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Lunar Eclipse 2026

A lunar eclipse, known in India as Chandra Grahan, will take place on March 3, 2026. The eclipse will begin at 3:20 PM and end at 6:47 PM. In India, the Moon will become visible at 6:26 PM, with the best viewing time between 6:33 PM and 6:40 PM. A lunar eclipse happens when the Earth comes directly between the Sun and the Moon, causing the Earth's shadow to fall on the Moon.

There are three types of lunar eclipses. In a penumbral eclipse, the Moon appears slightly dim and the change can be hard to notice. In a partial eclipse, a dark shadow covers part of the Moon, making it look like a "bite" has been taken out of it. In a total lunar eclipse, the entire Moon turns reddish because sunlight passing through Earth's atmosphere bends and falls on the Moon. How clearly the March 3, 2026 eclipse will be seen in India depends on its exact phase and timing, making it important for skywatchers and those observing traditional practices.

West Asia war widens, spikes oil, strands flyers

A large-scale regional war has broken out involving Iran, Israel, and the United States, rapidly expanding across West Asia. Iran and allied armed groups launched missiles at Israel, U.S. military bases, and several Arab states, while Israel and the U.S. carried out extensive airstrikes inside Iran. The fighting has spread to multiple fronts, with Gulf cities such as Dubai witnessing incoming fire. Heavy casualties have been reported. The Iranian Red Crescent Society stated that over 555 people were killed in U.S.-Israeli strikes in Iran. In Israel, at least 11 people died in Iranian missile attacks. The Iran-backed Hezbollah targeted Israel, prompting Israeli retaliation in Lebanon that killed more than two dozen people. Four U.S. troops were also reported dead.

Women bear the brunt in Nagpur factory blast: 18 killed, 24 injured, most victims female

A major explosion at an industrial explosives manufacturing unit near Nagpur killed 18 workers and critically injured over 20 others, most of them women employed in the packing section. The blast reportedly occurred in a non-manufacturing area of the plant. Several victims suffered severe burns and blast injuries, and authorities indicated that the toll may rise. The scale of casualties and the nature of injuries suggest a high-intensity explosion, raising concerns about compliance with safety protocols in hazardous industries.

Regulatory and Legal Dimensions

Investigations have been initiated by the Petroleum and Explosives Safety Organisation (PESO) and the Directorate of Industrial Safety and Health (DISH). Preliminary findings indicate alleged violations under the Explosives Act, Explosives Rules, and the Factories Act. A case of culpable homicide is being registered against the management, indicating possible criminal negligence rather than an unavoidable accident. This case highlights the regulatory framework governing hazardous industries in India, particularly licensing, storage norms, periodic inspections, and worker safety obligations.

Governance Concerns

Explosives manufacturing falls under high-risk industrial classification, requiring strict compliance with occupational safety standards, risk assessment, and emergency preparedness. The incident raises key governance questions: adequacy of inspections, enforcement of safety audits, worker training, and adherence to hazard communication norms. The state government and the Prime Minister's National Relief Fund announced ex-gratia assistance. However, beyond compensation, the focus must be on prevention through stricter compliance monitoring, third-party audits, and accountability mechanisms.



NMC warns against 'fake' patients in medical colleges

The National Medical Commission (NMC) has warned medical colleges against admitting "fake patients" to artificially inflate bed occupancy during inspections. Some institutions reportedly admit individuals who do not require treatment in order to meet mandatory clinical material requirements for approval of new postgraduate (PG) courses or additional seats. The Commission has clarified that such practices will attract strict penalties.

Regulatory Framework and Approval Process

Approval for new courses or increased intake is granted through a structured, time-bound online process conducted by the Medical Assessment and Rating Board (MARB). Assessments are based on compliance with Postgraduate Medical Education Regulations and Undergraduate Minimum Standard Requirements. Key parameters include faculty strength, infrastructure, clinical material, and overall quality of education.

Identification and Penalties

The NMC has issued guidelines to detect "fake patients." These include patients admitted just before inspections, cases with minor ailments suitable for outpatient care, absence of diagnostic tests or in-patient procedures, multiple admissions from the same family, and large admissions through health camps. In paediatric wards, children without significant medical conditions may also be categorised as fake admissions.



The Mechanics and Limits of Modern Missile Defence

Missile defence has evolved into one of the most technologically sophisticated components of contemporary warfare. Designed to detect, track, and destroy incoming missiles before impact, these systems combine satellite surveillance, ground-based radar, advanced computing, and high-speed interceptors. Yet despite impressive capabilities, real-world conflicts reveal significant operational limits.

