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The Topper's Last Read. Every Morning.

PART I · HEADLINES TO ECONOMY

Tuesday, 18 August 2026

"The Topper's Last Read"

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INSIDE PART I

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How to read the date stamps. Every card carries a green badge showing when the item actually happened. Two cards today carry true dates outside the immediate window — the Census gazette notification of 14 August and the Standing Committee report tabled on 11 August. Both are stated plainly rather than dressed up as today's news, because both are too substantial to omit and neither has been covered here before.

⚠ **The trap in today's news cycle, flagged before you meet it elsewhere.** Searching for the outcome of the BRICS Environment Ministers' Meeting returns an article headlined "BRICS Environment Ministers adopt New Delhi Statement on Environment." **That article is from 27 August 2021** and covers the 7th Ministerial under India's previous chairship. The 12th Ministerial is being held *today*, and no outcome document had been adopted or named at the time of writing. We have therefore built today's BRICS card on the senior officials' meeting of 17 August, which is fully on the record, and left the ministerial outcome for tomorrow.

SECTION 01

Top Headlines — 18 August 2026

1. **Census 2027 will ask every household its caste** — the questionnaire notified under Section 8(1) of the Census Act carries an open column at Question 10, the first full-population caste enumeration since 1931 (gazette 14 Aug; self-enumeration began 17 Aug).
2. **Gujarat High Court refuses to quash an FIR against a journalist** over an article alleging directed LIC investment; police searched his homes in Kerala and Delhi hours later (17 Aug).
3. **Supreme Court lays down bail conditions for foreign nationals in narcotics cases** — passport deposit, registration with the FRRO within a week, and departmental inquiry for officials who verify fake sureties (17 Aug).
4. **UNCCD COP17 opens at Ulaanbaatar with the drought protocol still deadlocked**, India speaking on behalf of the Asia-Pacific Group; the agenda was adopted only in part (17 Aug).
5. **DRI uncovers a ₹2,500 crore rules-of-origin fraud in areca nut imports** routed through a Bangladeshi export processing zone to claim nil duty under SAFTA; nine arrests (16 Aug).
6. **Fifth tranche of the electronics components scheme clears 31 applications** including rare-earth permanent magnets, taking approved investment past the scheme's own target (17 Aug).
7. **RBI announces a ₹1.5 lakh crore overnight variable rate reverse repo auction** for today, citing evolving liquidity conditions (announced 17 Aug, conducted 18 Aug).
8. **SEBI launches an Incident Reporting Portal and a Cyber Suraksha Portal**, aligning market cyber-incident disclosure with the Financial Stability Board format (17 Aug).
9. **India launches its first-ever guide to grasslands and other open natural ecosystems** at COP17 — a direct challenge to the "wasteland" classification (17 Aug).
10. **A new genus and species of blind, unpigmented subterranean eel is described from borewells in Bihar** — the first stygobitic fish ever recorded from the Gangetic basin (17 Aug).
11. **Jharkhand cancels a 2024 recruitment examination and every other exam conducted by the same private agency**, as the Education Ministry separately directs strict compliance with examination protocols (17 Aug).

12. **Kharif sowing crosses 1,000 lakh hectares** even as a deep depression floods Kolkata and a landslide blocks the Jammu-Srinagar highway (14–17 Aug).

SECTION 02

Polity & Governance

GS1

GS2

14 & 17 AUG

Population, Society & Social Justice

Gazette notification 14 August 2026 under Section 8(1), Census Act 1948; self-enumeration for early areas began 17 August

One Open Column: Census 2027 Will Count Caste for the First Time Since 1931

Why in News: The Registrar General of India and Census Commissioner notified the Census 2027 household schedule by gazette on **14 August 2026**, exercising power under **Section 8(1) of the Census Act, 1948**. **Question 10 of 40** reads "Scheduled Caste (SC) / Scheduled Tribe (ST) / Caste" and is an **open column** — no drop-down, no tick-box, no pre-defined list. The enumerator records caste as the respondent declares it. This is the first full-population enumeration of caste in independent India. Self-enumeration for snow-bound and non-synchronous areas opened on **17 August**.

Background: India has counted Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes at every census, but has not counted the general category of caste since **1931**. That gap is why every debate on backward-class reservation rests on a ninety-five-year-old baseline. The **Socio-Economic and Caste Census of 2011** did collect caste data, but it was conducted under executive authority rather than the Census Act, its caste returns were never fully released, and the raw data reportedly contained millions of unclassifiable entries. Census 2027 is India's **16th census overall and the 8th since Independence**, conducted under the Census Act, 1948 and the Census Rules, 1990, and delayed from 2021 by the pandemic.

⚡ KEY FACTS

- **Legal basis:** gazette notification of **14 August 2026** under **Section 8(1) of the Census Act, 1948**, empowering census officers to put the specified questions to all persons.
- **40 questions** in the household schedule, against **29 in Census 2011**. *Reports differ on how many are strictly "new" — one says thirteen, another simply notes the arithmetic difference of eleven. We give the two totals and leave the difference unresolved.*
- **Question 10** is an open column for caste. New questions also cover **digital literacy, place of Covid-19 vaccination, number of bank accounts**, mobile number, Aadhaar, voter ID, passport and driving licence.
- **Two-phase design.** Phase 1, Houselisting and Housing Census, ran 1 April to 30 September 2026. Phase 2 is Population Enumeration.
- **Two reference dates.** For snow-bound and non-synchronous areas the reference moment is **00:00 hrs on 1 October 2026**; for the rest of India it is **00:00 hrs on 1 March 2027**.
- **Early-area schedule:** self-enumeration **17–31 August 2026**; door-to-door enumeration **1–30 September**; revisional round **1–5 October**. Covers the whole of Ladakh, sixteen of twenty districts in Jammu and Kashmir, and roughly 6,903 snow-bound areas in Himachal Pradesh.
- **India's first fully digital census.** Households may self-enumerate online before the enumerator's visit and receive a **Self-Enumeration ID** for verification at the door.

- **Outlay ₹11,718.24 crore**, approved by the Union Cabinet on 12 December 2025; about ₹4,102 crore released to States and Union Territories so far.

MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The strongest argument for counting caste is simply that policy already turns on it. Reservation, sub-categorisation of Other Backward Classes, and the creamy-layer test all require numbers the State does not currently possess, and administering an entitlement to a population whose size is unknown is not evidence-based policy.
- **The open column is the central design decision, and it cuts both ways.** It respects self-description and avoids the State imposing a caste taxonomy on citizens. But with several thousand caste names in circulation, plus sub-castes, synonyms, spelling variants and regional equivalents, an unstructured field creates an enormous post-enumeration classification problem — precisely the problem that made the 2011 caste data unusable.
- The comparison being drawn in commentary is with States that have run structured caste surveys with dozens of questions in a matter of months. The counter-argument is that a State survey and a decennial national census are not the same instrument: the census must be uniform across a continent and legally defensible, which pushes towards minimalism.
- The privacy dimension is real and under-discussed. Aadhaar, voter ID, passport, bank-account count, mobile number and driving licence in a single household record create a linkage risk that the **Census Act's confidentiality provisions** and the **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023** will both be tested against. Census records are protected by statute and are not admissible in evidence, but the design still concentrates identifiers.
- There is a federal and political economy angle. Caste numbers, once published, will reopen the question of the fifty per cent ceiling on reservation laid down in *Indra Sawhney*, and will alter the arithmetic of demands for sub-categorisation within the OBC category. Governments have historically been reluctant to publish such data for exactly this reason.

