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No Severe Heatwave, Yet 45 Degrees: The Classification Gap

 **DOWN TO EARTH**

25 July 2026

ENVIRONMENT**GS3**

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GS3
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THE LIFT LINE

The record book said the summer was normal. The people sweating through 45 degrees said otherwise. When the official definition and the lived experience disagree, it is worth asking which one the definition is serving.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This is a rare editorial that turns a technical definition into a governance question. A heatwave is not just weather; it is a legal category that decides whether a warning is issued, whether a district acts, and whether a family gets compensated for a death. If the definition undercounts real heat stress, the whole disaster-management chain misfires. That is prime GS3 disaster-management material.

GS Paper 3: Disaster and disaster management, climate change and extreme weather, and the institutional machinery (IMD, NDMA, State Disaster Response Fund) that classifies and responds to hazards.

For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: the **IMD heatwave criteria**, declared when the maximum temperature reaches at least **40 degrees Celsius in the plains, 30 degrees in the hills and 37 degrees in coastal areas**; a **departure of 4.5 to 6.4 degrees** above normal counts as a **heatwave** and above **6.4 degrees** as a **severe heatwave**; alternatively, an absolute maximum of **45 degrees** triggers a heatwave and **47 degrees** a severe heatwave. Note that **heatwave is not a notified disaster** under the National Disaster Management Act list in most states, so central SDRF relief does not automatically apply. For **Mains**, argue for a humidity-aware, heat-index or **wet-bulb** based classification and for notifying heat as a disaster.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In a reply in Parliament on **July 22, 2026**, the government stated that 2026 had seen **no unusually severe heatwaves** even though several regions, including **Vidarbha in Maharashtra, southern Uttar Pradesh and northern Madhya Pradesh, crossed 45 degrees Celsius**. The reasoning was climatological: these regions have historically touched similar temperatures in the peak months of April and May, so by the departure-from-normal rule the summer did not qualify as exceptional.

The reply is technically correct and precisely the problem. IMD's heatwave definition rests on **dry-bulb air temperature** and its **departure from the local normal**. A place that is reliably very hot has a high normal, so even a punishing summer can register a small departure and escape the "severe" label. Meanwhile the definition largely ignores **humidity** and **night-time (warm-night) temperature**, the two factors that most determine whether the human body can actually cool down. The result is a metric that can call a dangerous summer unremarkable.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The argument is that India measures heat by the thermometer alone, while the human body experiences heat as a combination of temperature, humidity and the chance to recover at night. Closing that gap is not academic; it decides who is warned and who is compensated.

Departure from normal hides chronic heat

Anchoring the definition to each place's own normal means the hottest regions face the highest bar to be declared in crisis. A district that is always extreme rarely posts a large positive departure, so its residents endure severe heat that the official record never flags. The metric rewards places for being consistently hot by simply not counting their heat.

Humidity and warm nights are missing

Dry-bulb temperature says nothing about whether sweat can evaporate. In humid coastal and delta regions, a lower air temperature can be far more dangerous than a higher, drier reading inland, because the body cannot shed heat. Equally, if the night stays hot, the body never recovers, and health damage accumulates. A definition blind to humidity and warm nights systematically undercounts the most lethal heat.

FEATURE	IMD HEATWAVE DEFINITION	LIVED HEAT STRESS
Core measure	Dry-bulb air temperature	Temperature plus humidity
Benchmark	Departure from local normal	Absolute strain on the body
Humidity	Largely excluded	Central to danger
Night-time heat	Not a trigger	Warm nights prevent recovery
Chronically hot region	Small departure, no alert	Severe heat, no relief

The classification decides relief

Because heatwave is **not a notified disaster** under the NDMA schedule in most states, a family that loses a breadwinner to heat is often outside the automatic **SDRF** compensation net that covers cyclones or floods. So the definition is not only a scientific label; it is the gate to disaster notification, funded relief and death

compensation. If a severe summer is classified as ordinary, the state's obligation to respond quietly disappears.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Use a **measure-versus-impact frame**: a good hazard metric should track harm to people, not just a physical reading. IMD's definition optimises for meteorological consistency, but disaster policy should optimise for human impact. Where the two diverge, the metric must bend toward impact, because the purpose of classifying a heatwave is to protect and compensate, not merely to describe the atmosphere. A **heat-index or wet-bulb** approach realigns the label with the harm.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Dry-bulb temperature and departure-from-normal rule -> chronically hot regions post small departures -> humidity and warm nights ignored -> severe lived heat classified as "normal" -> no notification, no SDRF relief, no compensation -> fix with a wet-bulb or heat-index definition and disaster notification

WAY FORWARD

- ❶ **Adopt a heat-index or wet-bulb classification.** Move beyond dry-bulb temperature to a combined heat-humidity measure, and add a warm-night criterion, so the label reflects the strain the body actually feels.
- ❷ **Notify heat as a disaster.** Bring heatwaves formally into the National Disaster Management Act schedule and state disaster lists, so SDRF relief, ex-gratia and compensation apply automatically as they do for floods and cyclones.
- ❸ **Localise thresholds to health, not just climate.** Set district triggers on health outcomes such as hospital admissions and excess mortality, not only on departure from a historical normal, so chronically hot districts are not defined out of crisis.
- ❹ **Strengthen surveillance and attribution.** Standardise heat-death certification and near-real-time **morbidity** tracking, so the true toll is visible and cannot be masked by a definition that says the summer was ordinary.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about disaster management institutions and about the classification and **mitigation** of specific hazards, and the debate over what counts as a notified disaster is a live governance theme. The heatwave-definition gap gives an aspirant a sharp, current example of how a metric shapes a policy response.

Practice question (Mains, GS3, 15 marks): “India”s official heatwave definition can call a dangerous summer ordinary.” Examine the limitations of the IMD criteria and argue whether heatwaves should be notified as a disaster with a humidity-aware classification. (250 words)

Sources: Down To Earth, India Meteorological Department

Source: No Severe Heatwave, Yet 45 Degrees: The Classification Gap — Ujjyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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