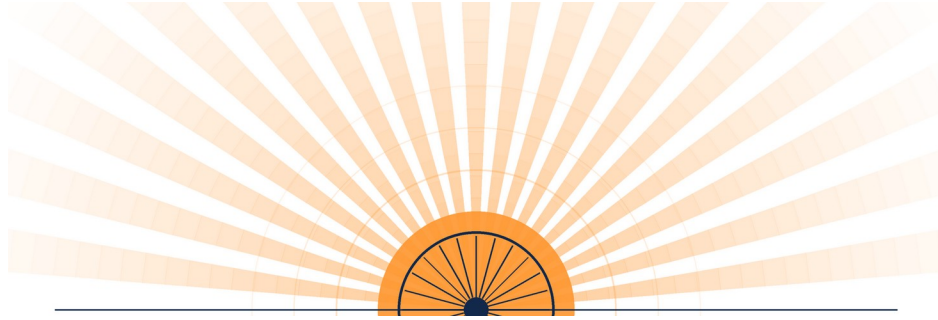




UPSC DARPAN

शीलं परं भूषणम्

Sheelam param bhushanam · Character is the highest ornament

The motto of the Lal Bahadur Shastri National Academy of Administration, Mussoorie, from Bhartrihari's Shataktraya

Your one-stop solution for UPSC CSE examination resources.

Welcome to the Ohana family

Hum jeet ka maja chakh kar rahenge.

Quote of the Day

"Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it; so that when Men come to be undeceived, it is too late; the Jest is over, and the Tale has had its Effect."

— Jonathan Swift, The Examiner, No. 14, 9 November 1710

The Hindu, The Indian Express & The Economic Times (Delhi Editions) — 29 September 2026

General Studies · Daily Current Affairs · Concept Matrix · Point-Wise Analysis

Ability · Anonymity · Austerity

Free, and meant for every aspirant — whatever they can or cannot pay.

A Letter from the Editor

Why this magazine exists, and how it is meant to be read

This magazine begins with an admission rather than a promise. The Civil Services Examination is not, in the end, a test of how much you have collected. Our own reading of the last decade's papers is that well over sixty per cent of what this examination actually asks — across the General Studies papers, the essay and the interview — is not a fact you can look up. It is a critical issue: a live public problem with competing interests inside it, on which you are expected to have thought, weighed, and arrived somewhere. The candidate who has memorised a thousand facts and thought about none of them is the candidate who writes four hundred marks and cannot understand why.

That is the whole reason this magazine exists in the form it does. Every story here is turned into a study card that does the thinking work with you and not for you: what happened, which line of the syllabus it sits on, why the examiner keeps returning to this theme, the handful of facts that could actually decide a Prelims option, an analysis broken into named points so the argument can be read from the headings alone, a Mains question in the exam's own phrasing, a model approach to it — and then the question a District Magistrate or a Joint Secretary would actually have to answer on this very issue. That last part is the one most compilations leave out, and it is the one the examination is really testing.

The second reason is simpler and harder. Too many capable candidates fall behind for reasons that have nothing to do with ability. They do not know which sources matter. They cannot reach the good material, or cannot pay for it. They study in Hindi and find that the honest, current, well-organised version of a topic exists only in English. We have seen this, and we do not accept it as the natural order of things. Nothing in UPSC Darpan is behind a payment, and nothing assumes a coaching class. Whatever we read each morning — the newspapers, PIB, PRS, the court's own record, the research journals — is read once, properly, and handed on in full. No aspirant should be left behind because of where they were born, what their family earns, or which language they think in.

The third reason is the one we do not say out loud very often. The kind of officer this examination is supposed to produce was described long ago in Mussoorie, and the description has not improved since: a Karma Yogi, a civil servant whose soul is suffused with the principles of Ability, Anonymity and Austerity. Ability, because good intentions administered incompetently still hurt people. Anonymity, because the officer whose name is in the newspaper every week is usually not the officer whose district is working. Austerity, because the distance between the officer's life and the citizen's life is exactly the distance at which empathy fails. We are not there. But that is the standard this magazine is trying to be worth, and the standard we are asking you to prepare against — not the cut-off.

So read it slowly. Do not try to finish it. Take three cards, understand them to the point where you could argue either side, and write one answer. That is a better morning than reading all twenty-five and remembering none. And when you sit in that room, remember what you are actually being selected for.

— The Editor

UPSC Darpan · 29 September 2026

We want to become the Mussoorie-wala Karma Yogi — a civil servant whose soul is suffused with the principles of Ability, Anonymity and Austerity. And we shall become, my man.

Our Inspiration

Our inspiration, and the reason this initiative exists



Rakesh Verma Sir

Indian Administrative Service, 1981 batch

Every initiative has a person standing behind it who never asked to be named. Ours is Rakesh Verma sir — an IAS officer of the 1981 batch, who spent a career inside the administration and then, after retiring from it, went back to the classroom to teach the next set of officers. What he gave us was not a strategy. It was a way of looking at the work.

WHAT HE TAUGHT US

1. **सेवा परमो धर्म: — service is the highest duty, and it is a duty, not a favour** — He would not let the word 'service' stay decorative. A civil servant does not confer a benefit on a citizen; the citizen is entitled, and the officer is discharging an obligation. Once you accept that, the tone of an office changes — the file moves because someone is waiting on the other side of it, not because a note demanded it.
2. **The Mussoorie-wala Karma Yogi: Ability, Anonymity, Austerity** — Ability, because good intentions administered incompetently still hurt people. Anonymity, because the officer whose name is in the newspaper every week is usually not the officer whose district is working. Austerity, because the distance between the officer's life and the citizen's life is the distance at which empathy fails. He taught these three as one instruction, not three virtues to be picked from.
3. **Begin with the last person, not the average person** — His constant test for any scheme, any circular, any decision: what happens to the person at the end of the line — the one with no documentation, no connection, no way to complain, and no idea the scheme exists. A policy that works for the median citizen and fails the last one has not worked. It has only been measured generously.
4. **Reach the last mile, because the last mile is where the state actually is** — Delivery, he insisted, is not the boring part that follows policy; it is the policy. The budget line means nothing until the money reaches the panchayat, the entitlement means nothing until the beneficiary is on the list, and the list means nothing if the person who was left out has no way back onto it. He made us look at the exclusion errors, not the coverage numbers.
5. **Understand the system before you criticise it** — He had no patience for the easy cynicism aspirants pick up online. Learn how a file actually moves, who signs, where the discretion sits, what the officer on the spot is trading off. Criticism that comes after that understanding is worth something; criticism that replaces it is noise — and it writes a shallow answer, too.
6. **Karma yoga at the desk: do the work, stay with the work** — He taught the Gita's instruction as an administrator's working rule, not as a sermon. You control the effort and the honesty; you do not control the transfer order, the posting, the recognition or the result. An officer who needs the outcome to feel the work was worth it will not last a career. Nor will an aspirant who needs the result to justify the year.
7. **Teach what you know, to whoever cannot pay for it** — The clearest thing he did was the simplest: after a full career, he went back and taught. Not to a selected batch that could afford it — to whoever turned up. That is where this initiative came from. The idea that good preparation material should not be a function of what a family can spend is not our idea; it is his.

We are not his equals and this is not his page. It is the receipt for something we were given for free, by a man who spent forty years serving the country and then spent his retirement teaching other people how to do it properly. सेवा परमो धर्मः — and we shall become.

Quotes of the Day

Carry one into the introduction of an essay — not into every paragraph. Each is quoted from a documented source, so it can be attributed with confidence.

“Trifles light as air are to the jealous confirmations strong as proofs of holy writ.”

— **William Shakespeare (spoken by Iago)** · *Othello*, Act 3, Scene 3 (written c. 1603–04; first printed 1622)

Use in: Rumour and belief (today's clashes in Ujjain and violence at two Punjab universities set off by AI-generated videos and unverified messages, and the finding that AI image models reproduce caste stereotypes from a skewed archive). Use it in essays on truth, trust and technology, and in GS2/GS3 answers on misinformation and internal security: a rumour does not need proof because the listener's fear or prejudice supplies it, so fact-checking after the event is never enough. Argue for early and plain communication by the administration, friction on platforms such as forwarding limits and labels on synthetic media, lawful takedown of incitement as Shreya Singhal (2015) allows, bias audits of AI models, and media literacy in schools.

“The State shall, in particular, direct its policy towards securing... that the ownership and control of the material resources of the community are so distributed as best to subserve the common good.”

— **Constitution of India** · Article 39(b), Part IV (Directive Principles of State Policy)

Use in: Sharing scarce resources and their gains (today's CAG finding that Odisha's District Mineral Foundations spent ₹2,578.73 crore under a category the rules never created, and the Odisha–Chhattisgarh talks on the Mahanadi, as the monsoon ends about 12% short). Use it in GS2 answers on inter-State river disputes and Article 262, in GS3 answers on mining, DMFs and PMKKKY, and in essays on scarcity and justice: the Constitution asks that resources be distributed for the common good, which means those who bear the cost of extraction or shortage come first. Argue for distress-sharing formulae agreed before the dry year, published data on reservoirs and fund accounts, and a real voice for gram sabhas under PESA.

“There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation. There is a sorrow here that weeping cannot symbolize.”

— **John Steinbeck** · *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Chapter 25

Use in: Waste amid want (today's FAO assessment that India leads on post-harvest loss data but lags on retail and household waste, set beside pulse prices rising up to 10% in a month as drought threatens rabi sowing). Steinbeck wrote it about farmers destroying food to hold up prices while migrant children went hungry. Use it in GS3 answers on food security, the PDS and SDG 12.3, and in essays on scarcity and distribution: a shortage is often made worse by what is thrown away and by who bears the price rise. Argue for measuring and cutting waste at the retail and household end, cold chains and storage, buffer stocks of pulses, and targeted protein support for poor households.

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How to use this magazine — each story is a study card: what happened (The News), the syllabus topic it sits on (Static Linkage), why examiners return to this theme (Trend), the facts that could decide a Prelims option (Prelims Nuggets), a point-wise Analysis, a Mains question in the exam's own phrasing with a Model Approach, and the questions a District Magistrate or Joint Secretary would actually face on it. Every long field is broken into numbered points with its own heading, so the argument reads from the headings alone. Where a story works through a sequence of effects, the whole chain is given in one line before the points explain each link.

1. Polity & Governance

Today's six polity stories are all about who holds the pen when the State writes things down. A Home Ministry panel wants States to record citizens' lives by religion, the higher judiciary still picks most of its judges from the Bar rather than from the trial courts, and a State's chief electoral officer has to ask a central software team for permission to use powers Parliament already gave his officers. The Supreme Court asks what a child's social-media account legally is, PRS data show that MPs from reserved seats speak far less in the Lok Sabha than their party colleagues, and the Union Home Minister steps into the Mahanadi water dispute between Odisha and Chhattisgarh. In each case the formal rule is clear; the fight is over who applies it and on what record.

1.1 Home Ministry's Demography Panel Seeks 15 Years of Religion-Wise Data, and States Say They Cannot Supply It

THE NEWS New Delhi. State governments are unable to answer most of the questions sent to them by a high-level panel studying demographic changes, because their departments do not ordinarily keep that information on a religion-wise basis, The Hindu reported on September 29. The High-Level Committee on Demographic Changes (HLCDC), set up under the Union Home Ministry, has sent the States a set of 35 questions. It has sought religion-wise data for the past 15 years on birth and vehicle registrations, school enrolment and property transactions, district-wise details of religious structures, and unusual increases in Aadhaar and voter ID registrations. States have been asked to collate data on Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Muslims, Parsis and Buddhists in every category. State officials told the paper the questions were difficult to answer "as the secular construct of the Constitution prohibited the collection of data under religious categories". Apart from birth registration, where the newborn's religion is mentioned on the certificate, and the number of undocumented migrants apprehended or deported, religion-wise data in all other categories were unavailable, they said. The questionnaire goes well beyond counting. One question seeks "details of districts showing unusual school enrolment trends inconsistent with historical birth rates, along with reasons". Another wants district-wise data on religious structures established in the past 15 years, including any GIS mapping (Geographic Information System, the digital plotting of locations on a map) used to identify them. The panel asks for district-, religion- and year-wise voter registration data of the last 15 years for individuals "without prior-generation birth certificates or familial legacy records". It seeks changes in religious composition in cities, industrial centres, border districts, tribal areas and Fifth/Sixth Schedule areas, changes in the religious composition of Scheduled Tribe populations, and intelligence assessments and commission reports on religious conversion among tribal communities. It also asks for details of operational detention centres; religion-wise birth registrations, including delayed registrations; unusual increases in Aadhaar enrolments, voter IDs and ration cards; cases of forged identity documents; religion-wise property transactions, "demographic clustering" and ownership patterns; religion-wise distribution of ration cards and school enrolments; "fraudulent access to welfare schemes"; and GIS mapping of religious educational institutions, including madrasas. The paper recalls that in 2006, as the principal Opposition, the BJP had opposed the recommendations of the Sachar Commission, appointed by the UPA government in 2005 to study the social, economic and educational status of Muslims, and questioned its constitutional validity as promoting a religious quota and being socially divisive. The syllabus link is GS2: secularism and fundamental rights, Centre-State relations, and the limits on State data collection after the right-to-privacy judgment.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Concern over migration, conversion and 'demographic change' enters national policy talk → the Union Home Ministry sets up a High-Level Committee on Demographic Changes → the panel sends States 35 questions seeking 15 years of religion-wise data, from births to property deals to religious structures → State departments find they never recorded religion outside birth registration and some migrant data → a legal and federal question opens on whether, and on what authority, the State may build such a record

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

1. The Census is a Union subject, and it is the lawful channel through which India already counts religion — "Census" is Entry 69 of the Union List in the Seventh Schedule, so only Parliament can legislate on it, and the Census Act, 1948 is that law. Every decennial Census since Independence has asked each person's religion, and the published tables give religion-wise population down to district and town level. The Act keeps individual Census returns confidential: they cannot be inspected by the public or used as evidence, which is why Census data can be published only in aggregate. Other

lawful sources of statistics include the Collection of Statistics Act, 2008, the National Sample Survey and the Registration of Births and Deaths Act, 1969, each governed by its own purpose and safeguards.

- 2. Statistics is a shared field, but the subjects of this questionnaire are mostly State subjects** — The Union List allows Parliament to provide for inquiries, surveys and statistics for matters in the Union List, and the Concurrent List does the same for matters in the State and Concurrent Lists. Public order and police are Entries 1 and 2 of the State List, and land, including rights in land and land records, is also a State subject; school education is in the Concurrent List after the 42nd Amendment. The Union's executive power to give directions to States comes mainly from Article 256, which obliges States to comply with laws made by Parliament, and Article 257, which covers the Union's own field. A questionnaire from a ministry committee that is not backed by a statute is therefore a request, not a binding direction under Article 256.
- 3. Secularism is part of the basic structure, and equality forbids discrimination on grounds of religion only** — The word "secular" was added to the Preamble by the 42nd Amendment in 1976, and in *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994) a nine-judge Bench held secularism to be part of the basic structure. Article 14 guarantees equality before the law and Article 15(1) prohibits the State from discriminating against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Articles 25 to 28 protect freedom of conscience and religious practice, and Articles 29 and 30 protect minorities' culture and their right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice. Indian secularism does not forbid the State from knowing religion; it forbids the State from treating citizens differently only because of it.
- 4. After Puttaswamy, every State collection of personal data must pass a proportionality test** — In *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* (2017), a nine-judge Bench held that privacy is a fundamental right under Article 21 and Part III as a whole. Any State intrusion must satisfy legality (a law authorising it), a legitimate aim, and proportionality (a rational link to the aim and no less intrusive alternative), along with procedural safeguards against abuse. Religion is sensitive personal information, and combining it with property, voter and school records creates a profile of individuals and neighbourhoods. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 allows the Union to exempt notified State instrumentalities from its obligations on grounds including sovereignty and integrity, security of the State and public order, so the Act offers limited protection against the State itself.

WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)

- 1. GS2 asks about secularism as practice, not as a definition** — UPSC has repeatedly asked how Indian secularism differs from the Western model and what challenges it faces. A State questionnaire that seeks religion-wise data on property, schools and voters is a live example of the question at the centre of Indian secularism: whether the State keeps a principled distance or an unequal gaze.
- 2. Privacy and data governance are now a standing GS2 and GS3 theme** — Since Puttaswamy, questions have asked about the right to privacy, data protection and surveillance, and the DPDP Act, 2023 is on every current syllabus reading list. This story lets an answer move from abstract privacy to the specific danger of linking datasets by a sensitive attribute such as religion.
- 3. Centre-State relations appear through the administrative, not only the legislative, route** — Questions on cooperative federalism usually focus on finance and legislation. Here the friction is administrative: who can require State departments to collect and hand over information, and under which Article. Prelims regularly tests the Seventh Schedule entries and Articles 256 and 257.

PRELIMS NUGGETS

- "Census" is Entry 69 of the Union List of the Seventh Schedule, and the Census in

India is conducted under the Census Act, 1948.

- The word “secular” was inserted into the Preamble of the Constitution by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976.
- In *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India* (1994), the Supreme Court held that secularism is a part of the basic structure of the Constitution.
- Article 15(1) prohibits the State from discriminating against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, place of birth or any of them.
- Article 30 gives all minorities, whether based on religion or language, the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice.
- Article 256 obliges every State to exercise its executive power so as to ensure compliance with laws made by Parliament, and the Union may give directions to a State for that purpose.
- The Fifth Schedule deals with the administration of Scheduled Areas and Scheduled Tribes, while the Sixth Schedule deals with tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.