Let's Remember This Through a Trick

1931 was the last count; Question 10 of 40 is the next one. And the two reference dates: **1 October 2026 for the snow, 1 March 2027 for the rest.** Snow first, because the passes close.

Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements regarding Census 2027:

1. The household schedule was notified under Section 8(1) of the Census Act, 1948.
2. The reference date for the population enumeration in most of India is 1 March 2027.
3. The last full enumeration of caste in a decennial census was in 1941.

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) All three

Answer: (a) 1 and 2 only. The last full caste enumeration was in **1931**.

PYQ LINKAGE

GS1 2022 and 2018 on caste as a determinant of Indian social structure; GS2 2021 on reservation policy and the sub-categorisation debate; Prelims has tested the Census Act and SECC 2011.

A Defamation Complaint and an FIR for Forgery: The Gujarat High Court on Parallel Proceedings

Why in News: On **17 August 2026** the Gujarat High Court **declined to quash** a First Information Report against a journalist arising from an article published in October 2025 that claimed a public insurer had invested about **USD 3.9 billion** in a corporate group on the Central Government's instructions. The insurer and the Department of Financial Services both stated that the documents relied on were never issued or prepared by them. Hours after the order, police searched the journalist's residences in Kerala and Delhi and seized five electronic devices belonging to him, a colleague and his son.

Background: The article relied on documents purportedly issued by the insurer and by a Union department. The corporate group first filed a **private complaint for defamation** and subsequently procured an **FIR alleging cheating and forgery**. The journalist argued this was an impermissible duplication of proceedings on the same facts, and had earlier approached the Supreme Court before withdrawing with liberty to move the High Court. The offences invoked are under the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023**: Section 318(4) for cheating, Sections 336(2) and 336(4) for forgery, and Section 340(2) for using a forged document as genuine.

⚡ KEY FACTS

- Provisions invoked, all under the **Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023**: **Section 318(4)** cheating; **Sections 336(2) and 336(4)** forgery; **Section 340(2)** using as genuine a forged document or electronic record.
- The Court's ratio: though the facts in the private complaint and the FIR may be the same, *"the allegations levelled against the petitioner in the impugned FIR are altogether different and prima facie make out a cognizable offence"*, and a complainant who has filed a defamation complaint *"cannot be precluded from taking recourse to law for the alleged cognizable offence."*
- The Court also held that the existence of the documents *"is under the clouds and they prima facie appear to be forged"*, and that it is for the investigating agency to establish the truth.
- Defamation is non-cognizable and compoundable** and is ordinarily pursued by private complaint; **forgery and cheating are cognizable** and permit police investigation, arrest and search. That difference is the whole of the legal argument.
- The governing test for quashing an FIR remains ***State of Haryana v. Bhajan Lal (1992)***, which lists the categories in which the extraordinary power may be exercised — including where a proceeding is manifestly attended with mala fide or instituted with an ulterior motive.
- The constitutional frame is **Article 19(1)(a)** and the permissible restrictions in **Article 19(2)**, which include defamation but not "inconvenience to a corporation".
- Electronic evidence seized during a search must satisfy **Section 63 of the Bharatiya Sakshya Adhiniyam, 2023** (the successor to Section 65B of the Evidence Act); reports that no **hash value** was furnished at seizure go directly to the integrity of that evidence.
- India's position in press-freedom indices has been a recurring point of criticism, and the mechanism most often identified is not censorship but **process as punishment** — investigation, seizure and travel restriction rather than conviction.

🎯 MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The Court's legal reasoning is orthodox and hard to fault on its own terms: forgery is a distinct offence from defamation, and a person who allegedly fabricates a government document cannot claim immunity because the fabrication was published as journalism. If the documents are forged, the FIR is proper.
- The difficulty is systemic rather than doctrinal. If publishing a document that an institution later disowns can convert a defamation dispute into a cognizable forgery investigation, the practical consequence is that any journalist relying on a leaked

document faces criminal process rather than a civil suit. The chilling effect operates at the point of investigation, long before any finding of guilt.

- The counter-consideration deserves equal weight: fabricated official documents are a genuine and growing harm, and a legal system that could not investigate them would be defenceless against disinformation dressed as reporting. The problem is designing a filter that separates the two without pre-judging the story.
- The same-day searches raise a distinct question about proportionality and sequencing. Seizing devices belonging to a colleague and a family member reaches material well beyond the alleged offence, and the reported absence of a hash value at seizure creates an evidentiary vulnerability that will surface at trial.
- For answer writing, the honest framing is that press freedom in India is rarely curtailed by prohibition. It is curtailed by the cost, duration and intrusiveness of lawful process — which is why reform proposals focus on procedural safeguards for journalists rather than on new speech protections.

Let's Remember This Through a Trick

Defamation is non-cognizable and private; forgery is cognizable and police-led. That single distinction converts a civil-flavoured dispute into a search warrant. And the quashing test is always *Bhajan Lal*.

Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. Defamation is a non-cognizable offence ordinarily pursued through a private complaint.
2. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 replaced the Indian Penal Code, 1860.
3. Defamation is an express ground of restriction under Article 19(2).

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) All three

Answer: (d) All three.

PYQ LINKAGE

GS2 2023 and 2019 on freedom of the press and reasonable restrictions; GS2 2018 on the misuse of criminal process.

GS2

17 AUG

Governance — Institutions & Accountability

17 August 2026 · Jharkhand Government decision; Education Ministry direction to the National Testing Agency the same day

Cancelling an Examination, and Every Examination That Agency Ever Ran

Why in News: On **17 August 2026** the Government of Jharkhand cancelled its 2024 Combined Graduate Level examination and, more strikingly, **every other recruitment examination conducted by the same private agency**. The same day, the Union Education Minister met the Secretary (Higher Education) and the Director General of the **National Testing Agency** and directed strict compliance with established examination protocols. Read together, the two decisions describe a system still working through a crisis of examination integrity.

Background: India conducts competitive examinations at a scale no other country attempts — tens of millions of candidates a year across national entrance tests, staff selection and State public service commissions — and the delivery of those examinations has been progressively outsourced to private technology vendors. A sequence of paper leaks and irregularities culminating in 2024 produced the **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024**, and a high-

level committee under a former ISRO chairman recommended reforms to the National Testing Agency's structure, security and transparency. The Jharkhand decision applies a different and blunter remedy: cancelling not one examination but everything a compromised vendor touched.

KEY FACTS

- The **Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024** makes offences **cognizable, non-bailable and non-compoundable**, with imprisonment of three to five years and fines up to ₹10 lakh for individuals.
- For **organised crime** involving service providers, the Act prescribes imprisonment of five to ten years and a fine of not less than **₹1 crore**, and permits recovery of the proportionate cost of the examination from the service provider.
- A service provider found culpable may be **barred from conducting public examinations for four years**.
- The Act notably **does not penalise the candidate** as such; it targets organised leaks, impersonation rings and colluding service providers.
- The **National Testing Agency** was established in 2017 as an autonomous body under the Department of Higher Education to conduct entrance examinations; a high-level committee constituted in 2024 recommended reforms to its examination process, data security and governance.
- Recruitment to State services is conducted by **State Public Service Commissions under Article 315**, and by State staff selection commissions constituted by State law; their examinations are outside the Union's administrative control, which is why remedies differ across States.
- The remedy adopted in Jharkhand — voiding *all* examinations conducted by one vendor — is unusual, and its consequence falls on candidates who did nothing wrong.
- Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment; a compromised examination is a direct injury to that guarantee, which is the constitutional reason cancellation is sometimes unavoidable.

MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The structural cause is outsourcing without commensurate accountability. Examination delivery involves question-paper generation, printing, transport, storage, centre allotment, biometric verification and result processing, and each handover is an attack surface. The State retains responsibility for the outcome while contracting away control of the process.
- Blanket cancellation is a defensible but brutal instrument. It restores the integrity of the selection but imposes the entire cost of institutional failure on candidates — often candidates who have crossed age limits, spent years preparing, or foregone other employment. Any answer should name this as a distributive injustice, not merely an inconvenience.
- The deterrent design of the 2024 Act is sound in targeting organised networks rather than individual candidates, but its efficacy depends on investigative capacity in the States, since most leaks occur in State-level recruitment rather than national tests.
- The deeper problem is the ratio of aspirants to posts. When the reward for a leaked paper is a lifetime of secure employment and the probability of legitimate success is a fraction of a per cent, the incentive to cheat is structural. Examination security is necessary but cannot substitute for employment generation.
- The forward-looking reform direction is technological and procedural: computer-based testing with randomised question delivery, encrypted last-minute paper transmission, and above all a published, auditable chain of custody. Transparency about the process is the only durable source of public confidence in the result.

Let's Remember This Through a Trick

The 2024 Act's three numbers: **3 to 5 years for the individual, 5 to 10 for organised crime, ₹1 crore minimum fine and a 4-year ban for the service provider**. And note the omission: **the candidate is not the target**.

Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements about the Public Examinations (Prevention of Unfair Means) Act, 2024:

1. Offences under the Act are cognizable and non-bailable.
2. A service provider found culpable may be barred from conducting public examinations for four years.
3. The Act prescribes imprisonment for candidates found using unfair means.

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) All three

Answer: (a) 1 and 2 only. The Act targets organised leaks and service providers, not candidates as such.

 PYQ LINKAGE

GS2 2022 and 2020 on statutory and regulatory bodies and on transparency and accountability in governance; GS4 has used examination malpractice as an ethics case.

THEIAS AKADEMIA Polity held at three cards for the fourth consecutive edition. The Supreme Court's narcotics-bail directions of 17 August are substantial enough to have been a fourth — so they appear below under Internal Security, where their subject matter genuinely belongs. theiasakademia.com

SECTION 03

Internal Security

GS3

GS2

17 AUG

Narcotics, Foreigners & Criminal Justice

17 August 2026 · Supreme Court, Justices Sanjay Karol and Augustine George Masih

Passport, Surety, FRRO: The Supreme Court Writes a Bail Protocol for Foreign Nationals

Why in News: On **17 August 2026** a Bench of **Justices Sanjay Karol and Augustine George Masih** laid down a set of conditions to be imposed when bail is granted to foreign nationals in cases under the **Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act**. The occasion was a case in which a foreign national obtained bail and absconded, with concerns that the sureties furnished were fake. The directions are unusually operational for a bail order — they reach into verification timelines, departmental accountability and the creation of a national database.

Background: Bail under the NDPS Act is already governed by **Section 37**, which imposes twin conditions for commercial-quantity offences: the court must be satisfied that there are reasonable grounds for believing the accused is not guilty, and that he is not likely to commit an offence while on bail. Even so, the court retains discretion over the *conditions* attached to bail, and it is here that flight risk for a foreign national differs qualitatively from that of a resident. A person with no domicile, no traceable assets and a foreign passport can leave the jurisdiction in a way a local accused cannot, and the surety system — which relies on a solvent local person standing behind the accused — is the weakest link.

⚡ KEY FACTS — THE CONDITIONS LAID DOWN

- **Deposit of passport** with the jurisdictional court, and **no travel outside India** without prior permission.
- **Registration with the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) within one week** of release.
- Ordinarily **two sureties**, each for the same amount as the bail bond.
- The accused's Indian residential address and contact details must be **physically re-verified within three days** of the bail order, even if already verified during investigation.
- An **affidavit disclosing the source of income and funds in India** and bank account details.
- Authorities are to create a **central database of foreign accused persons and their sureties**.
- **Departmental inquiry against the central or State officials who verified a surety** subsequently found to be fake — the accountability provision, and the most novel part of the order.
- Statutory context: **Section 37 NDPS Act** (twin conditions for bail in commercial-quantity cases); the **Foreigners Act, 1946** and the Registration of Foreigners Act, 1939, under which the FRRO operates; and the **Immigration and Foreigners Act, 2025**, which consolidated the older foreigners legislation.
- The NDPS Act classifies quantities as **small, intermediate and commercial**, with punishment and bail stringency scaling accordingly; the **Narcotics Control Bureau** is the nodal agency.

🎯 MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The order addresses a real and under-recognised gap. The surety system was designed for a society in which a local guarantor's reputation and property were meaningful security. It transfers poorly to a defendant with no local stake, and the routine acceptance of unverified sureties has made bail conditions nominal in exactly the cases where flight risk is highest.
- The accountability direction is the significant innovation. Making the verifying official personally answerable converts verification from a paper formality into a duty with consequences — the same logic that underlies attestation liability elsewhere in administrative law.
- The civil-liberties objection must be stated fairly. Bail is not punishment, and conditions that make release practically unusable — passport surrender plus two solvent sureties plus a funds affidavit — can amount to denial of bail by other means, particularly for a poor foreign national such as a trafficking courier who is himself often a victim.
- There is a proportionality question the order does not fully resolve: the same conditions apply whether the accused faces a small-quantity or a commercial-quantity charge, and NDPS jurisprudence has moved towards treating consumers and addicts differently from traffickers. Uniform conditions risk collapsing that distinction.
- The database proposal engages data-protection principles. A central register of accused persons and their sureties is a legitimate law-enforcement tool, but it holds data on people not yet convicted, including sureties who are not accused of anything, and will need purpose limitation and retention rules to survive scrutiny.

💡 Let's Remember This Through a Trick

Passport in, FRRO in a week, address in three days, two sureties, one affidavit. Five conditions, and a sixth that bites the verifier rather than the accused.

🎯 Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. Section 37 of the NDPS Act imposes twin conditions for the grant of bail in commercial quantity cases.
2. The Foreigners Regional Registration Office functions under the Ministry of External Affairs.
3. The NDPS Act classifies quantities as small, intermediate and commercial.

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) All three

Answer: (c) 1 and 3 only. The FRRO functions under the **Ministry of Home Affairs**, not External Affairs.

 PYQ LINKAGE

GS3 2019 and 2023 on drug trafficking, its linkages with organised crime, and border management; GS2 on the rights of the accused under Article 21.

SECTION 04

International Relations

GS2

GS3

17 AUG

International Conventions & Negotiation

17 August 2026 · UNCCD COP17 opening plenary, Ulaanbaatar; India spoke for the Asia-Pacific Group

The Drought Protocol Nobody Would Sign: What Is Actually Being Negotiated at COP17

Why in News: The opening plenary of **UNCCD COP17** at Ulaanbaatar on **17 August 2026** revealed the shape of the fight. The central unresolved question, carried over from COP16 at Riyadh, is whether the world should adopt a **legally binding global drought protocol** — pressed by the African Group — or a non-binding framework, preferred by others. **India spoke on behalf of the Asia-Pacific Group**, calling for an outcome on drought that is "*ambitious, balanced, practical and durable*." Tellingly, the plenary **adopted the agenda only in part**: items on gender, migration, drought and rangelands policy, and civil-society participation were set aside for further consultation.