How Missile Defence Works

Missile defence systems rely on layered detection and engagement. Sensors such as satellites and radar identify threats and calculate their trajectory. Once classified as hostile, command centres determine the most suitable response, typically launching an interceptor missile. The U.S. MIM-104 Patriot system illustrates this process. Its phased-array radar tracks targets and guides interceptors launched from mobile platforms. In the final seconds of flight, the interceptor's onboard seeker locks onto the target. Interception occurs either through proximity detonation or hit-to-kill collision, where kinetic energy destroys the missile directly.

Performance in Combat

Effectiveness varies by threat type. Israel's Iron Dome has reported 80–97% success rates against short-range rockets. Patriot systems, which engage faster ballistic missiles, have demonstrated mixed results. In one 2023 engagement, Patriot reportedly intercepted six Russian Kinzhal missiles with complete success and achieved over 60% effectiveness against Iskander-M missiles.

However, adversaries adapt. Decoys, evasive manoeuvres, and saturation attacks—where large numbers of missiles are launched simultaneously—have reduced interceptor effectiveness and depleted stocks. Under sustained barrages, reported success rates declined significantly.

The U.S. Ground-based Midcourse Defense programme, designed to shield the American homeland from long-range missile threats, has achieved roughly a 55% success rate in tests, underscoring persistent reliability concerns.

Operational Constraints

Missile defence systems face physical and logistical constraints. Each interceptor battery carries a limited number of missiles and must reload after firing, creating temporary vulnerability. Radar coverage angles, tracking precision, and reaction time further shape effectiveness. Even advanced systems remain probabilistic rather than foolproof. Modern missile defence can blunt attacks and reduce damage, but it cannot guarantee complete protection, especially under sustained, high-volume assault. Over time, the strain of repeated engagements can erode readiness, deplete inventories, and expose gaps in coverage.

Key takeaways

Modern missile defence represents a remarkable fusion of computing, radar science, and aerospace engineering. Yet combat experience shows that performance depends not only on technology but also on adversary adaptation, ammunition availability, and operational tempo. The central reality is clear: missile defence mitigates risk, but it does not eliminate it.

Missile Defence, Deterrence, and the Sustainability Problem

While missile defence systems demonstrate impressive technological capability, their strategic value ultimately depends on sustainability. Recent regional conflicts involving the United States, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran have highlighted that cost, production capacity, and stockpile endurance may matter as much as interception success.

Layered Defence and Regional Adaptation

During the 12-day war of 2025, a layered defence structure emerged. Arrow 3 and U.S. SM-3 missiles intercepted ballistic threats in space. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and Arrow 2 provided endo-atmospheric defence, followed by David's Sling and Patriot as lower-tier systems. Drones were countered using Iron Dome, air-to-air missiles, and increasingly, the high-energy laser system Iron Beam. In the Gulf theatre, the UAE activated South Korea's Cheongung II system. Unlike older Patriot configurations limited to 120-degree radar coverage, Cheongung II employs vertical launch capability and 360-degree radar scanning, optimised for low-flying cruise missiles and short-range ballistic threats.

The Economics of Interception

Cost heavily shapes deterrence. Patriot PAC-3 MSE interceptors cost approximately \$4 million per missile, while adversaries may launch large numbers of comparatively inexpensive projectiles. This imbalance encourages saturation strategies aimed at exhausting defensive stocks. To address this, the U.S. has deployed alternative systems such as the Indirect Fire Protection Capability using AIM-9X missiles and dual-role SM-6 interceptors. Israel's growing reliance on Iron Beam reflects a shift toward directed-energy solutions that offer lower per-shot costs and help conserve expensive interceptors like Arrow 3 and Stunner.



Production and Replenishment Challenges

High-intensity warfare rapidly depletes munitions. Although the U.S. Department of Defense has increased production of THAAD and PAC-3 interceptors and accelerated deployment of directed-energy systems, manufacturing capacity remains insufficient for prolonged, high-tempo conflict. Replenishment timelines may extend beyond a year under current production rates.

Iran's Defensive Architecture

Iran maintains a layered air defence network centred on the Bavar-373 system, reportedly capable of intercepting targets beyond 300 kilometres. Additional systems include Arman ballistic missile defence, Sevom-e-Khordad with Sayyad-3 missiles protecting strategic sites, and Russian-made Tor-M1 systems alongside indigenous Majid and Azarakhsh platforms for drone and cruise missile threats. Nevertheless, large-scale strikes suggest that even layered systems can be strained by volume attacks, particularly during reload intervals.

