pragmatic assessment shows that without steady assurance from India on the main river Padma (Ganga), Bangladesh's other plans are not expected to proceed smoothly beyond 2026. River affairs expert Aiman Nishat has stated that a delay in the renewal of the 30-year-old Ganga treaty will put the Ganges-Kobadak irrigation project in a challenging situation affecting vast portions of western and central Bangladesh. The lack of predictable water supply will affect the upcoming sowing seasons, hurting Bangladesh's economy that is already dealing with the crippling effects of the energy crisis because of the U.S.-Israel war on Iran.

The compounded effect of these disruptive forces will increase pressure on the Tarique Rahman government that is already under criticism for its inept handling of the worst measles outbreak in the country that has claimed the lives of at least 600 infants. Critics have targeted the government for its weak handling of the health crisis as well as the growing incidents of sexual violence, which is a symptom of the breakdown of law and order in the country that is yet to make a recovery since the protests of August 2024. Rivals, including Sheikh Hasina's Awami League that are mobilising on the ground despite a ban, will be strengthened if Mr. Rahman fails to renew the Ganga river agreement with Delhi before the deadline of December 31, 2026.

Such material factors on the ground call for pragmatism in both the capitals as the challenges will soon overwhelm Bangladesh, reverting it to instability, which again is not in India's immediate or long-term interests.

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- **Exploring Alternatives:** Faced with a cold shoulder from India, Prime Minister Tarique Rahman is now considering official visits to Malaysia and China toward the end of June 2026, which could become a major strategic concern for India.

3. Bangladesh's Internal Challenges and the 'Ganga Water Treaty' Crisis

- **Renewal of the 1996 Ganga Water Treaty:** The 30-year-old Ganga Water Treaty between the two nations is set to expire on December 31, 2026. If a timely consensus is not reached, Bangladesh's 'Ganges-Kobadak Irrigation Project' will face a severe crisis, severely impacting agriculture and the economy in western and central Bangladesh.
- **Economic and Energy Crisis:** Due to ongoing geopolitical tensions in the Middle East (the US-Israel-Iran conflict), Bangladesh is already grappling with a severe energy crisis and high inflation.
- **Law & Order and Health Crisis:** The Rahman government has failed to fully restore law and order across the country. Simultaneously, a severe outbreak of measles has resulted in the deaths of over 600 infants, drawing heavy domestic criticism for the administration.

Implications for UPSC (Administrative & Strategic)

- **Testing the 'Neighborhood First' Policy:** India's policy appears hesitant following the regime change in Bangladesh. India requires a stable and friendly government in its neighborhood, regardless of which political party is in power. Any delay in mending ties could allow the 'China Factor' to expand its footprint in the neighborhood.
- **Strategic Pragmatism:** River water sharing (such as the Ganga and Teesta rivers) is not merely a technical issue; it is a matter of life and death for Bangladesh. India must leverage water diplomacy to rebuild its goodwill among the Bangladeshi public.
- **Domestic Politics vs. Foreign Policy:** Rhetoric used in domestic electoral rallies (such as on immigration) has a direct bearing on bilateral ties. Balancing domestic political narratives with foreign policy objectives remains a formidable challenge for Indian diplomacy.

Conclusion

India-Bangladesh relations are currently at a delicate crossroads, where the gap between 'expectations and realities' is widening. Given Bangladesh's internal instability, health crisis, and economic slowdown, the Tarique Rahman government urgently needs India's cooperation—especially regarding the renewal of the Ganga Water Treaty—to maintain its political relevance.

On the other hand, India must recognize that instability in Bangladesh, or its excessive tilt toward China, will be detrimental to India's internal security and the stability of its North-East region. Therefore, both sides must look beyond rhetoric and embrace pragmatic diplomacy. India, playing the role of the mature regional leader, should ease visa and trade restrictions to pave the way for long-term peace and the restoration of strategic trust in South Asia.

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: India-Bangladesh relations have entered a phase of strategic uncertainty following political changes in Bangladesh. Examine the key challenges and suggest a roadmap for rebuilding mutual trust. **(15 Marks, 250 Words)**



Page 09 :GS II :International Relations/ Preliminary Examination

The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has released the preliminary Fact Sheets of the National Family Health Survey-6 (NFHS-6) covering the period 2023-24. The survey gathered data from approximately 6.8 lakh households across all states and Union Territories of the country, with the exception of Manipur. While the survey records significant improvements in child nutrition, maternal care, and digital penetration, its core design has undergone a major transformation. Compared to the 131 indicators included in the previous round (NFHS-5), only 101 indicators have been retained this time, sparking a fresh debate at diplomatic, administrative, and policy-making levels.