ANALYSIS

- 1. The States’ objection is legally stronger on authority than on secularism** — State officials say the secular construct of the Constitution prohibits religion-wise data, but that is too broad: the Census has asked religion since 1951, and birth registration records it. The stronger objection is about authority and purpose. A religion-wise count of population is different from a religion-wise ledger of who bought land, who registered a vehicle and which child enrolled in which school. The first describes society; the second profiles individuals and localities. Under *Puttaswamy*, the second needs a law, a stated aim and proof that nothing less intrusive would do, and none of these is visible in a committee questionnaire.
- 2. Several questions assume their conclusion before any data is collected** — Phrases such as “unusual school enrolment trends inconsistent with historical birth rates”, “demographic clustering” and “fraudulent access to welfare schemes” treat a pattern as a problem before it is measured. School enrolment can rise because of migration for work, better retention or new schools, not only because of undocumented residents. Asking for voter registrations of people “without prior-generation birth certificates” ignores that delayed birth registration was the norm for older generations, especially among the poor and tribal communities. A sound inquiry frames neutral questions and lets data answer them; a leading questionnaire invites State officials to produce the answer the Centre appears to expect.
- 3. Data systems built for one purpose become dangerous when joined by religion** — Aadhaar, electoral rolls, ration cards and land records were each created under a law with a specific purpose. Most do not record religion; the Aadhaar Act, 2016 expressly excludes religion from the demographic information Aadhaar may collect. Linking them through religion would create a capability that outlives any one government and any one purpose. The counter-view is real: the State needs evidence on illegal migration, identity fraud and forced conversion, which are genuine governance problems. The answer is to study those problems through their own indicators, such as forged-document cases and deportation records, rather than by tagging every transaction with a faith.
- 4. The Sachar comparison cuts both ways** — The paper recalls that the BJP in 2006 opposed the Sachar Commission, which collected religion-wise data on Muslims’ socio-economic status, as divisive. Supporters of the HLCDC can argue that if religion-wise data was acceptable to identify deprivation, it is acceptable to identify demographic change. The difference lies in use. Sachar’s data was meant to justify welfare for a disadvantaged group, while several HLCDC questions point towards policing, detention

	and suspicion. Consistency requires either side to accept a single principle: religion-wise data for aggregate public policy under statutory safeguards, never for individual targeting. 5. The federal friction is a useful check, not obstruction — States run the registries in question, and their inability to answer is also a statement that they did not design their systems this way. If the Union wants such data, the constitutional path is a parliamentary law or a Census question, debated in the open, not an administrative questionnaire. States declining to invent data they never collected protects the reliability of official statistics. The risk is uneven compliance: some States may fill the questionnaire with estimates, which would produce a patchwork of unverifiable numbers that later drive policy.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	“Indian secularism does not prevent the State from knowing the religion of its citizens, but it limits what the State may do with that knowledge.” Examine this statement in the light of recent attempts to collect religion-wise administrative data from States. What constitutional safeguards should govern such data collection? (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Open with the Home Ministry’s High-Level Committee on Demographic Changes sending States 35 questions seeking 15 years of religion-wise data on births, vehicles, schools, property and religious structures, and State officials’ reply that such data is not maintained. 2. Body — what the State may lawfully know — Explain that the Census (Union List Entry 69, Census Act, 1948) counts religion with confidentiality of individual returns, and that birth registration records it. Show that Indian secularism, as held in S.R. Bommai, is principled distance and equal treatment, not ignorance of religion. 3. Body — where the limits lie — Use Articles 14 and 15(1), Articles 25–30 and Puttaswamy’s proportionality test. Distinguish aggregate statistics from individual-level profiling across linked databases, and note the DPDP Act’s exemptions for State agencies. 4. Body — federal and administrative dimension — Point out that most subjects are State subjects, that Article 256 directions attach to parliamentary laws, and that an unbacked questionnaire cannot compel. Mention the counter-view on illegal migration and forged documents and suggest targeted indicators instead. 5. Conclusion — Propose safeguards: statutory basis, stated purpose, aggregation, independent statistical agencies, parliamentary oversight and a bar on linking datasets by religion. Conclude that the legitimacy of data comes from its law and its use, not only its accuracy.
ADMINISTRATOR’S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are Chief Secretary of a State. The HLCDC questionnaire arrives with a deadline. What do you do? Approach: I would first ask the Law Department to examine under what law the request is made and whether any Union statute requires compliance. I would supply what already exists lawfully, such as Census tables and aggregate birth-registration data, and state clearly which data our departments do not maintain. I would not direct district officers to create new religion-wise records of property, vehicles or school children without a legal basis, because that exposes the State to privacy litigation. I would reply in writing, so that the record shows cooperation within the law rather than refusal. Q2. A District Collector is informally asked to count religious structures built in the last 15 years using GIS. How should she respond? Approach: She should seek written instructions identifying the order and its legal

authority, since an informal count of religious places can inflame local tensions if it leaks. Where unauthorised construction is the concern, the correct tool is existing land-use and building law applied to all structures equally, not a list sorted by religion. She should keep the data secure and aggregate. Her duty under Article 15 is equal treatment, and she should say so politely.

Q3. An interview board asks: is it wrong for a government to study demographic change?

Approach: No; studying fertility, migration and urbanisation is essential for planning schools, hospitals and jobs, and the Census and national surveys already do it. What matters is method and purpose. Demographic study should rely on neutral indicators, independent statistical bodies and published methods, so that its findings can be tested. When the questions are framed around suspicion of one community, the study stops being demography and becomes a political exercise with the State's authority behind it.

1.2 Only 233 of 1,114 High Court Judges Came From the District Judiciary, and the Supreme Court Has None

THE NEWS New Delhi. The elevation of seven district judges to the Delhi High Court has again drawn attention to how few judicial officers reach the higher Bench, The Hindu reported on September 29. With Chief Justice D.K. Upadhyaya administering the oath, the Delhi High Court's working strength has risen to 50 against a sanctioned strength of 60, of whom 19 judges came from the subordinate courts. Article 217 of the Constitution provides two streams for High Court appointments, members of the Bar and judicial officers, but prescribes no ratio. By convention, two-thirds of vacancies go to the Bar and one-third to the judicial service cadre, but even that one-third has not been achieved in most States. Of a sanctioned strength of 1,114 High Court judges across the country, only 233 judges elevated from the district judiciary are currently in office, as per official data cited by the paper. Tripura (40%), Himachal Pradesh (35.29%) and Delhi (31.67%) exceed or come close to the norm; service judges make up only 9.09% in Uttarakhand and Chhattisgarh, 11.90% in Telangana, 15.15% in Odisha and 17.02% in the Bombay High Court, and Sikkim has none. The Supreme Court currently has no sitting judge who began in the trial courts; the last was Justice Bela M. Trivedi, appointed in August 2021, who retired in June 2025. Most judicial officers join as civil judges in their late twenties, take about ten years to become senior civil judges and another decade to become district and sessions judges, and enter the zone of consideration for the High Court in their late fifties, a few years before the retirement age of 62. In 2023 the Judicial Service Association of Delhi sought a direction to fill 50% of High Court seats from the service quota; a Bench of Justices B.R. Gavai, Vikram Nath and Sanjay Karol said on April 25 that it was "not inclined to consider the prayer", but directed High Courts to recommend service-cadre names before vacancies arise. Justice (retd.) R.K. Gauba traced the skew to colonial magistracy manned by Indian Civil Service officers. Separately, on September 28, the Supreme Court Collegium headed by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant recommended three High Court Chief Justices for the Supreme Court: Sunita Agarwal (Gujarat), Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya (Delhi) and Aparesh Kumar Singh (Telangana). All three were elevated from the Bar, The Indian Express reports. If approved, the Court will have 37 sitting judges against a sanctioned 38, and Justice Agarwal will be what the paper calls the third woman SC judge. The syllabus link is GS2: structure and functioning of the judiciary and appointments.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Colonial courts leave criminal magistracy to ICS officers and higher Benches to lawyers → the Constitution separates the judiciary from the executive and creates State judicial services, while Article 217 opens two streams without a ratio → an informal two-thirds Bar, one-third service convention settles in, and the collegium draws mostly from the Bar → judicial officers reach the zone of consideration only in their late fifties → only 233 of 1,114 High Court seats and no Supreme Court seat are held by career judges

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The Constitution opens two doors to the High Court but does not fix how wide each is —** Article 217(2) makes a citizen eligible for appointment as a High Court judge if he or she has held a judicial office in India for at least ten years, or has been an advocate of a High Court, or of two or more such courts in succession, for at least ten years.

Article 217(1) fixes the retirement age of a High Court judge at 62. Article 124(3) makes a person eligible for the Supreme Court if he or she has been a High Court judge for five years, a High Court advocate for ten years, or is, in the President's opinion, a distinguished jurist. The Supreme Court judges retire at 65 under Article 124(2). The one-third share for the judicial service is a convention, not a rule of law.

2. **The subordinate judiciary is a State service controlled by the High Court** — Article 233 provides that district judges are appointed by the Governor in consultation with the High Court, and that a person not already in the service must have been an advocate or pleader for at least seven years. Article 234 provides for the recruitment of other judicial officers by the Governor in consultation with the State Public Service Commission and the High Court. Article 235 vests control over district courts and subordinate courts, including postings and promotions, in the High Court. Article 50, a Directive Principle, asks the State to separate the judiciary from the executive in public services.
3. **The collegium system is the product of three Supreme Court judgments** — In *S.P. Gupta v. Union of India* (1981), the First Judges case, the Court held that "consultation" with the Chief Justice did not mean concurrence, giving the executive primacy. The Second Judges case, *Supreme Court Advocates-on-Record Association v. Union of India* (1993), reversed this and gave primacy to the judiciary through the Chief Justice of India. The Third Judges case, a Presidential Reference in 1998, fixed the collegium as the CJI and the four senior-most judges for Supreme Court appointments, and the CJI and two senior-most judges for High Court appointments. In 2015 the Fourth Judges case struck down the 99th Amendment and the National Judicial Appointments Commission, restoring the collegium. The procedure is set out in the Memorandum of Procedure agreed between the government and the judiciary.
4. **An All India Judicial Service has been possible since 1976 but has never been created** — The 42nd Amendment in 1976 amended Article 312 to allow an All India Judicial Service. Parliament can create it only after the Rajya Sabha passes a resolution supported by two-thirds of members present and voting declaring it necessary in the national interest. Article 312(3) says the service shall not include any post inferior to that of a district judge. Supporters argue it would bring in high-quality talent through a national examination; opponents, including several High Courts and States, argue it would weaken High Court control under Article 235 and ignore local languages and laws.

WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)

1. **Judicial appointments are among the most frequently asked GS2 topics** — UPSC has asked about the collegium, the NJAC judgment and the independence of the judiciary. The composition of the Bench, including the representation of career judges, women and social groups, is the natural next question, and today's figures give a ready-made case.
2. **Pendency questions increasingly look at the lower judiciary** — Mains questions on judicial pendency have moved from the Supreme Court to district courts, where most cases lie. The career path of judicial officers affects who joins the service and how long vacancies stay open, which links appointments directly to pendency and access to justice.
3. **Prelims tests the eligibility Articles by number** — Qualifications for High Court and Supreme Court judges, the retirement ages, and Article 233 on district judges are routine Prelims material. The All India Judicial Service under Article 312 is an old favourite for statement-based questions.

PRELIMS NUGGETS

- Under Article 217(2), a person is qualified to be a High Court judge if he or she has held a judicial office in India for at least ten years or has been an advocate of

a High Court for at least ten years.

- Under Article 124(3), a distinguished jurist, in the opinion of the President, is eligible for appointment as a judge of the Supreme Court, but there is no such category for High Court judges.
- Under Article 233, district judges are appointed by the Governor of the State in consultation with the High Court exercising jurisdiction in relation to that State.
- Article 235 vests control over district courts and courts subordinate to them in the High Court.
- The provision enabling an All India Judicial Service was inserted into Article 312 by the Constitution (Forty-second Amendment) Act, 1976, and the service cannot include posts inferior to that of a district judge.
- The Third Judges case (1998) settled that the collegium for Supreme Court appointments consists of the Chief Justice of India and the four senior-most judges of the Supreme Court.
- Article 50, a Directive Principle of State Policy, directs the State to take steps to separate the judiciary from the executive in the public services of the State.

ANALYSIS

- 1. The problem is timing more than quotas** — The Hindu's figures show that judicial officers reach the zone of consideration in their late fifties, with only a few years left before retirement at 62. A lawyer can be elevated in his or her mid-forties and serve fifteen years or more, which also puts him or her in line for Chief Justiceship and the Supreme Court. So even when the one-third convention is met, service judges rarely accumulate the seniority that leads upward. A quota alone would not change this. What would change it is earlier consideration, through faster promotions in the district judiciary or a separate track for the best officers, so that they reach the High Court with a full decade of tenure.
- 2. The collegium's own choices reproduce the pattern at the top** — The three High Court Chief Justices recommended on September 28 were all elevated from the Bar, and the Supreme Court has had no career judge since Justice Trivedi retired in June 2025. Supreme Court appointments are drawn largely from Chief Justices and senior judges of High Courts, and seniority there favours those who came young from the Bar. The collegium can correct this within the existing law, since nothing prevents it from recommending a senior service judge. The counter-view is that Supreme Court work is largely constitutional and appellate, where advocates who argued such cases have an advantage over judges who spent decades in trial work.
- 3. Trial-court experience is an asset the higher Bench is missing** — Most litigants never go beyond a district court, and the quality of trials decides whether appeals are needed at all. Judges who have recorded evidence, framed charges and managed dockets understand why trials are delayed in a way few advocates do. Justice Gauba's point that service judges come with performance appraisals and years of judgments on record is also an argument for transparency, since their merit can be assessed on paper. A higher judiciary with more career judges could make appellate rulings more attentive to trial realities.
- 4. Career prospects decide who joins the judicial service at all** — Former district judge Pawan Kumar Jain's argument that the lack of career progression discourages top law graduates is the deeper cost. If the best graduates choose corporate practice or the Bar, the quality of the district judiciary falls, and with it the pool of future High Court judges. This becomes a cycle in which the service is under-represented at the top because its best potential members never join. An All India Judicial Service is one proposed answer, but it faces State opposition; better pay, faster promotion and assured consideration for elevation are the options within existing law.

	5. Vacancies are also a problem the service stream could solve faster — The Delhi High Court still has 10 vacancies against a sanctioned 60 even after seven new judges. Judicial officers' records are available in advance, so names can be processed before a vacancy arises, as the Supreme Court directed in its April 25 order. The Bar stream depends on identifying willing advocates and on the government's clearance, which can stall, as seen with the Centre not approving the earlier recommendation of Himachal Pradesh Chief Justice G.S. Sandhawalia. A planned pipeline of service judges is the quickest lever for reducing vacancies.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	"The subordinate judiciary is the foundation of the justice system, yet its members are under-represented in the higher judiciary." Discuss the reasons for this imbalance and suggest measures to create a fair career path from the district courts to the High Courts and the Supreme Court. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Cite that only 233 of the 1,114 sanctioned High Court judges in office came from the district judiciary, and that the Supreme Court has had no career judge since Justice Bela M. Trivedi retired in June 2025. 2. Body — constitutional and conventional framework — Explain Article 217(2) and its two streams, the one-third convention, Articles 233–235 on the subordinate judiciary, and the collegium from the Second and Third Judges cases. Show that the Constitution fixes no ratio. 3. Body — reasons for the imbalance — Discuss late entry into the zone of consideration, the retirement age of 62, colonial origins, collegium preference for the Bar and weak career prospects. Use State figures such as Tripura at 40% and Sikkim at zero. 4. Body — measures — Suggest time-bound promotions, early processing of service names as the Supreme Court directed, transparent criteria in the Memorandum of Procedure, a fair share for career judges in Supreme Court appointments, and a reasoned debate on the All India Judicial Service under Article 312. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that a judiciary that rewards trial-court experience will attract better talent to the district courts, where most citizens meet the justice system.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. As Registrar General of a High Court, how would you help the collegium consider more service judges? Approach: I would maintain an updated panel of eligible district judges, with their annual confidential reports, disposal rates, reversal rates and integrity records, ready well before vacancies arise. I would place this before the collegium at least six months in advance of each expected vacancy, as the Supreme Court has directed. I would also flag officers who will cross the zone of consideration soon, so that able candidates are not lost to retirement. Good records make a fair process possible. Q2. A young law graduate asks you whether to join the State judicial service or practise at the Bar. What do you advise? Approach: I would tell her honestly that the judicial service offers early responsibility, security and the chance to decide real disputes from the first year, while the Bar offers higher income and a faster route to the High Court. I would explain the current figures so that she chooses with open eyes. If she values public service and steady growth, the judicial service is a good choice, but she should know that elevation depends on performance records she builds from day one. Q3. An interview board asks: should there be a fixed statutory quota for career judges in High Courts? Approach: A fixed quota would give certainty and stop the one-third convention from

being ignored in States like Sikkim and Uttarakhand. But a rigid quota could leave seats vacant when suitable names are unavailable and could be seen as interfering with the collegium's discretion. A better approach is a stated target in the Memorandum of Procedure, with public reporting of the ratio every year, so that the collegium explains shortfalls. Transparency changes behaviour more reliably than rigid rules.

