

## Topics of Discussion:

1. India–Oman Free Trade Agreement (CEPA)
2. Live-in Relationships & Judicial Ruling
3. GRAM G Bill (VB-G RAM G) Replaces MGNREGA
4. India–Russia Logistics Agreement (RELOS)
5. Delhi Air Pollution Crisis

## Looking to expand market access, India inks free trade pact with Oman

### Syllabus:

**Preliminary Examination:** Current events of national and international importance

**Mains Examination: General Studies-II:** Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests.

**What's the ongoing story:** India Thursday signed a free trade agreement (FTA) with Oman, the second trade deal with a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) country after the UAE, in an effort to expand market access for its exporters in the West Asian market at a time when steep tariffs in the US market are hurting trade and investments.

### Key Points to Ponder:

- What is a free trade agreement?
- What is the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)?
- What are GCC countries? What is the objective of the GCC?
- What is the status of trade between India and Oman?
- What is the significance of this deal?
- Oman's strategic location makes it a vital gateway to the Gulf and Africa. Elaborate.
- What is India's West Asia strategy?
- India has an FTA deal with many GCC countries?



— Map work: Location of Oman and surrounding countries

### **Key Takeaways:**

— Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who met Oman Sultan Haitham bin Tarik in Muscat, told the India-Oman Business Forum: “Today we are taking a historic decision, the echoes of which will be heard for many decades to come. The Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement, or CEPA, will infuse our partnership with new confidence and energy in the 21st century...”

— “CEPA will create many new opportunities for growth, innovation and employment for our youth. Your role is crucial in ensuring that this agreement moves from paper to performance. Because only when policy and enterprise work together does a partnership create new history,” he said.

— Under the deal, Oman has offered zero-duty access on 98 per cent of its tariff lines that could result in \$2 billion worth of exports in the near term, according to official estimates, benefitting gems and jewellery, textiles, leather, footwear, sports goods, plastics, furniture, agricultural products and engineering products, among others.

— India, on its part, has liberalised tariffs on 77.79 per cent of its total tariff lines, protecting sensitive sectors such as agricultural products including dairy, tea, coffee, rubber, and tobacco products; gold and silver bullion, and jewellery. As part of the services sector deal, Oman has increased the quota for Intra-Corporate Transferees from 20 per cent to 50 per cent.

— According to the Ministry, the agreement also provides for more liberal entry and stay conditions for skilled professionals in key sectors such as accountancy, taxation, architecture, medical and allied services, thereby supporting deeper and more seamless professional engagement.

— Oman’s total annual imports are around \$40 billion, but nearly two-thirds of its imports are machinery goods where India could gain market access. Indian exports, largely driven by machinery and parts exports, have doubled in the last five years from \$2 billion to \$6 billion. New Delhi’s top exports include machinery, aircraft, rice, iron and steel articles, beauty and personal care products and ceramic products.

— The CEPA, according to the government, is expected to have three outcomes: “Strengthen and further develop closer economic and commercial integration, increase trade between the two

countries by reducing trade barriers and creating a stable framework, and unlock opportunities in all major sectors of the economy, enhance economic growth, create jobs and boost investment flows between both countries.”

— Oman’s gains are concentrated in energy and industrial inputs. India has offered tariff liberalisation on about 78 per cent of its tariff lines, largely through tariff-rate quotas to protect sensitive sectors.

— India imported roughly \$6.6 billion of goods from Oman in fiscal 2025, dominated by crude oil, liquefied natural gas and fertilisers, alongside chemical inputs such as methanol and ammonia, Srivastava said.

— S C Ralhan, president of Federation of Indian Export Organisations (FIEO), said Oman’s strategic location makes it a vital gateway to the Gulf and Africa, and the CEPA will enable Indian exporters to integrate more effectively into regional value chains, diversify markets, and expand India’s export footprint.

— Besides CEPA, the two sides signed five pacts on maritime heritage and museums, agriculture, higher education, food innovation and maritime cooperation.

### **ECONOMY: How Oman deal adds heft to India’s West Asia trade strategy amid rising trade curbs in the West**

— Amid increasing trade restrictions in the US due to tariffs and the European Union on account of the carbon tax, India has **signed a trade deal** with Oman on Thursday (December 18) to expand the footprint for its exports in West Asia.