Missile defence now plays a central role in regional deterrence, but its effectiveness is inseparable from economic and industrial capacity. The decisive question is not merely whether missiles can be intercepted, but whether defence networks can sustain operations under prolonged, high-intensity conditions. In modern warfare, deterrence rests not only on technological sophistication but on endurance.

Skill India as herculean challenges, Galgotian blunders

India's demographic dividend, lasting until around 2040, presents a rare opportunity that requires urgent systemic reform in skill development. While several European Union countries and China have built strong vocational systems—where nearly 50% of secondary students are enrolled in vocational streams—India's share is only 1.3%. This reflects prolonged neglect of school education until 1990 and vocational education until 2006. Although the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP) targets 50% learner “exposure” to vocational education by 2025, the phrasing indicates a continuing attitudinal bias against mainstreaming it. Public financing remains weak and fragmented, with no consolidated data and inconsistent annual Budget support.

Governance Failures and CAG Findings

India's ambition to become the “skill capital of the world” contrasts sharply with persistent governance failures. The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) audited the flagship Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY) for 2015–22 and found serious concerns. Earlier audits had flagged delays in financial reporting and weak accountability; the 2025 audit revealed that 94.5% of bank accounts were invalid and only about 41% of trainees in short-term courses secured placement. Despite a decade of implementation, the ecosystem remains focused on quantity through short-term training with limited outcomes. Underutilisation of funds, such as only 5% spending under the FY 2026 internship scheme, further illustrates design inefficiencies.

Way Forward Mandating online job portals to share anonymised aggregate data with the government could help build a functional labour market information system. Data mining and AI modelling should replace one-off skill gap studies. The data could be integrated with the National Career Service portal to improve planning and transparency. With the demographic dividend closing by 2040, incremental reforms are insufficient. India requires a decisive shift from fragmented, supply-driven programmes to a transparent, demand-led, employer-owned, and learner-centric skill ecosystem. The policy tools and global examples already exist. In this situation, what is needed is timely course correction and consistent implementation before the opportunity window closes.



Reforming Skill Financing: Loans, Vouchers, and Levies

A restructuring of skill financing is essential to build a demand-driven and accountable ecosystem. One approach is to redirect public expenditure toward skill loans for learners, similar to education loan models. By placing purchasing power with students, this would expand choice, promote competition among providers, and improve quality through market discipline. Although risks such as loan defaults exist, financial mechanisms can manage them.

Another option is skill vouchers, where funds follow the trainee rather than institutions. This would incentivise better delivery and outcomes while promoting lifelong learning, technological upskilling including artificial intelligence, digital and green skills, women's workforce participation, and language training for global employment. International experience shows that voucher systems can create competitive and flexible training markets.

A third reform is a skill levy on organised industries to ensure sustainable financing. Linking employer contributions to payroll and reimbursing firms after training would make industry a direct stakeholder. Such a model shifts the system from state-funded and supply-driven to employer-owned and outcome-oriented, aligning training with labour market needs.

GST collection increases by 8.1% to over ₹1.83 lakh crore



India's Goods and Services Tax (GST) collections rose 8.1% year-on-year to over ₹1.83 lakh crore in February, driven by stronger import revenues and improved domestic sales. Gross domestic revenue increased 5.3% to about ₹1.36 lakh crore, while revenue from imports climbed 17.2% to ₹47,837 crore. After refunds of ₹22,595 crore, net GST collections stood at over ₹1.61 lakh crore, reflecting a 7.9% annual rise. However, net cess revenue declined sharply to ₹5,063 crore compared to ₹13,481 crore a year earlier.

The growth comes after major GST reforms introduced in September 2025, when tax rates on around 375 items were reduced. The earlier four tax slabs of 5%, 12%, 18%, and 28% were merged into two primary slabs of 5% and 18%, with a higher 40% rate retained for select ultra-luxury goods and tobacco. Collections had initially dipped to ₹1.7 lakh crore in November following the rate cuts, but gradually recovered to ₹1.74 lakh crore in December and ₹1.93 lakh crore in January. Experts attribute the rebound to a rise in consumption that offset the impact of lower tax rates. However, uneven growth across States remains a concern, with Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan reporting negative growth, and West Bengal, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, and Maharashtra posting growth below the national average. Overall, the data suggests that India's consumption-driven economy remains resilient despite tax rationalisation.

War Risk Insurance Pulled Amid Hormuz Crisis

Global shipping lines have suspended or diverted vessel movements through the Strait of Hormuz following U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran and subsequent Iranian retaliation. War risk insurers moved swiftly to issue cancellation notices for ships operating in the Middle East, even before markets reopened, signalling the seriousness and speed of the crisis. Industry sources warn that insurance costs are likely to surge if hostilities persist. Major container carriers have halted or rerouted traffic away from the Strait of Hormuz and, in some cases, from the Suez Canal as tensions escalated. War risk premiums for vessels transiting the Gulf, previously around 0.25% of a ship's replacement value, are expected to rise by as much as 50%. For a \$100 million vessel, this would increase insurance costs from \$250,000 to approximately \$375,000 per voyage. Premiums for ships calling at Israeli ports, which had stood at roughly 0.1% of vessel value, are also projected to increase sharply amid fears of further retaliation. Shipping data indicate that at least 15 container ships have reversed course while attempting to enter or exit the Strait of Hormuz, while several others have halted or diverted. Approximately 170 container ships, with a combined capacity of about 450,000 TEU—around 1.4% of the global fleet—remain inside the strait and face restrictions on departure.

Major shipping companies have taken precautionary measures. The Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) suspended all worldwide cargo bookings to the Middle East and directed vessels in or heading towards the Gulf to move to designated safe shelter areas. CMA CGM ordered ships in or en route to the Gulf to seek immediate shelter and suspended all Suez Canal transits. Hapag-Lloyd announced a halt to all transits through the Strait of Hormuz, citing its official closure by relevant authorities and warning of delays, rerouting, and schedule disruptions for Gulf-bound services.

PRELIMS CORNER :

1) With reference to the “Tea Board” in India, consider the following statements: (2022)

1. The Tea Board is a statutory body.
 2. It is a regulatory body attached to the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.
 3. The Tea Board’s Head Office is situated in Bengaluru.
 4. The Board has overseas offices at Dubai and Moscow.
- Which of the statements given above are correct ?

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

2) Which of the following bodies does not/ do not find mention in the Constitution? (2013)

1. National Development Council
2. Planning Commission
3. Zonal Councils

Select the correct answer using the code given below:

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

PRELIMS 2026 COUNTDOWN

82 DAYS TO GO



HERITAGE

Holika Dahan: The Sacred Bonfire that Heralds Holi



Holika Dahan, observed on the first day of Holi (also called Chhoti Holi or Jalawali Holi), forms the spiritual core of the festival. On this evening, communities gather to light a ceremonial bonfire and symbolically burn the effigy of Holika. The ritual represents purification — the destruction of negativity, arrogance, and evil before welcoming celebration and renewal.

Mythological Significance

The origins of Holika Dahan lie in a well-known Hindu legend. The demon king Hiranyakashyap attempted to kill his son Prahlad for his unwavering devotion. With the help of his sister Holika, who was believed to be immune to fire, he tried to have Prahlad burned alive. However, Prahlad survived due to his faith, while Holika perished in the flames. The bonfire thus symbolises the triumph of devotion, justice, and moral order over tyranny and evil.

Time for Transition

Holika Dahan also marks the seasonal transition from winter to spring — a time associated with renewal and agricultural change, reinforcing the festival’s theme of regeneration.

Prelims Corner: Explanations

1) Answer is option d

Statement 1: This is correct. The Tea Board of India is a statutory body established under the Tea Act, 1953. It is responsible for the development and promotion of the tea industry in India.

Statement 2: This is incorrect. The Tea Board is a regulatory body, but it is attached to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, not the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.

Statement 3: This is incorrect. The Tea Board's Head Office is located in Kolkata, not Bengaluru.

Statement 4: This is correct. The Tea Board has overseas offices in Dubai and Moscow to promote Indian tea exports in international markets.



2) Answer is option d

National Development Council (NDC): The National Development Council was established in 1952 by an executive resolution of the Government of India. It is not mentioned in the Constitution and functions as an advisory body to the Planning Commission (now replaced by NITI Aayog).

Planning Commission: The Planning Commission was established in 1950 by a resolution of the Government of India. It was not a constitutional body and did not have any mention in the Constitution. It has since been replaced by the NITI Aayog in 2015.

Zonal Councils: Zonal Councils were established under the States Reorganisation Act, 1956, and are statutory bodies. They are not mentioned in the Constitution.

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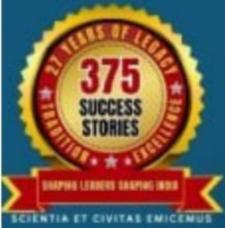
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