1.3 Maharashtra's Poll Chief Asks ECINet to Restore EROs' Discretion, and the EC's Nine-Point Note Partly Concedes

THE NEWS Mumbai and New Delhi. Maharashtra's Chief Electoral Officer S. Chockalingam wrote to the Election Commission of India (ECI) on September 24 seeking four changes to the ECINet software, each in effect a request that it let Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) use a discretion the law already gives them, The Indian Express reported on September 29. This builds on the paper's September 23 report that Election Commissioners Sukhbir Singh Sandhu and Vivek Joshi had recorded objections 14 times in 10 months; what is new is a State CEO's formal letter and the Commission's own reply. Maharashtra is the largest State now in the notice phase of the Special Intensive Revision (SIR); its draft roll of August 31 left out 21.1% of electors, and the final roll is due on November 16. A "logical discrepancy" is not a finding that someone is not a voter; it is a mismatch ECINet throws up when it tries to link an elector to a parent or grandparent on the last SIR roll, or when the elector submitted no document or only Aadhaar. The letter, addressed to Senior Deputy Election Commissioner Maneesh Garg, Director General of IT Seema Khanna and two officers, asked for an "Exempted from Hearing" option, since the rules give the ERO "the discretion to require" personal appearance; a 14th option, "Other/Other Equivalent Document", because the 13 listed documents are "indicative and not exhaustive" and tribal, homeless and sex-worker communities may not have them; power for EROs to dispose of all categories of discrepancy on a booth-level officer's statement or panchnama; and an optional, not mandatory, "Extract of Last SIR" upload. He also sought written FAQs, saying "oral instructions from ECI or CEO are insufficient". On August 14, Mr. Sandhu had written that the powers of CEOs, DEOs and EROs were "curtailed by centralised control of ERONet at DG(IT) level." On September 26, after a full Commission meeting, the ECI issued a four-page note with nine decisions: EROs may exempt electors flagged for logical discrepancies from personal hearing; agendas will be circulated before every meeting and minutes issued afterwards; officers' foreign trips need Commission approval; new IT modules go through a committee of officers; ECINet will be reviewed by a committee headed by a senior Deputy Election Commissioner with an independent IIT expert; and Commissioners' directions will be "meticulously complied with". The Indian Express editorial calls the note welcome but short, and Yogendra Yadav argues it is "a formal admission of guilt". Separately, the Supreme Court declined to advance the hearing on West Bengal SIR exclusion appeals before the October 6 bypolls in Nandigram and Rejinagar, with CJI Surya Kant saying "these are only by-elections". The syllabus link is GS2: the Election Commission, the Representation of the People Act and statutory bodies.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

The Representation of the People Act, 1950 makes the ERO in each Assembly seat the authority for the voters' list → the Election Commission moves roll management onto a central platform, ECINet/ERONet, controlled by its IT division → during the SIR the software offers EROs fewer options than the law gives them, and two Commissioners object on file → a newspaper investigation brings the objections out and Maharashtra's CEO formally asks for four changes → the Commission's September 26 note concedes hearing exemptions and process reforms, while the Opposition prepares a removal motion against the CEC

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

1. **The Representation of the People Act, 1950 places the voters' list in the hands of the ERO** — Section 13B provides that the electoral roll for every Assembly constituency is prepared and revised by an Electoral Registration Officer, designated by the Election Commission in consultation with the State government; in practice the ERO is usually a sub-divisional magistrate. Section 13A provides for a Chief Electoral Officer in each State, and Section 13AA for District Election Officers. Section 21 covers preparation and revision of rolls and allows the Commission to direct a special revision; Section 22 covers correction of entries, Section 23 inclusion of names, and Section 24 appeals against the ERO's orders. The detailed procedure, including notices, hearings and objections, is in the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, framed by the Central

	government in consultation with the Commission. 2. Article 324 gives the Commission superintendence, not a licence to override statute — Article 324(1) vests the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections in the Election Commission. In <i>Mohinder Singh Gill v. Chief Election Commissioner</i> (1978), the Supreme Court held that this power fills gaps where law is silent but must be exercised in conformity with laws made by Parliament under Article 327. Article 326 guarantees elections on the basis of adult suffrage to every citizen aged 18 or above who is not otherwise disqualified. Article 325 bars exclusion from the roll on grounds only of religion, race, caste or sex. 3. The Commission is a multi-member body, and removal of its members follows different tracks — Under Article 324(2), the Commission consists of the Chief Election Commissioner and such number of other Election Commissioners as the President fixes; it has had three members since 1993. In <i>T.N. Seshan v. Union of India</i> (1995), the Supreme Court upheld the multi-member Commission and decision by majority, with the CEC as first among equals. Under Article 324(5), the CEC can be removed only in the manner and on the grounds of a Supreme Court judge, that is, by an address of each House of Parliament passed by a special majority on grounds of proved misbehaviour or incapacity under Article 124(4). The other Election Commissioners can be removed only on the CEC's recommendation. 4. Appointments are now governed by the 2023 Act, which followed Anoop Baranwal — In <i>Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India</i> (2023), a Constitution Bench directed that, until Parliament made a law, the CEC and Election Commissioners be appointed on the advice of a committee of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India. Parliament then passed the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners (Appointment, Conditions of Service and Term of Office) Act, 2023, which replaced the Chief Justice with a Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the Prime Minister. The Act repeats the constitutional removal protection for the CEC. The removal process for a Supreme Court judge, which the CEC's removal follows, is detailed in the Judges (Inquiry) Act, 1968.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. Electoral reform and the autonomy of the Election Commission are staple GS2 questions — UPSC has asked about the independence of the Election Commission, the appointment process and electoral reforms. The ECINet dispute adds a new dimension: whether an institution's internal technology can shift power away from the officers the law names, which fits the syllabus line on statutory and constitutional bodies. 2. E-governance questions are moving from benefits to accountability — Earlier GS2 questions on e-governance stressed efficiency and transparency. Today's story shows the other side: when a central platform decides what options a field officer has, accountability shifts to whoever writes the software. That argument is useful for any answer on digital public infrastructure. 3. Prelims tests the Article 324 architecture — Questions have asked about the composition of the Election Commission, the removal of the CEC and Election Commissioners, and the Representation of the People Acts of 1950 and 1951. The difference between the CEC's protection and that of the other Commissioners is a frequent trap.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● Under the Representation of the People Act, 1950, the electoral roll for each Assembly constituency is prepared and revised by an Electoral Registration Officer designated by the Election Commission in consultation with the State government. ● The Registration of Electors Rules, 1960 lay down the procedure for the preparation and revision of electoral rolls, including claims, objections and

hearings.

- Article 324(1) vests the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of electoral rolls and the conduct of elections in the Election Commission.
- Under Article 324(5), the Chief Election Commissioner can be removed only in like manner and on the like grounds as a judge of the Supreme Court, while other Election Commissioners can be removed only on the recommendation of the Chief Election Commissioner.
- Article 326 provides that elections to the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies shall be on the basis of adult suffrage.
- In *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India* (2023), the Supreme Court directed that the CEC and Election Commissioners be appointed on the advice of a committee of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and the Chief Justice of India, until Parliament made a law.
- The selection committee under the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023 consists of the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha and a Union Cabinet Minister nominated by the Prime Minister.

ANALYSIS

- 1. In a digital roll, software design is the real rulebook** — The rules say an ERO may require an elector to appear in person, which means the ERO may also decide not to. If the software menu offers only two options and neither waives the hearing, the discretion exists on paper and nowhere else. This is what the idea that “code is law” means in plain terms: whoever designs the interface decides what an officer can actually do. Delegated legislation such as the 1960 Rules is published, debated and can be challenged in court; a software configuration changed in Delhi is none of these. The Commission’s promise of a review committee is a step, but the durable fix is to publish ECINet’s decision rules and tie each one to a legal provision.
- 2. Centralisation undercuts the Commission’s own best defence** — As the Express notes, the Commission has for decades answered allegations of roll manipulation by pointing to a decentralised design in which no single person controls the list. A central IT division that decides what EROs can do weakens that answer, because it creates exactly the single point of control critics fear. The counter-view deserves weight: central systems catch duplicate entries and prevent local officers from being pressured, and uniform procedures help a nationwide revision. The balance lies in central checks with local decisions, not central decisions with local clerical work.
- 3. The nine-point note concedes the process, not the accountability** — Agendas, minutes, approval for foreign trips and a committee for IT modules are basic features of any collegial body, and their promise now implies they were missing. The Express editorial points out what the note does not answer: who inserted the parents question into Form 6 in July, what action follows against named officers, who authorised appeals against voters restored by judicial officers in Bengal, and why Goa’s restoration software was never enabled. A reform that changes procedures for the future without explaining the past invites the suspicion that the problem was the exposure, not the conduct.
- 4. Yogendra Yadav’s impeachment case sets a high bar that politics alone cannot meet** — Mr. Yadav argues that the note is a formal admission of guilt, citing its paragraphs on agendas, Form 6 and an ECINet review, and invoking Section 32(1) of the 1950 Act on breach of official duty in roll preparation. His own framing concedes that removal under Article 324(5) requires proved misbehaviour, not error or good-faith misinterpretation. The earlier motion, moved in March by 63 Rajya Sabha and 130 Lok Sabha MPs, was rejected by the presiding officers on April 6, and a fresh Rajya Sabha

	notice of April 24 is pending. Removal needs a special majority the Opposition does not have, so the practical value of the motion is to force an inquiry and a record, which is where the argument should focus. 5. The Bengal case shows how delay can decide rights — The Election Commission's September 16 affidavit said 1,26,194 of 38,31,429 SIR appeals had been decided and 37,05,235 were pending. In Nandigram, 89 of 6,443 appellants have been restored; in Rejinagar, four of 12,452. The Supreme Court's view that bypolls are not urgent is defensible as docket management, but for an excluded voter every election missed is a vote lost for good. When the appeal machinery cannot keep up with deletions made through software, the burden of the system's error falls on the citizen, which is the reverse of what a fair roll revision should do.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	"The Representation of the People Act, 1950 makes the Electoral Registration Officer the authority for the electoral roll, but digital platforms may shift that authority to those who design them." Critically examine this statement in the context of the Special Intensive Revision of electoral rolls. How can technology be used without diluting statutory accountability? (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Begin with the Maharashtra CEO's September 24 letter seeking four changes to ECINet so that EROs can exercise discretion given by the rules, and the Commission's September 26 note partly conceding it. 2. Body — the statutory design — Explain Sections 13B and 21–24 of the RP Act, 1950 and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, with the ERO at the centre, and the Commission's superintendence under Article 324 as interpreted in Mohinder Singh Gill. 3. Body — how software shifted authority — Use the examples: no hearing-waiver option, a closed list of 13 documents, discrepancy decisions pushed to the DEO level, a mandatory upload, and Commissioner Sandhu's note on centralised control by DG(IT). Give the counter-view on uniformity and fraud prevention. 4. Body — safeguards — Suggest publishing platform rules mapped to legal provisions, independent audit, written instructions instead of oral ones, a statutory grievance route for field officers, and recorded decisions of the full Commission. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that technology should carry out the law, not rewrite it, and that the legitimacy of the electoral roll depends on a named, accountable officer taking each decision.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are an ERO in Maharashtra. ECINet will not let you waive a hearing for an 82-year-old elector with valid documents. What do you do? Approach: I would record my decision on file that the documents are satisfactory and that I do not require personal appearance, citing the Rules, and send it to the District Election Officer and CEO. Where the software forces a hearing, I would arrange for a booth-level officer to visit the elector rather than make her travel. I would log each such case so the CEO has evidence for the change the Commission has now allowed. The law is my authority; the software is a tool I must report when it fails. Q2. As Director General (IT) of the Election Commission, how would you respond to field officers' complaints? Approach: I would publish, for every ECINet function, the legal provision it implements and the options it offers, and invite written feedback from CEOs. Where the law gives an officer discretion, the software should give that officer a choice, with a reason field and an audit trail. Changes should go through the committee the Commission has announced, and be notified in writing. My job is to build a system that makes lawful decisions easy and unlawful ones visible.

Q3. An interview board asks: should the Chief Election Commissioner be removed over these disclosures?

Approach: Removal under Article 324(5) requires proved misbehaviour or incapacity, found through a process like that for a Supreme Court judge, not a political judgement. The right first step is a fair inquiry into who took the decisions and whether they followed law and the Commission's own procedures. If the inquiry shows wilful breach, removal becomes a constitutional question for Parliament. Until then, the Commission's credibility is best restored by transparency, published minutes and correcting the rolls.

1.4 Supreme Court Asks Centre to Use IT Rules to Bar Under-18s From Opening Social Media Accounts

THE NEWS New Delhi. The Supreme Court on Monday, September 28, asked the Union government to put in place statutory rules so that social media platforms and other digital intermediaries comply with Indian law on minors and make 18 years the minimum age for membership. A three-judge Bench presided over by Chief Justice of India Surya Kant, with Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V. Mohana, was hearing a public interest litigation (PIL) by the NGO Just Rights for Children Alliance (JRCA), filed through advocate Saksham Maheshwari and argued by senior advocate H.S. Phoolka. Notices went out on September 10 to the Electronics and IT, Law and Labour Ministries. The core of the argument is legal capacity. Under Section 3 of the Majority Act, 1875, a person attains majority only on completing 18 years, and under Section 11 of the Indian Contract Act, 1872, a person below majority is not competent to contract. An account is a contract, and a minor's contract is, as the Bench put it, void ab initio — void from the very beginning, as if it never existed. "What are these social media platforms doing? Are they permitting children as young as 12 years to 15 years to have accounts? And what is an 'account'? It is a contract between the social media platform and a child," Justice Bagchi said, The Hindu reports. The petition says platforms let children aged 13 and above open accounts merely by declaring their age, a "fundamental legal and regulatory inconsistency". Justice Bagchi noted that these intermediaries — companies that host content posted by others — are registered under US law and have "imported into Indian digital space the restrictions which are applicable in the US". The Indian Express reports that CJI Kant said the government can invoke sections 4 and 9 of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, to issue directions, and Justice Bagchi urged the government to direct platforms to "fashion their software or platform in conformity with Indian law" with "a minimum threshold of 18 years". Solicitor-General Tushar Mehta agreed that minors cannot contract under Indian law, said "we will have to control the intermediaries", and added, "Government is ready to do that." He also submitted that the issue is prima facie covered by the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023; Mr. Phoolka replied that its provisions come into force only in 2027. The PIL seeks age-assurance mechanisms (real checks of age, not self-declaration), an end to independent accounts for minors, and educational access through parent-run accounts. The 21 September card covered the EU's under-15 proposal; what is new is that India's top court has framed the question through contract law. The syllabus link is GS2 on government policies, statutory bodies and the protection of vulnerable sections, and GS3 on cyber security.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Platforms built under US norms set 13 as the minimum age and rely on self-declared birth dates → crores of Indian children open accounts that Indian contract law does not recognise → the DPDP Act, 2023 requires parental consent for under-18s but its operative provisions are not yet in force → an NGO's PIL asks the Supreme Court to close the gap → the Bench asks the Centre to use the IT Rules, 2021 to impose an 18-year threshold, and the Solicitor-General agrees

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

1. A minor cannot make a contract in India, and such an agreement is void from the start — Section 10 of the Indian Contract Act, 1872 says an agreement is a contract only if made by the free consent of parties competent to contract, for a lawful consideration and a lawful object. Section 11 defines a competent person as one who has attained the age of majority, is of sound mind and is not disqualified by law. In *Mohori Bibee v. Dharmodas Ghose* (1903), the Privy Council held that a mortgage executed by a minor was void ab initio, not merely voidable, and that the minor could

not be made to repay the money advanced. Section 68 of the Act is a narrow exception: a supplier of “necessaries” to a minor can recover the price from the minor’s property, but not from the minor personally. The Majority Act, 1875 fixes the age of majority at 18.

- 2. The DPDP Act, 2023 treats everyone below 18 as a child and demands parental consent** — The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 defines a “child” as an individual who has not completed 18 years. Section 9 requires a data fiduciary — the company deciding why and how personal data is processed — to obtain the verifiable consent of a parent or lawful guardian before processing a child’s personal data. It also bars processing likely to harm a child’s well-being and prohibits tracking, behavioural monitoring and targeted advertising directed at children. The Act lets the government exempt certain classes of fiduciaries or purposes from these conditions. The DPDP Rules, 2025 phase in the substantive obligations, which is why the petitioner told the court the provisions come into force only in 2027.
- 3. Safe harbour protects platforms only if they follow the government’s due-diligence rules** — Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 exempts an intermediary from liability for third-party content it hosts, provided it observes due diligence and acts on lawful orders. In *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), the Supreme Court read down Section 79 so that “actual knowledge” means a court order or a government notification, not a private complaint. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 spell out these due-diligence duties, with extra obligations for “significant social media intermediaries” above a user threshold notified by the government. A platform that ignores the Rules risks losing its safe harbour, which is the lever the Bench asked the Centre to pull.
- 4. Children’s rights in the digital space rest on Article 21 and international commitments** — In *Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India* (2017), a nine-judge Bench held privacy to be a fundamental right under Article 21. India is a party to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which defines a child as a person below 18 and makes the best interests of the child a primary consideration in all actions concerning children. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences Act, 2012 also use 18 as the age line. Article 39(f) of the Directive Principles asks the State to ensure that children are protected against exploitation and moral and material abandonment.

WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)

- 1. GS2 asks about the protection of vulnerable sections and the regulation of big technology** — Mains questions have asked about data protection, the accountability of social media platforms and the balance between free speech and regulation. This case adds a clean legal hook — contractual capacity — that a candidate can use to argue that platform regulation need not wait for a new law. It also fits GS2’s “mechanisms, laws, institutions and bodies constituted for the protection and betterment of these vulnerable sections”.
- 2. Prelims tests the vocabulary of digital law** — UPSC has asked about the IT Act, 2000, the DPDP Act, 2023 and the meaning of terms such as intermediary and data fiduciary. The definition of a child under the DPDP Act, the safe-harbour provision in Section 79 and the Contract Act’s rule on minors are the kind of settled provisions Prelims prefers.
- 3. A global wave of age limits is now reaching India** — Australia legislated a minimum age of 16 for social media accounts, and the EU is weighing parental gates for under-15s, as this magazine reported on 21 September. An answer on children’s online safety should compare these models — outright bans, parental consent and design-based duties — rather than treat India’s debate in isolation.

PRELIMS NUGGETS

- Under Section 11 of the Indian Contract Act, 1872, a person who has not attained the age of majority is not competent to contract.
- In *Mohori Bibee v. Dharmodas Ghose* (1903), the Privy Council held that an agreement with a minor is void ab initio.
- Under the Majority Act, 1875, a person attains majority on completing 18 years of age.
- The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 defines a child as an individual who has not completed 18 years and requires verifiable parental consent before processing a child's personal data.
- The DPDP Act, 2023 prohibits tracking, behavioural monitoring and targeted advertising directed at children.
- Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 grants intermediaries safe harbour from liability for third-party content, subject to due diligence.
- In *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the IT Act and read down Section 79 to require a court order or government notification for "actual knowledge".

ANALYSIS

- 1. The Bench has found a way to regulate platforms without waiting for a new law —** The usual debate on children and social media asks whether Parliament should ban accounts below some age. The Bench sidestepped that by pointing out that Indian law already does not recognise a child's account as a valid contract. If the contract is void, the platform's terms of service cannot bind the child, and the platform's claim that the child "agreed" to data collection collapses. Combined with the IT Rules, which are delegated legislation the executive can amend quickly, this gives the government a route that does not require a fresh Bill. The counter-view is that courts should not push the executive into rule-making on a policy question, since the choice of an age line involves trade-offs that belong to the legislature.
- 2. Void contract logic cuts both ways and could hurt children more than platforms —** If a minor's account is void, the child also loses the contractual protections — grievance redress, data deletion obligations under the platform's own policy — that flow from the terms of service. Void-contract doctrine was built to protect minors from being bound by bad bargains, not to shut them out of public spaces. A child who uses a messaging app for school groups, or a teenage creator who earns from content, would find that the law treats their activity as legally non-existent. The better reading is that the contract point justifies stricter rules on platforms, not the exclusion of children, and the petition itself asks for parent-controlled access to educational content.
- 3. Age assurance is the hard engineering problem the order does not solve —** Platforms today rely on self-declared birth dates, which any child can falsify. Real age assurance means either document checks, which require collecting identity data from everyone, or estimation from face or behaviour, which raises privacy and error concerns. Requiring every Indian adult to prove age to open an account would expand data collection sharply, which sits awkwardly with the DPDP Act's principle of data minimisation. The design of any rule will therefore decide whether child safety is bought at the cost of adult privacy. A graded approach — stricter checks only for features that carry higher risk, such as messaging strangers or monetisation — may be more workable than a single gate.
- 4. The DPDP timetable exposes a gap between law on paper and law in force —** The Solicitor-General's answer that the DPDP Act already covers the issue and the petitioner's reply that it takes effect only in 2027 show the cost of long phase-in periods. The Act was passed in 2023, yet its parental-consent rule for children is not yet enforceable. Meanwhile platforms have no statutory duty beyond self-declaration.

	The court's suggestion to use the IT Rules is effectively a bridge until the DPDP regime starts. It also means two parallel regimes — MeitY directions under the IT Rules and the Data Protection Board under the DPDP Act — may later need to be reconciled. 5. Setting the line at 18 is stricter than most of the world — The US-derived norm of 13 comes from American children's privacy law, Australia chose 16 and the EU proposal discussed on 21 September looks at 15. An 18-year threshold would make India one of the strictest jurisdictions. Supporters argue that Indian law already uses 18 for majority, consent and child protection, so consistency demands it. Critics note that 16- and 17-year-olds use platforms for education, jobs and civic life, and a rigid ban may push them to borrowed accounts or unregulated apps. The choice is not only legal but social, and a public consultation before any rule would strengthen its legitimacy.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	"The protection of children online cannot be left to self-declared age and platform terms of service." In the light of the Supreme Court's recent observations on minors' social media accounts, examine the legal framework in India for regulating children's access to digital platforms. Suggest a balanced approach. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Open with the September 28 hearing: a Bench led by CJI Surya Kant asked the Centre to use the IT Rules, 2021 to make 18 the minimum age for social media membership, reasoning that a minor's account is a contract void ab initio. 2. Body — the existing framework — Explain Sections 10 and 11 of the Contract Act and Mohori Bibee; the Majority Act, 1875; Section 9 of the DPDP Act, 2023 on verifiable parental consent and the bar on tracking and targeted ads; Section 79 safe harbour and the IT Rules, 2021. Note that the DPDP provisions take effect only in 2027. 3. Body — gaps and dilemmas — Discuss self-declared age, platforms importing the US threshold of 13, the privacy cost of age verification for all users, the risk of excluding teenagers from educational and economic uses, and overlapping regulators. 4. Body — a balanced approach — Propose risk-based age assurance, parent-controlled accounts for younger users, default privacy settings for minors, a ban on targeted advertising to children, digital literacy in schools, and clear enforcement by MeitY and the Data Protection Board. Cite Australia and the EU as comparisons. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that India should anchor child online safety in the rights of the child under Article 21 and the best-interests principle, using design duties on platforms rather than relying only on bans.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are a Joint Secretary in MeitY asked to draft directions under the IT Rules after this hearing. What would you put in them? Approach: I would require platforms to stop relying on self-declared age alone and to deploy age-assurance methods proportionate to risk, while prohibiting them from retaining identity documents beyond verification. Accounts for users under 18 would need linked parental consent, private-by-default settings and no targeted advertising, in line with Section 9 of the DPDP Act. I would publish a draft for public consultation and give a clear compliance timeline. Non-compliance would be linked to loss of safe harbour under Section 79. Q2. As a District Magistrate, how would you address children's online safety in your district before any national rule is in place? Approach: I would work with the District Education Officer to run digital safety sessions for students and parents in government and private schools. The District Child Protection Unit and the cyber cell of the police would get a simple reporting channel for online exploitation cases. Schools would be asked to review whether they push children onto social media for homework groups. The aim is awareness and quick

response, since regulation of platforms is beyond a district's power.

Q3. An interview board asks: is banning teenagers from social media a violation of their freedom of expression?

Approach: Article 19(1)(a) protects expression, but reasonable restrictions are allowed and the State has a recognised duty to protect children. A complete ban for 16- and 17-year-olds may be disproportionate, because it cuts off lawful learning and expression along with the harm. A proportionate approach would restrict risky features and data practices rather than presence itself. So I would argue for regulation of platform design rather than a blanket prohibition.

1.5 PRS Data Show MPs From Reserved Seats Took Part in Fewer Lok Sabha Debates Than Peers

THE NEWS New Delhi. An analysis by The Hindu of PRS Legislative Research's MP Track data for the 18th Lok Sabha, covering June 24, 2024 to August 23, 2026, shows that Members of Parliament elected from seats reserved for Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) have taken part in fewer debates than the House average and than their own party colleagues. PRS Legislative Research is an independent research group that tracks the work of Parliament and individual MPs; "participation in debates" counts how often an MP spoke in debates on Bills and other discussions. The analysis was prompted by a letter dated September 16 from Union Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi to Lok Sabha Speaker Om Birla asking for more floor time for SC and ST MPs of the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Mr. Manjhi referred to an "NDA sansad samooch samvaad baithak" (NDA MP group dialogue meeting) held at his residence on August 5, where BJP MP Gajendra Singh Patel, who represents Khargone, a reserved tribal constituency in Madhya Pradesh, had pointed out that MPs from SC/ST communities were not being given adequate time to speak during discussions on important Bills. Mr. Manjhi urged the Speaker to rectify the situation. The data, which exclude six Ministers from SC/ST constituencies, show that the 24 BJP MPs from SC seats averaged 14.67 debates and the 22 from ST seats 13.05. Together the 46 averaged 13.89, against 21.53 for all 483 sitting MPs. The 145 BJP MPs outside SC and ST seats averaged 19.68. Compared with BJP MPs on non-reserved seats, SC-seat BJP MPs averaged 4.14 fewer debates (14.67 against 18.80) and ST-seat BJP MPs 5.92 fewer (13.05 against 18.96). Mahendra Singh Solanki, 42, elected for a second time from Dewas, is the only one of the 46 who has not participated in any debate. Nine of the 46 are above the House average, led by Vishnu Dayal Ram of Palamau with 44 debates and Hemant Vishnu Savara of Palghar with 43. The pattern is not limited to one party. Across all parties, SC-seat MPs averaged 18.22 debates against 22.15 for others, and ST-seat MPs 17.67 against 21.91. The principal Opposition party, the Congress, also recorded a gap, with its SC-seat MPs averaging 19 against 23.38 for party peers; its ST-seat MPs, however, averaged 24.42, above the 22.22 of their peers. A reserved constituency is one where only a candidate from the SC or ST community may contest, though all voters of the constituency vote. The syllabus link is GS2 on Parliament — its functioning and conduct of business — and on the representation of vulnerable sections.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Separate electorates for depressed classes are replaced by joint electorates with reserved seats in the Poona Pact of 1932 → the Constitution carries reserved seats into Articles 330 and 332 → reserved-seat MPs must win votes from all communities and depend on party tickets → floor time in the Lok Sabha is rationed through party whips and leaders → an NDA Minister writes to the Speaker, and PRS data confirm a participation gap across parties

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- Articles 330 and 332 reserve seats for SCs and STs in proportion to their population** — Article 330 reserves seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Lok Sabha, and Article 332 does the same in State Legislative Assemblies. The number of reserved seats in a State bears, as nearly as possible, the same proportion to its total seats as the SC or ST population bears to the State's population. After the delimitation based on the 2001 Census, 84 Lok Sabha seats are reserved for SCs and 47 for STs. Reserved seats are filled through joint electorates, so every voter in the constituency votes, but only an SC or ST candidate can stand. Article 334 originally set a time limit of ten years for this reservation, which has been extended repeatedly.
- The 104th Amendment extended reservation of seats to 2030 and ended Anglo-**

	Indian nomination — The Constitution (One Hundred and Fourth Amendment) Act, 2019 amended Article 334 to extend the reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies until January 2030. The same amendment did not extend the provision for nominating Anglo-Indian members to the Lok Sabha and Assemblies, which therefore lapsed in January 2020. Reservation of seats is thus the only time-bound reservation in the Constitution, unlike reservation in jobs and education, which has no sunset clause. 3. The Delimitation Commission decides which constituencies are reserved — Under Article 82 and the Delimitation Act, 2002, a Delimitation Commission redraws constituency boundaries and identifies seats to be reserved for SCs and STs. ST seats generally go to constituencies where the tribal share of population is highest; SC seats are chosen by SC population share while spreading them across a State, because SCs are less geographically concentrated. Article 329(a) bars courts from questioning laws on delimitation, and the Commission's orders have the force of law. Since the SC population is dispersed, SC-seat MPs usually win in constituencies where SCs are a minority of voters. 4. The Poona Pact of 1932 chose joint electorates with reserved seats over separate electorates — The British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald's Communal Award of 1932 granted separate electorates to the depressed classes, meaning only depressed-class voters would elect their representatives. Mahatma Gandhi opposed this with a fast in Yerawada jail, and B.R. Ambedkar agreed to the Poona Pact in September 1932. The pact replaced separate electorates with joint electorates and increased reserved seats for depressed classes in provincial legislatures from 71 to 148. Ambedkar later argued that joint electorates allowed the majority to choose Dalit representatives who were acceptable to it, a critique that remains central to the debate on the quality of representation.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS2 asks about the functioning of Parliament and the quality of legislative debate — Mains has asked about the decline in parliamentary sittings, the passage of Bills without discussion and the role of committees. This data adds a new dimension: not how long Parliament sits, but who gets to speak. It can be used in answers on parliamentary productivity, the power of party whips and the Speaker's role in conducting business. 2. Representation of weaker sections is a recurring theme across GS1 and GS2 — Questions on the Poona Pact, Ambedkar's views on representation and the continuation of political reservation appear in both history and polity papers. Prelims has asked about Article 334 and the 104th Amendment. The concept of descriptive versus substantive representation is also standard material in the Political Science optional.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	- Article 330 of the Constitution provides for reservation of seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the Lok Sabha, and Article 332 in State Legislative Assemblies. - The Constitution (104th Amendment) Act, 2019 extended the reservation of seats for SCs and STs in the Lok Sabha and State Assemblies till 2030 and discontinued nomination of Anglo-Indian members. - Seats reserved for SCs and STs are filled through joint electorates: all voters of the constituency vote, but only SC or ST candidates may contest. - The Poona Pact of 1932 between Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar replaced separate electorates for depressed classes, granted in the Communal Award, with reserved seats in joint electorates.

- Under Article 329(a), the validity of any law relating to delimitation of constituencies or allotment of seats cannot be questioned in any court.
- The Rules of Procedure and Conduct of Business in the Lok Sabha are made by the House under Article 118 of the Constitution.
- The Business Advisory Committee of the Lok Sabha, chaired by the Speaker, recommends the time to be allotted for discussion of Bills and other business.

ANALYSIS

- 1. Reserved seats guarantee presence, not voice** — The political theorist Hanna Pitkin distinguished descriptive representation — whether the legislature looks like the society it represents — from substantive representation — whether representatives act for the interests of those they represent. Reserved seats have delivered the first: the Lok Sabha has SC and ST members in proportion to their population. The PRS data suggest the second is weaker, because presence in the House does not translate into equal participation. A member who rarely speaks cannot raise constituency grievances, question Ministers or shape Bills. The counter-view is that debates are only one measure; members also work through questions, committees and constituency service, which this data do not capture.
- 2. The gap is structural, which is why it shows up across parties** — The Hindu's data show the gap in the Congress as well as the BJP, and across all parties, which points away from a single party's choices and towards the way Parliament allots time. Floor time is rationed by party: the Speaker and the Business Advisory Committee allot time broadly in proportion to party strength, and each party's leadership then decides who speaks. Members with seniority, ministerial ambitions or close ties to the leadership tend to get the slots. Reserved-seat members, many of them first-generation politicians from dispersed communities, may have less bargaining power within the party. The Congress's ST-seat members, who spoke more than their peers, show that the pattern is not inevitable.
- 3. Joint electorates create a dependency that Ambedkar warned about** — Because SCs are dispersed, an SC-seat MP typically wins with votes from other communities and depends heavily on the party ticket. That makes the member accountable first to the party organisation, which chooses the candidate, and only then to the community. Ambedkar's objection to the Poona Pact was exactly this: the majority would pick Dalit representatives it found comfortable. The Tenth Schedule, which disqualifies members who defy the party whip, reinforces party control over what members say and do. Low participation may therefore be one symptom of a wider design in which the reserved-seat member's room for independent action is limited.
- 4. A Minister's letter shows the grievance is felt inside the ruling alliance** — The complaint did not come from the Opposition but from within the NDA, through Mr. Manjhi and Mr. Patel. That matters, because it frames the issue as a problem of internal party democracy and House management rather than a partisan attack. The Speaker can respond without taking sides by encouraging parties to rotate speakers, reserving time in debates on Bills that affect SCs and STs, or making greater use of Zero Hour and short-duration discussions. The limit is that the Speaker cannot compel a party to field a particular member, since the choice of speakers rests with party leaders.
- 5. Counting debates is a useful but crude measure of an MP's work** — The number of debates rewards members who speak often, even briefly, and says nothing about the quality of interventions. Some members focus on questions, private member's Bills or committee work, and others on constituency service, which rural voters often value more. The data also cover barely two years of a five-year term. Yet the gap is consistent across parties and categories, and the House average of 21.53 against 13.89 for the 46 BJP reserved-seat members is large enough to be more than noise. The data

	are a starting point for inquiry, not a verdict on individual members.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	“Reservation of seats has secured the presence of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in Parliament, but not necessarily their voice.” Critically examine this statement in the light of recent data on participation of MPs from reserved constituencies in Lok Sabha debates. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Cite PRS MP Track data for June 24, 2024 to August 23, 2026: SC-seat MPs across parties averaged 18.22 debates against 22.15 for others, and ST-seat MPs 17.67 against 21.91; the 46 BJP reserved-seat MPs averaged 13.89 against a House average of 21.53. 2. Body — the constitutional design — Explain Articles 330, 332 and 334, the 104th Amendment, joint electorates, and the Poona Pact. Introduce Pitkin’s distinction between descriptive and substantive representation in plain words. 3. Body — reasons for the gap — Discuss party control of floor time, the Business Advisory Committee and the Speaker’s role, the Tenth Schedule and the whip, dependence on party tickets in dispersed SC constituencies, and first-generation members’ weaker position within parties. 4. Body — the other side — Note that debates are one measure among questions, committees and constituency work; that nine of the 46 BJP members exceed the House average; and that the Congress’s ST-seat members outperform their peers. 5. Conclusion — Suggest rotation of speakers, time reserved in debates on Bills affecting SCs and STs, and capacity-building for new MPs, concluding that the next step in political reservation is securing voice, not only seats.
ADMINISTRATOR’S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are the Secretary-General of the Lok Sabha. The Speaker asks you for options after Mr. Manjhi’s letter. What do you advise? Approach: I would first compile participation data by category for the Speaker, since good decisions need a clear baseline. I would suggest that the Business Advisory Committee request party leaders to rotate speakers and include reserved-seat members in major debates. Zero Hour slots and short-duration discussions could be used to give more members a chance. I would also propose orientation sessions through the Parliament’s research and training services for first-time members. Q2. An interview board asks: is the continuation of reserved seats beyond 2030 justified if MPs from those seats participate less? Approach: Lower participation is an argument for strengthening representation, not for ending it. Without reserved seats, the number of SC and ST members would likely fall sharply, since their communities remain under-represented in party tickets for general seats. The better course is to address why their voice is weaker — party control of time, dependence on tickets — while keeping the guarantee of presence. Any decision on continuation should rest on data about social and political inclusion, not on one metric. Q3. As an Electoral Registration Officer in a reserved constituency, what can you do to improve political participation of SC and ST voters? Approach: I would ensure that every eligible SC and ST voter, especially in remote hamlets, is enrolled and has a nearby polling station. Voter awareness drives under the Election Commission’s SVEEP programme can be targeted at these communities. Accurate rolls and high turnout give the elected member a stronger mandate. My role is neutral, so I would focus on access and awareness, not on any candidate or party.

