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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

When the Heat Rises: Making Climate Policy Age-Sensitive for the Elderly

 THE HINDU

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When the Heat Rises: Making Climate Policy Age-Sensitive for the Elderly

 The Hindu

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THE LIFT LINE

A heatwave does not fall equally on a population. It settles hardest on the frail, the isolated and the poor, and increasingly in India that means the old. As the country ages and the thermometer climbs, the question is no longer whether the elderly are more exposed, but whether our disaster and climate policy is willing to see them at all.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

India stands at an unusual crossroads. It is still a young country demographically, yet it is ageing faster than most societies ever have, even as climate stressors such as **extreme heat**, **erratic monsoons** and **urban flooding** grow sharper each year. The overlap of these two megatrends, a rising share of older persons and an intensifying climate, produces a specific and under-studied form of **vulnerability**. This editorial asks aspirants to treat ageing not as a welfare footnote but as a core variable in **disaster risk reduction** and **climate adaptation**.

For the examination, the value lies in linking demography, rights and disaster governance into one argument rather than three silos. The topic sits precisely where the syllabus wants candidates to think laterally.

GS Paper 2: Welfare schemes for vulnerable sections, mechanisms and laws for the protection of the elderly, and issues relating to the development and management of the social sector.

GS Paper 3: Disaster and disaster management, and the challenges of climate change adaptation.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the share of persons aged **60 and above** is projected to rise toward roughly **20 per cent of India's population by 2050**, per **UNFPA** and **NSO** projections, roughly doubling from present levels. Know the **Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act, 2007**, which makes maintenance of parents a legal obligation and provides for maintenance tribunals. Know the **National Programme for the Health Care of the Elderly (NPHCE)**, launched in 2010 under the Health Ministry, and the pension architecture including the **Indira Gandhi National Old Age Pension Scheme (IGNOAPS)** under the National Social Assistance Programme. Recall that **Heat Action Plans (HAPs)** are prepared by States and cities, with **Ahmedabad's 2013 HAP** the pioneering model, and that the **National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA)** issues heatwave guidelines.

For **Mains**, the framing is that policy designed for an average citizen fails the older citizen, and that age-disaggregated vulnerability data is the missing foundation for any fix.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

For decades India spoke of a **demographic dividend**, the economic promise of a young workforce. That story remains true, but it is only half the picture. Rising life expectancy and falling fertility mean the base of the population pyramid is narrowing while its top thickens. Several southern States have already crossed the ageing **threshold**, and the national elderly share is set to climb steeply from the 2030s.

At the same time, the lived experience of climate change in India is increasingly an experience of heat. Summers arrive earlier, night-time temperatures stay high, and humid heat pushes the human body toward its limits. Studies by organisations such as **HelpAge India** have documented how older persons absorb these shocks differently. The elderly regulate body temperature less efficiently, are more likely to live with **chronic illnesses** such as cardiovascular and kidney disease that heat aggravates, often take medicines that impair heat tolerance, and frequently face **reduced mobility** and **social isolation** that keep them from cooling centres, hospitals or even a neighbour's help. When relief systems require standing in queues, navigating digital forms or travelling to distant offices, they quietly exclude exactly those who need them most.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Intersectional vulnerability, not a single risk factor

The central claim is that old age does not act alone. It compounds with poverty, gender, disability and location. An older widow living alone in a poorly ventilated urban tenement, dependent on a small pension and a distant child, faces a stacked risk that no single scheme addresses. Treating “senior citizens” as one homogeneous category hides these gradients. Effective policy must ask which older persons, in which settings, face which hazards.

The data blind spot

India cannot protect what it does not count. Most disaster damage assessments and relief rolls do not record **age-disaggregated data**, so the specific mortality and **morbidity** burden that heat imposes on the elderly stays invisible in official numbers. Without this evidence, heat action plans default to generic advisories rather than targeted outreach to the highest-risk residents.

Schemes that exist but do not reach

The legal and programmatic scaffolding is present on paper. The gap is delivery under stress.

INSTRUMENT	PURPOSE	GAP DURING CLIMATE SHOCKS
Maintenance and Welfare Act, 2007	Legal right to maintenance and care	Weak awareness, slow tribunals, no disaster linkage
NPHCE	Geriatric health care at district level	Uneven coverage, thin at primary level
IGNOAPS / old-age pensions	Income support	Low amounts, exclusion errors, delays
Heat Action Plans	Early warning and heat response	Rarely name the elderly as a priority group
Disaster relief rolls	Post-event compensation	No age-disaggregated targeting

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Read this issue through the lens of **vulnerability equals exposure plus sensitivity minus adaptive capacity**, the standard climate framing. Older persons often score high on exposure (heat, urban heat islands), high on sensitivity (chronic disease, thermoregulation) and low on adaptive capacity (mobility, income, digital access, social support). Layer onto this a **rights-based lens**: the right to life under **Article 21** includes the right to health and dignity, which the State's duty of care must honour precisely when systems are stressed. Finally, apply an **equity-in-adaptation** frame drawn from disaster studies, which holds that adaptation that ignores the most vulnerable is not merely incomplete but can widen inequality.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Ageing population + intensifying heat -> stacked vulnerability (health, isolation, poverty) -> generic relief systems miss the elderly -> preventable morbidity and deaths -> age-sensitive HAPs + accessible relief + targeted protection -> resilient, dignified ageing

WAY FORWARD

- 1 Name the elderly in every Heat Action Plan.** HAPs at State and city level must list older persons as a designated high-risk group, map where they cluster, and trigger active outreach, welfare checks and accessible cooling shelters rather than passive advisories.
- 2 Build age-disaggregated vulnerability data.** Disaster and health authorities should record age in relief rolls, heat-related admissions and mortality audits, creating the evidence base that targeted protection requires.

- ③ **Make relief and schemes reach the doorstep.** Convert entitlements under the Maintenance Act, NPHCE and pensions into doorstep and community-anchored delivery, with simplified access that does not depend on travel, queues or digital fluency.
- ④ **Strengthen community and geriatric care.** Invest in local self-help networks, ASHA and volunteer-led welfare visits during heat spells, and expand geriatric services at the primary health level so that isolation does not become a death sentence.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

This theme connects directly to past questions on vulnerable sections and on disaster management. The 2020 Mains question on how the vulnerabilities of the elderly are being addressed, and recurring GS3 questions on disaster risk reduction and climate adaptation, both reward candidates who can fuse demography with disaster governance. The examiner increasingly favours intersectional answers over single-cause treatments.

Practice question: “As India ages amid intensifying climate stressors, disaster and adaptation policy must become explicitly age-sensitive.” Critically examine, with reference to heat action plans and social protection for older persons. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: The Hindu, editorial on climate and the elderly, UNFPA India Ageing Report, NDMA Heatwave Guidelines

Source: When the Heat Rises: Making Climate Policy Age-Sensitive for the Elderly — Ujjayari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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