Background: The UNCCD is the only one of the three Rio Conventions without a dedicated financial mechanism of its own, and drought has historically been its weakest limb — addressed through national action programmes and voluntary initiatives rather than binding obligation. At COP16 in Riyadh the African Group pushed for a protocol with legal force, arguing that voluntary frameworks have produced pledges without delivery. The proposal was not resolved and was deferred to COP17. The Executive Secretary has framed this session as the "**COP of implementation**."

⚡ KEY FACTS — THE NUMBERS BEHIND THE ARGUMENT

- **About 1 billion hectares** of land restoration has been pledged globally by 2030, against **1.5 to 2 billion hectares** actually degraded — the pledge does not even cover the problem.
- **Roughly 40% of countries do not report land-degradation data at all**, which makes the global figure itself an estimate.
- **About 1.8 billion people** are affected by drought.
- The **Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership**, launched at COP16, attracted pledges of **over USD 12 billion**.

- On business as usual, the degraded area is projected to **double by 2050**, against a population projected to exceed **10 billion**.
- **77% of Mongolia's land** — the host country's — is affected by desertification or degradation.
- The **European Union's** stated position is that redirecting existing finance matters as much as increasing it, and it has called for **phasing out or repurposing environmentally harmful subsidies**.
- COP17 runs **17–28 August 2026** under the theme "**Restoring Land, Restoring Hope**", alongside the UN International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists.

MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The binding-versus-voluntary question is the oldest argument in environmental multilateralism, and drought is an unusually hard case for it. A binding protocol creates obligation but risks non-ratification by the states whose participation matters; a voluntary framework secures universality at the cost of enforceability. The African Group's position rests on the observation that the voluntary route has already been tried.
- The arithmetic is the strongest argument for urgency: pledges of one billion hectares against one and a half to two billion hectares degraded means that even *full delivery* of every existing promise would leave the problem substantially unsolved. This is not an implementation gap; it is an ambition gap.
- India's choice to speak for the Asia-Pacific Group rather than only for itself is a deliberate positioning. Coordinated regional statements carry more weight in UNCCD processes than national interventions, and the formulation used — "ambitious, balanced, practical and durable" — is diplomatic language for a framework strong enough to matter but flexible enough to be accepted.
- The partial adoption of the agenda is the most revealing procedural detail. When gender, migration and civil-society participation are set aside for consultation at the opening, it usually signals that the substantive fight will be about who has standing to be heard, not only about what is decided.
- The migration linkage deserves attention in any answer. Land degradation is among the strongest drivers of distress migration, yet it sits in a convention with no finance mechanism, while climate migration is contested in the UNFCCC and refugee law does not recognise environmental displacement at all. The gap between the phenomenon and its governance is the point.

MEMORY TECHNIQUE — RETURNING TOPIC

Yesterday we covered COP17 as an **institution** — the third Rio Convention, LDN, India's 26 million hectare pledge. Today it returns as a **negotiation**, because the opening plenary showed what is actually contested. Hold the pair: *the convention is about land, but the fight is about drought — and whether a promise should be binding*.

Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. The Riyadh Global Drought Resilience Partnership was launched at UNCCD COP16.
2. The UNCCD has a dedicated financial mechanism comparable to the Green Climate Fund.
3. The theme of UNCCD COP17 is "Restoring Land, Restoring Hope".

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) All three

Answer: (c) 1 and 3 only. The UNCCD has no dedicated fund of its own comparable to the GCF.

PYQ LINKAGE

GS2

GS3

17-18 AUG

Global Groupings & Digital Governance

17 August 2026 · 7th BRICS ICT Working Group, Pune; Digital Public Infrastructure Focus Group meets today

The BRICS Institute of Future Networks: A Standards Body You Have Not Heard Of

Why in News: The **7th Meeting of the BRICS Working Group for Cooperation in Information and Communication Technologies** opened at **Pune on 17 August 2026**, inaugurated by the Secretary, Department of Telecommunications. The substantive event was a meeting of the **Council of the BRICS Institute of Future Networks**, which reviewed its designated national branches and received updates from study groups on **artificial intelligence, next-generation communications, internet applications in Industry 4.0, and electromagnetic field exposure**. Today, **18 August**, the **Focus Group on Digital Public Infrastructure** and the **Digital BRICS Task Force** meet.

Background: The BRICS Institute of Future Networks was agreed at the 2015 Ufa summit and established with a headquarters in Shenzhen and national branches in member states, as a research and standards-coordination body for next-generation telecommunications. Its existence reflects a strategic judgment shared across the grouping: that technical standards for telecommunications, artificial intelligence and network architecture are set in a small number of Western-anchored bodies, and that emerging economies which do not participate in standard-setting become permanent standard-takers. India's addition of a **Digital Public Infrastructure focus group** is the distinctively Indian contribution to this agenda.

⚡ KEY FACTS

- The **BRICS ICT Track** runs at **Pune, 17–21 August 2026**, under the theme "**Innovate, Cooperate and Transform (ICT) for a Resilient Future**", comprising the 7th ICT Working Group, the Digital BRICS Forum and Expo, and the **12th BRICS Communications Ministers' Meeting on 21 August**.
- The **BRICS Institute of Future Networks (BIFN)** operates through **designated national branches** in member countries and a Council that coordinates them.
- BIFN study group subjects reported this session: **artificial intelligence, next-generation communications, internet applications in Industry 4.0, and electromagnetic field exposure**.
- **18 August:** meetings of the **Focus Group on Digital Public Infrastructure** and the **Digital BRICS Task Force**.
- India's DPI stack — identity, payments and data exchange, commonly summarised as Aadhaar, UPI and DEPA — is the reference model India promotes internationally, and was a headline deliverable of its G20 presidency.
- Global standard-setting for telecommunications runs primarily through the **International Telecommunication Union**, a UN specialised agency headquartered at Geneva, and through industry bodies such as **3GPP**; participation in these determines whose patents become essential.
- India's **Bharat 6G Vision** targets domestic contribution to global 6G standards, and India has committed to contributing a defined share of 6G intellectual property.
- The 18th BRICS Summit is scheduled for **New Delhi, 12–13 September 2026**.

- Standard-setting is where technological sovereignty is actually decided, and it is almost entirely absent from popular coverage. A country that does not shape a standard pays licence fees to those who did, for the lifetime of the technology. This is the quiet economic logic behind BIFN.
- The choice facing India is a genuine strategic dilemma. Working through BRICS bodies builds influence in a grouping where India has convening power, but the same bodies risk fragmenting global standards into competing blocs — and a fragmented standards environment raises costs for exactly the manufacturing base India is trying to build.
- Digital Public Infrastructure is India's strongest export in this space precisely because it is not a product but an architecture: open, interoperable, publicly governed rails on which private services compete. Promoting it through BRICS extends a model that has already been adopted in several developing countries.
- The electromagnetic field exposure study group is worth noting for the reason it exists: dense small-cell deployment for 5G and 6G raises public-health questions that are scientifically settled but politically live, and coordinated position-taking is an attempt to prevent regulatory divergence.
- The honest limitation is capacity. BRICS members have divergent telecommunications architectures, incompatible data-governance philosophies — from state-controlled to relatively open — and no common market. Coordination on technical standards is achievable; coordination on data governance is not, and answers should not conflate the two.

Let's Remember This Through a Trick

He who writes the standard collects the royalty. That is the whole case for BIFN in one line. And for India's DPI pitch: *identity, payments, data exchange — three rails, publicly owned, privately used.*

Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. The International Telecommunication Union is a specialised agency of the United Nations headquartered at Geneva.
2. The BRICS Institute of Future Networks operates through designated national branches in member countries.
3. The 18th BRICS Summit is scheduled to be held in New Delhi in September 2026.

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) All three

Answer: (d) All three.

PYQ LINKAGE

GS2 2023 on the significance of groupings for India; GS3 2022 on developing new technology and India's participation in global standard-setting.

SECTION 05

Economy & Finance

16 August 2026 · Directorate of Revenue Intelligence, Department of Revenue · month-long operation

The Betel Nut Route: How a Container Swap in Bangladesh Cost ₹2,500 Crore

Why in News: On **16 August 2026** the **Directorate of Revenue Intelligence** concluded a month-long operation against a syndicate importing areca nuts — betel nuts — into India by disguising their origin. Areca nuts sourced from **Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia** were shipped to an **export processing zone in Bangladesh**, where containers and bags were physically swapped; the syndicate then obtained **Certificates of Origin from Bangladeshi authorities** and re-exported the consignments to India as Bangladeshi-origin goods, claiming duty-free entry under **SAFTA**. The estimated revenue loss exceeds **₹2,500 crore**. Nine arrests were made, with about ₹75 lakh in cash and roughly 160 metric tonnes of areca nuts seized.

Background: The economics are entirely explained by one number. Imported areca nut ordinarily attracts **100% Basic Customs Duty** — among the highest tariff walls in the Indian schedule, maintained to protect growers in Karnataka, Kerala, Assam and Meghalaya. Areca nut genuinely originating in Bangladesh, however, enters **duty-free under the South Asian Free Trade Area**, provided it satisfies the agreement's **rules of origin**. A tariff differential of a hundred percentage points between two neighbouring sources is an almost irresistible invitation to origin fraud, and the fraud takes the simplest possible form: move the goods through the favoured country and buy a certificate.

⚡ KEY FACTS

- **Duty arbitrage:** areca nut normally attracts **100% Basic Customs Duty**; eligible Bangladesh-origin areca nut is **fully exempt under SAFTA** subject to rules of origin.
- Estimated potential revenue loss **over ₹2,500 crore; nine arrests**; seizures of about **₹75 lakh cash** and roughly **160 metric tonnes** of areca nuts from a live consignment.
- **SAFTA** — the South Asian Free Trade Area — was signed in **2004** at the 12th SAARC Summit in Islamabad and came into force in **2006**; members are the eight SAARC states.
- Rules of origin confer economic nationality either by the goods being **wholly obtained** in a country or by **substantial transformation** there, tested through change in tariff heading, a value-addition threshold, or specified processing.
- India's domestic instrument is **CAROTAR, 2020** — Customs (Administration of Rules of Origin under Trade Agreements) Rules — framed under **Section 28DA of the Customs Act, 1962**, which places the onus on the *importer* to possess origin information and permits customs to deny preferential treatment pending verification.
- The **Directorate of Revenue Intelligence** is the apex anti-smuggling intelligence agency under the Central Board of Indirect Taxes and Customs, Department of Revenue.
- Areca nut is a politically sensitive commodity: it is a major plantation crop in Karnataka, Kerala, Assam and Meghalaya, and cheap imports directly depress domestic grower prices, which is why the tariff is set so high.
- A **minimum import price** mechanism has also been used for areca nut, alongside the tariff, as a further barrier.

🎯 MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The case is a textbook demonstration that **a high tariff is only as strong as the origin regime behind it**. Protection for domestic growers was nullified not by trade negotiation but by a container swap and a piece of paper, and no amount of tariff increase would have prevented it.
- The structural weakness of preferential trade agreements is exposed here. A free trade area between countries with very different external tariffs creates an incentive to route goods through the member with the lowest barrier — the classic **trade deflection** problem, which rules of origin exist precisely to prevent and which they prevent only as well as they are administered.

- The certification question is the sharpest institutional issue. A Certificate of Origin is only as reliable as the issuing authority in the exporting country, and India has no jurisdiction over that authority. CAROTAR's response — shifting the burden to the importer and permitting independent verification — is a rational adaptation to a problem India cannot solve at source.
- There is a regional-diplomacy cost that a good answer will name. Aggressive origin verification against a neighbour's certificates strains a trading relationship India has political reasons to nurture, and SAFTA is already the least utilised major trade agreement in Asia. Enforcement and neighbourhood policy pull in opposite directions.
- Note the continuity with the wider debate: a foreign trade report earlier this month placed India among the jurisdictions of elevated transshipment risk. India's credibility in rejecting that characterisation rests on demonstrating exactly this kind of enforcement — which makes the DRI action diplomatically as well as fiscally useful.

💡 Let's Remember This Through a Trick

100% duty from Jakarta, zero from Dhaka — the whole fraud is contained in that sentence. And the defence: **CAROTAR 2020 under Section 28DA** makes the *importer* prove where the nut grew.

🎯 Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. SAFTA came into force in 2006 following the agreement signed at the 12th SAARC Summit.
2. CAROTAR, 2020 places the onus on the importer to possess information regarding the origin of goods.
3. The Directorate of Revenue Intelligence functions under the Ministry of Commerce and Industry.

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) All three

Answer: (a) 1 and 2 only. The DRI functions under the **Department of Revenue, Ministry of Finance**.

📄 PYQ LINKAGE

GS2 2016 and 2022 on SAARC and regional trade agreements; GS3 2020 on India's external sector and the effectiveness of tariff protection.

GS3

17 AUG

Industrial Policy & Critical Minerals

17 August 2026 · Source: Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology — fifth tranche approvals

Rare-Earth Magnets on the Approved List: The Electronics Components Scheme Overshoots Its Target

Why in News: On **17 August 2026** the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology approved **31 applications** in the fifth tranche of the **Electronics Components Manufacturing Scheme**. Direct investment is **₹6,844 crore**, rising to **₹7,877 crore** with enhancements from existing applicants, against projected production of **₹82,243 crore** and employment of **9,588**. Cumulatively the scheme has now approved **106 applications** across about 30 products in 15 States, with approved investment of **₹69,548 crore against a scheme target of ₹59,350 crore** — the target has been exceeded. The product list includes **rare-earth permanent magnets**.

Background: India assembles a very large volume of electronics but imports most of what goes inside them. The production-linked incentive schemes of recent years succeeded in attracting final assembly — mobile phone production

rose sharply — while leaving the component ecosystem largely imported, which meant high export figures with modest domestic value addition. The Electronics Components Manufacturing Scheme is the deliberate correction: it targets the passive and sub-assembly layer — display modules, camera modules, connectors, enclosures, capacitors, transducers, antennas — that determines how much of a device's value is actually created in India.

⚡ KEY FACTS

- **Fifth tranche:** 31 applications approved; direct investment **₹6,844 crore**, **₹7,877 crore** including enhancements; projected production **₹82,243 crore**; employment **9,588**; spread across **10 States**, with Tamil Nadu (7), Maharashtra (6) and Haryana (6) leading.
- **Cumulative: 106 applications**, about **30 products**, **15 States**, approved investment **₹69,548 crore** against a scheme target of **₹59,350 crore**.
- Approved product categories include capital goods, camera modules, display modules, anode material, enclosures, connectors, transducers, optical transceivers, relays, antennas, capacitors, coils, filters — and **rare-earth permanent magnets**.
- **Rare-earth permanent magnets** — principally neodymium-iron-boron and samarium-cobalt — are essential to electric vehicle traction motors, wind turbine generators, hard drives, speakers and precision-guided munitions.
- China dominates rare-earth **processing and magnet manufacture** to a far greater degree than it dominates mining, and has used export controls on magnets and processing technology as an instrument of policy.
- India holds significant **monazite** reserves in the beach sands of Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, but monazite is thorium-bearing and its handling is regulated under atomic energy law — a structural constraint on private participation.
- The **National Critical Mineral Mission** and **IREL (India) Limited** are the policy and public-sector vehicles; a dedicated scheme for rare-earth magnet manufacturing has been under consideration.
- Related architecture: the **India Semiconductor Mission**, the PLI schemes for large-scale electronics and IT hardware, **SPECS** and the modified **Electronics Manufacturing Clusters** scheme.

🎯 MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The scheme addresses the correct problem. Assembly-led electronics growth produces impressive gross export numbers with thin domestic value addition, because the imported bill of materials dominates. Moving up into components is the only route to genuine value capture, and it is slower and less photogenic than assembly.
- **Rare-earth permanent magnets are the single most strategically significant entry on the list**, and deserve to be the focus of any answer. They are a chokepoint in electric mobility and wind energy, they are concentrated in one country's processing capacity, and export restrictions on them have already disrupted automotive production internationally.
- The honest constraint is that magnet manufacture is downstream of separation and metal-making, and India's weakness is in *separation* rather than in magnet assembly. Approving magnet plants without securing separated oxide supply risks recreating the assembly-import dependency one layer higher up the chain.
- Exceeding the investment target is a genuine success indicator but should be read carefully: approved investment is not disbursed investment, and incentive schemes are historically characterised by a substantial gap between sanction and commissioning. The measure that matters is production actually realised.
- The regional concentration — three States accounting for the majority of this tranche — raises a balanced-regional-development question. Electronics clusters exhibit strong agglomeration economies, so concentration is efficient; but it deepens inter-State divergence in industrial employment, which is a legitimate federal concern.

💡 Let's Remember This Through a Trick

Mining is not the chokepoint; separation and magnets are. China's leverage is downstream, not underground. And India's own constraint has a name: **monazite is thorium-bearing**, so rare earths here run into atomic energy law.

 Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. Neodymium is used in permanent magnets for electric vehicle motors and wind turbines.
2. Monazite, a major Indian source of rare earths, also contains thorium.
3. China's dominance in rare earths is greater in processing and magnet manufacture than in mining.

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) All three

Answer: (d) All three.

 PYQ LINKAGE

GS3 2023 on critical minerals and supply-chain security; GS3 2019 on the effectiveness of production-linked incentives and industrial policy.

GS3

17-18 AUG

Monetary Policy & Liquidity Management

Announced 17 August 2026 for conduct on 18 August · Source: Reserve Bank of India

₹1.5 Lakh Crore Withdrawn for a Day: Reading an RBI Liquidity Operation

Why in News: The Reserve Bank announced on **17 August 2026** an **overnight Variable Rate Reverse Repo auction of up to ₹1.5 lakh crore** to be conducted **today, 18 August**, citing a review of prevailing and evolving liquidity conditions. It is a routine operation, and that is precisely why it is worth understanding: this is the machinery through which monetary policy is transmitted between meetings, and it is tested far more often than the headline repo rate.

Background: The **Liquidity Adjustment Facility** is the corridor within which the RBI manages the overnight money market. The **repo rate** is the policy rate at which banks borrow from the RBI; the **Standing Deposit Facility** rate forms the *floor* of the corridor, at which banks park surplus funds without collateral; and the **Marginal Standing Facility** rate forms the *ceiling*, at which banks borrow against their statutory liquidity holdings. The RBI's operating objective is to keep the weighted average call rate close to the repo rate. When the banking system carries a surplus, that objective requires *absorbing* liquidity — and a Variable Rate Reverse Repo is the instrument for doing so, with banks bidding competitively for the rate rather than being offered a fixed one.

 KEY FACTS

- The operation: an **overnight VRRR auction of up to ₹1.5 lakh crore**, announced 17 August, conducted 18 August 2026.
- The **LAF corridor**: **MSF rate** at the top, **repo rate** in the middle as the policy rate, **SDF rate** at the bottom. The corridor is conventionally 25 basis points on either side of the repo.
- The **Standing Deposit Facility**, introduced in April 2022, allows the RBI to absorb liquidity **without offering collateral** — its key advantage over the old reverse repo.

- **Reverse repo absorbs** liquidity from the system; **repo injects** it. In a *variable rate* auction the quantum is announced and banks bid on rate, so the cut-off reveals how badly banks want to park funds.
- The operating target is the **Weighted Average Call Rate (WACR)** in the uncollateralised overnight market.
- Distinguish **frictional liquidity** — short-lived swings from tax outflows, government cash balances and currency demand — from **durable liquidity**, altered by forex intervention and open market operations. VRRR addresses the former; OMO sales address the latter.
- The **Monetary Policy Committee** met 3–5 August 2026 and held the **repo rate at 5.25%** with a **neutral stance**; growth for FY27 was revised up to **6.7%** and CPI inflation projected at **5.0%**.
- Under **Section 45ZL of the RBI Act, 1934**, the minutes of an MPC meeting must be published **on the fourteenth day after the meeting** — which for a 5 August decision falls on **19 August 2026**.

MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The instruction to draw from this is that monetary policy is not made eight times a year at the MPC; it is executed continuously through liquidity operations. A central bank that holds the repo rate steady while systematically absorbing surplus liquidity is tightening in substance without tightening in name.
- The context makes the operation legible. The FCNR(B) swap window closed early this month after mobilising a very large volume of foreign currency, and the rupee counterpart of those inflows adds to system liquidity. Absorbing it through VRRR is the sterilisation leg of that transaction.
- Variable-rate auctions are informationally superior to fixed-rate windows. The cut-off rate at which banks are willing to park funds reveals the true tightness or looseness of the system in a way an administered rate cannot, which is why the RBI has shifted decisively towards them.
- The transmission question remains the perennial one. India's monetary transmission is incomplete because a large share of bank deposits is fixed-rate and term, while the external benchmark linkage applies mainly to newer retail loans. Liquidity management shortens the lag but does not remove the structural friction.
- For answer writing, hold the distinction between *stance*, *rate* and *liquidity* as three separate levers. A neutral stance with an unchanged rate and active absorption is a coherent position, and being able to say so precisely distinguishes a strong economy answer from a vague one.

Let's Remember This Through a Trick

MSF is the ceiling, repo the middle, SDF the floor — and SDF needs no collateral, which is why it replaced the old reverse repo as the floor. **Reverse repo absorbs, repo injects.**

Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. The Standing Deposit Facility allows the RBI to absorb liquidity without providing collateral.
2. The Marginal Standing Facility rate forms the floor of the liquidity adjustment facility corridor.
3. In a Variable Rate Reverse Repo auction, banks bid for the rate at which they will park funds with the RBI.

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) All three

Answer: (c) 1 and 3 only. The MSF rate is the **ceiling**; the SDF rate is the floor.

PYQ LINKAGE

GS3 2021: "Do you agree with the view that steady GDP growth and low inflation have left the Indian economy in good shape?"; Prelims has repeatedly tested the LAF, SDF and MSF.

GS3

GS2

17 AUG

Financial Regulation & Cybersecurity

17 August 2026 · Securities and Exchange Board of India, Cyber Defence Symposium

From Secure Firm to Resilient Ecosystem: SEBI's Two New Cyber Portals

Why in News: At its Cyber Defence Symposium on **17 August 2026**, SEBI launched an **Incident Reporting Portal** and a **Cyber Suraksha Portal**. The first makes cyber-incident disclosure by market intermediaries structured and timely and aligns it with the **Financial Stability Board's** reporting format; the second is a central hub for threat intelligence, vulnerability warnings and incident insights across the securities market. The Chairman framed the shift precisely: the question must move from *"is this organisation secure"* to *"is the broader ecosystem resilient"*. A **RegTech Lab** was inaugurated the same day at the National Institute of Securities Markets.

Background: Financial-market cybersecurity is a collective-action problem. An exchange, a depository, a clearing corporation and thousands of brokers are interconnected, so an intrusion at a small intermediary can propagate into systemic disruption. Firms nonetheless under-report incidents, because disclosure carries reputational and regulatory cost while the benefit accrues to competitors. Regulators respond by mandating reporting and pooling the intelligence — which is exactly what these two portals do. SEBI had already issued a consolidated **Cybersecurity and Cyber Resilience Framework** for regulated entities.

⚡ KEY FACTS

- Two portals launched on 17 August 2026: the **Incident Reporting Portal**, structuring and aligning incident disclosure with the **Financial Stability Board** format, and the **Cyber Suraksha Portal** for threat intelligence, vulnerability warnings, policy measures and incident insights.
- A **RegTech Lab** was inaugurated at the **National Institute of Securities Markets** campus at Patalganga, Maharashtra.
- SEBI was established in 1988 and given statutory status by the **SEBI Act, 1992**; it regulates the securities market and protects investor interests.
- The **Financial Stability Board** is the international body that monitors and makes recommendations on the global financial system, established after the 2009 London G20 summit as successor to the Financial Stability Forum; India is a member.
- Domestic cyber architecture: **CERT-In** under MeitY is the national nodal agency for incident response under the IT Act, 2000, and its 2022 directions prescribe reporting of specified incidents within **six hours**; **NCIIPC** protects critical information infrastructure, a category that expressly includes the financial sector.
- India's financial-stability coordination body is the **Financial Stability and Development Council**, chaired by the Union Finance Minister, with a sub-committee chaired by the RBI Governor.
- SEBI's **Closing Auction Session**, introduced on **3 August 2026**, will continue, the Chairman confirmed.
- The **Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023** imposes independent breach-notification obligations on data fiduciaries, which will interact with these sectoral requirements.

🎯 MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The reframing from firm-level security to ecosystem resilience is the substantive point and should anchor any answer. Security asks whether an intrusion can be prevented; resilience asks whether the system continues to function when prevention fails. For

market infrastructure, where continuity of settlement matters more than any individual firm's integrity, resilience is the correct objective.

- Mandatory structured reporting solves the under-disclosure problem by removing the competitive disadvantage of honesty — if everyone must report, reporting is no longer a signal of weakness. Alignment with the FSB format additionally makes Indian data comparable internationally, which matters for cross-border firms and for India's own standing in global standard-setting.
- The regulatory-overlap question is genuine. An intermediary suffering a breach may owe reporting duties to SEBI, to CERT-In within six hours, potentially to NCIIPC, and to the Data Protection Board under the 2023 Act. Multiple non-harmonised timelines and formats consume exactly the incident-response capacity that should be directed at containment.
- The systemic-risk case for this architecture is strong and under-appreciated: financial infrastructure is a designated category of critical information infrastructure, and a successful attack on clearing or settlement would be a financial-stability event, not merely a commercial loss.
- The limitation to acknowledge is capacity. Thousands of small intermediaries lack dedicated security staff, and portals impose compliance burden without supplying capability. Threat intelligence is only useful to an entity able to act on it, which argues for shared security services for smaller participants rather than reporting mandates alone.

Let's Remember This Through a Trick

Security prevents; resilience survives. And the four bodies a breached Indian financial firm may have to face: **SEBI, CERT-In within six hours, NCIIPC, and the Data Protection Board.**

Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. CERT-In is the national nodal agency for responding to computer security incidents.
2. The Financial Stability Board was established as a successor to the Financial Stability Forum after the 2009 G20 summit.
3. The Financial Stability and Development Council is chaired by the Governor of the Reserve Bank of India.

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) All three

Answer: (a) 1 and 2 only. The FSDC is chaired by the **Union Finance Minister**; its sub-committee is chaired by the RBI Governor.

PYQ LINKAGE

GS3 2022 and 2017 on cyber security and critical information infrastructure; GS2 2021 on regulatory bodies and their effectiveness.

SECTION 06

Agriculture & Infrastructure

A Thousand Lakh Hectares Sown, a Deep Depression over Bengal

Why in News: Kharif sowing crossed **1,000 lakh hectares** as of **14 August 2026**, with rice alone accounting for more than **379 lakh hectares**. The same week the monsoon's destructive face was on display: a **deep depression** brought incessant rain and severe waterlogging to Kolkata on 17 August, a landslide blocked the Srinagar-bound carriageway of the **Jammu-Srinagar National Highway in Udhampur**, and Assam reported flood damage of about **₹480 crore** affecting **26,681 houses**, with 96,842 affected families compensated so far.

Background: The kharif season is sown with the onset of the southwest monsoon from June and harvested from September, and it accounts for the larger share of India's foodgrain output. Its dominant crops are rice, maize, pulses such as arhar, urad and moong, oilseeds including groundnut and soyabean, and the commercial crops cotton and sugarcane. Sowing area is the earliest available indicator of the season's likely outcome, which is why the weekly figure is watched closely — though area sown says nothing about yield, which depends on rainfall *distribution* through the growing period rather than on total quantity.

⚡ KEY FACTS

- Kharif coverage crossed **1,000 lakh hectares** as of **14 August 2026**; rice above **379 lakh hectares**.
- India's three cropping seasons: **kharif** (sown June-July with the monsoon, harvested September-October), **rabi** (sown October-December, harvested April-May), and **zaid** (the short summer season between them).
- A **deep depression** is an intensity category in the IMD's classification of low-pressure systems over the north Indian Ocean, sitting between a depression and a cyclonic storm, with associated wind speeds of roughly 52 to 61 kilometres per hour.
- The IMD scale runs: low pressure area → depression → **deep depression** → cyclonic storm → severe cyclonic storm → very severe → extremely severe → super cyclonic storm.
- Assam flood damage reported at about **₹480 crore**, **26,681 houses** affected, **96,842 families** compensated so far.
- The **Jammu-Srinagar National Highway** is **NH-44**, India's longest national highway, and the only all-weather surface link to the Kashmir Valley — which is why a single landslide at Udhampur has strategic and not merely local consequence.
- Minimum Support Prices for kharif crops are announced before the sowing season on the recommendation of the **Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices**, using the A2+FL and C2 cost concepts.
- Crop-loss protection runs through the **Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana**, with the **Restructured Weather Based Crop Insurance Scheme** as the index-based alternative.

🎯 MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- Healthy sowing area alongside destructive flooding is not a contradiction; it is the characteristic signature of a monsoon delivering adequate *total* rainfall in increasingly concentrated bursts. Area sown captures the adequacy of onset rain; it entirely misses the damage done by intensity later.
- The persistence of rice as the dominant kharif crop is the deeper structural issue. Assured procurement and free or near-free power for groundwater pumping have entrenched paddy in water-scarce regions, and crop diversification has repeatedly failed because the price and procurement signal points the other way.
- Flood damage accounting deserves scrutiny. A figure of ₹480 crore counts houses and visible infrastructure; it does not capture standing-crop loss, soil fertility loss from sand casting, or the depletion of household assets that pushes families into debt. Reported damage is systematically an undercount of welfare loss.
- The NH-44 landslide illustrates a general point about mountain infrastructure: single-corridor dependence converts a routine geological event into a supply-security problem. Redundancy — alternative alignments, rail links, tunnelling — is expensive but

is the only structural answer.