1.6 Amit Shah to Chair Odisha–Chhattisgarh Meeting on Mahanadi Dispute as States Shift to Direct Talks

THE NEWS Bhubaneswar. Union Home Minister Amit Shah will preside over a meeting on October 1 to discuss the resolution of the Mahanadi river water-sharing dispute between Odisha and Chhattisgarh, with the Chief Ministers of both States expected to present their positions, Odisha's Advocate General Pitambar Acharya said on Monday, September 28, The Hindu reports. The paper spells his first name "Pitamabar". "Apart from the Chief Ministers, Chief Secretaries and Chief Engineers of Water Resources Department of both States will be present at the meeting," Mr. Acharya said. The meeting, he said, is expected to build confidence and trust between the two States so that a final resolution can be achieved and accepted. It follows a high-level meeting chaired by Union Jal Shakti Minister C.R. Patil on July 30. For a decade, both States have been asserting their rights over the Mahanadi. Engineers from both States have met several times on technical issues and submitted their reports to the Central Water Commission (CWC), which Mr. Acharya described as the apex body on technical and administrative matters of river water management in the country. The CWC will submit its report to the Mahanadi Water Disputes Tribunal, headed by former Supreme Court judge Justice Bela M. Trivedi. A tribunal of this kind is a quasi-judicial body set up by the Centre under a special law to decide how the waters of an inter-State river are shared. Mr. Acharya pointed out that court battles have often failed to provide a long-standing resolution to river water disputes. "After Bharatiya Janata Party came to power in Odisha, we informed the tribunal that both States should be given opportunity to sit together and talk directly on the contentious issues. The tribunal agreed," he said. He said the resolution that emerges from both political and technical negotiations could be the best result, and "there could be a regulatory body for Mahanadi" that decides water-sharing, though "the tribunal will take the final decision". According to the Odisha government, Chhattisgarh has built more than 500 anicuts and 30 barrages on the Mahanadi after 2010. An anicut is a small masonry weir built across a river to raise the water level and divert it into canals; a barrage is a larger gated structure that does the same. The previous Naveen Patnaik-led government in Odisha had demanded that this upstream construction be halted and sought a definitive water-sharing formula, arguing that Odisha is critically dependent on the river. The shift is significant: the same party now governs both States and the Centre, and Odisha has moved from litigation to negotiation. The syllabus link is GS2 on federalism, inter-State relations and dispute-redressal mechanisms, and GS1/GS3 on the distribution and management of water resources.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

The Mahanadi rises in Chhattisgarh and flows into Odisha, whose Hirakud dam and delta depend on its flow → Chhattisgarh builds more than 500 anicuts and 30 barrages upstream after 2010 → Odisha protests and seeks a tribunal, which the Centre constitutes under the 1956 Act → years of adjudication without a settlement → with the same party in power in both States, Odisha asks the tribunal to allow direct talks → the Jal Shakti Minister meets the States on July 30 and the Home Minister will chair talks on October 1

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. Article 262 lets Parliament take river water disputes out of the courts** — Article 262(1) empowers Parliament to provide by law for the adjudication of any dispute or complaint about the use, distribution or control of the waters of any inter-State river or river valley. Article 262(2) allows Parliament to provide that neither the Supreme Court nor any other court shall exercise jurisdiction over such a dispute. Water is a State subject under Entry 17 of the State List, but that entry is made subject to Entry 56 of the Union List. Entry 56 allows the Union to regulate and develop inter-State rivers and river valleys to the extent Parliament declares by law to be expedient in the public interest.
- 2. The Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956 sets up tribunals on a State's request** — Under the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956, a State government can request the Centre to refer a water dispute to a tribunal. Under Section 4, the Centre must constitute a tribunal if it is of the opinion that the dispute cannot be settled by negotiations. The tribunal's decision, once published in the Official Gazette, is final and binding on the parties. Section 11 bars the Supreme Court and other courts from exercising jurisdiction over a dispute that can be referred to a tribunal, though the Supreme Court can still hear appeals by special leave against a tribunal's final award. The River Boards Act, 1956, passed at the same time to create advisory river boards, has never been used to set up a board.

	3. The Central Water Commission is the technical arm of the Union on water — The Central Water Commission is the apex technical organisation in water resources, functioning under the Ministry of Jal Shakti. It appraises irrigation, flood control and multipurpose projects, collects hydrological data and advises on inter-State matters. In water disputes, it is often asked to verify the data submitted by States, such as flow measurements and utilisation figures, which is why its report will go to the Mahanadi tribunal. It does not have the power to decide disputes, which rests with the tribunal. 4. Other disputes show how tribunals and courts have shaped water-sharing — The Cauvery Water Disputes Tribunal gave its final award in 2007, and in February 2018 the Supreme Court modified it, increasing Karnataka's share and directing a scheme for implementation, which led to the Cauvery Water Management Authority. The Krishna and Godavari Water Disputes Tribunals set allocations among the southern States, and the Krishna dispute was reopened after the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh. These cases show that awards take years or decades and often need a separate authority to implement them. The Mahanadi tribunal, set up after Odisha's complaint, is one of several such bodies now functioning.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. Inter-State water disputes are a staple of GS2 federalism questions — UPSC has asked why inter-State water disputes take so long to resolve and how effective the tribunal system has been. The Mahanadi case, where negotiation is now being tried alongside adjudication, is a good contemporary example for answers on cooperative federalism and alternative dispute resolution. 2. Prelims asks about Articles, lists and the geography of rivers — Questions have tested Article 262, the entries on water in the Union and State Lists, and the States through which rivers flow. The origin of the Mahanadi in Chhattisgarh, the Hirakud dam in Odisha, and the list of functioning tribunals are natural Prelims material. 3. Water governance links GS1 geography with GS3 resource management — Rivers are also studied in GS1 as physical geography and in GS3 as a resource under stress. A question on water scarcity or irrigation efficiency can use the Mahanadi to show how upstream storage affects downstream agriculture and hydropower.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	- Under Article 262 of the Constitution, Parliament may by law provide for adjudication of inter-State river water disputes and exclude the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court and other courts over them. - Water is an entry in the State List (Entry 17), subject to Entry 56 of the Union List, which covers regulation and development of inter-State rivers and river valleys. - The Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956 empowers the Central government to constitute a tribunal when a State requests it and the dispute cannot be settled by negotiation. - The River Boards Act, 1956 provides for advisory boards for inter-State rivers but no board has been constituted under it. - The Mahanadi river rises in Chhattisgarh and flows through Odisha into the Bay of Bengal; the Hirakud dam is built on it in Odisha. - The Central Water Commission is the apex technical body on water resources and functions under the Ministry of Jal Shakti. - Zonal Councils are statutory bodies set up under the States Reorganisation Act, 1956, and the Union Home Minister is the chairman of each Zonal Council.
ANALYSIS	1. Political alignment is doing what the tribunal could not — For a decade the dispute was fought as Odisha against Chhattisgarh, with different parties in power and every

construction upstream treated as a hostile act. Now the same party governs both States and the Centre, and Odisha itself has asked the tribunal to allow direct talks. That creates room for give-and-take, since leaders in both capitals can defend a compromise as a joint achievement. The risk is that a settlement produced by political alignment may not survive a change of government in either State. Any agreement therefore needs to be written into the tribunal's final order or a statutory body, so it is not merely a party deal.

- 2. The Home Minister's role signals that water is treated as a law-and-order and federal issue** — Water disputes normally sit with the Jal Shakti Ministry, which held the July 30 meeting. Bringing in the Home Minister raises the political level and draws on his role in managing Centre-State relations, which he performs through the Zonal Councils. Odisha and Chhattisgarh, however, belong to different Zonal Councils — Eastern and Central — so this meeting is an ad hoc forum rather than a statutory one. That flexibility is useful, but it also shows the lack of a standing mechanism for inter-State river disputes. The Inter-State Council under Article 263 exists for such coordination, but meets rarely.
- 3. Data, not law, is the real bottleneck in river disputes** — Most water disputes turn on questions of fact: how much water flows in dry and wet years, how much each State uses, and how much upstream structures reduce downstream flow. That is why engineers' reports are going to the CWC before the tribunal. States often contest each other's data, and tribunals spend years reconciling it. A basin-level data system, open to both States and verified by the CWC, would shorten future disputes more than any change in the law. A "regulatory body for Mahanadi", as Mr. Acharya suggested, would work only if it has access to real-time flow data.
- 4. A negotiated settlement must protect downstream interests explicitly** — Odisha's case rests on its dependence on the river for the Hirakud reservoir, irrigation and drinking water, and on the fear that upstream anicuts and barrages reduce lean-season flow. Chhattisgarh argues it has a right to use water that rises in its territory for its own farmers and industry. International and Indian practice both favour equitable utilisation, where each State gets a fair share and no State causes significant harm to another. A good settlement would fix minimum lean-season releases, data-sharing and joint operation of structures, rather than a single annual volume. Without such guarantees, the downstream State bears the risk.
- 5. The case strengthens the argument for a permanent tribunal and time limits** — Tribunals under the 1956 Act have taken years, sometimes decades, and have needed extensions. A proposal to replace them with a single permanent tribunal with benches and fixed timelines has been discussed for years. The Mahanadi experience, where direct talks were needed to break a deadlock, suggests that any reform should also build in a mandatory negotiation stage before adjudication. The counter-view is that a permanent tribunal may not solve the underlying problem of political will, which is what finally moved this dispute.

POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION

"Inter-State river water disputes in India are better resolved through negotiation than adjudication." Critically examine this statement with reference to the Mahanadi water dispute. Suggest institutional reforms for faster resolution. (15 marks, 250 words)

MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION

- 1. Introduction** — State that Union Home Minister Amit Shah will chair a meeting of the Chief Ministers of Odisha and Chhattisgarh on October 1 on the Mahanadi dispute, after Odisha asked the Mahanadi Water Disputes Tribunal to allow direct talks.
- 2. Body — the legal framework** — Explain Article 262, Entry 17 of the State List and Entry 56 of the Union List, the Inter-State River Water Disputes Act, 1956, the bar on courts, the River Boards Act, 1956 and the CWC's role. Mention the Cauvery 2018 judgment as

an example of long adjudication.

- 3. Body — merits of negotiation** — Argue that negotiated settlements carry political ownership, can include flexible arrangements such as lean-season releases and data-sharing, and avoid decades of litigation. Use Odisha's shift and the July 30 and October 1 meetings as evidence.
- 4. Body — limits of negotiation** — Note that negotiations depend on political alignment, may leave the weaker downstream State exposed, and need legal backing. Tribunals remain necessary as a final arbiter, as Mr. Acharya himself said.
- 5. Conclusion** — Recommend a mandatory negotiation stage, a basin authority with real-time data, a permanent tribunal with time limits and a more active Inter-State Council, concluding that negotiation and adjudication should complement each other.

ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH

Q1. You are the Water Resources Secretary of Odisha preparing for the October 1 meeting. What would your brief contain?

Approach: I would list Odisha's core needs: guaranteed lean-season flows at the State border, protection of the Hirakud reservoir's storage and assured drinking water for downstream towns. I would include verified data on flows before and after the upstream structures, as submitted to the CWC. I would suggest a joint monitoring mechanism and a Mahanadi regulatory body as the outcome. The brief would also identify areas where Odisha can be flexible, so that the meeting produces agreement and not just restated positions.

Q2. As a District Collector in a downstream district, farmers complain that water in canals has reduced. How do you respond?

Approach: I would first get measured data from the irrigation department on canal releases and reservoir levels, to separate the effect of rainfall from upstream use. I would hold meetings with water user associations to explain the situation and plan crop choices for the season. I would push for better canal maintenance and water-saving methods, which are within the district's control. Inter-State issues I would report to the State government with evidence, not handle through public statements.

Q3. An interview board asks: should water be moved from the State List to the Union List?

Approach: Moving water entirely to the Union List would centralise a resource closely tied to local farming, drinking water and livelihoods, which States manage better. The existing design already allows Parliament to regulate inter-State rivers under Entry 56 of the Union List, though it has used this power sparingly. A better course is to use existing Union powers for basin-level authorities and data systems while leaving local water management to States. So I would argue for stronger cooperative institutions rather than a change in the lists.

2. Economy

Today's economy pages are about who pays, and whether the rules allow it. The Supreme Court wants the Centre to name the legal character of a charge on UPI payments; the auditor finds Odisha's mineral districts spending money under a category the rules never created; households are lending the government more through small savings just as the bond market demands a higher price for everyone else's money. Behind all of it sits an oil shock whose true cost is higher than the headline price, and a factory boom that is real but flattered by last year's weak base.

2.1 Supreme Court Refuses to Stay 0.4% UPI Charge, Asks the Centre What Its Legal Character Is

THE NEWS New Delhi. The Supreme Court on Monday, September 28, refused to stay the Centre's decision to levy a merchant discount rate (MDR) of 0.4% on person-to-merchant (P2M) UPI payments above ₹2,000 from October 15, 2026, but asked the government to explain the legal basis of the charge. The court challenge is new since our 19 September card on the charge's design. The MDR is the fee a merchant pays, as a share of each payment, to the banks, payment aggregators and network that move the money; a P2M payment goes to a shop or business, unlike a transfer between two individuals. A three-judge Bench of Chief Justice of India Surya Kant and Justices Joymalya Bagchi and V. Mohana issued notice to the Union, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) and the National Payments Corporation of India (NPCI) on a public interest petition by advocate Anjan Datta against the Finance Ministry's September 14, 2026 gazette notification, and gave four weeks for counter affidavits, The Hindu reports. The papers report Justice Bagchi's question in slightly different words; The Economic Times has: "Is it tax or a fee? If not a fee, what is the executive basis for making this expropriation? What is the service?" Additional Solicitor General N. Venkataraman replied, "It is neither a tax nor a fee," and "it is not an expropriation." He said 96% of people using the gateway are exempted; among the remaining 4%, essential services are capped at ₹5, and any payment above ₹75,000 is capped at ₹300, "whether it's Rs 1 crore or 10 crore or 100 crore" (The Indian Express). The charge is a settlement fee between payment aggregators and banks, card payments already carry charges, and the government is not taking "a single rupee", he said; "It's not a statutory collection... The NPCI, the nodal body, facilitates." Person-to-person UPI stays free. The court called it "less of a legal and more of a technical issue", said it was examining only the "legal incidence", and cited Section 269SU of the Income Tax Act, 1961, which requires merchants above a threshold turnover to offer electronic payment modes. If that section permits such transfers, it asked, "what is the character of the receipt", and in whose hands does it amount to "income"? The petition also challenges the amended Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007, for giving the Executive unguided power to decide which modes get no-charge protection, noting that RuPay debit cards keep it without a monetary ceiling. The petitioner argued businesses may pass the cost to consumers and that cash and black money would return; the Bench declined a stay. Syllabus: GS3 digital payments and resource mobilisation; GS2 limits of executive power.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Section 269SU and Section 10A (2019) bar charges on prescribed digital modes, making UPI free for merchants → volumes explode while banks and apps bear the running cost of the rails → Finance Ministry notifies a 0.4% MDR on P2M payments above ₹2,000 on September 14, 2026 → a PIL attacks the charge as an expropriation without authority of law and Section 10A as excessive delegation → Supreme Court refuses a stay but demands, on affidavit, the legal character of the charge

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The MDR is a price for a payment service, paid by the merchant, not the customer —** When a customer pays a shop digitally, the money passes through the customer's bank, the merchant's bank (the acquirer), often a payment aggregator or app, and the network that routes the message. The merchant discount rate is the percentage of the payment that the merchant gives up to pay these parties. On cards it has long been charged; on UPI and RuPay debit cards it was set at zero by law for prescribed businesses. An MDR is therefore not a government levy in the ordinary sense, which is exactly why the court is asking what legal character it has once a government notification switches it on.
- 2. The Payment and Settlement Systems Act makes the RBI the regulator and NPCI an authorised operator —** The Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007 designates the Reserve Bank of India as the authority to regulate and supervise payment systems, and

no one may run a payment system without the RBI's authorisation under the Act. The National Payments Corporation of India is a not-for-profit company promoted by the RBI and the Indian Banks' Association; it operates UPI, RuPay, IMPS and other retail systems as an authorised operator, and is not itself a regulator. Section 10A, inserted in 2019, bars banks and system providers from imposing any charge for the electronic modes prescribed under Section 269SU of the Income-tax Act, 1961 (carried into Section 187 of the Income-tax Act, 2025 from April 2026). The provision requires businesses above a turnover threshold to provide those prescribed modes to customers.

