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THE INDIAN EXPRESS  
EXPLAINER

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## EXCISE DUTY CUT SHIELDS OIL FIRMS AMID PRICE SURGE, NO RELIEF AT THE PUMP



The Union government has reduced the Special Additional Excise Duty (SAED) on petrol and diesel by ₹10 per litre each, bringing diesel duty to zero and petrol duty to ₹23 per litre. However, this cut will not lead to lower fuel prices for consumers. Instead, the move is aimed at easing the financial burden on public sector oil marketing companies (OMCs) such as Indian Oil Corporation Limited, Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited, and Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited, which are currently selling fuel below cost due to rising global crude oil prices. The government estimates that this excise reduction will cost the exchequer around ₹17,000 crore over a 15-day period, while OMCs continue to absorb significant under-recoveries on fuel sales.

To offset revenue losses, the government has simultaneously increased export duties on diesel and aviation turbine fuel (ATF), expecting to generate additional revenue and partially balance the fiscal impact. These measures come amid a volatile global energy situation, with Brent crude prices rising sharply due to disruptions linked to the West Asian conflict. While public sector OMCs are maintaining stable retail prices, some private companies have begun passing on higher costs to consumers. The government has clarified that there is no proposal for fuel rationing or lockdown, and that duty rates will be reviewed periodically given the uncertain and rapidly changing global conditions.

## A mislabelling of a Supreme Court handbook

The Supreme Court of India recently described the Handbook on Combating Gender Stereotypes (2023) as “too technical” and “Harvard-oriented.” The Chief Justice suggested a review by the National Judicial Academy to simplify its language and improve practical usability. The concern raised was that certain forensic and technical terms may not be easily understood by non-experts, especially survivors and their families. The Court also emphasized the need for better practical training of judges.

### What is the Handbook About?

The handbook, released under former CJI D. Y. Chandrachud, aims to eliminate gender stereotypes in judicial reasoning and language. It has three key objectives:

- To identify stereotypical language used in judgments and suggest neutral alternatives
- To highlight flawed reasoning patterns based on gender bias
- To compile binding Supreme Court judgments that reject such stereotypes

It provides practical examples, such as avoiding terms like “ravished” or “keep,” and promotes language consistent with constitutional values of dignity and equality.