- For a policy answer, the direction that follows is towards **index-based insurance with rapid satellite-verified settlement**, procurement diversification away from paddy, and drainage investment in the eastern flood-prone belt, which receives far less attention than irrigation investment in the west.

💡 Let's Remember This Through a Trick

The IMD ladder in order: **low** → **depression** → **deep depression** → **cyclonic storm** → **severe** → **very severe** → **extremely severe** → **super cyclone**. Eight rungs, and "deep depression" is the third.

🎯 Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. In the IMD's classification, a deep depression is more intense than a cyclonic storm.
2. The zaid season falls between the rabi harvest and the kharif sowing.
3. Minimum Support Prices are recommended by the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices.

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) All three

Answer: (b) 2 and 3 only. A deep depression is *less* intense than a cyclonic storm.

📄 PYQ LINKAGE

GS1 2017 and 2022 on the Indian monsoon and its variability; GS3 2020 and 2023 on cropping patterns, MSP and crop insurance.

GS2

GS3

11 AUG

Parliamentary Committees & Transport Policy

392nd Report, presented 11 August 2026 · Department-related Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture

"Count the Passenger": The Standing Committee Report on Bus Transport Nobody Has Read

Why in News: The Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committee on Transport, Tourism and Culture presented its **392nd Report** on **11 August 2026**, titled *"Enabling Inclusive, Digital and Sustainable Bus Transport: Policy, Regulation and Public-Private Partnership for Next-Gen Mobility."* We carry it a week late and say so, because it is the most substantive piece of transport-policy analysis Parliament has produced this session and it has gone almost entirely unreported. Its final recommendation is the one that gives it its force: **India does not reliably know how many people travel by bus.**

Background: Buses carry the overwhelming majority of India's public-transport passengers — far more than rail, metro and air combined — yet receive a fraction of the policy attention and budgetary provision. State Road Transport Undertakings have been in financial decline for decades; private operators run under a permit system designed in another era; and terminals are typically owned and operated by the same entities that run the buses, which forecloses competition. Parliamentary standing committees are the principal instrument of legislative oversight over ministries, examining demands for grants, bills and policy, and their reports are recommendatory rather than binding.

⚡ KEY FACTS — THE TEN RECOMMENDATIONS

- **All India Passenger Permit:** replace the All India Tourist Permit within one year with a permit issued by the State of first registration, rights stated exhaustively on its face, enforced *exclusively* through electronic correlation of **VAHAN, FASTag and vehicle-location data**, and **end border check posts** in the six States where they persist.
- **National Bus Terminals Authority:** separate terminal ownership from bus operation as settled national policy, and constitute a dedicated authority **on the Airports Authority of India model**, with a National Code for Bus Terminals within one year.
- **National Bus Digital Grid:** notified interoperability standards within a year; a public live-tracking layer aligned with Indian Railways specifications; **unified booking across public and private operators**; a moderated crowdsourced rating system linked to permit databases; and a **cVIGIL-pattern citizen vigilance channel** with geo-tagged, time-bound reporting.
- **Operator-centric safety:** district-wise completion plan for **Automated Testing Stations**; verification of fire, egress and alert equipment at every fitness test; a **published operator safety rating** factored into permit renewal; and the emergency alert system to function within one year, **failing which the levy on operators shall cease**.
- **Fleet Transition Compact:** leasing entities so operators run buses they need not own, entered via **scrap-and-lease at registered scrapping facilities**; a time-bound electric-bus plan with per-operator targets; and an **end-of-life framework for e-buses and batteries within one year**.
- **Services for women, run by women:** within six months, dedicated peak-hour services operated with women drivers and women staff; CCTV in new buses enforced; on-board toilet standardisation under the **Bus Body Code**; funded through an **Inclusive Transport Fund**.
- **A budgetary identity for the bus passenger:** a defined provision for public transport infrastructure within the Ministry's budget, with the Ministry to state its position on applying **of the order of 25% of the road allocation** to it, plus viability gap funding for conforming terminals.
- **The State of the States:** an annual published ranking of States on bus transport facilitation — with **the first edition to name the States still operating border check posts**.
- **Count the passenger:** reconciliation of fleet figures within six months, a federated national data architecture in which States own their systems, and a periodic authoritative estimate of **passengers carried by bus**, published with the authority accorded to other modes' statistics.

MAINS DIMENSIONS / ANALYSIS

- The report's intellectual core is the separation of **infrastructure ownership from service operation** — the same unbundling principle that transformed civil aviation, telecommunications and electricity. A terminal owned by an operator is a barrier to entry; a terminal owned by a neutral authority is a market. Proposing the Airports Authority model is a precise and well-chosen analogy.
- The enforcement design is unusually sophisticated for a committee report. Replacing physical border check posts — sites of delay and rent-seeking — with electronic correlation of existing databases uses infrastructure that already exists, and naming the States that retain check posts converts an unenforceable recommendation into a reputational sanction.
- The conditional sanction on the emergency alert system deserves particular attention: if the system does not work within a year, the levy funding it must cease. That is a rare instance of an accountability mechanism with an automatic consequence rather than a request for compliance.
- The data recommendation is the most damning and the most important. A State that cannot say how many passengers its buses carry cannot allocate subsidy rationally, plan routes, or evaluate any intervention. The invisibility of the bus passenger in official statistics is the reason the bus passenger is invisible in the budget.
- The limitation is constitutional and should be stated. Motor vehicles are on the **Concurrent List**, but permits, taxation and State transport undertakings are substantially State subjects, and standing committee reports bind nobody. Implementation depends on the Ministry accepting the recommendations and the States choosing to act — which is why the naming-and-ranking device is the report's shrewdest instrument.

 Let's Remember This Through a Trick

Unbundle the terminal from the bus, as airports were unbundled from airlines. And the report's own last line is the exam-worthy one: *count the passenger* — because what is not measured is not funded.

 Probable Prelims MCQ (Statement-Based)

Consider the following statements:

1. Department-related Parliamentary Standing Committees make recommendations that are binding on the concerned ministry.
2. Motor vehicles is a subject in the Concurrent List.
3. VAHAN is the national register of vehicle registration data.

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) All three

Answer: (b) 2 and 3 only. Standing committee recommendations are **recommendatory, not binding**.

 PYQ LINKAGE

GS2 2020 and 2023 on the effectiveness of parliamentary committees; GS3 2022 on infrastructure and public-private partnership models.

THEIAS AKADEMIA Two cards today carry true dates outside the immediate window — a gazette notification of 14 August and a committee report of 11 August. Both are labelled as such. A document does not stop being examinable because a week has passed, and we would rather carry it late and dated than not at all. theiasakademia.com

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12

NEWS CARDS

3

POLITY (CAPPED)

0

STATIC FILLER

6

SYLLABUS SECTIONS

2

HONESTLY BACK-DATED

Society (GS1)

Polity (GS2)

Internal Security (GS3)

IR (GS2)

Economy (GS3)

Agriculture (GS3)

✓ We flagged the 2021 "New Delhi Statement" article that search engines are returning for today's BRICS ministerial, rather than repeating it

✓ The Census "13 new questions" figure is disputed between sources, so we give the 40-versus-29 totals and leave the difference open

✓ Two cards carry true dates of 11 and 14 August in their badges — carried late and labelled, not disguised as today

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