3. **Article 265 forbids any tax without authority of law, and a fee must carry a quid pro quo** — Article 265 says no tax shall be levied or collected except by authority of law, which means a statute passed by a legislature, not an executive order alone. In *Commissioner, Hindu Religious Endowments v. Sri Lakshmindra Thirtha Swamiar of Sri Shirur Mutt* (1954), the Supreme Court distinguished a tax, a compulsory exaction for general public purposes with no promise of a specific return, from a fee, which is charged for a special service rendered to the payer and carries an element of quid pro quo. Article 110(2) reflects the same distinction: a Bill is not a Money Bill merely because it provides for fees for licences or services rendered. This is why the court asked "What is the service?"; if the charge is neither tax nor fee, the government must show it is a private contractual price that a statute allows.
4. **Delegated power is valid only if the parent law lays down a policy, and its use must not be arbitrary** — Parliament may delegate rule-making to the Executive, but it cannot hand over its essential legislative function; the parent Act must lay down the policy and guidelines within which the delegate acts, a principle traced to *In re Delhi Laws Act* (1951). A delegation without guidance is struck down as excessive delegation. Separately, since *E.P. Royappa v. State of Tamil Nadu* (1974), arbitrariness is treated as the antithesis of equality under Article 14, so even valid delegated power must be exercised on reasoned, non-discriminatory grounds. The petition's attack on Section 10A, and its complaint that RuPay debit cards keep zero-charge protection while large UPI payments lose it, rests on these two doctrines.

WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)

1. **GS3 asks how India's digital public infrastructure will be paid for** — The syllabus lists inclusive growth, mobilisation of resources and the effects of policy on the common citizen. Mains questions on digital payments have moved from celebrating adoption to asking about sustainability, cyber-fraud and the economics of zero-cost rails. The MDR case lets an answer show both the economic question of who funds UPI and the legal question of how a charge may be imposed.
2. **Prelims tests institutions and the constitutional vocabulary of levies** — Digital-payments questions have typically asked who operates UPI and RuPay, and who regulates payment systems. The tax-fee-cess distinction, Article 265 and the Money Bill definition under Article 110 are standard Polity material. This case ties both sets together, which is the kind of overlap examiners like.
3. **GS2 on separation of powers and delegated legislation** — Whether the Executive can decide by notification which payment modes get statutory protection is a clean example of the excessive-delegation question, useful in answers on parliamentary control of delegated legislation and judicial review of economic policy.

PRELIMS NUGGETS

- Article 265 of the Constitution provides that no tax shall be levied or collected except by authority of law.
- The Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007 designates the Reserve Bank of India as the authority to regulate and supervise payment systems in India.

- The National Payments Corporation of India is a not-for-profit company promoted by the Reserve Bank of India and the Indian Banks' Association; it operates UPI and RuPay but is not a regulator.
- Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007 bars banks and system providers from imposing charges for electronic payment modes prescribed under Section 269SU of the Income-tax Act, 1961 (now Section 187 of the Income-tax Act, 2025).
- The merchant discount rate is paid by the merchant receiving the payment, not by the customer making it.
- In the Shirur Mutt case (1954), the Supreme Court held that a fee, unlike a tax, is charged for a special service rendered and carries an element of quid pro quo.
- Under Article 110(2), a Bill is not deemed a Money Bill merely because it provides for fees for licences or fees for services rendered.

ANALYSIS

- 1. The Centre's best legal answer is also its most awkward one** — By calling the MDR “neither a tax nor a fee”, the ASG places it outside Article 265: if it is a private price between merchants, aggregators and banks, no taxing statute is needed. But a purely private price would not normally need a gazette notification. What the notification really does is lift, for payments above ₹2,000, a statutory ban on charging that Section 10A imposed. The honest legal question is therefore not whether the government is taxing, but whether the Executive may selectively withdraw a protection Parliament created. That is why the challenge to Section 10A is the stronger half of the petition.
- 2. The RuPay asymmetry is where Article 14 bites** — The petitioner points out that RuPay debit cards keep no-charge protection without any monetary ceiling, while UPI payments above ₹2,000 lose it. Two digital modes serving the same merchant are thus treated differently, and the state must give a reason. A plausible reason exists: RuPay is a domestic card network the state wishes to promote, and card and UPI economics differ. The weakness is that the parent section gives no stated criteria for such choices, and courts now expect delegated power to come with reasons on record. The Centre's affidavit will succeed or fail on whether it can articulate that policy.
- 3. “96% exempt” is a count of people, not of money** — The ASG said 96% of users are exempted. That is true by number, but the charge was designed to fall where the value is, on large payments to merchants. A merchant receiving a few big payments a day bears most of the cost, and the 19 September reports showed merchants already splitting bills into ₹2,000 pieces. The figure is persuasive in court but tells us little about the burden on traders, which is the petition's real grievance. A fairer statistic for the affidavit would be the share of P2M value, not users, that attracts the charge.
- 4. Someone has always paid for UPI; the question is who** — Zero MDR never meant zero cost. Banks and apps absorbed the cost of running the rails, and the Centre has in recent years paid banks incentives for low-value UPI and RuPay transactions from the Budget. The choice is between the taxpayer, the banks and the merchant. Charging only large merchant payments is defensible, because those users benefit most and can bear a fee. The counter-view is that a free, universal payment rail is a public good like a road, and that small frictions can push informal businesses back to cash, reversing gains in formalisation and tax visibility.
- 5. The court's “income” question has consequences beyond this case** — By asking in whose hands the charge amounts to income, the Bench is testing whether the government can distance itself from a receipt that exists only because of its notification. If the charge is income of banks and aggregators, the Centre's position holds. If the court sees it as a compulsory exaction enabled by the state, Article 265 comes back into play. The answer will shape how India funds other digital public

	infrastructure, from account aggregators to open commerce networks.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	“If it is not a tax or a fee, what is it?” In the light of the Supreme Court’s question on the 0.4% merchant discount rate on UPI payments, discuss the constitutional limits on the Executive’s power to impose charges, and suggest a sustainable model for financing India’s digital payments infrastructure. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — State the facts: a Finance Ministry notification of September 14, 2026 imposes a 0.4% MDR on P2M UPI payments above ₹2,000 from October 15, capped at ₹300 above ₹75,000 and ₹5 for essential services; the Supreme Court refused a stay but sought the legal basis on affidavit. 2. Body — constitutional limits — Explain Article 265, the tax-fee distinction from <i>Shirur Mutt</i> (1954) and the quid pro quo test, the excessive-delegation doctrine, and Article 14 arbitrariness. Apply them to the Centre’s claim that the MDR is a private settlement fee and to the challenge against Section 10A and the RuPay exemption. 3. Body — economics — Show that zero MDR shifted costs to banks and the Budget; weigh the case for charging high-value merchant payments against the risks of bill-splitting, cost pass-through to consumers and a return to cash. 4. Body — a sustainable model — Suggest a statutory framework with criteria for any charge, value-based rather than per-user thresholds, transparent publication of P2M value affected, a sunset review, and targeted budget support for small merchants. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that the charge may be economically sound, but its legitimacy depends on Parliament, not a notification, setting the principles; digital public infrastructure needs a funding model that is lawful, reasoned and reviewable.
ADMINISTRATOR’S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are a Joint Secretary in the Finance Ministry drafting the affidavit. What must it contain? Approach: It must state the statutory source of the notification, the policy reasons for the ₹2,000 threshold and the caps, and why RuPay debit cards are treated differently. It should show who receives the money and in what proportion, with data on the share of P2M value affected, not only the share of users. It should also set out the consultation held and a plan for review. An affidavit that simply repeats that the charge is “neither tax nor fee” will not satisfy a court asking for the source of legal incidence. Q2. As a District Collector, you receive complaints that pharmacies and hospitals are refusing UPI for bills above ₹2,000. What do you do? Approach: I would first check the facts, because the ASG told the court that essential services are capped at ₹5, so such refusals may rest on a misunderstanding. I would hold a meeting with chemists’ associations, hospitals and the lead district manager of banks to explain the rules. Where a business insists on cash to avoid a record, I would ask the tax and drug-control authorities to examine it. Public notices at hospitals on patients’ right to pay digitally would help. Q3. An interview board asks: should UPI remain free forever? Approach: UPI has been India’s most successful piece of public digital infrastructure, and its zero cost was central to that success. But a system that carries a large share of the country’s retail payments has real running costs and fraud-prevention needs, and someone must fund them. I would keep small payments and person-to-person transfers free permanently, and allow a modest, capped charge on high-value merchant payments under clear statutory rules. The worst outcome would be a free system that is underfunded and therefore less secure.

2.2 Industrial Output Grows 8% in August on the New 2022-23 Base, but Consumer Non-Durables Lag

THE NEWS New Delhi. India's industrial production grew 8% year-on-year in August 2026, up from 7.4% in July, according to Index of Industrial Production (IIP) data released on Monday, September 28, by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI). The IIP measures the volume of output of factories, mines and utilities against a base year; this is the fifth monthly release on the revised 2022-23 base. The Economic Times reports, and industrial output had grown 4.7% in August 2025. Manufacturing, which accounts for 76.1% of the index, grew 9%, up from 8.2% in July; MoSPI said the sector recorded growth of 8% or more for the last three consecutive months. Eighteen of 23 industry groups expanded, led by electrical equipment (30.9%), motor vehicles, trailers and semi-trailers (25.2%) and other transport equipment (25.3%). Electricity and gas supply rose 12.3%, from 8.7% in July; electricity generation grew 13.3% but gas supply contracted 2.4%, which Devendra Pant of India Ratings said underlined "the continued impact of the West Asia crisis". Mining and quarrying, over a tenth of the index, shrank 5.6%, though minerals including rare earths grew 5%, said Madan Sabnavis of Bank of Baroda. Water supply, sewerage and waste management rose 6.3%. By use, capital goods grew 16.9% (19% in July) and intermediate goods 13.7% (10.4%). The weak spot, The Indian Express reports, is consumption: consumer durables such as appliances and vehicles rose 11.1% after 12% in July, but non-durables, mainly fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) like soap and packaged food, grew only 2.1%. Rajani Sinha of CareEdge Ratings called "the feeble performance of consumer non-durables" concerning. Part of the strength is a base effect: growth is measured against August 2025, when, says ICRA's Rahul Agrawal, firms cut inventories ahead of GST rate cuts announced in early September 2025, so the comparison month was low. Compared with July, output actually fell: overall by 1.8% and manufacturing by 1.4%; mining fell 9.2%, usual in the monsoon, and only electricity and gas improved, by 0.3%. IIP growth averaged 7.7% in July-August against 6.2% in the first quarter (ET) and 6.7% in April-August against 4.2% a year earlier (IE); June's 8.8% was the highest since March 2024. With April-June GDP growth at 7.8%, Sabnavis said India could grow 7-8% this year. The IE notes household purchases are increasingly on credit: bank personal loans rose 16.2% and non-bank personal loans 21.4% by end-July. Syllabus: GS3 on growth, industry and the measurement of the economy.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

GST rate cuts announced in early September 2025 → firms run down inventories in August 2025, depressing that month's output → MoSPI shifts the IIP to a 2022-23 base with new weights → August 2026 output grows 8% on a low base, led by capital goods, electrical equipment and vehicles → but non-durables grow only 2.1% and output falls month-on-month, raising doubts about mass consumption as the festival season, a weak monsoon and the oil shock arrive

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The IIP is a volume index compiled monthly by the National Statistics Office** — The Index of Industrial Production is compiled and released by the National Statistics Office (NSO) under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. It is a fixed-base volume index built on the Laspeyres formula, which means output in each month is compared with a base year using that base year's weights. It tracks the physical quantity of production of a basket of items, not their value, so it shows short-term movements in industrial activity. Because it is a year-on-year comparison, a weak month a year earlier can inflate growth, which is called a base effect.
- 2. Base-year revision updates weights and the item basket to reflect today's economy** — Over time new products appear, old ones fade and the relative size of industries changes, so an index based on an old year misrepresents the economy. A base revision updates the basket of items, the sample of factories and the weight of each industry. The previous series used 2011-12 as base; the new series uses 2022-23, aligning industrial statistics with other revised macro data. On the new base, manufacturing carries 76.1% of the index, and the index now reports four sectors: mining and quarrying, manufacturing, electricity and gas supply, and water supply, sewerage and waste management.
- 3. Use-based classification shows where the output goes** — Besides the sectoral classification, the IIP groups output by end use into primary goods, capital goods, intermediate goods, infrastructure or construction goods, consumer durables and consumer non-durables. Capital goods such as machinery signal investment;

	intermediate goods such as components signal future production; consumer durables such as appliances and vehicles reflect discretionary spending; and non-durables such as food, soap and medicines reflect everyday mass consumption. Reading the use-based numbers together tells whether growth is investment-led or consumption-led, and whose consumption. 4. The eight core industries are a separate index with a large weight in the IIP — The Index of Eight Core Industries covers coal, crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilisers, steel, cement and electricity, and is compiled by the Office of the Economic Adviser in the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade (DPIIT). On the 2011-12 base these industries together carried about 40% of the weight of items in the IIP, with refinery products the largest. Because the core index is released earlier, it is used as an early indicator of the IIP. The IIP also differs from manufacturing gross value added (GVA) in the national accounts: the IIP measures volume of gross output, largely from organised units, while GVA measures value added after inputs, so the two can diverge.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS3 asks about growth, its quality and its measurement — The syllabus covers growth and development and the Indian economy's planning and mobilisation of resources. Questions have repeatedly asked whether growth is jobs-rich and consumption-broad. The contrast between 11.1% growth in durables and 2.1% in non-durables is data a candidate can use to discuss an uneven, or K-shaped, recovery. 2. Prelims tests who compiles which index — UPSC has a habit of testing which body compiles an index: the IIP by the NSO under MoSPI, the core index by the Office of the Economic Adviser in DPIIT, CPI by the NSO, and WPI by the Office of the Economic Adviser. Base-year changes, the eight core industries and use-based categories are natural questions this year. 3. Statistical reform is itself a syllabus theme — With the GDP, CPI and IIP series being rebased, questions on the credibility and timeliness of official statistics have become more likely in both GS3 and the Essay paper.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	• The Index of Industrial Production is compiled and released by the National Statistics Office under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. • The IIP is a fixed-base volume index that measures changes in the quantity of industrial production, not its value. • The use-based classification of the IIP groups output into primary, capital, intermediate, infrastructure or construction, consumer durable and consumer non-durable goods. • The Index of Eight Core Industries is compiled by the Office of the Economic Adviser in the Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade. • The eight core industries are coal, crude oil, natural gas, refinery products, fertilisers, steel, cement and electricity. • The revised IIP series uses 2022-23 as its base year, with manufacturing carrying the largest weight in the index. • A base effect arises when a year-on-year growth rate is raised or lowered by an unusually low or high value in the same period of the previous year.
ANALYSIS	1. 8% is real but flattered, and the month-on-month fall matters — The headline is strong, and growth has been broad, with 18 of 23 industry groups expanding. But ICRA explains that August 2025 was depressed by inventory cuts before the GST rate changes, so this August is measured against a low base. The month-on-month figures are the check: overall output fell 1.8% and manufacturing 1.4% from July. Part of that

is monsoon seasonality, especially in mining. The fair reading is that industry is growing well, but the momentum is not accelerating as the 8% suggests.

- 2. The consumption split tells us whose demand is strong —** Durables grew 11.1% while non-durables grew 2.1%. Durables are bought by better-off households and increasingly on credit, with bank personal loans up 16.2% and non-bank personal loans up 21.4%. Non-durables are what every household buys every week. Weak growth there, with a weak monsoon and rising prices, points to strain in rural and lower-income budgets. A recovery led by credit-funded purchases of the well-off is less durable than one led by rising wages, and more exposed if interest rates rise, which the markets now expect.
- 3. Capital and intermediate goods suggest an investment cycle, with a caution —** Capital goods grew 16.9% and intermediate goods 13.7%, and electrical equipment grew 30.9%. This fits an economy investing in power, grids and vehicles, and India Ratings points to domestic and export demand for electrical goods. The caution is that capital goods growth slowed from 19% in July, and the oil shock is raising input costs and interest rates, which can make firms defer investment. If private capex is to carry growth, it will need steady demand from the non-durables side too.
- 4. The energy shock is already visible inside the index —** Gas supply contracted 2.4% and gas-based generation fell even as electricity generation grew 13.3% on renewable and non-renewable sources. That is the West Asia war in the data: expensive, scarce LNG pushes utilities away from gas. It also shows the value of renewable capacity as an energy-security hedge. The downside is that gas-dependent industries such as fertilisers and city gas face costlier inputs, which will show up in later months.
- 5. A new base needs time before it earns trust —** This is only the fifth release on the 2022-23 base, and the Indian Express text even prints last August's growth confusingly, which shows how easy it is to misread new series. Revisions in the first year are normal, and comparisons with the old series are not like-for-like. Policymakers should read the IIP with GST collections, electricity demand and credit data rather than alone. The strength of the new series is that its weights reflect today's economy, with manufacturing at 76.1%, which makes it a better guide once a full year of data is available.

POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION

"High-frequency indicators suggest strong industrial growth, but its composition points to an uneven recovery." Examine this statement with reference to the latest Index of Industrial Production data, and discuss what policy measures can broaden the base of consumption demand. (15 marks, 250 words)

MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION

- 1. Introduction —** Give the August 2026 IIP: 8% growth on the new 2022-23 base, manufacturing up 9%, capital goods 16.9%, consumer durables 11.1%, non-durables only 2.1%.
- 2. Body — strength —** Show breadth (18 of 23 groups), manufacturing at 8% or more for three months, strong capital and intermediate goods, and growth averaging 6.7% in April-August against 4.2% a year earlier.
- 3. Body — unevenness —** Explain the base effect from August 2025 inventory cuts, the month-on-month fall, the durables-non-durables gap, credit-funded consumption, and energy-driven weakness in gas supply and mining.
- 4. Body — policy —** Suggest measures for mass demand: rural employment and wage support in a weak-monsoon year, food price management, passing on GST rate cuts, MSME credit and labour-intensive manufacturing; also better statistics through a stable new base.

	5. Conclusion — Conclude that sustained growth needs mass consumption and private investment to move together, and that policymakers should read the composition of growth, not only the headline.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. As an Economic Adviser in the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, how would you brief the Minister on this IIP release? Approach: I would present the 8% headline with its two qualifiers: the favourable base from August 2025 and the month-on-month decline. I would highlight the strong sectors, electrical equipment and vehicles, and the weak ones, non-durables, gas and mining. I would recommend watching the festival season, fuel costs and credit conditions over the next two releases before drawing firm conclusions. A Minister who overclaims on a flattered number loses credibility when the base normalises.
	Q2. As a District Collector in a district with many small food-processing and FMCG units, what can you do about weak non-durables output? Approach: I would meet the units through the District Industries Centre to find whether the problem is demand, input costs or credit. Where credit is the issue, I would push banks through the district consultative committee to clear working-capital applications. I would connect units to government procurement such as nutrition schemes where rules allow, and to export promotion channels. Local data on unit closures and employment would go to the State government as an early warning.
	Q3. An interview board asks: why does India keep changing base years? Does it not make data less comparable? Approach: Base years must change because the economy changes; an index weighted to an old year overstates declining industries and misses new ones. The cost is a break in comparability, which statisticians handle by publishing linking factors and back series. The real risk is not revision but poor communication, which invites suspicion. Regular, pre-announced revisions with clear documentation are what give an index credibility.

2.3 Small-Savings Inflows Jump 56% as the 10-Year Bond Yield Hits a Two-Year High of 7.19%

THE NEWS New Delhi and Mumbai. Net collections in small savings schemes such as the Public Provident Fund (PPF), Sukanya Samriddhi Yojana and senior citizens' schemes are set to exceed the 2026-27 budgeted target of ₹3.59 lakh crore by a fair margin, The Economic Times reports. Deposits and certificates under the National Small Savings Fund (NSSF), the account into which these savings flow, stood at ₹1.54 lakh crore in April-July 2026, against ₹98,259 crore a year earlier, a rise of 56%; the four-month inflow is already about 43% of the full-year target. Much of such saving usually comes in the March quarter with year-end tax planning. In 2025-26 the government budgeted ₹3.06 lakh crore, revised it to ₹3.42 lakh crore, and actual collections beat the revised estimate by more than ₹1 lakh crore; the FY27 target is about 5% above last year's revised estimate. The Centre has budgeted ₹3.87 lakh crore of net financing through small savings this year, and net NSSF financing stood at ₹1.16 lakh crore in April-July. A senior official said demand for "predictable, government-backed returns" was unaffected by large retail participation in equities. Rates for the July-September quarter range from 6.9% on one-year deposits to 8.2% on the Senior Citizens' Savings Scheme and Sukanya Samriddhi, with PPF at 7.1% and National Savings Certificate at 7.7%. Last Friday's card covered the cut in gross market borrowing to ₹15.99 lakh crore from ₹17.2 lakh crore; today's reports show where part of the financing is coming from, and what the bond market thinks. The 10-year benchmark government bond yield closed at 7.19% on Monday, up from 7.12%, its highest since April 2024, despite the lower borrowing, ET reports; dealers expect 7.25%, some 7.50% if oil stays high. "The market has completely ignored the issuance calendar and has focused on oil," a trader at a large public sector bank said. The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) sold ₹25,000 crore of bonds through an open market operation (OMO) — banks offered ₹67,655 crore — to reduce liquidity that had ballooned after FCNR(B) deposit inflows; banking system liquidity fell to ₹4.39 lakh crore from ₹11 lakh crore earlier this month, and a ₹2 lakh crore variable rate reverse repo (VRRR) auction was due on Tuesday. The Indian Express puts US 10-year yields above 5.2%, the highest since 2004; ET says they touched 5.23%, the highest since 2007. The rupee

settled at 95.98 to the dollar. An IE editorial notes the US Fed's recent rate hike and says the RBI's Monetary Policy Committee meets next week amid expectations of a hike. Syllabus: GS3 on government borrowing, household savings and monetary policy.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

West Asia war lifts oil and inflation expectations; the US Fed hikes and global yields climb → FCNR(B) inflows swell rupee liquidity, which the RBI drains through OMO sales and VRRR → the 10-year G-sec yield hits 7.19%, a two-year high, even as the Centre cuts gross borrowing → households, seeking safe fixed returns, pour 56% more into small savings → the NSSF finances a larger share of the fiscal deficit at administered rates

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The National Small Savings Fund sits in the Public Account and lends to the government** — The National Small Savings Fund was set up in 1999 in the Public Account of India, the account under Article 266(2) that holds money the government receives as a banker or trustee rather than as its own revenue. All collections under small savings schemes are credited to it and all withdrawals and interest are paid from it. The net balance is invested mainly in special securities of the Central government, and has also been lent to public entities. Because the Centre borrows these funds, net NSSF financing is one of the sources that finance the fiscal deficit, alongside market borrowing through dated securities and Treasury bills.
- 2. Small-savings rates are administered, reset quarterly on a market-linked formula** — Following the recommendations of a committee headed by former RBI Deputy Governor Shyamala Gopinath, small-savings rates were linked to yields on government securities of similar maturity plus a small spread, which is larger for schemes for senior citizens and the girl child. The Finance Ministry resets the rates every quarter. In practice the government has discretion and has at times left rates unchanged when the formula pointed elsewhere, so the rates are market-linked in principle but administered in practice. The schemes now rest on the Government Savings Promotion Act, 1873, into which earlier separate laws for savings certificates and PPF were merged.
- 3. OMO sales and VRRR both drain liquidity, one permanently and one temporarily** — Liquidity means the spare rupee funds banks hold beyond their needs. In an open market operation, the RBI buys or sells government securities outright; when it sells, banks pay rupees to the RBI, so liquidity is withdrawn permanently. In a variable rate reverse repo, the RBI borrows money from banks for a fixed short period against securities, at a rate discovered in an auction, and returns it at maturity, so the absorption is temporary. Both are tools under the RBI's liquidity management framework, whose corridor runs between the Standing Deposit Facility rate at the floor and the Marginal Standing Facility rate at the ceiling, with the policy repo rate in between.
- 4. Bond prices and yields move in opposite directions** — A bond pays a fixed coupon. If market interest rates rise, older bonds with lower coupons become less attractive, so their price falls until the return to a new buyer, the yield, matches the market. Rising yields therefore mean falling bond prices and losses for banks holding bonds. The 10-year government bond yield is the benchmark for long-term borrowing costs in the economy, affecting State government loans, corporate bonds and home-loan pricing. Expectations of higher inflation or of policy rate hikes push yields up even when government borrowing falls.

WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)

- 1. GS3 lists mobilisation of resources and government budgeting** — Questions on how the fiscal deficit is financed, on the role of the NSSF and on crowding out have appeared across years. The contrast between falling gross borrowing and rising yields is an ideal example of why the market reacts to inflation and global rates, not only to supply of bonds.

	2. Prelims regularly tests liquidity instruments and fund locations — UPSC has asked about repo, reverse repo, MSF, OMO and the effects of each on money supply, and about what lies in the Consolidated Fund versus the Public Account. The NSSF in the Public Account and the direction of liquidity under OMO sales and VRRR are exactly this kind of question. 3. Household savings is a live Mains theme — The shift of household savings between bank deposits, equities and small savings, and the fall in net household financial savings, has been discussed in Economic Surveys; this story adds evidence that safe government-backed instruments remain popular.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The National Small Savings Fund was established in 1999 and is maintained in the Public Account of India. ● Net collections under small savings schemes are a source of financing of the Central government's fiscal deficit. ● Interest rates on small savings schemes are notified by the Ministry of Finance and reset every quarter. ● An open market operation sale of government securities by the RBI absorbs liquidity from the banking system. ● In a variable rate reverse repo auction, the RBI borrows funds from banks for a fixed period, temporarily absorbing liquidity. ● The price of a bond and its yield move in opposite directions. ● Money held by the government as a banker or trustee, such as small savings deposits and provident funds, is credited to the Public Account under Article 266(2).
ANALYSIS	1. Small savings are becoming the cheaper source for the Centre as market yields rise — With the 10-year yield at 7.19% and PPF paying 7.1%, the gap between administered and market rates has narrowed or reversed for some schemes. That makes the 56% jump in inflows convenient for the Centre, which can finance more of its deficit without adding bonds to a nervous market. But small savings are not free: they carry long-term interest liabilities, tax benefits on some schemes, and are hard to reduce in a hurry. Leaning on them shifts financing from a market that disciplines government to households that do not. 2. The quarterly reset is now a political test — The formula ties small-savings rates to government bond yields. With yields at a two-year high, the formula argues against cutting rates and perhaps for raising some. The government, which is financing more through the NSSF, has an interest in keeping rates steady, and it has discretion. Holding rates while market yields rise would quietly reduce savers' real returns as inflation rises. A transparent application of the formula would protect the credibility of the scheme and of the government as a borrower. 3. Households moving to small savings can squeeze bank deposits — Money that goes to the NSSF leaves bank deposits. At a time when the RBI is draining liquidity and credit demand for personal loans is strong, banks may have to raise deposit rates to compete. That transmits tighter conditions to borrowers even before the MPC acts. The counter-view is that the NSSF's money flows back into the economy through government spending, so the effect is on its composition, not on total liquidity. 4. The RBI has chosen the rupee and inflation over the bond market — Selling ₹25,000 crore of bonds when yields are already rising adds to the upward pressure on yields. The RBI did it anyway, because surplus rupee liquidity from FCNR(B) inflows can fund speculation against a rupee near 96 to the dollar and feed inflation. That the offer was

	₹67,655 crore, more than two and a half times the amount, shows banks were willing to park surplus funds. The price is costlier borrowing for States and companies, and the MPC meeting next week will decide whether this becomes a policy rate hike. 5. Cutting borrowing did not buy lower yields, which says something about fiscal credibility — The Centre reduced gross borrowing and the share of 10-year paper, yet yields rose. Traders say the market is watching oil, not the calendar. This shows that in a global shock, domestic supply management can only do so much; yields respond to inflation expectations and to US yields that are at their highest in nearly two decades. It also warns that if the oil shock forces fuel subsidies or tax cuts, the fiscal numbers may slip and yields could rise further.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	Small savings have emerged as a significant source of financing the Central government's fiscal deficit. Discuss the advantages and risks of this reliance, especially at a time of rising market yields and tightening liquidity. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Cite the news: net small-savings inflows up 56% in April-July 2026 to ₹1.54 lakh crore, a budgeted ₹3.87 lakh crore of net small-savings financing in FY27, while the 10-year G-sec yield hits 7.19%. 2. Body — how the NSSF finances the deficit — Explain the NSSF in the Public Account, investment in special Central securities, and its place among deficit-financing sources alongside market borrowing and Treasury bills; the rate-setting formula and quarterly reset. 3. Body — advantages — Stable, long-term funding from households; reduced bond supply when markets are volatile; financial inclusion and safe returns for savers and senior citizens. 4. Body — risks — Administered rates may be sticky; long-term interest liabilities; weaker market discipline on fiscal policy; competition with bank deposits during liquidity tightening; the temptation to keep rates below the formula. 5. Conclusion — Argue for strict application of the rate formula, transparent reporting of NSSF liabilities in the Budget, and a financing mix that keeps the government accountable to the market.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are in the Budget Division. The formula suggests raising some small-savings rates next quarter. What do you advise? Approach: I would present the formula outcome and the cost to the exchequer of each option. I would note that inflows are already strong, so a rise is not needed to attract money, but that ignoring the formula when it favours savers damages trust. My advice would be to apply the formula faithfully, perhaps prioritising schemes for senior citizens and girls, and to publish the calculation. Credibility with small savers is a long-term asset for the government. Q2. As a Deputy Governor handling market operations, a bank complains that OMO sales are pushing up yields and causing it losses. How do you respond? Approach: I would explain that liquidity management aims at price and currency stability, not at protecting bond portfolios. Banks were not forced to buy; they offered more than two and a half times the amount on sale. The RBI communicates its liquidity stance so that banks can manage interest-rate risk, and banks are expected to hedge and to follow valuation norms. I would, however, listen for signs of market stress, because disorderly bond markets are themselves a stability risk. Q3. An interview board asks: why do Indian households still prefer post office schemes when equity markets have done well?

Approach: For many households, especially retirees, women and rural savers, safety and predictability matter more than higher but uncertain returns. Post office schemes carry a sovereign guarantee, fixed rates and in some cases tax benefits, and are available close to home. This year's fall in equity markets reinforces that preference. The policy task is not to steer them into risky assets, but to make sure the safe option pays a fair, inflation-aware return.

2.4 CAG Finds Odisha's Mineral Foundations Spent ₹2,578.73 Crore Under a Category the Rules Never Created

THE NEWS Bhubaneswar. The Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) has found irregularities in how District Mineral Foundation (DMF) funds, meant for people and areas affected by mining, were spent in Odisha, The Hindu reports. A DMF is a trust set up in each mining district, financed by contributions from mining lease holders, to spend on the welfare of affected communities. The CAG's performance audit, on the "Implementation of Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana, including the functioning of District Mineral Foundations in Odisha for the year ended March 2024", said mineral-bearing districts had delayed identifying the people directly and indirectly affected by mining. Directly affected areas are those where mining happens; indirectly affected areas are those that suffer its economic, social or environmental consequences. Under rule 10(D) of the Odisha DMF Rules, 2015, not more than 40% of DMF funds may be used in indirectly affected areas. "Amount utilised for indirectly affected areas has increased beyond the stipulated limit to 45.68% in DMF, Keonjhar and 41.10% in DMF, Sundargarh," the CAG said. It also reported that in Keonjhar and Sundargarh, 30.67% and 22.67% of the sanctioned amounts were shown as spent under a new category called "common affected areas", and 19.86% of Jajpur's DMF funds were spent under it. In the three DMFs of Jajpur, Keonjhar and Sundargarh, ₹4,541.66 crore was sanctioned for 1,114 projects in "common affected areas", of which ₹2,578.73 crore was utilised "without any provision in the rules". "This indicated that the creation of the new category was only to accommodate ineligible utilisation within the prescribed limits," the report said. The same day, as our 25 September card on the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act, 2026 anticipated, Biju Janata Dal (BJD) president Naveen Patnaik led a demonstration before the State Assembly, the party's first protest on such a scale since the BJP ended its 24-year rule in 2024, The Indian Express reports. The protest targets a clause barring mineral-bearing States from taxing mining lease holders, though the Supreme Court in July 2024 had empowered them to levy such taxes and collect arrears from April 2005. Parties estimate a loss of ₹1 lakh crore in arrears and ₹12,000 crore a year; the State government is yet to assess the impact. Mr. Patnaik said the Bill was passed "without any discussion", asked why Odisha's 20 BJP Lok Sabha MPs stayed silent, and said his two letters to Chief Minister Mohan Charan Majhi went unanswered. BJD leaders plan to stop mineral transport from mines; the INDIA bloc called a demonstration for September 29. Syllabus: GS2 federalism and accountability; GS3 mining and inclusive growth.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Mining displaces and pollutes, but its revenue flows to governments, not to affected villages → the MMDR Amendment Act, 2015 creates District Mineral Foundations funded by miners, and PMKKKY sets priorities → Odisha's rules cap spending in indirectly affected areas at 40% → districts create an unrecognised "common affected areas" category and route ₹2,578.73 crore through it → the CAG flags ineligible use, even as Odisha's parties fight the Centre over the State's power to tax minerals

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The 2015 amendment to the MMDR Act created District Mineral Foundations** — The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957 was amended in 2015 to move mineral concessions to auction and to add Section 9B, which requires the State government to establish a District Mineral Foundation, as a non-profit trust, in every district affected by mining operations. Its object is to work for the interest and benefit of persons and areas affected by mining. Lease holders pay the DMF an amount linked to royalty, with a higher share for older leases than for auctioned ones. The same amendment added Section 9C, creating the National Mineral Exploration Trust, funded by lease holders, to finance mineral exploration.
- 2. PMKKKY sets national priorities for how DMF money should be spent** — The Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana was launched by the Ministry of Mines in 2015 to

	guide the use of DMF funds, and its guidelines were revised in 2024. It divides spending into high-priority areas, such as drinking water, health, education, sanitation, the welfare of women, children, the aged and disabled, and skill development, and other priorities such as physical infrastructure and irrigation, with most of the money reserved for high-priority areas. It also distinguishes directly affected areas, where mining operations take place, from indirectly affected areas, which bear the economic, social and environmental fallout, and reserves the larger share for the former. States frame their own DMF rules within this framework, as Odisha did in 2015. 3. The CAG audits Union and State accounts and reports to the legislature — Articles 148 to 151 of the Constitution provide for the Comptroller and Auditor General, appointed by the President and removable only like a Supreme Court judge. His duties and powers are set out in the Comptroller and Auditor General's (Duties, Powers and Conditions of Service) Act, 1971. Under Article 151, reports on a State's accounts are submitted to the Governor, who causes them to be laid before the State legislature, where the Public Accounts Committee examines them. A performance audit goes beyond checking whether money was spent legally and asks whether it achieved its purpose with economy, efficiency and effectiveness. 4. Mining areas are often Fifth Schedule areas, and the Supreme Court has separated royalty from tax — Much of Odisha's mineral belt lies in Scheduled Areas under the Fifth Schedule, where the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA) gives gram sabhas a role in approving development plans and in consultation before land acquisition. In Orissa Mining Corporation v. Ministry of Environment and Forests (2013), the Niyamgiri case, the Supreme Court left the decision on bauxite mining to local gram sabhas. In Mineral Area Development Authority v. Steel Authority of India (2024), a nine-judge Bench held by 8:1 that royalty is not a tax and that States have the power to tax mineral rights and mineral-bearing land, which the 2026 amendment now restricts.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS2 and GS3 meet in mining governance — The syllabus covers the role of the CAG, Centre-State financial relations, the welfare of vulnerable sections and inclusive growth. Mains questions have asked about displacement, benefit-sharing with tribal communities and the resource curse. The DMF audit gives hard numbers on how benefit-sharing is actually working. 2. Prelims tests provisions of the MMDR Act and the CAG — Questions on constitutional bodies routinely test Articles 148-151, and the MMDR framework — DMF, NMET, auctions — is standard material after the 2015 reforms. The 2024 royalty judgment and the 2026 amendment make this a likely area. 3. Ethics and governance questions on accountability — GS4 case studies often involve funds spent outside their purpose to meet targets. Creating a new category to hide excess spending is a textbook example of rule-bending that an administrator must recognise.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● Section 9B of the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, 1957, inserted in 2015, provides for a District Mineral Foundation in every district affected by mining operations. ● Section 9C of the MMDR Act, 1957 provides for the National Mineral Exploration Trust. ● The Pradhan Mantri Khanij Kshetra Kalyan Yojana is implemented through District Mineral Foundations using funds contributed by mining lease holders. ● Articles 148 to 151 of the Constitution deal with the Comptroller and Auditor General of India.

	● Under Article 151(2), the CAG's reports relating to a State's accounts are submitted to the Governor, who causes them to be laid before the State legislature. ● In Mineral Area Development Authority v. Steel Authority of India (2024), a nine-judge Bench of the Supreme Court held by 8:1 that royalty is not a tax. ● The Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 gives gram sabhas in Fifth Schedule areas a role in approving plans and in consultation before land acquisition.
ANALYSIS	1. Renaming spending is a way of defeating a ring-fence — The 40% cap on indirectly affected areas exists to make sure the villages that bear the dust, blasting and lost land get most of the money. By creating "common affected areas", district bodies could fund projects that did not qualify for either category while keeping the reported shares within limits. The CAG's phrase, "only to accommodate ineligible utilisation", is unusually direct. The design lesson is that a limit without a closed list of categories invites creative accounting. 2. DMF money is tempting as a substitute for the State budget — DMF funds are large in districts like Keonjhar, Sundargarh and Jajpur, and are controlled by district administrations. That makes them an easy source for roads, buildings and schemes that the State's own budget should pay for, spread thinly over wider areas. The affected village then competes with the district headquarters for its own compensation. Unless spending is tied to plans made with affected gram sabhas, DMFs risk becoming a second district budget rather than a benefit-sharing fund. 3. Odisha's case against the Centre is weakened by how it spends the money it has — The BJD's protest is about the State's right to tax minerals, which the Supreme Court upheld in 2024 and the 2026 amendment restricts. The federal argument is strong: minerals are a State's natural capital, and the arrears at stake are large. But the same week, the auditor shows that mineral money already given for local benefit was misdirected. A State that wants more fiscal autonomy strengthens its case by showing it can account for what it has. The counter-view is fair too: the audit concerns district trusts, not the State's tax revenue, and misuse at one level does not justify curbing powers at another. 4. Delayed identification of beneficiaries is the root failure — The CAG found that districts delayed identifying people directly and indirectly affected by mining. Without that list, every other rule is hard to enforce, because no one can say whether a project served the intended people. Identification is also where tribal and landless households are most easily left out. The fix is a published, village-wise list of affected areas and persons, updated as mines open and close, and verified by gram sabhas. 5. Audits matter only if the legislature acts on them — A CAG report becomes accountability only when the Public Accounts Committee examines it and the government files action-taken notes. Odisha's politics is now focused on mineral revenue, which gives all parties an incentive to take up the report. Recoveries, disciplinary action where rules were knowingly bent, and a rule change closing the loophole would show that the audit worked. Otherwise the pattern of reports gathering dust will repeat.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	District Mineral Foundations were created to share the benefits of mining with affected communities. In the light of recent audit findings, critically examine their functioning and suggest reforms to make them accountable to the people they are meant to serve. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE	1. Introduction — Introduce DMFs under Section 9B of the MMDR Act (2015) and

MAINS QUESTION

PMKKKY, and cite the CAG audit of Odisha for the year ended March 2024.

2. **Body — findings** — Give the numbers: indirectly affected area spending at 45.68% in Keonjhar and 41.10% in Sundargarh against a 40% cap; a “common affected areas” category with ₹2,578.73 crore utilised without provision in the rules; delays in identifying beneficiaries.
3. **Body — structural causes** — District-level control with weak community voice, substitution of State budget responsibilities, open-ended categories, and weak monitoring; link to PESA and Fifth Schedule rights.
4. **Body — reforms** — Closed categories with hard caps, village-wise beneficiary lists, gram sabha approval of plans, social audits, public dashboards of DMF spending, and time-bound PAC follow-up on CAG reports.
5. **Conclusion** — Link to the wider federal debate on mineral revenue: benefit-sharing is credible only if both the State and districts can show where mineral money goes.

ADMINISTRATOR'S
BRAINSTORM — Q &
APPROACH

Q1. You are the new Collector of Keonjhar and chair of its DMF. The CAG report has just come out. What are your first steps?

Approach: I would order a list of all projects booked under “common affected areas” and classify each as eligible, correctable or ineligible under the rules. Ongoing ineligible projects would be paused and reported to the State government. I would start the delayed identification of affected villages and persons, with gram sabha verification, and publish it. I would also put the DMF’s sanctions and expenditure on a public website so that villagers can see what is spent in their name.

Q2. As a Secretary in the State’s Steel and Mines Department, how would you close the loophole?

Approach: I would amend the State DMF rules to list permitted categories exhaustively and to state that any spending outside them is ineligible. The share for directly affected areas should be a floor, not a target, and tracked quarterly. Annual plans would need approval by affected gram sabhas in Scheduled Areas, and an independent social audit each year. I would also require the DMF to report to the PAC’s follow-up in a fixed time.

Q3. An interview board asks: is the BJD right that the new mining law hurts Odisha, and does the CAG report weaken its case?

Approach: The concern is legitimate: the Supreme Court recognised States’ power to tax minerals, and a law restricting it affects a mineral-rich State’s finances; but the State itself has not yet assessed the loss, so the figures are estimates. The CAG report concerns district trusts, not the State’s tax power, so it does not answer the federal question. It does remind every government that claims to mineral revenue rest on showing that affected communities benefit. Both debates point to the same principle: mineral wealth belongs to the people of the area, and every level of government must account for it.

2.5 West Asia War’s Bill for India: Crude Above \$108, Russian Imports at Five-Month Low, Diesel Rationed

THE NEWS New Delhi, Kolkata and Mumbai. U.S. President Donald Trump on Saturday rejected Iran’s proposal to end the war and reopen the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow sea passage that, The Hindu notes, carried about a fifth of the world’s oil and gas. The papers describe the plan differently: The Indian Express and The Hindu’s news report call it a seven-day proposal, while a Hindu editorial calls it seven-point. Per an IE explainer, it asked the U.S. to waive sanctions on Iranian oil, release about \$12 billion of frozen assets and end its naval blockade, and Israel to stop its war in Lebanon, after which Iran would open Hormuz on Day 7. Mr. Trump told Axios he expected more talks this week; Qatari mediators were to meet Iran’s Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in New York. Brent futures rose \$3.98 to \$108.30 a barrel early on Monday before

easing to \$105.13, Reuters reported in The Economic Times. But refiners pay more than the headline. Between September 1 and 22, spot Brent, the price of actual cargoes in the physical market, averaged about \$12 a barrel above November Brent futures, contracts for future delivery used mainly for hedging; the gap reached \$22 on September 15, per US Energy Information Administration data, ET reports. Suppliers are demanding premiums of up to \$20 because Gulf supplies remain constrained. India's Russian crude imports fell to about 1.75 million barrels a day (mbpd) in September, the lowest since April's 1.58 mbpd, from 2.02 mbpd in August and 2.65 mbpd in July; Kpler put it at 1.74 mbpd and linked the fall to U.S. pressure. Iraq's supply rose to 575,000 barrels a day from 163,000 and Saudi Arabia's to 566,000 from 347,000, while the UAE's fell to 480,000 from 546,000. Total imports averaged about 5.3 mbpd. A U.S. law signed on September 18, the Sanctioning Russia and Iran Act, authorises tariffs of up to 100% on specified major buyers of Russian oil; ET says new duties take effect on October 18. Private retailers are rationing: Jio-bp has capped diesel at 50 litres per customer a day and Nayara Energy at 70 to 200 litres, as bulk buyers turn to cheaper pump fuel. Petroleum Minister Hardeep Singh Puri said in Kolkata, "we have insulated ourselves from the turbulence," while calling the situation challenging, and that India has "more than eighty plus days" of storage capacity. The Sensex fell 1,124.02 points to 72,771.72 and the rupee settled at 95.98 to the dollar; foreign portfolio investors pulled about \$2.1-2.2 billion from equities in September, IE reports. Syllabus: GS3 energy security and external sector; GS2 effect of policies of other countries on India.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

U.S.-Iran war and rival blockades choke the Strait of Hormuz → Gulf supply tightens and physical crude trades up to \$22 above futures → U.S. sanctions law pushes Indian refiners away from Russian barrels towards costlier Gulf crude → higher import bill widens the current account deficit, FPIs sell and the rupee falls to about 96 per dollar → frozen pump prices create a gap between retail and bulk diesel, private pumps ration, and inflation pressure points the RBI towards a rate hike

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb are the two chokepoints of India's energy lifeline** — The Strait of Hormuz lies between Iran to the north and Oman's Musandam peninsula to the south, connecting the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Almost all crude and LNG exported from Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and much of Saudi Arabia and the UAE must pass through it. The Bab el-Mandeb strait, between Yemen and Djibouti and Eritrea, links the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and is the route to the Suez Canal. A threat to either raises freight, insurance and crude prices for India, which buys a large share of its crude from West Asia.
- India's strategic petroleum reserve is small, and most of its cover is commercial stock** — Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited, a special purpose vehicle under the Oil Industry Development Board of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, has built underground rock caverns at Visakhapatnam, Mangaluru and Padur with a combined capacity of about 5.33 million tonnes of crude. This covers only a small number of days of national consumption. The larger figure ministers cite, such as the "more than 80 days" Mr. Puri mentioned, combines strategic reserves with refinery and marketing company stocks, which are working inventory and cannot all be drawn down in a crisis. India is an association country of the International Energy Agency, whose full members must hold stocks equal to 90 days of net imports.
- Spot, futures and the price cap explain what India actually pays** — A futures contract is an agreement to buy a standard quantity at a set price on a future date; most traders use it to hedge or speculate, not to take delivery. The spot or physical price is what refiners pay for real cargoes, and it includes grade differentials and premiums. When supply is tight, spot can trade far above futures, as now. Russian crude has been subject since December 2022 to a price cap set by the G7, the EU and Australia, which bars Western shipping and insurance services for Russian oil sold above the cap; OPEC+, the alliance of OPEC with Russia and other producers formed in 2016, manages supply through production quotas.
- Petrol and diesel prices are deregulated in law, which is why frozen prices create distortions** — The government deregulated petrol prices in June 2010 and diesel prices in October 2014, allowing oil marketing companies to set prices according to

	international costs, and daily revision began in 2017. In practice, public sector companies have held retail prices unchanged during the current price surge. Bulk or industrial diesel is sold at market-linked prices, so when retail prices are frozen below cost, bulk buyers such as factories and transporters buy at retail pumps instead. Private retailers, who bear the full cost without government backing, then ration sales to limit losses, as Jio-bp and Nayara have done.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS3 on energy security and the external sector — The syllabus covers infrastructure including energy, and the effects of liberalisation and external shocks. Mains questions have asked about India's energy security, strategic reserves and diversification of crude sources. The current shock provides rare, precise evidence: the spot-futures gap, the shift from Russian to Gulf supply, and fuel rationing. 2. GS2 asks about the effect of other countries' policies on India — The U.S. sanctions law on buyers of Russian oil and the U.S.–Iran negotiations directly shape India's import choices. UPSC has asked about India's balancing act between the U.S., Russia and Iran; this story adds the economic cost of that balance. 3. Prelims loves maritime chokepoints and reserve locations — Map-based questions on straits and the locations of strategic petroleum reserves are recurring. Examiners also test the difference between deregulation dates of petrol and diesel and the institutional home of ISPRL.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	• The Strait of Hormuz lies between Iran and Oman and connects the Persian Gulf with the Gulf of Oman. • The Bab el-Mandeb strait connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and lies between Yemen on one side and Djibouti and Eritrea on the other. • India's strategic crude oil reserves have been built by Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited at Visakhapatnam, Mangaluru and Padur. • Indian Strategic Petroleum Reserves Limited is a special purpose vehicle under the Oil Industry Development Board, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas. • Petrol prices were deregulated in India in 2010 and diesel prices in 2014. • The price cap on Russian seaborne crude oil was introduced by the G7, the European Union and Australia in December 2022. • OPEC+ is the grouping of OPEC members with other oil producers, including Russia, that coordinates production since 2016.
ANALYSIS	1. The headline price understates India's real oil bill — News reports quote Brent futures at about \$108, but Indian refiners buy physical cargoes that averaged \$12 more, with premiums up to \$20. Because September purchases are priced on October-loading averages, the high costs will show up in the import bill with a lag. The current account deficit, oil marketing company losses and inflation estimates built on futures prices will therefore be too optimistic. Policymakers should plan on the physical price, not the screen price. 2. Diversifying away from Russia has raised dependence on the Gulf just when the Gulf is least reliable — Under U.S. pressure and ahead of the October 18 tariff threat, Indian refiners cut Russian crude from 2.65 mbpd in July to 1.75 mbpd in September and bought more from Iraq and Saudi Arabia. That reduces sanctions risk but concentrates supply in the region whose exit route is contested. It is also costlier, because Russian barrels were discounted. The counter-view is that a 100% tariff on Indian exports would cost far more than the discount saved, so the shift is a rational hedge. The lesson is that India needs more supply options outside both regions.

	3. Frozen pump prices protect consumers but create a dual market that someone must pay for — Holding retail prices steady shields households from a sudden shock, which is defensible early in a crisis. But when retail diesel is cheaper than bulk diesel, factories and transporters crowd pumps, public sector companies bear larger losses, and private companies ration. The cost does not disappear; it moves to the oil companies' balance sheets and eventually to the Budget. A calibrated, announced pass-through, with targeted support for farmers and public transport, would reduce the distortion. 4. The oil shock is now a macroeconomic shock — A falling rupee near 96 to the dollar, foreign investors withdrawing about \$2 billion from equities in September, bond yields at a two-year high and expectations of a rate hike all trace back to oil. India, as the third-largest crude importer, imports inflation through fuel, freight and fertiliser. The RBI can defend the rupee and raise rates, but that slows growth just as industrial output is strong. The policy mix needs fiscal action on fuel taxes and energy efficiency as well as monetary action. 5. "Eighty days" is reassuring but not the same as a strategic buffer — Mr. Puri's figure combines strategic caverns with refinery and marketing stocks. Commercial stocks keep refineries running; they cannot all be released in an emergency without disrupting supply. India's dedicated strategic reserve is small compared with IEA members' obligations. The crisis is a reason to complete planned reserve expansion and to use low-price periods to fill caverns, as a buffer is cheapest when it is bought before it is needed.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	The West Asia conflict has exposed the vulnerabilities in India's energy security. Examine the channels through which an oil price shock affects the Indian economy, and suggest a strategy to reduce India's exposure to such shocks. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Open with the facts: Brent futures near \$108, physical crude averaging \$12 above futures, Russian imports at a five-month low, and private pumps rationing diesel. 2. Body — channels of impact — Explain the import bill and current account deficit, rupee depreciation and FPI outflows, imported inflation and monetary tightening, fiscal and oil company losses from frozen prices, and supply disruption at chokepoints. 3. