UPSC Current Affairs Notes

UPSC with Saurabh Kaushik

Sources: The Hindu · Indian Express Explained

■ 9 July 2026

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The Hindu · Indian Express Explained

Topic 1

US-Iran Ceasefire Collapses — Trump Declares It 'Over' at NATO Summit

GS Paper 2 | International Relations | GS Paper 3 | Energy Security

What Happened (8 July 2026)

- **Trump at NATO Summit, Ankara (Turkey)**: Speaking at the press conference alongside NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte on 8 July 2026, President Trump declared: 'For me, I think it's over. I don't want to deal with them anymore. They're scum.'
- Iran had attacked three commercial ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz on 7 July — the second ceasefire violation in days. The US responded with 'powerful strikes' against 80+ Iranian military targets (CENTCOM statement).
- Iran's IRGC retaliated by launching missiles and drones at US military bases in **Kuwait and Bahrain**, threatening 'harsher retaliation in coming days'.
- Despite declaring the ceasefire 'over', Trump permitted his negotiators — Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner — to continue diplomatic talks if they chose to.
- The US Treasury simultaneously **revoked the sanctions waiver** allowing sale of Iranian crude oil — a key economic pressure lever.
- UK PM Keir Starmer urged both parties to 'respect the ceasefire' and warned of economic costs of resuming full war.

Timeline of the Conflict (2026)

- **28 February 2026**: US and Israel launched joint military strikes on Iran targeting nuclear infrastructure; Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei was killed.
- **March–May 2026**: Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz in retaliation, causing a global oil price spike and disrupting India's energy imports.
- **Mid-June 2026**: An interim 'Islamabad MoU' (ceasefire memorandum) was signed, establishing a 60-day window for nuclear talks; US lifted the naval blockade; Hormuz reopened.
- **7–8 July 2026**: Iran attacks ships in Hormuz → US retaliatory strikes → ceasefire effectively collapses.
- Iran has NOT formally declared the MoU void; it accused the US of violating 'several articles' — leaving a thin diplomatic thread open.

Why Talks May Continue Despite Trump's Declaration

- Trump's statement is strategic signalling, not a formal termination of the MoU — negotiators Witkoff and Kushner are still authorised to talk.
- Gulf states (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Oman, Qatar) are mediating to prevent full resumption of hostilities; they have the most to lose from Hormuz closure.
- Iran's interim government (successor to Khamenei) needs sanctions relief to survive economically — a nuclear deal remains their incentive to negotiate.
- The **60-day window** set by the MoU (mid-June to mid-August) technically still applies.

■ SIGNIFICANCE / ANALYSIS

The US-Iran conflict cycle illustrates how military agreements without institutional underpinning can collapse rapidly. For India, the stakes are existential: ~50% of crude imports transit Hormuz. Every escalation triggers oil price spikes, widens the Current Account Deficit, and puts pressure on the rupee. India's strategic challenge is to maintain equidistance — preserving ties with both Washington and Tehran — while securing its energy lifeline.

■ KEY TERMS

Islamabad MoU: Interim ceasefire memorandum between the US and Iran (~mid-June 2026); provided 60-day window for nuclear and sanctions talks; now effectively collapsed.

Strait of Hormuz: Critical maritime chokepoint between Iran and Oman; ~20% of global oil trade (including ~50% of India's crude imports) transits through it.

CENTCOM (US Central Command): US military command responsible for operations in Middle East and Central Asia; conducts strikes on Iranian targets.

IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps): Iran's elite paramilitary force; controls missile arsenal, Strait of Hormuz operations, and proxy networks.

JCPOA Ghost: The underlying nuclear deal framework (2015) that both sides reference; Iran's uranium stockpile at 60% enrichment is the core sticking point.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

The collapse of the US-Iran ceasefire in 2026 exposes the fragility of agreements lacking institutional mechanisms. Critically analyse.

How does the geopolitical instability around the Strait of Hormuz affect India's energy security, foreign policy, and economic stability? Discuss the policy options.

Topic 2

Bishnoi & Brar Charged for Nijjar Killing — US DoJ Unseals Federal Indictment

GS Paper 3 | Internal Security | Transnational Crime | GS Paper 2 | IR

Key Facts (7 July 2026 — Operation Hardball)

- A federal indictment **unsealed in Los Angeles (7 July 2026)** charges **Lawrence Bishnoi** (imprisoned Indian gangster) and his North American deputy **Satinderjeet Singh alias 'Goldy Brar'** with ordering the **assassination of Hardeep Singh Nijjar** on 18 June 2023 in Surrey, British Columbia, Canada.
- **Operation Hardball**: Coordinated law enforcement action by US, Canada, and Europe — **24 persons arrested** (11 in California); total **37 defendants charged** across three federal indictments targeting three India-based transnational organised crime groups.
- **Charges against Brar**: RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations) conspiracy; conspiracy to interfere with commerce through extortion; narcotics trafficking. FBI reward: **USD 50,000** for Brar's arrest.
- **US extradition demand**: The US plans to seek **extradition of Bishnoi from India** on sweeping federal racketeering charges.
- **Bishnoi's method**: Directed operations from Indian prison via smuggled cellphones; provided co-conspirators with Nijjar's photograph and multiple addresses.
- **Crucially**: The US indictment does **NOT allege any Indian government role** in the killing — a significant departure from earlier Canadian claims.

Background: The Nijjar Assassination & India-Canada Crisis

- Hardeep Singh Nijjar, 45, a Canadian citizen and Khalistani separatist, was shot dead outside the Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, Surrey, BC (18 June 2023).

• Then-PM Justin Trudeau alleged on 18 September 2023 that Canada had 'credible intelligence' linking Indian government agents to Nijjar's murder.

• India dismissed the claims as 'absurd' and 'motivated'. Both countries expelled six diplomats each in a tit-for-tat standoff.

• Canada's RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) separately charged three Indian nationals (Kamalpreet Singh, Karanpreet Singh, Amandeep Singh Mand) in October 2024 for the murder.

• The US DoJ indictment shifts the narrative: the killing appears to be a gang/organised crime operation (Bishnoi enterprise), not necessarily a state-sponsored act.

Lawrence Bishnoi Gang — Profile

• Lawrence Bishnoi has been imprisoned in India since 2015 but allegedly continues to run a **global criminal network** via smuggled phones.

• The network engages in: contract killings, extortion of the Indian diaspora via encrypted messaging (WhatsApp), narcotimcs trafficking (cocaine, heroin), and intimidation of religious/community leaders.

• The gang has **regional leaders**: Goldy Brar (North America), Rohit Godara (Europe), Sukhraj Singh Kang (Punjab).

• The gang also claimed responsibility for a **2023 shooting at Salman Khan's Mumbai home** — demonstrating its reach beyond diaspora communities.

■ KEY TERMS

RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organisations Act): US federal law targeting organised crime; allows prosecution of criminal enterprises; carries severe penalties including 20 years per count.

Bishnoi Gang: India-based transnational organised crime group led from prison by Lawrence Bishnoi; operates in North America, Europe, and Punjab; involved in contract killings, extortion, narcotics.

RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police): Canada's federal and national police service; has separately charged three Indian nationals in Nijjar murder case.

NIA (National Investigation Agency): India's central counter-terrorism agency; has investigated Bishnoi's gang's activities within India.

Khalistan: Demand for an independent Sikh homeland in Punjab; advocated by some Sikh diaspora groups in Canada, UK, Australia; designated terrorist movement by India.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

The US DoJ indictment of Bishnoi and Brar for the Nijjar killing represents a shift from state-sponsored to organised crime narratives. Critically examine its implications for India-Canada-US relations.

Transnational organised crime originating from India poses challenges to both domestic security and India's diplomatic relationships. Analyse the Bishnoi gang case in this context.

Topic 3

Russian Share in India's Oil Imports Rises Above 40% — Energy Strategy

GS Paper 3 | Economy | Energy Security | GS Paper 2 | IR

Key Data Points

• Russia's share in India's crude oil imports has risen above **40%** — and surged to a record **52–54% in June 2026** (Kpler data), as the Strait of Hormuz disruption drastically cut Gulf supplies.

• India's total crude imports hit a **June 2026 record of ~5 million barrels/day (b/d)**, with Russian supplies at a record **~2.6 million b/d**.

• Before the Ukraine war (pre-2022), Russian oil was just **~2% of India's imports**; it rose to ~35% by 2023 and has remained India's largest single source ever since.

• Indian Oil Corporation was the largest buyer (~900,000 b/d); Reliance's Jamnagar complex (~500,000 b/d) and Nayara Energy (Vadinar, ~345,000 b/d — 50% Rosneft-owned) were major buyers.

• Between December 2025 and February 2026, Russian crude's share had fallen to ~1.0 mb/d under US sanctions pressure — but Hormuz closure pushed it back to record highs.

Why Russia Filled the Gap

• **Hormuz crisis**: Iran's closure of the Strait of Hormuz (February–June 2026) cut off ~50% of India's crude supply from Gulf producers (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, UAE). Russian pipelines/Arctic routes are Hormuz-independent.

• **Discounted pricing**: Even a $2/barrel discount on Russian crude saves India billions annually given import volumes. Russian crude is priced below Brent.

• **Existing logistics**: Indian refiners (particularly Nayara/Vadinar) are already optimised for Russian ESPO/Urals blends.

• **US sanctions waiver**: The Biden-era and modified Trump-era waivers allow India to buy limited Russian crude without secondary sanction risk.

India's Balancing Act

• Trump's **February 2026** joint statement claimed India would stop Russian oil purchases — India did NOT officially confirm this. MEA's position: 'Energy security of 1.4 billion Indians is the supreme priority.'

• The India-US trade deal framework tied tariff relief to India reducing Russian oil imports — creating tension between energy security and trade strategy.

• The June 2026 surge to 52% Russian share shows India's pragmatism: when Gulf supplies were disrupted, Russia became the strategic buffer.

• Post-Hormuz normalisation (if the ceasefire holds), Middle Eastern crude is expected to reclaim share — but Russian oil remains India's 'strategic insurance'.

■ KEY TERMS

Kpler: Trade intelligence firm tracking global oil flows using AIS (ship tracking) and port data.

ESPO (East Siberia-Pacific Ocean Pipeline): Russian crude oil blend transported via Pacific pipeline; popular in Asian markets including India.

Nayara Energy (Vadinar Refinery): India's second-largest private refinery (20 MT capacity); ~50% owned by Rosneft; directly sanctioned by EU/UK; imports almost exclusively Russian crude.

Hormuz Premium: Additional cost built into non-Russian crude when Hormuz is closed or at risk; makes Russian crude (Hormuz-independent) relatively more attractive.

Secondary Sanctions: US sanctions penalising third-country entities/individuals transacting with sanctioned Russian entities; major risk for Indian refiners.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

India's continued import of Russian crude oil reflects its 'strategic autonomy' in energy policy. Critically evaluate India's energy diversification strategy in light of the 2026 Hormuz crisis.

How does India balance its commitment to an energy transition with its dependence on imported fossil fuels? What structural reforms are needed?

Topic 4

AAP Faces Heat After US Names Inspector in an 'Extortion Plot'

GS Paper 2 | Governance | Internal Security | Federalism

What Happened

• The same US DoJ indictment (Operation Hardball) that charged Bishnoi/Brar also named a Delhi Police inspector as part of an **'extortion plot'** — allegedly extorting members of the Indian diaspora in the US on behalf of an India-based criminal network.

• The inspector is alleged to have used his position to **threaten victims' families in India** unless they paid extortion money to criminals in the US.

• The **Aam Aadmi Party (AAP)** faced political heat as the inspector was reportedly associated with the Delhi Police's hierarchy (Delhi Police is under the Union Home Ministry/LG, not the elected Delhi government — a long-standing constitutional point).

• AAP and BJP traded accusations: BJP demanded accountability for AAP's alleged connections; AAP noted Delhi Police is under central government jurisdiction.

• The case also exposes **transnational extortion networks** that use law enforcement connections in India to threaten diaspora victims abroad.

Constitutional Context: Delhi Police Jurisdiction

• Under the **Government of NCT of Delhi Act, 1991** and the subsequent **GNCT Amendment Act, 2021**, Delhi Police is directly under the **Union Government (Home Ministry/LG)**, not the elected state government.

• The Supreme Court (Govt. of NCT of Delhi v. Union of India, 2018 and 2023) affirmed that the LG has overriding authority on services, public order, and police in Delhi.

• This creates a constitutional anomaly: the elected government is accountable to Delhi's residents but cannot control the police force.

■ KEY TERMS

Delhi Police (Special Commissioner / LG control): Delhi's police force under direct Union Home Ministry control; operates under LG, not the elected Chief Minister.

RICO Act (US): US federal anti-organised crime law; allows prosecution of those involved in a 'pattern of racketeering activity' including extortion.

Transnational Extortion: Criminal practice of threatening diaspora members abroad by threatening their families in the home country; facilitated by encrypted messaging.

GNCT Amendment Act 2021: Strengthened LG's authority over Delhi services and administration; contested by AAP government; upheld by SC.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

The AAP extortion controversy highlights the constitutional ambiguity around Delhi's governance model. Critically examine the division of powers between the Union and Delhi's elected government.

Transnational organised crime that uses law enforcement networks poses unique challenges for governance. How can India address this problem?

Topic 5

Over 42% Rise in Female Enrolment in Higher Education Since 2014 — AISHE Report

GS Paper 2 | Governance | Education | Social Justice

AISHE 2024–25 Key Findings

• All India Survey on Higher Education (AISHE) 2024–25 (released ~July 2026): Female enrolment in higher education has increased by more than **42% since 2014**.

• Total female enrolment in 2024–25: approximately **2.38 crore** (up from ~1.67 crore in 2014–15).

• **Gender Parity Index (GPI)** for Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER): India has crossed **GPI of 1.01** for the first time — meaning female GER now exceeds male GER at the national level.

- **Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education (18–23 age group)**: ~32.9% overall; female GER: ~33.2% vs male GER: ~32.7%.
- **OBC (Other Backward Classes)** students constitute ~36% of total enrolment; SC students ~15.7%; ST students ~6.0%.
- Distance education enrolment has grown — contributing significantly to female access (women unable to relocate for education benefit from online/distance programmes).
- Southern states (Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka) lead on female GER; Bihar, Jharkhand, and UP lag behind.

Policy Drivers

- **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)**: Scheme targeting sex ratio at birth and female education, particularly in low sex-ratio districts.
- **PM Vidya Lakshmi**: Single portal for education loan applications; facilitated access to higher education financing for women.
- **NEP 2020**: Targets 50% GER in higher education by 2035 — requiring near-doubling of current enrolment; special emphasis on gender inclusion.
- **Central sector scholarships**, PM Research Fellowships, and expansion of women's colleges and hostels in aspirational districts.
- **Pradhan Mantri Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan (PM-USHA)**: Replaced RUSA; focuses on quality and access in state universities.
- **Hostels and residential facilities**: Construction of Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) and women's hostels in underserved areas has been key to enabling rural female participation.

■ KEY TERMS

AISHE: All India Survey on Higher Education; annual survey by Ministry of Education; tracks enrolment, institutions, faculty by gender, caste, religion, state.

GER (Gross Enrolment Ratio): Ratio of students enrolled at a given education level to the population of the corresponding age group; GER>100 not unusual if overage students are enrolled.

GPI (Gender Parity Index): Ratio of female to male GER; GPI > 1 means female enrolment exceeds male relative to population; India crossed GPI of 1.01.

NEP 2020 GER Target: National Education Policy 2020 targets 50% GER in higher education by 2035; current GER ~32.9%.

PM-USHA: PM Uchchatar Shiksha Abhiyan; replaces RUSA; focuses on quality enhancement and access expansion in State Universities.

➥■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

India has achieved gender parity in higher education enrolment. Does this signify genuine progress toward gender equality? Critically analyse.

Discuss the role of government schemes and institutional reforms in driving increased female participation in higher education in India.

Topic 6

Caste Census — Open-Ended Method of Counting May Not Yield Usable Data

GS Paper 2 | Governance | Social Justice | OBC | Constitutional Law

The Methodological Debate

- The Government of India has confirmed that the upcoming **Census 2025–26** will include a caste enumeration question for the first time since 1931.

• The **methodological controversy**: Unlike SC/ST questions (which use pre-defined lists — the Presidential Orders under Articles 341 and 342), the proposed caste column for **OBCs and general categories uses an open-ended, self-declaration approach** — respondents write their own caste name.

• **Problem**: India has thousands of caste names; the same caste can have **dozens of name variants** (spellings, dialects, prefixes, suffixes) across districts and states. Open-ended responses will generate data that is extremely difficult to aggregate, deduplicate, and standardise.

• Demographers and social scientists warn this could produce data that is **internally inconsistent and unusable for policy** — making it impossible to determine reliable OBC sub-group populations.

• The Bihar Caste Survey (2023) used a **pre-coded list approach** — respondents selected from a defined menu of caste names — and was able to produce publishable data. This is considered more reliable than open-ended responses.

• The Socio-Economic and Caste Census (SECC) 2011 used a similar open-ended approach for caste data — and the **caste data has never been officially published** because it was considered methodologically unreliable.

Political and Constitutional Dimensions

• **Political sensitivity**: A reliable OBC caste census would provide the empirical basis for sub-categorisation of OBC reservations (following the Supreme Court's **Pankaj Kumar v. State of Bihar** judgment allowing sub-categorisation).

• **SC judgment on sub-categorisation (2024)**: 7-judge constitutional bench held that states can sub-categorise SC/STs within reservation quotas to benefit most backward communities — the same logic applies to OBCs.

• **OBC reservation**: Currently capped at 27% of central government jobs (Mandal Commission; upheld in Indra Sawhney v. Union of India, 1992); the 50% cap includes SC/ST reservations.

• The data is also critical for determining whether the 50% ceiling should be breached — which would require a Constitutional Amendment.

■ KEY TERMS

Indra Sawhney Case (1992): SC upheld 27% OBC reservation; imposed 50% ceiling on total reservations; excluded creamy layer from OBC benefits.

SECC 2011: Socio-Economic and Caste Census; gathered caste data for first time since 1931; caste data never published officially.

Bihar Caste Survey 2023: First major state-level caste census post-1931 to be made public; used pre-coded categories; showed OBCs + EBCs = ~63% of Bihar's population.

Sub-Categorisation: Division of SC/ST/OBC reservation quotas into sub-groups ensuring most backward communities get proportionate benefits; permitted by SC 2024.

Mandal Commission (1980): Backward Classes Commission report recommending 27% OBC reservation in central government jobs; implemented in 1989–90.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

The methodological challenges of counting caste in India's census reflect deeper tensions between social measurement and political outcomes. Critically examine.

Discuss the constitutional, legal, and sociological dimensions of the demand for a comprehensive caste census in India.

Topic 7

Sri Lanka Prison Riots — 28 Dead (Including Indian National), Overcrowding at 286%

GS Paper 2 | IR (Neighbourhood First) | GS Paper 1 | Society

What Happened (5–8 July 2026)

• A deadly riot at **Negombo Prison** (~35 km north of Colombo) began on the night of **5 July 2026** and spiralled into the island's **deadliest prison violence in years**.

• Death toll: rose to **28 by 8 July** (including one prison officer who died of injuries). Over **100 injured**.

• **Trigger**: Clash between two rival drug-trafficking gangs operating inside the prison — reportedly ignited when an inmate tipped off prison authorities about a drug operation, resulting in a lethal inter-gang confrontation.

• Firearms were seized from guards during the first night of unrest, sharply escalating danger. Inmates attempted a jailbreak on Monday morning but were contained.

• **~1,200 prisoners transferred** to other prisons across Sri Lanka (Angunakolapelessa, Boosa, Batticaloa, Welikade).

• An **Indian national, Unnikrishnan S., aged 73**, was among those killed. India's High Commission sent a note verbale to Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry.

• Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka reported 'torture and ill-treatment' of transferred inmates at receiving facilities.

• Sri Lanka's Justice Minister acknowledged 'longstanding problems' in the prison system.

Sri Lanka's Prison Crisis — Structural Issues

• **Overcrowding at 286.6%**: ~41,250 inmates in a system designed for ~10,000–15,000 (Tamil Guardian, citing HRSL data).

• Sri Lanka recorded **184 prison deaths in 2024** and 7 custodial deaths in 2026 (pre-riot), as reported to the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (visit 15–24 June 2026).

• **Drug-related incarceration**: Sri Lanka's strict drug laws (maximum penalty for trafficking: death penalty) and mandatory minimum sentences have driven mass incarceration of drug offenders.

• Previous major riots: **2020 Mahara Prison riot** (11 dead during COVID); **2012 Welikada riot** (police shot 27 inmates).

• The Bar Association of Sri Lanka called the riot 'symptomatic of longstanding structural deficiencies in criminal justice'.

■ KEY TERMS

Negombo Prison: Sri Lanka's Negombo facility, ~35 km north of Colombo; houses thousands of inmates far beyond capacity; site of the July 2026 riots.

HRSL: Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka; independent constitutional body investigating rights violations.

UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (SPT): UN body under the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture; visited Sri Lanka 15–24 June 2026.

Note Verbale: Formal diplomatic communication between states; India sent one to Sri Lanka's Foreign Ministry regarding the Indian national's death.

Article 21 (Indian Constitution): Right to life and personal liberty; extends to Indian nationals abroad; basis for India's consular intervention.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

Prison overcrowding and violence in South Asia reflect systemic failures in criminal justice. Critically analyse the structural causes and suggest reforms.

How should India balance its Neighbourhood First policy with the duty to protect Indian nationals abroad, as illustrated by the Sri Lanka prison riot case?

Topic 8

What Is the Right to Be Forgotten? — DPDP Act 2023 & Digital Privacy

GS Paper 2 | Governance | GS Paper 3 | Science & Technology | GS Paper 2 | Fundamental Rights

The Right to Be Forgotten — Concept

• The **Right to Be Forgotten (RTBF)** is the right of individuals to request deletion or de-indexing of their personal information from the internet, particularly from search engines and digital databases, when that information is outdated, irrelevant, or harmful to their privacy.

• Originating from the **EU's GDPR (Article 17)** and the landmark **Google Spain SL v. AEPD (2014)** case (European Court of Justice), where a Spanish individual successfully demanded removal of an outdated newspaper article from Google's search results.

• The RTBF is not absolute — it must be balanced against: freedom of expression, public interest journalism, historical record, and law enforcement.

India's Legal Framework: DPDP Act 2023

• The **Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023** does NOT explicitly use the phrase 'Right to Be Forgotten' — but provides a limited equivalent through **Section 12: Right to Erasure**.

• Under Section 12, a **Data Principal** (individual) can request a **Data Fiduciary** (entity processing data) to erase personal data when: (a) consent is withdrawn, or (b) the purpose for which it was collected has been served.

• The Data Fiduciary must erase data **unless retention is legally required** or necessary for the original purpose.

• **Phased implementation**: DPDP Act was notified August 2023; Data Protection Board of India (DPBI) established November 2025 (Phase I). Core compliance obligations effective **May 2027** (Phase III).

• **Key gaps**: India's RTBF is narrower than GDPR's — no right to de-indexing from search engines; no private right of action; DPBI powers are limited compared to GDPR's Data Protection Authorities.

Indian Judiciary's Approach

• **Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017)**: Supreme Court declared privacy a fundamental right under Article 21 — the foundation for data rights including RTBF.

• **Karnataka HC (2017)**: First Indian court order directing petitioner's name to be removed from court website for a minor criminal conviction he had been acquitted of.

• **Delhi HC**: Multiple orders addressing de-listing requests for defamatory content; courts balance RTBF against public interest.

■ KEY TERMS

DPDP Act 2023: India's primary data protection law; governs processing of digital personal data; provides right to erasure (Section 12); not yet fully enforced.

Data Principal: Individual whose personal data is being processed; equivalent to 'data subject' under GDPR.

Data Fiduciary: Entity that determines the purpose and means of processing personal data; equivalent to 'data controller' under GDPR.

GDPR Article 17: EU right to erasure ('right to be forgotten'); broader than India's DPDP Section 12; includes de-indexing from search engines.

DPBI (Data Protection Board of India): India's data protection regulator under DPDP Act; established November 2025; adjudicates complaints and penalises violations.

Right to Erasure vs RTBF: Erasure = deletion of data from a specific database; RTBF (fuller concept) includes de-indexing from all accessible digital locations including search engine results.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

Critically examine the 'Right to Be Forgotten' under India's DPDP Act 2023. How does it compare with the GDPR's approach, and what are its limitations?

How can India balance the right to privacy with freedom of expression and the right to information in the digital age? Discuss with reference to recent judicial and legislative developments.

Topic 9

What Is the 'Hummus Trail'? — Gastronationalism, Cultural Appropriation & the Conflict-Food Nexus

GS Paper 1 | Art & Culture | GS Paper 2 | IR

Context (July 2026)

- In the context of the ongoing Israel-Lebanon-Iran conflict and renewed boycott movements, the **'Hummus Trail'** — a term referring to the contested culinary geography of hummus across the Levant — has re-entered international discourse.
- The term refers to the historical journey of hummus (mashed chickpeas with tahini, lemon, garlic) across the Middle East and its commercialisation as 'Israeli food' in Western markets — a claim disputed by Palestinians, Lebanese, Syrians, and Jordanians.

The Origins Debate

- **Hummus** (Arabic: ■■■ = chickpeas) is a staple across the Levant — Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Israel. Its earliest documented historical references date to medieval Cairo (13th century Arabic cookbook 'Kitab Wasfal-at'ima al-Mutada').
- **The 'Hummus Wars'**: The Lebanese Association of Industrialists launched a campaign in 2008 claiming hummus as exclusively Lebanese after Israeli manufacturers' market dominance in Western supermarkets.
- Lebanon attempted but failed to register hummus as a **Protected Geographical Indication (PGI)** with the EU — the EU determined hummus is a regional dish, not exclusively Lebanese.
- Critics call Israeli marketing of hummus as 'Israeli food' an act of **gastro-colonialism** — appropriating Palestinian/Arab culinary heritage alongside territorial appropriation.
- **Google's contradictory listing**: Hummus has been listed under 'Israeli cuisine' in some algorithmic categorisations — triggering Lebanese and Palestinian objections.

Why This Matters for UPSC (Cultural Identity & International Law)

- **Food as identity**: Cuisines are repositories of cultural memory and political identity; gastronationalism is the politicisation of food for nation-building.
- **GI Tags and UNESCO ICH**: Legal mechanisms to protect culinary heritage — Lebanon's attempted EU PGI application; the parallel with India's GI tags (e.g., Basmati, Darjeeling tea) is instructive.
- **UNESCO's 2003 Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage** allows inscription of culinary practices as ICH — Israel and Lebanon both sought to inscribe falafel-related practices.
- **BDS movement**: The Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions campaign targets Israeli hummus brands (e.g., Sabra — partially Pepsi-owned) as part of economic pressure.
- **India's own food GI battles**: India has 650+ registered GIs including Darjeeling tea, Basmati rice, Alphonso mangoes — parallels with how geographical origin protects cultural heritage.

■ KEY TERMS

Gastronationalism: The political mobilisation of food as a marker of national identity; 'hummus wars' is a classic example; parallels include Turkey's claim to kebab, Italy's claim to pizza.

PGI (Protected Geographical Indication): EU intellectual property right protecting regional food products; must be made, processed or prepared in a specific region; e.g., Champagne, Parmigiano-Reggiano.

GI Tag (India): Geographical Indication under the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration & Protection) Act, 1999; India has 650+ GIs.

BDS Movement: Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions; Palestinian-led global campaign targeting Israeli products and institutions; targets hummus brands and companies involved in settlements.

UNESCO 2003 Convention: International Convention for Safeguarding the Intangible Cultural Heritage; allows inscription of culinary, musical, and ritual traditions.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

Food has increasingly become a medium of political and cultural contestation in the context of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Critically examine the concept of gastronationalism.

Discuss the significance of Geographical Indications (GIs) as tools for protecting cultural heritage and food sovereignty, with reference to both India and international cases.

Topic 10

US-Iran Ceasefire MoU — Background, Terms & What Went Wrong

GS Paper 2 | International Relations | Iran | Middle East

The Islamabad MoU (Mid-June 2026)

• After ~3.5 months of war (February–June 2026), the US and Iran signed a **Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)** — the 'Islamabad MoU' (mediated by Pakistan) — in mid-June 2026.

• Key provisions: Immediate cessation of hostilities; US to lift naval blockade of the Strait of Hormuz; Iran to reopen Hormuz for commercial shipping; 60-day window for direct technical talks on nuclear programme, frozen assets (~$50 billion), and future sanctions framework.

• Trump initially called the deal 'unconditional surrender' by Iran (17–18 June); described it as a 'great deal' — framing it as a diplomatic victory.

• The MoU did NOT resolve the core issue: Iran's **440 kg of uranium enriched to 60%** (weapons-adjacent). US demanded 'zero enrichment'; Iran insists on the right to enrich.

Why the MoU Collapsed

• **Unresolved core issues**: 60-day window was too short for zero-enrichment negotiations — the fundamental gap was never bridged.

• **Rival interpretations**: Iran publicly denied agreeing to any enrichment limits; US said enrichment was the central topic. Both sides 'lied' to domestic audiences about what was agreed.

• **IRGC hardliners**: Iran's new Supreme Leader (son of Khamenei) faces pressure from IRGC hardliners who want to reassert Iran's deterrence through Hormuz attacks.

• **Sanctions waiver revocation**: US Treasury revoked the crude oil sanctions waiver (7 July) — a major economic blow removing Iran's incentive to comply.

• **Trump's impulsiveness**: Trump's rhetoric escalated from 'great deal' to 'it's over' in three weeks — undermining the MoU's diplomatic credibility.

Topic 11

Strait of Hormuz Flare-Up — Oil Markets on Edge, India's Exposure

GS Paper 3 | Economy | Energy Security

• **Oil market impact**: Brent crude surged ~$8–12/barrel on news of ceasefire collapse (8 July 2026); markets price in Hormuz closure risk.

• **India's exposure**: ~50% of crude, ~100% of LPG imports, significant LNG imports transit the Strait. Each $10/barrel increase in oil price widens India's CAD by ~$12–15 billion annually.

• **Three Indian-flagged tankers** transited Hormuz safely on 8–9 July (Shipping Ministry), but the trajectory is uncertain.

• India has **~10 months of import cover** in forex reserves (~$580–595 billion) — providing some buffer but not indefinite protection.

• **Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR)**: India's underground SPR (Visakhapatnam, Mangalore, Padur) holds ~5.33 million metric tonnes — covering ~9–10 days of consumption. Critically inadequate for a prolonged Hormuz closure.

■ KEY TERMS

Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR): India's underground oil storage at Visakhapatnam, Mangalore, and Padur; ~5.33 MMT capacity; ~9–10 days of consumption cover; to be expanded to 11.8 MMT.

CAD (Current Account Deficit): Excess of imports over exports; oil price surge is the primary driver of India's CAD expansion.

Brent Crude: Global oil price benchmark; priced in USD; each $10/barrel rise costs India ~$12–15 billion more annually in import bills.

Indian Oil Corporation (IOC): Largest Indian public sector refiner; largest buyer of Russian crude (~900,000 b/d); exposed to Hormuz disruptions for Middle Eastern supply.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

India's strategic petroleum reserves cover only 9–10 days of consumption. In light of the 2026 Hormuz crisis, critically evaluate India's energy security preparedness.

Discuss the domestic economic impact of oil price shocks for India, and the policy measures the government should adopt.

Topic 12

Indira Point — Why Centre Wants to Protect Landmark Lighthouse & Develop Tourism Hub

GS Paper 1 | Places | GS Paper 3 | Economy | Maritime | Environment

What Is Indira Point?

• **Indira Point** (formerly Pygmalion Point) is the **southernmost point of India**, located on the southern tip of **Great Nicobar Island** in the Andaman and Nicobar UT.

• The Indira Point Lighthouse was commissioned in **April 1972**; stands **35 metres high**; built of cast iron on 11.5 hectares.

• Renamed in **1985** in memory of former PM Indira Gandhi.

• The lighthouse is a crucial navigational aid on the **Singapore–Colombo international maritime route** — one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

• **2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami**: The southern shoreline of Great Nicobar subsided by ~**4.25 metres**, pushing the sea inland. The lighthouse, originally on firm ground, now stands **in the sea** a few metres from shore — structurally vulnerable.

The Protection and Development Project

• Union **Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways** proposed protection and development works to be implemented by the **Directorate of Lighthouses and Lightships (DGLL)**.

• The proposal envisages: **fortified enclosure around the lighthouse**, constructed pathway to shore, a grand arch at the shoreline, and substantial tourism infrastructure on land.

• Also proposed: a **National Memorial** at Great Nicobar Island.

• Requires prior clearance under **Island Coastal Regulation Zone (ICRZ) Notification, 2019** — the project area falls under ICRZ-IA (most sensitive: mangroves, coral reefs, national parks) and ICRZ-IVA.

• ICRZ-IA bars most development; exceptions include eco-tourism, roads, and — in exceptional circumstances — defence/strategic/public utility projects with detailed EIA.

• Access to Indira Point currently restricted (tribal reserve area); tribal pass required.

Strategic Context: Great Nicobar Island Mega Project

- Great Nicobar Island (~Rs 81,000 crore mega project): India's **transformational development initiative** — International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), Greenfield International Airport, Township, and Hybrid Power Plant.
- **Strategic location**: ~40 nautical miles from East-West shipping lanes; ~2.8 km from the Phillip Channel (western approaches to Strait of Malacca); ~1,600 km from mainland India.
- The island is closer to Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia than to India's mainland.
- Critically, China imports **~80% of its crude oil and 2/3 of its trade** through the Strait of Malacca — Great Nicobar's development gives India potential sentry control of this choke point.
- **Environmental concerns**: Great Nicobar is a biodiversity hotspot; home to giant leatherback turtles, coral reefs, and endemic species. The project is in Seismic Zone 5 (highest earthquake risk). Indigenous Nicobarese communities have protested the project.

■ KEY TERMS

ICRZ (Island Coastal Regulation Zone): Notification under EPA 1986 for protecting island coastal ecosystems; ICRZ-IA = highest protection (mangroves, reefs); ICRZ-IVA = reclamation/bunding permitted.

DGLL (Directorate of Lighthouses and Lightships): Under Ministry of Ports; operates and maintains lighthouses across India's coastline and island territories.

Strait of Malacca: Critical maritime chokepoint between Malaysia/Singapore and Indonesia; handles ~25% of global trade; ~80% of China's oil imports transit through it.

Great Nicobar Project: Rs 81,000 crore mega project; includes international transshipment port, airport, township; contested on environmental and indigenous rights grounds.

Shompen Tribe: Indigenous tribal group of Great Nicobar Island; Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG); at risk from the Great Nicobar development project.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

Critically examine the geopolitical significance of the Great Nicobar Island development project and the competing environmental and indigenous rights concerns it raises.

Discuss the conservation challenges posed by development projects in Island Coastal Regulation Zone (ICRZ) areas, with reference to the Indira Point lighthouse project.

Topic 13

Hardeep Singh Nijjar Case — Canada's Latest Findings, US Charges, India's Diplomatic Position

GS Paper 2 | International Relations | GS Paper 3 | Internal Security

Canada's Position (Latest)

- Canada's RCMP had charged three Indian nationals in October 2024 with Nijjar's murder — alleged hitmen.
- Canada maintains that its intelligence, including from the Five Eyes intelligence sharing arrangement, pointed to **Indian government involvement** — specifically through RAW (Research and Analysis Wing) channels.
- The current elected Canadian PM (post-Trudeau) has maintained Canada's position but reduced the diplomatic temperature, seeking restoration of normal bilateral relations.
- India's investigation into the murder (NIA-led probe) has focused on the Bishnoi gang's role — which the US indictment now validates.

US DoJ's Position vs Canada's Position

- **US DoJ (Operation Hardball, July 2026)**: Charges Bishnoi and Brar; does **NOT allege Indian government involvement**; frames Nijjar killing as organised crime/gang operation.

• **Canada's RCMP**: Charges three Indian national hitmen; separately alleged Indian government agents orchestrated the plot — though formal government-level charges have not been laid.

• **The divergence**: The US and Canada are Five Eyes partners but have arrived at different narratives — US focusing on gang criminality; Canada on state involvement.

• **India's position**: Nijjar was designated a terrorist by India (NIA list, 2020) for alleged links to Sikh for Justice (SFJ) and Khalistani violence. India disputes Canada's intelligence and rejects state involvement.

• **India-Canada diplomatic trajectory**: Relations significantly damaged since 2023; some normalisation attempts in 2025–26 but the Nijjar issue remains unresolved.

■ KEY TERMS

Hardeep Singh Nijjar (1977–2023): Canadian Sikh citizen; president of Guru Nanak Sikh Gurdwara, Surrey; advocated for Khalistan; designated terrorist by India (2020); assassinated 18 June 2023.

RAW (Research and Analysis Wing): India's external intelligence agency; Canadian intelligence alleged RAW agents were involved in coordinating Nijjar's murder.

Five Eyes Alliance: Intelligence-sharing arrangement between USA, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand; shares SIGINT and HUMINT; underpins Canada's intelligence claims.

SFJ (Sikhs for Justice): US-based Sikh separatist organisation; banned in India; advocates for Khalistan referendum; Nijjar was associated with it.