— This fits into New Delhi’s strategy of rapidly pushing for more and more free trade agreements (FTAs), thereby securing new markets amid continued uncertainty around the trade deal with the US.

— Indian exporters have also been pushing for better market access in the Arab region due to less stringent standards compared with the European Union (EU). This not only raises the cost of compliance for exporters, but also often acts as a non-tariff barrier (NTB).

— While Oman is much less diversified and a much smaller market for India compared with the UAE, its strategic location serves as a hub from where Indian products can find other markets in the region and in Africa.

### **Do You Know:**

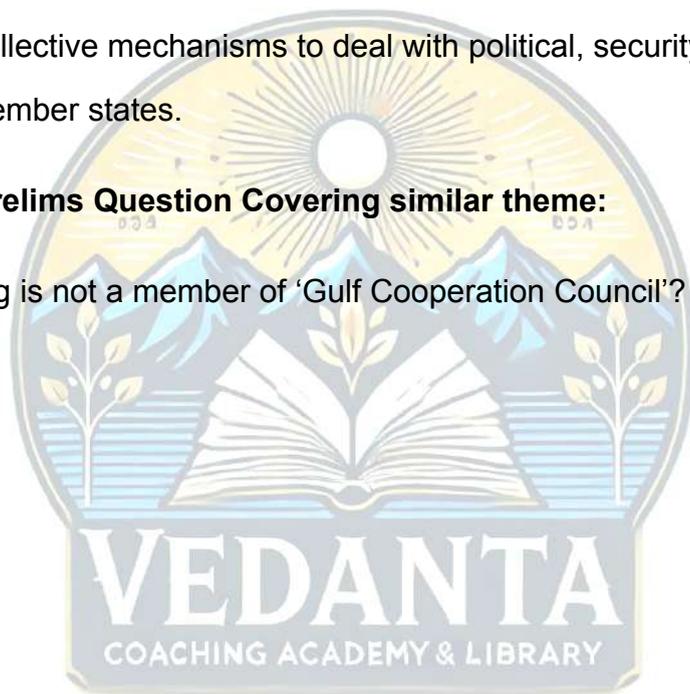
— The Cooperation Council for the Arab Gulf States, often called the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), is one of the most important regional organisations in the Gulf and the wider Middle East region.

— The six member states of the GCC, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, came together in 1981 to form the regional grouping in the light of the tumultuous politics at the time to develop collective mechanisms to deal with political, security and economic challenges facing the member states.

### **Previous year UPSC Prelims Question Covering similar theme:**

(1) Which of the following is not a member of 'Gulf Cooperation Council'? (UPSC CSE 2016)

- (a) Iran
- (b) Saudi Arabia
- (c) Oman
- (d) Kuwait



### **Previous year UPSC Mains Question Covering similar theme:**

The question of India's Energy Security constitutes the most important part of India's economic progress. Analyse India's energy policy cooperation with West Asian countries. (UPSC CSE 2017)

**Live-in relations not illegal, State's duty to protect': HC relief for 12 women**

### **Syllabus:**

**Preliminary Examination:** Current events of national and international importance

**Mains Examination: General Studies-I:** Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India.

**What's the ongoing story:** The Allahabad High Court has observed that a live-in relationship cannot be called illegal, nor is living together without the sanctity of marriage an offence. It also said the State is duty-bound to protect every citizen, and a couple's unmarried status does not deprive them of their fundamental rights.

**Key Points to Ponder:**

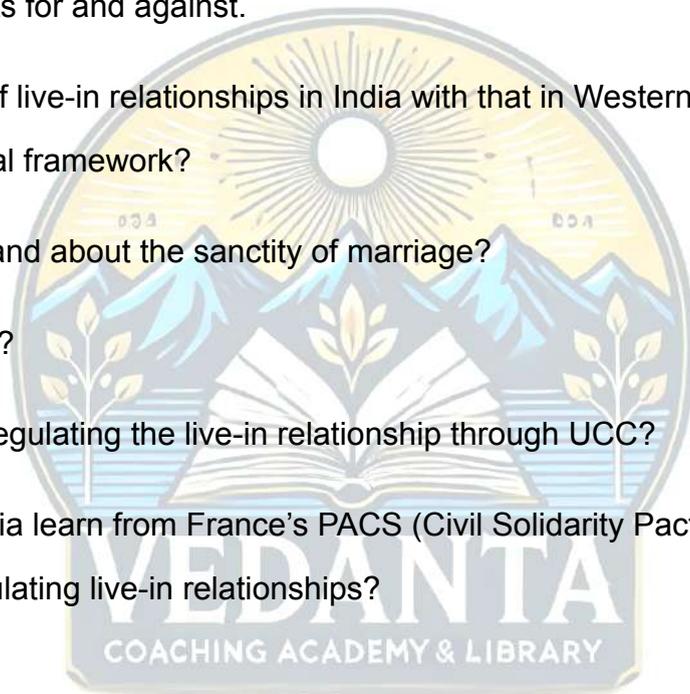
- What is the legal status of live-in relationships in India?
- How has the judiciary interpreted Article 21 in the context of live-in relationships in India?

Do you think that legal recognition of live-in relationships can help in women's empowerment in India? Provide arguments for and against.

- Compare the status of live-in relationships in India with that in Western democracies. Should India adopt a similar legal framework?
- What do you understand about the sanctity of marriage?
- What is a writ petition?
- How is Uttarakhand regulating the live-in relationship through UCC?
- What lessons can India learn from France's PACS (Civil Solidarity Pact) or Sweden's cohabitation laws in regulating live-in relationships?

**Key Takeaways:**

- Hearing 12 petitions filed by women in live-in relationships who sought protection as they feared a threat to their lives, the court ordered the police chiefs of the districts concerned to provide immediate protection if someone disturbs their peaceful living.
- While issuing the direction on Wednesday, the single bench of Justice Vivek Kumar Singh observed, "The concept of a live-in relationship may not be acceptable to all, but it cannot be said that such a relationship is an illegal one or that living together without the sanctity of the marriage constitutes an offence."
- The petitioners claimed they approached police in the districts concerned, but no attention was paid to them. In all the writ petitions — which the court clubbed — the petitioners prayed that the



police be directed to provide protection from people, including family members, relatives or associates, from causing any harm.

— The order referred to the argument of the government counsel, who stated, “Live-in relationships cannot be accepted at the cost of our country’s social fabric...”

— While protection may be granted to couples who have solemnised marriage against the wishes of their parents and relatives, no protection can be granted to unmarried couples, the government counsel argued, adding that the police cannot be compelled to serve as personal security for non-marital cohabitation.

— The court order stated that during arguments, the government counsel referred to a judgment by a division bench of the Allahabad HC on April 28, 2023, where the court refused to provide protection to couples in a live-in relationship.

— The court further observed, “The petitioners herein, who are major, have taken a decision to reside together without the sanctity of marriage, and it is not for the courts to judge them on their decision. If the petitioners... have not committed any offence, this court sees no reason why their prayer for the grant of protection cannot be acceded to...”

### **Do You Know:**

— The Uttarakhand government on January 27 rolled out the Uniform Civil Code Rules for regulating live-in relationships which requires, among other things, the couple to fill a **16-page form and obtain a certificate from a religious leader** showing they are eligible to marry, if they so choose.

— The Uttarakhand UCC describes a live-in relationship as a relationship between a man and a woman, “who cohabit in a shared household through a relationship in the nature of marriage.”

— The term “shared household” is defined as one “where a man and a woman, not being minors, live under one roof in a rented accommodation or in a house owned jointly or by any one of them or any other accommodation.”

### **Previous year UPSC Mains Question Covering similar theme:**

Do you think marriage as a sacrament is losing its value in Modern India? (UPSC CSE 2023)

## GRAM G bill clears both Houses

### Syllabus:

**Preliminary Examination:** Current events of national and international importance

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

**What's the ongoing story:** Amid protests from Opposition members who tore papers in the well of the House, the Lok Sabha on Thursday passed the Viksit Bharat-Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill, 2025 (VB-G RAM G), which seeks to repeal MGNREGA, by a voice vote. The House was adjourned for the day after the Bill's passage.

### Key Points to Ponder:

- What is MGNREGA?
- What is the significance of this scheme? What was the purpose of introducing it?
- What are the challenges associated with the scheme?
- Draw the differences and similarities between VB-G RAM G scheme and MGNREGA.
- How is the MGNREGA scheme implemented?
- How is it a demand-driven scheme?

### Key Takeaways:

- The Bill increases the number of days of guaranteed employment from 100 to 125, but changes the funding pattern. Under MGNREGA, the Centre provided the entire funding for wages and three-fourths of the material costs – with states providing one-third of the material costs, administrative costs, unemployment allowance, and compensation. Under the new Bill, the Centre will provide 60 per cent of all the costs and the states 40 per cent.
- Under the new Bill, the Centre will decide state-wise normative allocation each financial year, as per PRS Legislative Research, and states will bear any excessive expenditure above the normative allocation.

— Pointing out that many states struggle to fulfil even the existing 100-day guarantee, another MP from a key NDA constituent said, “How is it going to be a feasible scheme if you are reducing the Centre’s share while increasing the number of days (to 125 days)? MGNREGA has remained one of the most popular government schemes in rural areas.”

— Echoing the concerns, TDP floor leader in the Lok Sabha, Lavu Sri Krishna Devarayalu, said his party was conscious of the need to make changes to MGNREGA but hoped the Centre would address concerns about funding.

**EDITORIAL: P B Mehta writes: MNREGA was the ground beneath our feet. It’s slipping away**

— If the Nobel Prize were awarded for genuine economic thinking combined with demonstrable positive policy impact, the architects of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) would rank among the strongest candidates. It is difficult to imagine a public programme of comparable scale that was both so carefully designed and so consequential in its effects.

— The MGNREGA is possibly the most intensively studied public policy in Indian history. There are hundreds of academic papers analysing its design, implementation, and effects. The overwhelming verdict, even among scholars who began as sceptics, is that the scheme has been a remarkable success.

— They showed that the general equilibrium effects were substantial: Household earnings rose by about 14 per cent, poverty declined by roughly 26 per cent. The programme increased the bargaining power of labour. This led to higher wages and greater local demand, which in turn generated additional non-farm employment.

— More importantly, the evidence showed that higher wages under the MGNREGA did not lead to reduced employment. That rising wages for the poorest workers could be treated as a defect rather than a virtue of the scheme is mind-boggling.

— Public memory is short. Despite its implementation weaknesses, the MGNREGA was the programme that effectively helped save India during the Covid shock. It provided a critical lifeline to millions of households and played a key role in sustaining rural demand.

— Even setting aside any commitment to a rights-based welfare state, the MGNREGA grasped a fundamental truth about governance in India: Targeted programmes are exceptionally prone to failure and manipulation. Universality, near-universality, or self-targeting offers the best chance of success.

— MGNREGA cut through interminable debates by adopting a self-targeting design: Anyone willing to do the work could demand employment.

— The social consequences of this design choice were transformative. Nationally, more than 57 per cent of the MGNREGA employment days generated in 2023 accrued to women; in states such as Tamil Nadu, the figure rises to nearly 80 per cent. Few public policies have so decisively altered gendered patterns of labour force participation at scale.

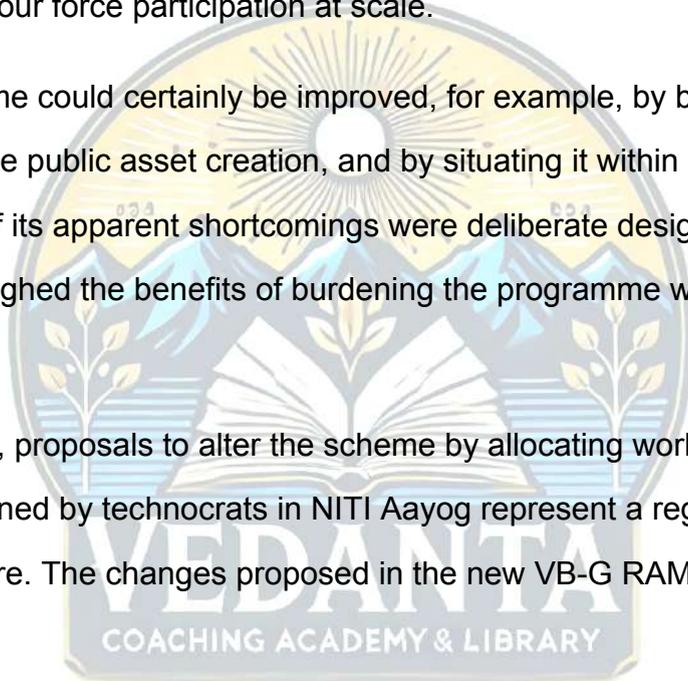
— In principle, the scheme could certainly be improved, for example, by better linking it to skill formation or more durable public asset creation, and by situating it within a changing welfare architecture. Yet many of its apparent shortcomings were deliberate design choices. The gains from simplicity far outweighed the benefits of burdening the programme with multiple, and often conflicting, objectives.

— From this perspective, proposals to alter the scheme by allocating work to states on supposedly objective criteria determined by technocrats in NITI Aayog represent a regression in India's administrative architecture. The changes proposed in the new VB-G RAM G Bill largely move in the wrong direction.

— On the surface, extending the employment guarantee to 125 days appears progressive. In practice, however, this is likely to be nullified by seasonal pauses, by converting a demand-driven entitlement into a budget-capped, supply-driven programme and by shifting a greater financial burden onto states.

— The MGNREGA, for all its limitations, was also a significant instrument of decentralisation, empowering gram panchayats in meaningful ways. Although the new Bill formally involves panchayats in planning, the requirement that these plans align with centrally determined priorities will, in practice, hollow out their agency.

**Do You Know:**



— Under MGNREGA, every rural household, whose adult members volunteer to do unskilled manual work, is entitled to get at least 100 days of wage employment in a financial year.

— Launched across India's 200 most backward rural districts in 2006-07, the MGNREGS was extended to an additional 130 districts during 2007-08; and to the entire country from financial year 2008-09.

— Section 3 (1) of the MGNREG Act provides for “not less than one hundred days” work per rural household in a financial year. But it has become the de facto upper limit as the NREGA software does not allow data entries for employment above 100 days to a household in a year unless specifically requested by the State/UT.

— The government, however, allows additional 50 days of wage employment (beyond the stipulated 100 days). For instance, every Scheduled Tribe household in a forest area is entitled to get 150 days' work under NREGS, provided that such families have no other private property except for the land rights granted under the Forest Right Act, 2016.

— Besides, the government, under Section 3(4) of the MGNREGA, can also provide an additional 50 days of unskilled manual work in a year, over and above the 100-day in such rural areas where drought or any natural calamity (as per Ministry of Home Affairs) has been notified.

**Previous year UPSC Prelims Question Covering similar theme:**

(2) Among the following who are eligible to benefit from the “Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act”? (UPSC CSE 2011)

(a) Adult members of only the scheduled caste and scheduled tribe households.

(b) Adult members of below poverty line (BPL) households.

(c) Adult members of households of all backward communities.

(d) Adult members of any household.

**India-Russia logistics agreement, with eye on Arctic, Indo-Pacific**

**Syllabus:**

**Preliminary Examination:** Current events of national and international importance

**Mains Examination: General Studies-II:** Bilateral, regional and global groupings and agreements involving India and/or affecting India's interests

**What's the ongoing story:** Days after his two-day official visit to New Delhi on December 4-5, Russia President Vladimir Putin has signed into federal law a major military cooperation agreement with India.

**Key Points to Ponder:**

- What are the major defence cooperation between India and Russia?
- What is the significance of Russia in defence cooperation for India?
- What are the major defence agreements signed by India?
- What is the significance of the Indo-Pacific for India?
- What are the challenges in the India-Russia relationship?

**Key Takeaways:**

- The Reciprocal Exchange of Logistics Support (RELOS) was ratified by both houses of the Russian Parliament before receiving presidential approval. It will come into force after the formal exchange of instruments of ratification between **Russia and India**.
- The agreement sets out procedures governing the movement of military formations, warships and military aircraft between Russia and India, as well as the arrangements for providing logistical support to each other's forces.
- It will facilitate the mutual use of airspace by Russian and Indian military aircraft, and has provisions related to port calls by warships of both countries.
- It is designed to regulate not only the dispatch of troops and military equipment, but also the logistics associated with such deployments. This includes support services that may be required when forces from either country operate on the other's territory.
- The established framework is intended to be applied during joint military exercises and training activities, as well as in situations involving humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

— For India, RELOS provides an institutional framework for access to Russian air and naval bases, from Vladivostok on the Pacific to Murmansk on the Arctic, for refuelling, repairs, and maintenance, boosting operational reach and readiness, especially for Russian-origin equipment.