Key Points

1. What was Achieved in NFHS-6? (Gains / Positive Aspects)

• Improvement in Maternal Health:

The percentage of mothers receiving at least four antenatal check-ups increased by nearly 7 percentage points compared to NFHS-5. Progress was also observed in the rate of exclusive breastfeeding of infants under six months, down nearly eight percentage points, and the use of modern contraception, down to 52.7% from 56.4%.

• Reduction in Child Stunting:

The rate of stunting (low height-for-age) among children aged five and under registered a rapid decline. While the decline between NFHS-4 and NFHS-5 was only 3 percentage points, NFHS-6 recorded a drop of more than 6 percentage points.

• Digital Empowerment:

Internet usage among women witnessed a massive surge. In Andhra Pradesh specifically, it jumped from 21% to 63.6%. Furthermore, new questions regarding digital literacy, financial transactions, and membership in Self-Help Groups (SHGs) were introduced in the survey.

• Decline in Domestic Violence:

The percentage of women experiencing spousal violence dropped from 29.3% to 22.3%.

What is lost and gained in NFHS-6

NFHS-6 records gains in child nutrition, maternal care, institutional births and women's Internet use, while also introducing new questions on digital literacy and direct benefit transfers but the survey's preliminary fact sheet is thinner than the last round, dropping key indicators such as anaemia, mortality, sex ratio at birth

ECONOMIC NOTES

Areena Arora

India's latest National Family Health Survey (NFHS-6) records gains in child nutrition, maternal care, institutional births and women's Internet use. But its preliminary fact sheet is also thinner than the last round, with 30 indicators compared with 131 in NFHS-5.

Which indicators were removed from NFHS-6?
Key indicators such as anaemia, mortality, sex ratio at birth, sanitation, and clean cooking fuel have been removed from the survey.

The Union Health Ministry released the fact sheets of NFHS-6 on May 29, covering 2023-24. The survey recorded data from nearly 6.8 lakh households across every State and Union Territory except Manipur.

Preliminary findings report clear gains on several measures, including mothers getting at least four antenatal check-ups, up about seven percentage points from NFHS-5, an increase in institutional births and women's Internet usage. It also points to declines in several metrics, such as exclusive breastfeeding of infants under six months, down nearly eight percentage points, and the use of modern contraception, down to 52.7% from 56.4%.

The NFHS is commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which designates the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) to conduct the survey. Over the years, the scope of the survey has been additive by design, retaining the previous questionnaire and adding to it.

NFHS-4 in 2016-18 introduced district-level estimates and table-based digital interviewing for survey collection. NFHS-5 pushed the indicators further, including new topics, such as preschool education, disability, access to a toilet facility, death registration, bathing practices during menstruation and methods and reasons for abortion. It also extended blood pressure and blood sugar measurements from adults aged between 15 and 49 to all adults aged 15 and above. The survey measured 131 key indicators, up from 114 in NFHS-4.

While the HIV testing component was dropped from NFHS-5, it retained questions on HIV/AIDS knowledge, attitudes, prior testing, sexually transmitted infections, and sexual behaviour. In NFHS-6, biological HIV testing has been brought back as part of the clinical, anthropometric and biochemical testing schedule.

The NFHS-6 fact sheet does not separately spell out whether all HIV/AIDS knowledge and attitude questions were retained.

NFHS-6 also added new questions on direct benefit transfers, self-help group memberships, digital literacy and financial transactions. It also includes testing for Hepatitis B and Hepatitis C among women and men, as well as dried blood spot collection from children aged 4-5 for Hepatitis B testing.

But for the first time, the survey has also subtracted overall, showing a net reduction of 30 indicators in the preliminary results. Among the dropped indicators, the most notable ones, such as anaemia, infant and child mortality, sex ratio at birth, clean cooking fuel use, and sanitation, have all appeared since at least NFHS-4.



THE GIST

NFHS-6 shows a net reduction of 30 indicators in its preliminary fact sheet, with 43 indicators dropped and 13 added compared with NFHS-5.

Anaemia was dropped from NFHS-6, with the official position being that it will be tracked separately through the Diet and Biomarkers Survey.

Several long-running indicators, including infant and child mortality, sex ratio at birth, sanitation coverage, clean cooking fuel use and cancer-screening measures, are absent from the latest fact sheet, leaving gaps that no other single source fills at the same scale.

The NFHS is commissioned by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, which designates the IIPS to conduct the survey. GETTY IMAGES

Why was anaemia dropped?
The case for removing anaemia is related to how it was measured. The indicator had long shown a worsening picture. Between NFHS-4 in 2016-18 and NFHS-5 in 2019-21, anaemia rose across the board. Among children, anaemia prevalence went up from 58.6% to 67.5%, among women aged 15-49, it rose from 53.3% to 57%, and among pregnant women, anaemia rose from 50.4% to 52.2%.