Extradition (India-Canada): India and Canada do not have an extradition treaty, complicating legal cooperation on the case.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

The Nijjar killing has created a multi-dimensional crisis involving organised crime, alleged state actors, diaspora politics, and diplomatic rupture. Critically evaluate India-Canada bilateral relations in this context.

How does transnational terrorism and diaspora activism in countries like Canada and the UK pose challenges to India's internal security and foreign policy?

Topic 14

India's Astra Missiles — Indonesia Buys; Operation Sindoor Makes Them Combat-Proven

GS Paper 3 | Defence | GS Paper 2 | IR (Act East) | Indo-Pacific

The Deal (Modi Visit Jakarta, 7–8 July 2026)

• PM Modi's two-day visit to Jakarta resulted in a landmark **~USD 630 million defence package** including: Astra BVR air-to-air missiles + additional BrahMos supersonic cruise missile batteries.

• **Astra Mk-I** — Indonesia becomes the **first foreign customer** of the missile — a historic milestone for India's defence exports.

• Deal also includes: development of Indonesia-specific **EVMs** (electronic voting machines), Indian investment in steel/nickel/rare earth permanent magnets in Indonesia, and joint development of **Sabang Port** (overlooking the Strait of Malacca, ~100 miles from India's Great Nicobar port project).

What Is the Astra Missile?

• **Astra Mk-I**: India's **first fully indigenous Beyond-Visual-Range Air-to-Air Missile (BVRAAM)**; developed by DRDO; manufactured by **Bharat Dynamics Limited (BDL)**.

• **Range**: 80–110 km (extendable to ~160 km in favourable launch conditions).

• **Speed**: Mach 4.5.

• **Guidance**: Inertial navigation + mid-course data-link updates + terminal **Active Radar Homing (ARH)** — allows autonomous target acquisition in the final phase.

• **Platform**: Currently integrated on Su-30MKI (Indian Air Force) and MiG-29K (Indian Navy); Indonesia's Su-27/Su-30 fleet is a natural fit.

• **Cost**: ~USD 840,000–960,000 per unit — significantly cheaper than Western equivalents (AIM-120 AMRAAM ~$1.2M+).

• **Astra Mk-II** (under development): Extended range >150 km; Indonesia has expressed interest.

Why Indonesia Chose Astra — The Operation Sindoor Factor

• **Operation Sindoor (May 2025)**: India's retaliatory strikes against Pakistan following the Pahalgam terror attack. Astra was used in **live air combat for the first time** — demonstrating its effectiveness against enemy aircraft and drones in a complex, multi-domain environment with mixed US-Chinese air defence architecture.

• Indonesia's defence planners cite Astra's Operation Sindoor combat record as the key differentiator — making it a **'combat-proven' system** rather than a brochure missile.

• Indonesia's Sukhoi fleet (Su-27/Su-30) is at risk of spare parts sanctions; Russian R-77 missile supply is uncertain. **Astra is a non-Russian BVR missile for a Russian-origin platform** — solving a critical supply chain problem.

• Geopolitically: Indonesia seeks to deter **Chinese grey-zone activities** around the Natuna Islands; buying Indian (not Chinese) missiles sends a message of strategic non-alignment without offending Beijing.

Significance for India

• **Aatmanirbhar Bharat in Defence**: Astra export validates DRDO-BDL's indigenous capability; opens potential markets in Vietnam, Malaysia, Algeria (all Sukhoi operators).

• **India-Indonesia Strategic Partnership**: Bilateral trade ~$28.15 billion (FY25); Indonesia is India's 2nd largest ASEAN trade partner; Sabang Port agreement gives India a strategic foothold near the Strait of Malacca.

• **BrahMos exports**: Philippines signed BrahMos deal (2022); Indonesia is now the third country. BrahMos Aerospace (India-Russia JV) sees Southeast Asia as its primary export market.

• **Great Nicobar + Sabang Port**: Together, these create an Indian maritime presence flanking both the eastern (Malacca) and western (Hormuz-Indian Ocean) approaches to Asia's critical sea lanes.

■ KEY TERMS

BVRAAM (Beyond-Visual-Range Air-to-Air Missile): Air-to-air missile capable of engaging targets beyond the pilot's visual range (~30+ km); uses active radar homing for autonomous terminal guidance.

BDL (Bharat Dynamics Limited): Defence PSU; Hyderabad; manufactures Astra, Akash, NAG, and other guided missile systems for Indian armed forces and for export.

Active Radar Homing (ARH): Terminal guidance mode where the missile's own radar seeker tracks the target in the final phase; makes the missile 'fire-and-forget'.

Sabang Port: Indonesian port on Weh Island at northern tip of Sumatra; overlooks Strait of Malacca; part of India-Indonesia strategic maritime cooperation.

BrahMos: World's fastest operational supersonic cruise missile (Mach 2.8–3.0); India-Russia JV (DRDO + NPOM); range 290–500 km; combat-proven in Operation Sindoor.

Operation Sindoor (May 2025): India's multi-domain retaliatory operation against Pakistan targeting terrorist infrastructure following the Pahalgam attack; first combat use of BrahMos and Astra.

═■ PROBABLE MAINS QUESTIONS

Indonesia's decision to purchase India's Astra and BrahMos missiles marks a significant milestone in India's defence exports and Act East Policy. Critically analyse the strategic implications.

How does Operation Sindoor's success in 2025 change the calculus of India's defence exports? Discuss with reference to the Astra and BrahMos missile deals.

UPSC Current Affairs Notes — 9 July 2026

Sources: The Hindu · Indian Express Explained

■■ *For educational/IAS preparation purposes only. Verify facts from primary sources.*