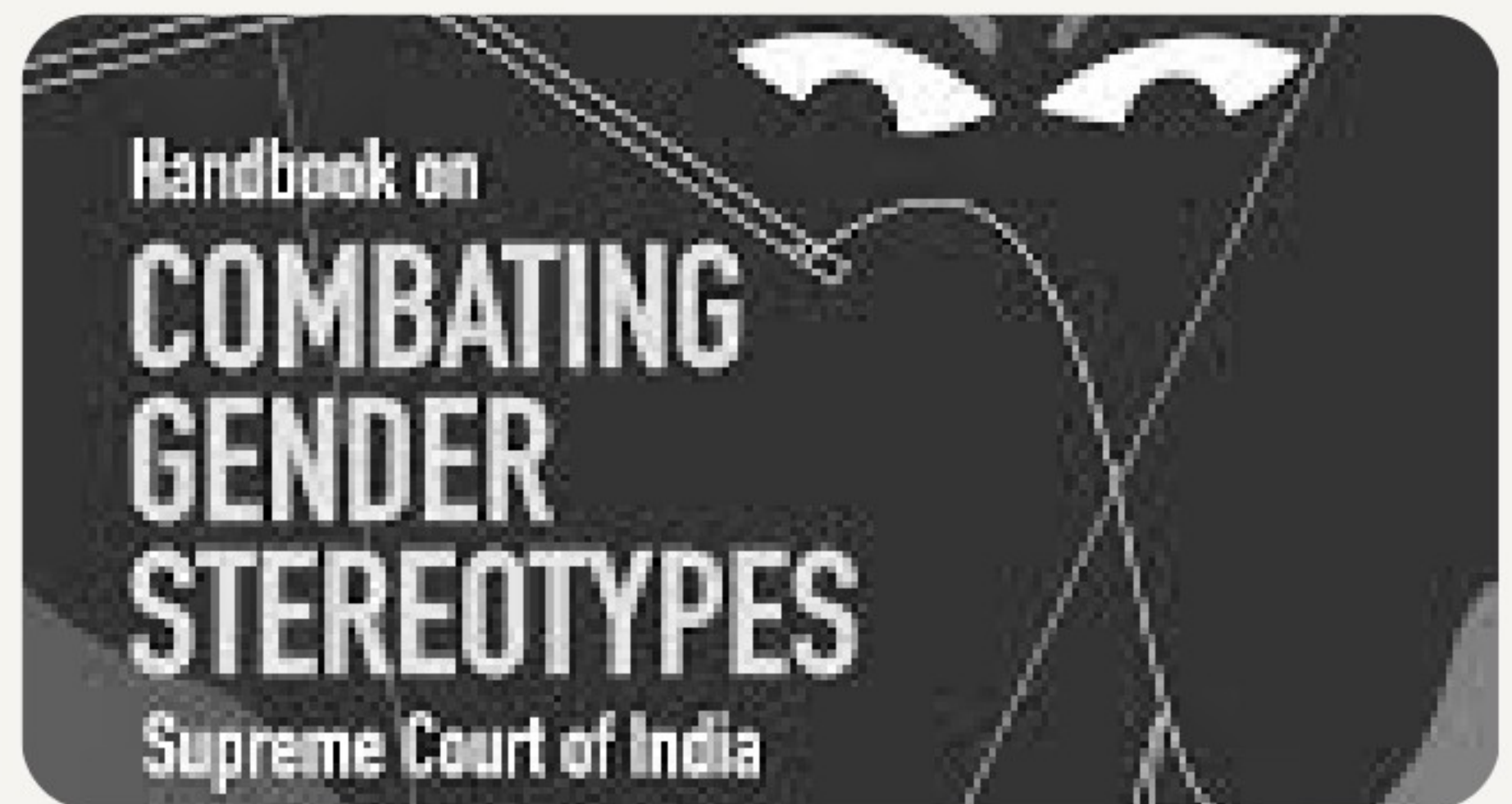
### Challenges and Criticism

The primary criticism is that the handbook is:

- Too technical in language, especially in describing sexual offences
- Not easily accessible to laypersons, though it is meant for judges and lawyers

However, critics argue that this concern may be misplaced because:

- The handbook is intended for legal professionals, not the general public
- It is grounded in Indian case law and courtroom realities, not foreign theory



### Feminist Judgments Project

The Feminist Judgments Project is an academic initiative where scholars rewrite landmark judgments from a feminist perspective.

Its objectives include:

- Demonstrating how judgments could avoid patriarchal reasoning
- Applying legal theory in practical judgment-writing
- Highlighting issues of gender, caste, class, and social identity

In India, this project explores how judicial reasoning can be more inclusive and socially aware, aligning closely with the goals of the handbook.

### Implications of the Issue

This debate highlights several important concerns regarding the functioning of the judicial system. Judicial language plays a crucial role, as it can either reinforce existing social biases or actively challenge and dismantle them through more inclusive and sensitive expression. At the same time, there is a clear need to strike a balance between maintaining technical precision in legal reasoning and ensuring accessibility, so that judicial outputs remain both accurate and understandable. The discussion also reflects a growing institutional recognition of the importance of gender sensitivity within the legal framework. In this context, describing the handbook as “too technical” risks undermining broader efforts aimed at reforming judicial reasoning and eliminating entrenched stereotypes, even though periodic review and refinement of such documents are both necessary and constructive. Overall, the issue underscores the larger goal of making the justice system more inclusive, accountable, and aligned with constitutional morality.



## The Transgender Persons Amendment Bill and the debate over self-determination

The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026 was passed by Parliament after being approved in both Houses. It was introduced by the Union Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment. Despite opposition demands for further scrutiny through a select committee, the Bill was debated and passed, marking a significant shift in India's legal framework governing transgender rights.

### Key Objective of the Amendment

The central aim of the Bill is to redefine the identification and regulation of transgender persons in India. The government has argued that the earlier definition under the 2019 Act was too broad and vague, making it difficult to target benefits to "genuine" beneficiaries. The amendment seeks to create a more restricted and structured framework for identification and welfare delivery.

