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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

The Cooling Divide: Air Conditioning and Climate Inequality

 **DOWN TO EARTH**6 July 2026 · **ENVIRONMENT** · **GS3** · **GS1**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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GS3
GS1

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THE LIFT LINE

As Indian summers grow longer and deadlier, the air conditioner is quietly sorting society into two groups: those who can buy their way to a cool room and those who cannot. This cooling divide is a new axis of climate inequality, and it is self-reinforcing, because the machines that cool the rich warm the streets of the poor. Adaptation that relies only on more AC will deepen the very injustice it claims to solve.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Climate adaptation, energy demand, urban planning and social equity intersect here, giving the theme reach across two GS papers.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation; climate change; energy; infrastructure. Adaptation, cooling demand and building energy efficiency.

GS Paper 1: Urbanisation, its problems and remedies; effects of geographical phenomena; social vulnerability (<https://ujyari.com/vocab/vulnerability/>) to extreme heat.

Prelims angle: India Cooling Action Plan (2019), the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol, the Energy Conservation Building Code, star-labelling of appliances, and heat-action plans.

Mains angle: Examine how air-conditioning access creates a new climate class divide and evaluate India's cooling strategy beyond mechanical air conditioning.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Extreme heat is becoming India's defining climate hazard, with longer, hotter and more frequent heatwaves. In response, air-conditioner ownership is rising fast, and peak electricity demand is climbing with it. But access to cooling tracks income. Wealthier households sit in cooled homes and offices, while the elderly, lone

parents, outdoor workers, informal-sector labourers and low-income renters, who are the most physiologically and economically vulnerable to heat, are the least able to afford cooling. The result is a cooling divide, a new dimension of climate inequality.

The **paradox** (<https://ujiyari.com/vocab/paradox/>) is that air conditioning is itself part of the problem. It is energy-intensive, drives up peak power demand (much of it still met by fossil fuels), and its refrigerants are potent greenhouse gases, which is why the Kigali Amendment to the Montreal Protocol commits countries to phasing down hydrofluorocarbons. AC units also expel heat outdoors, warming already hot streets and worsening the urban heat-island effect, so the machines that cool the affluent literally raise the temperature for those without them.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Cooling is becoming a class divide

Heat does not strike equally. The same heatwave that is an inconvenience in an air-conditioned flat is a mortal threat to a construction worker, a street vendor, an elderly widow in a tin-roofed room or a child in an informal settlement. When survival cooling is priced by the market, the burden of heat falls hardest on those least responsible for climate change and least able to escape it.

AC solves one problem and creates others

IMPACT OF EXPANDING AC	CONSEQUENCE
Rising peak electricity demand	Strain on the grid, more fossil-fuel generation
Refrigerant emissions	Potent greenhouse gases (addressed by Kigali Amendment)
Waste heat expelled outdoors	Worsens urban heat-island effect
Cost of purchase and running	Excludes the poor, deepening inequality

The table shows why AC-centric adaptation is self-defeating. More air conditioning means more emissions, more peak demand and hotter outdoor air, which then requires still more cooling, a spiral that widens the divide and raises the collective climate cost.

Adaptation must be about heat justice, not just machines

The goal is not to deny anyone cooling but to reframe cooling as a public good and a matter of heat justice. Passive design, urban greening and efficiency can deliver comfort to many at a fraction of the energy and emissions of universal AC, while heat-action plans protect the most exposed.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

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Use the **mitigation** (<https://ujjari.com/vocab/mitigation/>)-**adaptation-equity triangle**. AC is adaptation for those who can afford it, but it worsens mitigation (more emissions) and equity (excludes the poor). A sound cooling policy must improve all three simultaneously: keep people cool, cut emissions and protect the vulnerable.

Apply the **cooling hierarchy**, analogous to the waste hierarchy. First, avoid heat gain (orientation, insulation, cool roofs, shading). Second, use passive cooling (ventilation, greenery, water bodies). Third, use efficient mechanical cooling (star-rated, low-GWP refrigerant AC) only where needed. AC belongs at the bottom of the pyramid, not the top.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Picture a city street on a scorching afternoon. On one side, a glass tower hums with air conditioning; inside, the temperature is pleasant. From its outdoor units, hot exhaust pours onto the pavement. On that pavement stand a vendor, a rickshaw puller and an elderly woman, all pushed a degree hotter by the very machines keeping the tower cool. The cooling divide is exactly this picture: comfort concentrated behind glass, heat externalised onto the street. Heat justice means redesigning the street, cool roofs, trees, shade, water, drinking points and cooling shelters, so comfort is a shared public good, not a private purchase.

WAY FORWARD

- 1 **Strengthen the India Cooling Action Plan (2019)**. Prioritise passive and low-energy cooling and set equity as an explicit goal.
- 2 **Mainstream passive cooling**. Enforce cool roofs, reflective paints, shading and ventilation through the Energy Conservation Building Code, especially in affordable housing.
- 3 **Green and cool cities**. Expand urban tree cover, water bodies and shaded public spaces to counter the heat-island effect.
- 4 **Scale heat-action plans**. Universalise city and district heat-action plans with early warnings, cooling shelters, altered outdoor work hours and protection for outdoor workers.
- 5 **Make efficient cooling affordable and clean**. Tighten appliance star-labelling, phase down high-GWP refrigerants under the Kigali Amendment, and support access to efficient cooling for low-income households.
- 6 **Manage peak demand**. Pair rising cooling demand with renewable energy, thermal storage and demand-side management to protect the grid.

PYO LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

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The theme extends UPSC's coverage of climate adaptation and urban heat. **UPSC Mains GS3 (2022):** "Discuss global warming and mention its effects on the global climate. Explain the control measures to bring down the level of greenhouse gases which cause global warming, in the light of the Kyoto Protocol, 1997." and **GS1 (2013)** on urban heat-island effect connect directly. Prelims regularly tests the Montreal Protocol and Kigali Amendment.

Practice question (Mains, 15 marks, 250 words): "Air conditioning is deepening a climate class divide even as it strains the grid and warms cities. Examine the concept of the cooling divide and suggest an equitable (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/equitable/>), low-carbon cooling strategy for India."

Sources: Down To Earth (<https://www.downtoearth.org.in>)

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