— Not only does this deepen the existing defence partnership between Russia and India, it supports New Delhi's broader Indo-Pacific strategy by leveraging Russia's extensive network: access to over 40 Russian bases will help the Indian Navy and Air Force to operate further from home, and during long-range deployments.

— Reciprocally, the Russian military will gain greater access to Indian ports and airfields for refuelling, repairs, and operations.

— RELOS is similar to existing agreements — LEMOA (Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement), COMCASA (Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement), and BECA (Basic Exchange and Cooperation Agreement) — with the US. However, it has been tailored to the India-Russia dynamic.

#### **Do You Know:**

— COMCASA, inked in 2018, permits the US to give India encrypted communications equipment and systems, allowing Indian and US military leaders and their planes and ships to communicate over secure networks in both peace and conflict.

— LEMOA, inked in 2016, enables the US and Indian militaries to refuel from one another's military bases and get supplies, spare parts, and services from each other's land facilities, air bases, and ports.

— BECA facilitates sharing of high-end military technology, including access to US geo-spatial, satellite, and drone data.

#### **Previous year UPSC Prelims Question Covering similar theme:**

(3) Recently, India signed a deal known as 'Action Plan for Prioritization and Implementation of Cooperation Areas in the Nuclear Field' with which of the following countries? (UPSC CSE 2019)

(a) Japan

(b) Russia

(c) The United Kingdom

(d) The United States of America

**Previous year UPSC Mains Question Covering similar theme:**

What is the significance of Indo-US defence deals over Indo-Russian defence deals? Discuss with reference to stability in the Indo-Pacific region. (UPSC CSE 2020)

**Cleaning Delhi's air requires a Delhi-specific plan**

**Syllabus:**

**Preliminary Examination:** General issues on Environmental ecology, Biodiversity and Climate Change – that do not require subject specialization.

**Mains Examination: General Studies-III:** Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.

**What's the ongoing story: A K Mehta writes:** The government's replies to questions in the Lok Sabha on November 29, 2021, and July 18, 2022, show that even the Covid lockdown could not completely clean Delhi's air. The fix lies in prediction, participation, intensity of airshed-wide action, and the will to act before the air turns toxic.

**Key Points to Ponder:**

- What is the role of winter weather in air pollution?
- How is air pollution measured in India?
- What are the major causes of air pollution in Delhi?
- Why is there a severe air pollution issue in Delhi?
- What are the steps taken by the government to curb air pollution?
- What are the shortcomings of these initiatives?

— What needs to be done?

(Think about new ideas to tackle air pollution)

— What is the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP)?

### **Key Takeaways:**

— In 2020, when roads were deserted, factories were silent, and the skies were unusually clear, the city recorded 49 “very poor” and 15 “severe” air-quality days. In 2021, as economic activity revived, those numbers fell to 41 and 12. The year before, 2019, had seen 56 and 24 such days.

— The data demolish an illusion: If vehicles slowed and factories paused, Delhi would breathe easy. Something deeper traps the capital in a haze that neither lockdowns nor routine regulations can dispel. The current plans are inadequate to overcome the challenge. There are three lessons for Delhi.

— First, its geography demands thinking beyond routine responses. Chennai breathes sea air, hill towns draw freshness from altitude. But the Gangetic plains trap pollution under a lid of stagnant air. Delhi, therefore, needs an action plan that pushes the envelope, not one cut from a national template.

— Second, the improvement in 2021 — despite revived economic activity — shows that meteorology is a dominant force. Wind speed, temperature inversion, and mixing height (the vertical distance from the ground up to the level where pollutants, heat, and moisture come together) determine what we breathe more than short-term emission curbs.

— Third, the instrument meant to control air quality — the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP) — often reacts late. The delayed implementation of GRAP stages harms health and the economy. Acting late can force harsher shutdowns — Stage 3 instead of Stage 2. The delay ends up hurting livelihoods and lungs more than pre-emptive action would.

— Delhi, therefore, does not need another alert, but a redesign of its air-governance philosophy — from reaction to prediction, from control to prevention, from partial to complete solutions.

— Government must lead with foresight, not just enforcement. Predictive pollution modelling should drive pre-emptive implementation of GRAP — it could mean using AI, IoT, and satellite data.

— Transparency in decision-making is essential for participation. Stable electricity can eliminate diesel generators. Roads and construction sites must be dust-proofed through mechanised sweeping and water sprinkling. Every unpaved stretch must be paved, every bare patch greened, and every landfill contained.

— All this must be done on the scale of an airshed, leaving no gaps — this is impossible without mass participation, involving every habitation, institution, and individual. At the micro level, protection must focus on the most vulnerable.

— Delhi's smog is a test of governance, science, and shared will. Government data show that the current framework, even if fully enforced, cannot deliver clean air. The challenge is whether Delhi can move from hope to commitment, from reaction to resolve. Because this is not about AQI numbers or policy stages. It is about whether a city can rediscover its moral clarity, to not let its citizens struggle for a clean breath.

### **Do You Know:**

— Air pollution is one of the leading environmental threats to human health. At least 1.67 million deaths in 2019 — making up nearly 17.8 per cent of all deaths in the country that year — were attributable to air pollution, according to a study published in Lancet Planetary Health in 2021.

— Exposure to air pollutants can lead to various health issues, including lung disease, asthma, stroke and cancer.

— Severe air pollution also has significant consequences for children, especially those aged one to five years. During this stage, their lungs and immune systems are still developing, making them particularly vulnerable to the harmful effects of airborne pollutants like particulate matter (PM<sub>2.5</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub>), nitrogen oxides, sulfur dioxide, and volatile organic compounds (VOCs)

— The colour-coded Air Quality index was launched in India in 2014, and it helps the public and the government understand the condition of the air and what subsequent measures are to be taken to combat the situation, based on its severity.

— The pollutants measured include PM 10, PM 2.5, Nitrogen Dioxide, Ozone, Carbon, etc.

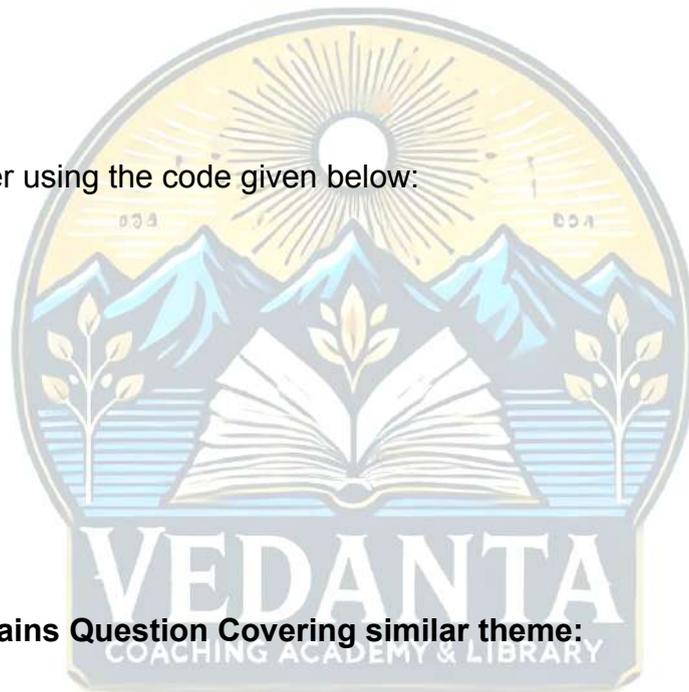
**Previous year UPSC Prelims Question Covering similar theme:**

(4) In the cities of our country, which among the following atmospheric gases are normally considered in calculating the value of Air Quality Index? (UPSC CSE 2016)

1. Carbon dioxide
2. Carbon monoxide
3. Nitrogen dioxide
4. Sulfur dioxide
5. Methane

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

- (a) 1, 2 and 3 only
- (b) 2, 3 and 4 only
- (c) 1, 4 and 5 only
- (d) 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5



**Previous year UPSC Mains Question Covering similar theme:**

Describe the key points of the revised Global Air Quality Guidelines (AQGs) recently released by the World Health Organisation (WHO). How are these different from its last update in 2005? What changes in India's National Clean Air Programme are required to achieve revised standards? (UPSC CSE 2021)