### Changes in Definition of Transgender Persons

The Bill introduces a narrower definition by limiting transgender identity to two main categories. First, it includes persons with biological or intersex variations present at birth and those belonging to recognised socio-cultural identities such as hijra or kinner communities. Second, it includes individuals who have been forcibly made to assume a transgender identity through coercive practices. Importantly, the Bill excludes self-perceived gender identities and people with diverse sexual orientations, marking a major departure from the earlier inclusive definition.

### Introduction of Medical Certification Process

A significant procedural change is the introduction of a medical board for issuing identity certificates. Under the 2019 Act, individuals could apply directly to the district magistrate based on self-identification. The new system requires evaluation by a medical board, whose recommendation will guide the final decision. This shifts the process from self-declaration to institutional verification.

The amendment represents a major shift from a rights-based to a regulatory approach in transgender policy. The debate highlights the ongoing tension between state regulation and individual rights in shaping social justice laws in India.



### New Offences and Penalties

The Bill introduces strict penalties for crimes involving forced gender identity changes. It criminalises acts such as kidnapping, coercion, and exploitation of individuals into transgender identities, particularly for begging or servitude. Punishments vary based on the age of the victim, with harsher penalties for crimes involving children. While intended as a protective measure, concerns have been raised about possible misuse.

### Additional Provisions and Administrative Changes

The amendment mandates that hospitals report details of gender-related medical procedures to authorities. It also makes post-surgery certification compulsory. These provisions increase state oversight over gender identity processes and introduce new compliance requirements for medical institutions.

### Concerns from the Transgender Community

The Bill has faced strong opposition from the transgender community. Critics argue that it undermines dignity and autonomy by removing the right to self-identify. The introduction of medical certification has been described as "medical gatekeeping." Activists also point out that the Bill contradicts the Supreme Court's landmark NALSA vs Union of India, which upheld self-determination of gender as a fundamental right under Article 21. Additionally, concerns have been raised about the lack of consultation and absence of clear grievance redressal mechanisms.

## Beyond the rhetoric of the north-south divide

India's development has long been viewed as a gradual process of convergence, where economically advanced regions would eventually pull lagging regions forward. However, recent debates around the upcoming Census and delimitation have highlighted a growing structural divide between the northern and southern parts of the country. This divide is not merely economic but also political, raising concerns about long-term national cohesion.

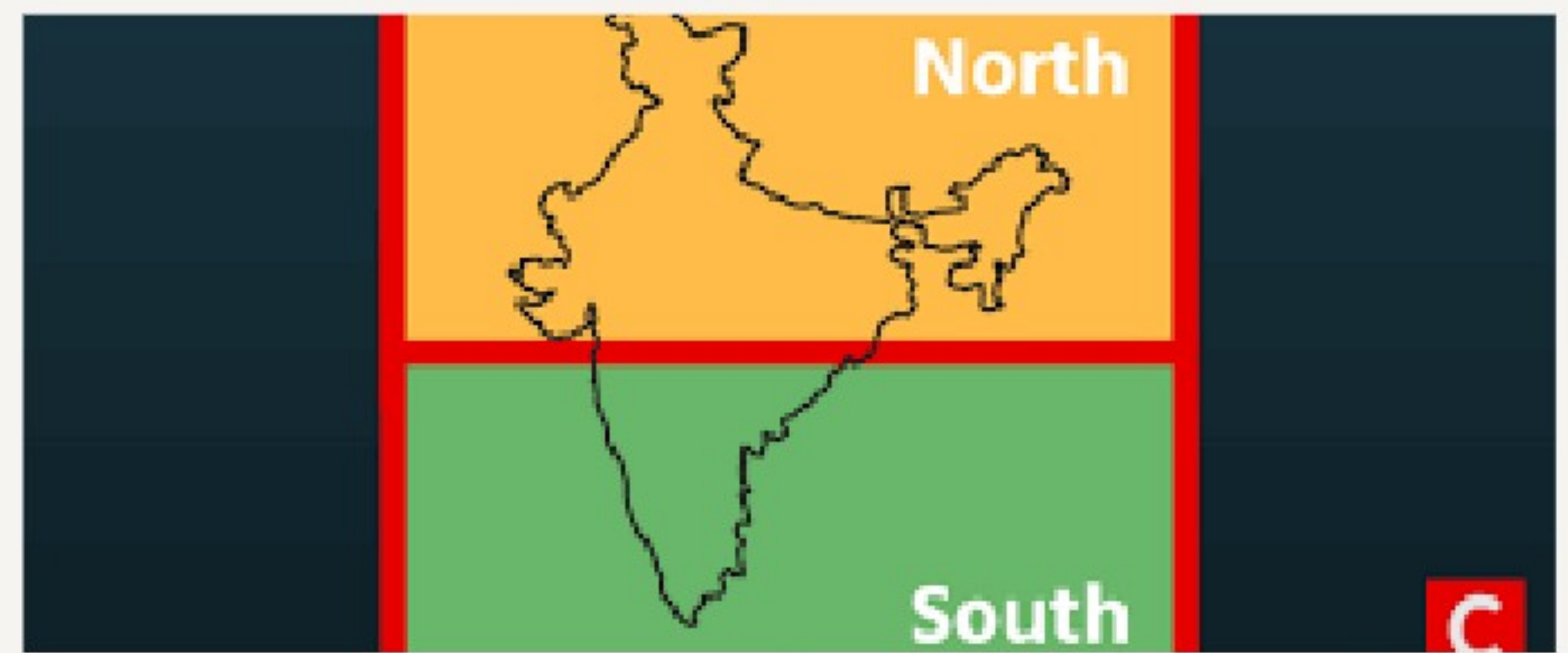
### Economic and Human Development Asymmetry

A significant gap exists between the Peninsular States and the northern "Great Indian Plain." Southern States such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala have achieved relatively high per capita incomes and strong human development indicators, including better health, education, and life expectancy. In contrast, northern States such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar continue to face lower income levels, higher population growth, and weaker social indicators. This divergence has led to a situation where economic prosperity is concentrated in one region, while demographic weight is concentrated in another.

### Political Implications of Delimitation

The upcoming delimitation exercise, which will redistribute parliamentary seats based on population, is likely to amplify this imbalance. Since northern States have higher population growth, they stand to gain greater political representation. This could reduce the relative influence of southern States, even though they contribute more significantly to economic output. Such a mismatch between economic contribution and political power poses a challenge for federal balance.

The North-South divide requires a balanced and nuanced response. Policymaking must move beyond regional blame and focus on strengthening both economic convergence and political fairness. Southern States need to enhance inclusivity and social development, while northern States require sustained investment in human capital and infrastructure. At the national level, cooperative federalism and institutional innovation will be essential to ensure that economic progress and political representation evolve in a complementary manner, preserving unity while addressing diversity.



### Comparative Perspective and Structural Risks

In most federal systems, such as the United States or Canada, economic strength and population are more closely aligned, ensuring stability. India's divergence raises concerns similar to historical cases like the dissolution of the Soviet Union and breakup of Yugoslavia, where economic and political imbalances contributed to instability. While such comparisons are cautionary rather than predictive, they highlight the importance of managing regional disparities carefully.

### Proposed Solution: Digressive Proportionality

One proposed approach to address this imbalance is the concept of digressive proportionality. This system would allocate more seats to populous States but reduce representation per capita, while smaller or less populous States would have relatively higher representation per person. By balancing population-based representation with regional equity, this model aims to preserve both democratic fairness and federal stability.

### Internal Challenges within Southern States

While the political imbalance is a concern, southern States also face internal structural challenges. Despite higher incomes, issues such as income inequality, regional disparities, and limited social mobility persist. Economic growth has not always translated into equitable distribution, with wealth often concentrated in urban centres. Social issues such as caste discrimination and gender inequality also continue to affect development outcomes.

## India signs 858-cr. defence deals with Russian, U.S. firms

The Ministry of Defence has signed contracts worth ₹858 crore to strengthen India's defence capabilities. These agreements focus on enhancing air defence systems for the Army and maintenance support for the Navy's reconnaissance fleet. The deals reflect India's continued efforts to modernise its armed forces while maintaining diversified global defence partnerships.



### Tunguska Air Defence System Procurement

A contract worth ₹445 crore has been signed with JSC Rosoboronexport for the procurement of the Tunguska Air Defence Missile System. This system is designed to counter aerial threats such as aircraft, drones, and cruise missiles, thereby strengthening India's multi-layered air defence network and improving protection against evolving low-altitude threats. Unlike conventional air defence systems that rely solely on missiles, the Tunguska integrates surface-to-air missiles with twin 30 mm autocannons, giving it a hybrid capability. This design makes it particularly effective against fast-moving and low-flying targets such as helicopters, drones, and cruise missiles. Its missile component, primarily from the 9M311 family, can engage targets at ranges of up to 8–10 km and at altitudes of up to 3,500 metres, using radio command guidance for high accuracy.

### Maintenance Support for P-8I Aircraft

The Ministry has also signed a ₹413 crore contract with Boeing India Defense Private Limited for depot-level inspection and maintenance of the Navy's P-8I Long-Range Maritime Reconnaissance Aircraft. This agreement will enable in-country maintenance, repair, and overhaul (MRO), ensuring higher operational readiness and reducing dependence on foreign facilities.



### Promotion of Indigenous Capability

Both contracts fall under the "Buy Indian" category with 100% indigenous content. This reflects the government's emphasis on Aatmanirbhar Bharat and Make in India. By strengthening domestic MRO capabilities and encouraging local production, India aims to build a more self-reliant defence ecosystem.

### Strategic Significance of the Deals

These agreements enhance India's overall defence preparedness. The air defence system improves the Army's ability to counter modern aerial threats, while the maintenance of maritime aircraft strengthens surveillance and maritime domain awareness. Together, they contribute to improved combat readiness across both land and sea domains.

### Reflection of Strategic Autonomy

The deals underline India's approach of maintaining balanced defence relations with major global partners. By engaging with both Russia and the United States, India continues to pursue a policy of strategic autonomy, ensuring access to diverse technologies without overdependence on a single country.

### Challenges in Defence Procurement

Despite these advancements, challenges remain in India's defence procurement framework. Dependence on foreign technology can lead to supply disruptions and interoperability issues. Additionally, delays in procurement processes and technology transfer may affect timely capability enhancement. Addressing these challenges will be crucial for sustaining long-term defence readiness.

## What is driving the fall in gold prices?

Gold has historically been viewed as a safe haven asset during periods of economic, political, or financial uncertainty. In past crises such as the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Russia-Ukraine War, gold prices either remained stable or increased significantly. This trend is driven by investors seeking to preserve wealth when other financial markets become volatile or unreliable.

In contrast to past patterns, gold prices have fallen sharply since the onset of the West Asian conflict February 2026. In India, gold prices declined steeply from peak levels reached earlier in 2026. This reversal has surprised analysts, as geopolitical crises typically lead to increased demand for gold rather than a sell-off.



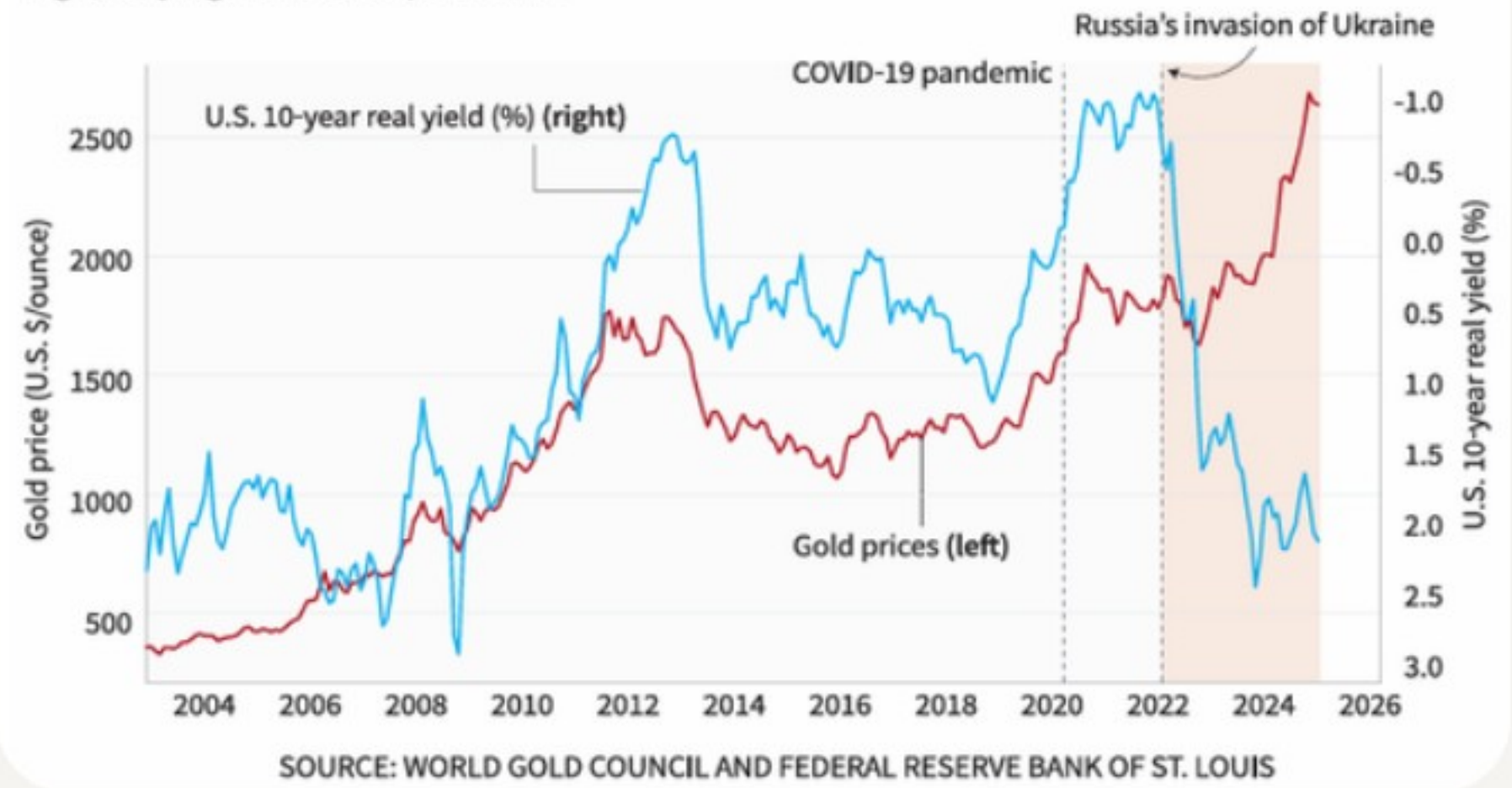
### Role of Interest Rates and Bond Yields

One key factor explaining this decline is the change in interest rate expectations. Gold does not provide any fixed return, unlike assets such as government bonds. When investors expect interest rates to remain high, bonds become more attractive due to their assured returns. As a result, capital shifts away from gold, reducing its demand and price. For India, the Strait holds vital importance due to its dependence on energy imports from West Asia. Continued access, even during conflict, indicates the importance of diplomatic relations and strategic balancing in the region.

In the short term, the US dollar has re-emerged as the preferred safe haven, particularly because global trade and oil transactions are largely dollar-denominated. However, gold continues to retain its long-term importance. Central banks are still accumulating gold as a strategic reserve asset, especially after concerns over financial sanctions in recent years. The future trajectory of gold prices will largely depend on how the conflict evolves. If oil prices stabilise and inflation concerns ease, gold may regain its attractiveness. Conversely, if the conflict deepens and leads to stagflation, gold could again emerge as a preferred asset. While short-term volatility is likely to persist, the long-term outlook for gold remains positive, supported by sustained demand and its role as a hedge against uncertainty.

### Gold stopped following the rules in 2022

Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, gold has kept climbing even as real yields have stayed high, defying decades of precedent



### Impact of the Strengthening US Dollar

Another major factor is the strengthening of the US dollar. Since gold is globally priced in dollars, a stronger dollar makes gold more expensive for international buyers, thereby reducing demand. At the same time, higher interest rates attract global capital into dollar-denominated assets like US Treasury bonds, reinforcing the dollar's position and further weakening gold prices.

### Oil Prices, Inflation, and Market Expectations

The conflict led to a sharp rise in global oil prices, increasing inflationary pressures worldwide. In response, markets began anticipating prolonged high interest rates instead of earlier expectations of rate cuts. This shift in expectations has been crucial in reducing gold's appeal, as the conditions that usually support gold—low interest rates and a weak dollar—are currently absent.

### Investor Behaviour and Market Dynamics

Market dynamics have also contributed to the fall in gold prices. After a prolonged period of price increases, gold reached very high levels before the conflict. The subsequent decline triggered automatic sell orders, leading to a chain reaction of further selling. Additionally, falling stock markets created liquidity pressures, prompting investors to sell gold holdings to cover losses in other assets.

## Indian coffee exports hit due to U.S.-Iran war

India's coffee exports have been significantly disrupted due to the ongoing U.S.-Israel conflict with Iran 2026. Around 300 containers of coffee shipments are currently stranded or delayed, particularly those destined for West Asian markets and parts of Europe. The disruption has created uncertainty in export logistics and raised serious concerns among exporters.

A major factor behind the disruption is the constraint in shipping through the Strait of Hormuz, a critical global trade route connecting the Persian Gulf to international markets. Reduced traffic and heightened security risks in this region have forced shipping lines to delay, reroute, or terminate voyages midway, affecting timely delivery of goods.



### Logistical Challenges & Rerouting of Shipments

Due to the evolving conflict situation, many shipments have been diverted to alternative ports such as Khor Fakkan, Sohar, Salalah, and Jeddah, which are far from the intended destinations. In several cases, shipping companies have declared "end of voyage," shifting responsibility to exporters. Exporters are then required to track consignments, arrange inland transport, and ensure delivery to buyers under difficult and uncertain conditions.

The crisis highlights the vulnerability of export-dependent sectors to geopolitical disruptions. Increased logistics costs, longer transit times, and uncertainty in global trade routes not only affect exporters but also impact producers and global supply chains. The situation underscores the importance of diversified trade routes, risk mitigation strategies, and stronger policy support to sustain export competitiveness in times of global conflict.



### Rising Costs and Financial Burden

The disruption has led to a sharp increase in export costs. Exporters are incurring additional expenses such as trucking charges, war risk surcharges, and higher insurance premiums. Overall, per-container costs have risen substantially, adding thousands of dollars over normal freight charges. This escalation has significantly reduced profit margins and increased financial stress on exporters.

### Impact on Market Dynamics and Trade Commitments

The delays have also affected contractual obligations. Many shipments meant to reach markets before key demand periods, such as Ramzan, have been delayed, leading to uncertainty over acceptance by buyers. While existing contracts are largely being honoured despite higher costs, exporters are hesitant to enter into new agreements due to unstable freight rates and logistical unpredictability.

### Global Competitiveness and Market Share Concerns

India's inability to deliver coffee shipments on time has created opportunities for competing coffee-producing countries such as Brazil, Ethiopia, and Uganda. These countries are better positioned to meet global demand in the current scenario, potentially leading to a loss of market share for Indian exporters in international markets.

## PRELIMS CORNER :

1) Consider the following statements: (2015)

1. The winds which blow between 30° N and 60° S latitudes throughout the year are known as westerlies.

2. The moist air masses that cause winter rains in North-Western region of India are part of Westerlies. Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- a) 1 only
- b) 2 only
- c) Both 1 and 2
- d) Neither 1 nor 2

2) The crop is subtropical in nature. A hard frost is injurious to it. It requires at least 210 frost-free days and 50 to 100 centimeters of rainfall for its growth. A light well-drained soil capable of retaining moisture is ideally suited for the cultivation of the crop.”

Which one of the following is the crop? (2019)

- a) Cotton
- b) Jute
- c) Sugarcane
- d) Tea

**PRELIMS 2026  
COUNTDOWN**

**57 DAYS TO GO**

## POLICY IN ACTION

### Democracy as a People's Festival

The Election Commission of India, along with State and district authorities, has launched extensive voter awareness initiatives across poll-bound regions to encourage active public participation in elections. Under the Systematic Voter Education and Electoral Participation (SVEEP) programme, activities are designed to make elections a people-centric celebration rather than a mere administrative exercise. In West Bengal, a major outreach event in Howrah brought together students, first-time voters, officials, and local communities through a cyclothon, cultural programmes, and even creative elements like a voter awareness boat ferry. Popular characters like Chhota Bheem and Chutki were used to connect with younger audiences, reflecting an effort to make democratic participation relatable and engaging. These initiatives highlight how ordinary citizens, especially youth, are being actively drawn into the democratic process in a festive and inclusive manner.

The focus of these efforts is to make voters informed, confident, and motivated. Special attention is being given to urban voters, women, persons with disabilities, and first-time voters to ensure wider inclusion. Cultural traditions such as Kalighat paintings, Chhau dance, and Baul music are being integrated into awareness campaigns, making the message resonate with local identities. At the same time, tools like the ECINET app, improved voter slips, and webcasting are being promoted to make voting easier and more transparent. Educational institutions, social media campaigns, and collaborations with organisations are further expanding outreach. Together, these measures aim to build a fear-free and participatory electoral environment where citizens are active stakeholders in shaping democracy.

# Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) The correct answer is (b)

The westerlies are permanent planetary winds that generally blow from west to east in the mid-latitudes, roughly between  $30^\circ$  and  $60^\circ$  in both hemispheres. However, Statement 1 is incorrect because it wrongly generalises their extent as “throughout the year” between  $30^\circ$  N and  $60^\circ$  S. In reality, the westerlies are more stable and continuous in the Northern Hemisphere between  $30^\circ$  N and  $60^\circ$  N, but in the Southern Hemisphere their flow is influenced by seasonal shifts in pressure belts and the dominance of oceanic areas. They are strongest between  $40^\circ$  S and  $60^\circ$  S (the “Roaring Forties” and “Furious Fifties”), but their exact position shifts seasonally rather than remaining fixed year-round.

Statement 2 is correct and reflects a key application of the westerlies in the Indian context. The winter rainfall in northwestern India is caused by Western Disturbances, which are extratropical cyclones embedded within the subtropical branch of the westerlies. These systems originate over the Mediterranean region and travel eastward, carrying moisture into parts of India such as Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, and western Uttar Pradesh. This rainfall is crucial for rabi crops like wheat. These disturbances are indeed linked to the westerly wind system.

2) The correct answer is (a) Cotton, and this can be understood by carefully matching the climatic and soil requirements given in the question with the characteristics of cotton cultivation.

Cotton is a subtropical to tropical crop grown mainly in the kharif season in semi-arid regions of India. One of its most important requirements is a long frost-free period, usually around 200–210 days, because even a light frost can severely damage the crop. This directly matches the condition given in the question that a “hard frost is injurious.” Cotton also thrives in moderate rainfall conditions, typically requiring about 50–100 cm of rainfall, which aligns perfectly with the data provided. Unlike crops such as jute or tea that need heavy rainfall, cotton grows best in relatively drier conditions with controlled moisture.

The soil requirement mentioned in the question—light, well-drained soil capable of retaining moisture—is another key indicator of cotton. Cotton plants are highly sensitive to waterlogging, so they need soils with good drainage but also adequate moisture retention. In India, cotton is commonly grown in black cotton soil (regur), which has high moisture-holding capacity, along with other well-drained loamy soils.

Climatically, cotton requires warm temperatures ( $20\text{--}30^\circ\text{C}$ ) and a clear sky during the flowering stage, along with plenty of sunshine. It is relatively drought-tolerant but still needs sufficient moisture during critical stages like flowering and boll formation. These features distinguish it from crops like sugarcane (which needs much higher water) and tea (which requires humid, high rainfall conditions).

Cotton remains a crucial cash crop in India, contributing significantly to livelihoods and the textile industry, with India producing nearly a quarter of global cotton output.