The rise in anaemia was near-universal across the country, with child anaemia increasing in 28 States and Union Territories, and in some cases by big leaps, from 35.7% to 68.4% in Assam and 19.3% to 46.4% in Mizoram. Such deterioration was reported despite the government launching the Anaemia Mukh Bharat campaign in 2018, aimed at tackling anaemia. The reason for dropping it as an indicator then boiled down to how the data were being collected.

NFHS measured haemoglobin from a finger-prick blood sample read on a portable analyser, which several nutrition researchers contend overstated anaemia compared to the venous blood drawn by other surveys. IIPS dropped the anaemia questionnaire when NFHS-6 fieldwork began in 2023. The official position is that the condition will now be tracked separately, through a dedicated Diet and Biomarkers Survey under the National Institute of Nutrition using a method its proponents consider more accurate.

The Diet and Biomarkers Survey in India was not a hurried replacement and was launched in December 2022, before NFHS-6 fieldwork began, at the ICMR's National Institute of Nutrition in Hyderabad.

The survey recorded data on individual dietary intake across age-groups, paired with blood and urine biomarkers.

It also built upon nutrition deficiencies and tracked obesity alongside anaemia, a first, according to the organisers. For anaemia, data were collected from venous blood instead of the finger-prick method that NFHS used. Data collection is complete, but hasn't been released yet.

What other changes were made?
A line-by-line comparison of the two fact sheets from NFHS-5 and NFHS-6 shows that the net fall of 30 actually combines 43 indicators dropped and 13 added. Several of the deletions were long-running series, and a few are closely related to the government's signature programmes.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government in 2019 had announced that India would be open defecation-free. NFHS-5 recorded 70% of the country's population living in households with access to sanitation facilities. That data point has also been dropped.

The share of households using clean fuel for cooking, 58.6% in NFHS-5, is gone — a direct measure of the success of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana.

The three mortality indicators — neonatal, infant and under-five — have also been cut, but these will be tracked by the Sample Registration System, whose latest bulletin put infant mortality at 24 per 1,000 live births.

The Registration System, however, does not carry district-level data and socio-economic breakdowns that are available in NFHS.

The sex ratio of the total population and the sex ratio at birth, 929 females per 1,000 males in NFHS-5, are both absent, removing a standard signal of sex-selective practices. Four

cancer-screening indicators, covering cervical, breast and oral cancer, introduced only in NFHS-5 are gone after a single round.

A few changes are redefinitions rather than cuts. Women's individual ownership of a house or land has become a household-level measure. Three-dose hepatitis B line has become a birth-dose measure, and pre-school attendance has shifted age bands, targeting a younger demographic. IIPS has not published a rationale for the wider list.

Together, the removals leave no current survey-based national figure for infant mortality, sanitation coverage, sex ratio at birth, cancer screening rates or comprehensive HIV knowledge, gaps that no other single source fills at the same scale.

How did survey results change between NFHS-5 and NFHS-6?
NFHS-6 reported a drop in the number of women who have experienced spousal violence, down to 22.3% from 29.3%. The number of children aged five or below who are stunted declined too. The drop from NFHS-4 to NFHS-5 was just under three percentage points, but NFHS-6 saw a drop of over six percentage points.

State-level changes are sharper for certain indicators.

Health insurance coverage rose the most in West Bengal, from 33.7% of households in NFHS-5 to 88.2% in NFHS-6. Women's Internet use saw its largest increase in Andhra Pradesh, from 21% to 63.6%. Haryana recorded the steepest fall in exclusive breastfeeding among infants under six months, from 69.8% to 41.2%. The share of women classified as overweight or obese increased in every State.

- **Expansion of Health Insurance:** Health insurance coverage showed remarkable improvement, with West Bengal leading the trend (increasing from 33.7% to 88.2%).

2. What was Omitted? (Losses / Negative or Concerning Aspects)

A total of 43 indicators were dropped from the fact sheet this time, while only 13 new indicators were added, resulting in a net reduction of 30 indicators. The primary indicators excluded are as follows:

- **Anaemia:** Indicators related to anaemia among children, women, and pregnant women have been removed.
- **Mortality Indicators:** Vital indicators tracking neonatal, infant, and under-five mortality rates have been excluded.
- **Sex Ratio:** Data regarding the Sex Ratio at Birth (SRB) and the sex ratio of the total population have been omitted, which previously served as the primary mechanism for monitoring malpractices like female foeticide.
- **Sanitation and Clean Fuel:** Key benchmarks measuring Open Defecation Free (ODF) status and the success of the 'Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana' (use of clean cooking fuel) have been dropped.
- **Cancer Screening:** Indicators associated with the screening of cervical, breast, and oral cancers were removed after being included for just a single round (NFHS-5).

Analysis of Major Policy Issues

Reasons Behind the Removal of Anaemia

- **Dispute over Data Collection Methodology:** NFHS-5 had revealed a nationwide surge in anaemia rates (from 58.6% to 67.1% among children and from 53.1% to 57% among women). Experts argued that the 'finger-prick method' utilized by the NFHS tends to overestimate anaemia levels on portable analyzers.
- **Alternative Arrangement:** The government's official stance is that anaemia is now being tracked via a dedicated 'Diet and Biomarkers Survey' under the National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), which employs the more precise 'venous blood' method.

Deterioration in Other Indicators

- **Decline in Breastfeeding:** The rate of exclusive breastfeeding for infants under six months fell by nearly 8 percentage points, with Haryana recording the sharpest decline (from 69.5% to 41.2%).
- **The Challenge of Obesity:** The proportion of overweight or obese women increased in almost every state, highlighting the 'double burden of malnutrition'.
- **Modern Contraceptives:** The usage of modern contraceptive methods declined from 56.4% to 52.7%.

Administrative and Policy Implications for UPSC

Daily News Analysis

- **Data Gap and Policy-Making (GS Paper 2 & 3):** The NFHS was the country's sole survey providing data disaggregated at the district level and across socio-economic brackets (caste, religion, income). Excluding indicators like infant mortality and sex ratio will hinder the formulation of targeted, district-specific welfare schemes.
- **Decentralized Data vs. Centralized Data:** Although mortality rates will continue to be tracked by the Sample Registration System (SRS), the SRS lacks district-level granularity and socio-economic classification, both of which are critical for policy interventions like the 'Aspirational Districts Programme'.
- **Accountability of Government Schemes:** Removing indicators related to sanitation (Swachh Bharat Mission) and clean fuel (Ujjwala Yojana) will complicate the independent and objective evaluation of these flagship programs.

Conclusion

The findings of NFHS-6 present a mixed picture of India's socio-economic landscape. The reduction in child stunting, alongside improvements in digital literacy and antenatal care, demonstrates that grassroots development initiatives are yielding positive outcomes. However, the omission of several critical indicators—most notably the sex ratio at birth and child mortality rates—raises concerns from the standpoint of policy transparency. This lack of data could also impact India's standing on global platforms, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) indices.

The government must ensure that the alternative mechanisms being cited (such as the Diet and Biomarkers Survey or the SRS) release their data in a timely manner with the same comprehensive socio-economic and district-level classifications. This is essential to ensure that the democratic and administrative process of evidence-based policy making continues uninterrupted.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: Consider the following statements regarding NFHS-6:

1. NFHS-6 covered all States and Union Territories including Manipur.
2. The survey covered approximately 6.8 lakh households.
3. The number of indicators in the fact sheet has been reduced compared to NFHS-5.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: National Family Health Survey (NFHS) serves as a critical instrument for evidence-based policymaking in India. Discuss the significance of NFHS-6 and examine the concerns arising from the exclusion of key indicators. **(10Marks, 150 Words)**

Page 11 :GS II :Social Justice/ Preliminary Examination

India's 'Census 2027' has officially commenced on April 1, marking the largest human counting exercise in global geography. Following the last census in 2011, this eighth national census is taking place after a substantial gap of 15 years due to the COVID-19 pandemic and general elections. The slogan for this census is 'Our Census, Our Development' (Our Census, Our Development), with 'Pragati' and 'Vikas' as its official mascots. This exercise is not merely a statistical drill but a historic milestone that will shape the future of India's democratic representation, federal fiscal devolution, social justice, and policy-making.

Key Points

1. A Two-Phase Digital Census

- **Phase I:** Under this phase, data related to house listing, housing conditions, available amenities (electricity, drinking water, toilets, etc.), and assets of each household across the country is being collected.
- **Phase II:** This phase will capture vital demographic and socio-economic data, including education, migration, fertility rates, and most importantly, details regarding caste.
- **Digital Innovation:** For the first time in history, an option for online self-enumeration has been provided in this census, which was utilized by over 10 million (1 crore) families within the first 15 days alone. Alongside this, digital devices and tablets are being used on a massive scale for data collection.

2. Why Census 2027 is Historic (The Core Catalysts)

- **Caste Census:** For the first time since independence, a question regarding caste has been included in the census. This data will completely reshape the framework of reservation policies, affirmative action, and social justice in the country.
- **Delimitation of Constituencies:** The upcoming redrawing of boundaries for Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assembly constituencies is set to be based on the data of this census. Furthermore, the implementation of the recently passed Women's Reservation Act (allocating 33% seats) is also linked to this delimitation.

CACHE

Why Census 2027 matters for development, democracy and representation

Census 2027, the world's largest count of people within a national geography, is an overdue exercise with far-reaching implications: an accurate and comprehensive count will ensure that no one is left behind and that policies, entitlements, and resources are guided by reliable data

Akshay Raut



Record turnout in the recently concluded Assembly elections have brought attention to all those who believe in the ultimate say of numbers and counts in a democracy. The only concern amid this celebration is whether everyone who needs to be counted has actually been included. This sense of urgency should equally drive the ongoing Census, the mother of all counts.

The world's largest ever count of people within a national geography got underway on April 1, with the commencement of the first of the two phases of Census 2027. The first phase will gather nationwide information on the conditions, amenities, and assets of every household. The second will collect critical demographic and socio-economic information, including details on education, migration, fertility, and, of course, caste.

Seriously overdue

The eighth census since independence comes after a gap of 15 years instead of the usual 10, owing first to the COVID-19 disruption and later to the Lok Sabha elections. India has certainly been missing an updated demographic database. Public and private planning alike have had to rely on the 2011 Census or on informed extrapolations from it.

There are other credible surveys, including five rounds of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), but these largely focus on health and nutrition. The World Bank and various UN agencies have also periodically conducted studies in their areas of interest. The United Nations Population Fund estimates India's population in 2025 at more than 146 crore. The population count in 2011 stood at 121 crore, marking a growth of 17% over the 2001 Census. Census 2027 is expected to record an increase of 25-30 crore. That makes the case for an accurate, secure, and comprehensive national census even more urgent.

The purpose of the Census in colonial India was to help the rulers govern more efficiently and sustain the regime. In post-independence India, the Census has served a different purpose: improving governance and speeding up multidimensional and inclusive development. The 1951 Census, expectedly, revealed dismal levels of literacy, poverty, and life expectancy in a country depleted by colonial rule. India in 2026-27 stands on a completely different footing in terms of mobility, connectivity, infrastructure, education, healthcare and other indicators of living standards, which await measurement.

Contested demography

The season of demographic politics is here. Special intensive revision (SIR) is a rebuilding of India's electoral rolls; the process has also prompted citizens to ensure that they are counted and that their names remain on the rolls.

One act was played in Parliament in mid-April when women's reservation became a casualty of the fear of 'biased' delimitation of constituencies. New electoral boundaries will ordinarily be anchored in Census data, and the 33% reserved seats for women in the legislature will be tied to it. This way, the Census exercise will have elaborate implications for the country's representative democracy.

Another standout feature of Census 2027 is the inclusion of the caste question for the first time. The matter has been on the political agenda for years now, often dragged into elections. The direction of the debate after the release of the data will be closely watched.

Existing reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes will also have the new Census as a reference. Instead of belligerent battles fought over caste, class, and community interests in the electoral cauldron, getting duly counted along these divisions could be a constructive presentation of the case. Affirmative action for marginalised groups, provided under India's legal and constitutional framework and considered as the fountainhead of social justice, depends on systematic data drawn from the Census.

Roti, kapda, makaan

The Census may appear not to offer any individual profile, but most certainly it does. Access to jobs, food, housing, cooking gas, clean drinking water, safe sanitation, schools, and hospitals are among the expectations citizens have of an elected government.

Accurately identifying needs and deprivations through reliable databases provides the basis for targeted delivery of these welfare measures and public services. Demographic profiles also

inform the Finance Commission's devolution of funds to States and local bodies and even guide private sector investments in identified areas.

Public policy and service delivery can falter when residents are not properly counted under various buckets. Digital data collection, being done for the first time, could provide deeper and more segregated identification of issues in localities. Viewed from another perspective, departmental dashboards for social and infrastructural provisions could face reality checks post-Census, against their claims.

Guardrails of individual rights

Online self-enumeration, available for 15 days, preceding the survey and already completed by over one crore households, is an additional facilitation, but not mandatory. Self-enumeration blends digital empowerment with the right to privacy and accuracy of personal data. Census authorities loudly assure that an enumerator will definitely visit your home. The Census Act, 1948, ensures the protection of individual data in the face of a malevolent and interconnected world.

In contemporary elections, population groups look out for targeted benefits, often casting votes in return. The ethical and economic prudence of this bargain is widely questioned. But a good Census delivers the same without moral or fiscal damage. While the government has pitched the Census as an instrument of development, citizens must reactively

grab the chance of getting counted. Census in 2011 had the tagline: 'Our Census, Our Future'. In 2027, it is 'Our Census, Our Development'. One could hasten to add, 'my census, my right.'

Everyone's task, everyone's gain

High profile enumeration of the top brass in the national and State capitals carries great symbolism. But the true mandate of the Census is to ensure that no one is left behind and that no faces — or even faces — from the remotest hamlet or the most crowded urban slum, regardless of people's circumstances, are excluded from this long overdue exercise.

Over three million census staffers will have to overcome topographical and social barriers as they go door to door to complete this onerous task.

Although participation in the Census is mandatory, public cooperation must be driven by a heightened awareness of self-interest rather than the parity that often characterises urban life. 'Pragati' and 'Vikas', the mascots of Census 2027, are statements not only of the purpose, but of equal role for men and women.

Millions of voters stood in line at polling booths over the past two months because they recognised the importance of their vote, even though voting remains optional. In an ocean of census operations, every individual count matters, just as every single vote matters in a large election.

(Akshay Raut is a former Director General, Election Commission of India and a Public Policy Commentator. Views expressed are personal)

- **Massive Population Surge:** In 2011, India's population stood at 1.21 billion. According to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), it has crossed 1.46 billion in 2025. Consequently, Census 2027 is expected to record a net increase of approximately 250 to 300 million people.

Key Dimensions (Policy and Strategic)

1. Democracy and Representation (GS Paper 2)

- **The North vs. South Divide:** Since the allocation of seats during delimitation is based on population, there are apprehensions that North India (which has a higher population growth rate) may gain more seats, while South India (which performed better in population control) might face a political disadvantage. The 2027 statistics will form the core baseline for this strategic and political debate.
- **Accurate Electoral Rolls:** Combined with the recently conducted Special Intensive Revision (SIR), this data will ensure that no eligible citizen is left behind or deprived of political representation.

2. Resource Allocation and Public Welfare (GS Paper 3)

- **Baseline for the Finance Commission:** The Finance Commission utilizes this demographic profile to determine the states' share in central taxes and the grants-in-aid allocated to local bodies (Panchayats/Municipalities).
- **Targeted Service Delivery:** The outdated 2011 data has become virtually irrelevant for the precise identification of beneficiaries for flagship schemes spanning basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter, to LPG cylinders, Ayushman Bharat, and digital connectivity. The 2027 data will serve as a definitive reality check against the claims on departmental dashboards.

3. Privacy and Inclusion

- **Data Security:** In the era of digital data collection, privacy is a paramount concern. However, the confidentiality of individual data is explicitly guaranteed under the Census Act, 1948.
- **Digital Inclusion:** Along with self-enumeration, the manual method (door-to-door physical form filling) and multilingual options have been retained to ensure that marginalized sections living in remote villages or urban slums are not left behind.

Administrative and Strategic Implications for UPSC

- **Democratization of Data:** The recent omission of critical indicators (such as anaemia, sex ratio, and infant mortality) from NFHS-6 created a significant data gap. The socio-economic categories captured in Census 2027 can go a long way in bridging this deficit.
- **Evidence-Based Policy Making:** Policies formulated without accurate data are akin to "shooting arrows in the dark." This data will serve as the foundational pillar of administrative planning to understand the requirements (such as employment, schools, and hospitals) of a newly added population of over 250 million.

- **A Test for Cooperative Federalism:** The sensitive nature of caste-based data and the contentious issue of delimitation could potentially escalate diplomatic and political tensions between the states and the Centre. The central government will need to maintain utmost sensitivity and transparency in utilizing this data.

Conclusion

Census 2027 is not merely a statistical enumeration; it is the blueprint for the social, economic, and political future of 21st-century India. While the objective of the census during the colonial era was to 'subjugate and rule', its objective in independent India is to achieve 'inclusive development and good governance'. Although the exercise is strategically sensitive due to caste data and delimitation implications, it remains indispensable for reinforcing social justice and democratic representation.

This monumental effort to count the last person standing at the periphery of society through over 3 million (30 lakh) enumerators will only succeed with the active cooperation of its citizens. Ultimately, just as 'My Vote, My Right' is foundational to a democracy, the principle of 'My Enumeration, My Right' must be realized in this mega-counting exercise to truly translate '*Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas*' into reality.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: Consider the following statements regarding Census 2027:

1. It is India's first fully digital census.
2. It provides an option for online self-enumeration.
3. The census is conducted under the provisions of the Census Act, 1948.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: Census 2027 is not merely a demographic exercise but a foundational pillar of democratic governance. Discuss. (10 Marks, 150 Words)

The Oman CEPA, a new gateway for India's exports

India and Oman share one of the oldest trading relationships, with commercial and maritime links dating back thousands of years. From the movement of spices, textiles and frankincense to enduring people-to-people ties, trade has long been a cornerstone of this partnership. The India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), which came into force on June 1, 2026, reaffirms and strengthens this historic relationship by providing a modern framework to deepen trade, investment and economic cooperation for the future.

India is amongst the top suppliers for Oman and bilateral trade has grown from \$8.94 billion in FY2023-24 to \$11.18 billion in FY2025-26, reflecting the growing complementarities between the two economies.

An expansion of India's trade ties

The CEPA comes at a time when India is actively diversifying its trade partnerships and integrating more deeply with global value chains. Following agreements with the United Arab Emirates, Australia, the European Free Trade Association, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and the European Union, the Oman CEPA further strengthens India's presence in a region that is central to its energy security, trade and strategic interests.

The CEPA offers significant opportunities for Indian exporters. Oman has offered duty-free access on 98.08% of its tariff lines, covering 99.38% of India's exports by value. Before the agreement, only 15.33% of India's exports entered Oman at zero duty under the Most Favoured Nation regime. The CEPA, therefore, provides an immediate competitiveness boost across a broad range of sectors. In textiles and apparel, India already commands a 43% share of Oman's woven apparel imports and 31% of knitted apparel imports. The removal of the existing 5% tariff will strengthen the competitiveness of Indian manufacturers against China, which is the other dominant supplier in this market. In the case of chemicals, India already supplies nearly 39% of Oman's inorganic chemical imports, making it



Anant Goenka

President,
The Federation of
Indian Chambers
of Commerce and
Industry (FICCI)

The agreement
boosts exports,
services,
investment and
professional
mobility

one of the leading players in the market. Tariff free access will only amplify this further.

Likewise, engineering goods will also benefit. Oman imports over \$3.7 billion worth of mechanical machinery and \$3.3 billion worth of automobiles annually, where India's market share is only 5% and 2%, respectively. Preferential market access under the CEPA can help Indian exports of engineering goods expand significantly and deepen their presence in Oman's infrastructure, construction and industrial sectors.

In pharmaceuticals, where India holds around 10% market share, the agreement's value lies not in tariff reductions but in regulatory facilitation. Products approved by leading international regulators will benefit from fast-tracked approvals, reducing compliance costs and accelerating market entry. As Oman's pharmaceutical market continues to expand, Indian companies will be well-positioned to capture a larger share. Duty-free access for products such as meat, eggs, honey, butter and processed foods will further strengthen India's already strong position. At the same time, sensitive sectors such as dairy, cereals, edible oils and several agricultural commodities have been kept outside tariff concessions, ensuring that domestic producers remain protected.

Streamlining procedures

Significant trade facilitation measures have been introduced. Oman will accept certificates issued by India's Export Inspection Council (EIC), eliminating duplicative testing and inspections, while also recognising India's organic (NPOP) and halal certification systems. There are dedicated sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) and technical barriers to trade (TBT) provisions, which will enhance regulatory transparency and cooperation, and streamlined customs clearance, including fast-track processing for perishables, which will reduce costs and improve export efficiency.

Another forward-looking aspect of the CEPA is its strong focus on services and professional mobility. Bilateral services trade stood at \$863

million in 2024, with India enjoying a surplus of nearly \$447 million. Yet, India's share in Oman's global services imports remains just over 5%, indicating substantial untapped potential.

Oman has undertaken binding commitments covering professionals in sectors such as accounting, engineering, information technology, health care, education and consulting. Oman also raises the quotas for intra-corporate transferees, facilitating greater mobility of Indian professionals and specialists. Provisions relating to AYUSH and traditional medicine further create opportunities for Indian health care and wellness services in the Gulf.

Strategic location advantage

Beyond trade statistics, the CEPA has a larger strategic significance. Oman occupies a unique position at the crossroads of the Gulf, the Indian Ocean and East Africa. Its ports at Sohar, Duqm and Salalah are emerging as major logistics and industrial hubs. For Indian businesses, Oman can serve not only as a destination market but also as a gateway to the wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region and East African economies.

The India-Oman CEPA once again demonstrates the evolution of India's trade policy from tariff negotiations to comprehensive economic partnerships encompassing goods, services, investment, mobility and regulatory cooperation. Its benefits will extend from textile clusters in Tamil Nadu and the gems and jewellery industry in Gujarat to engineering hubs in Maharashtra and Punjab, and from pharmaceutical manufacturers in Telangana to seafood exporters in Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

The real test will now lie in implementation and utilisation. If businesses actively leverage the opportunities created by the agreement, the CEPA can significantly expand India's export footprint, strengthen economic integration with the Gulf, and support the country's broader ambition of becoming a globally competitive manufacturing and services powerhouse. For India, the agreement opens not only the Omani market but also a broader gateway to the Gulf and beyond.

GS Paper II: International Relations

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Questions: "The India-Oman CEPA represents a convergence of economic diplomacy and strategic interests in West Asia. Examine. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

Context: Commercial and maritime ties between India and Oman span thousands of years. Giving a modern and strategic dimension to this historic partnership, the India-Oman Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) officially

entered into force on June 1, 2026. According to the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), bilateral trade between the two nations has increased from \$8.94 billion in FY 2023-24 to \$11.18 billion in FY 2025-26. This agreement comes at a time when India is diversifying its foreign trade policy and integrating itself with Global Value Chains (GVCs). It marks a new milestone not only for trade but also for India's strategic outreach in West Asia.

Key Points

1. Unprecedented Market Access in Goods

- **Elimination of Tariff Lines:** Oman has offered duty-free access on 98.08% of its tariff lines, which covers 99.38% of India's total exports to Oman by value. Previously, only 15.33% of Indian exports enjoyed zero-duty benefits in Oman.
- **Textiles and Apparel:** India already accounts for a 43% share of Oman's woven fabric imports. The elimination of the current 5% tariff will give Indian manufacturers a significant competitive edge over China in this market.
- **Engineering Goods:** Oman annually imports over \$3.7 billion worth of machinery and \$3.3 billion worth of automotive products, where India's share currently stands at a meager 5% and 2% respectively. This sector is expected to witness a massive surge post-CEPA.
- **Pharmaceuticals:** The value in this sector lies not in tariff cuts, but in regulatory facilitation. Indian medicines approved by major international regulators will now receive 'fast-track' clearance in Oman.
- **Protection of Domestic Industries (Negative List):** Keeping domestic sensitivities in mind, dairy, grains, edible oils, and several agricultural commodities have been excluded from tariff concessions to protect India's domestic producers.

2. Trade Facilitation and Procedural Reforms

- **Recognition of Certificates:** Oman will now accept certificates issued by India's 'Export Inspection Council' (EIC), eliminating the need for double testing and inspection.
- **Organic and Halal Certification:** Oman has recognized India's National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) and Halal certification systems.
- **Fast-Track Customs:** Customs clearance will be accelerated for perishable goods, directly benefiting agricultural and marine product (seafood) exporters.

3. Trade in Services and Professional Mobility

- **Untapped Potential:** In 2024, bilateral services trade stood at \$863 million (with India enjoying a surplus of \$447 million), but India's share in Oman's total services imports is just 5%.
- **Quotas for Professionals:** Oman has made binding commitments for Indian professionals in sectors such as accounting, engineering, IT, healthcare, education, and consultancy, alongside increasing quotas for 'intra-corporate transferees'.

- **Expansion of AYUSH:** Provisions related to traditional medicine and AYUSH have been integrated, opening new avenues for Indian wellness services in the Gulf region.

Strategic and Geographical Significance

- **Gateway to West Asia and Africa:** Oman is located at the crossroads of the Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and East Africa. Its major ports — Sohar, Duqm, and Salalah — are emerging as global logistics hubs. For Indian businesses, Oman is not just a market but a strategic gateway to access the wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and East African economies.
- **Energy Security and Maritime Diplomacy:** Due to its proximity to the Gulf of Oman and the Strait of Hormuz, Oman is extremely critical for India's energy security and Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). India already enjoys robust military and logistical access to the Duqm Port, and this economic pact will further deepen these strategic ties.

Implications for UPSC (Administrative and Economic)

- **Evolution of Foreign Trade Policy (GS Paper 3):** This agreement demonstrates that India's trade policy is no longer limited to mere tariff negotiations; rather, it comprehensively incorporates goods, services, investment, intellectual property, and regulatory cooperation (as seen recently with the UAE, Australia, EFTA, and the UK).
- **Boosting Regional Manufacturing:** The benefits of this pact will ripple across various parts of the country — such as the textile clusters of Tamil Nadu, the gems and jewelry industry of Gujarat, the engineering hubs of Maharashtra and Punjab, the pharmaceuticals of Telangana, and the marine exporters of Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. This will provide a major fillip to 'Make in India'.

Conclusion

The India-Oman CEPA is not merely a trade liberalization agreement between two nations; rather, it is a visionary step that solidifies India's "economic and strategic penetration" into West Asia. The historic customs exemptions granted by Oman will provide Indian exporters with a definitive edge over competitors like China in the global marketplace. However, the true success of this landmark agreement will depend on its implementation and its 'optimum utilization' by Indian industries. If Indian policymakers and the manufacturing sector capitalize on this opportunity effectively, it will accelerate India's journey toward becoming a \$5 trillion economy and establishing itself as a global manufacturing and services powerhouse.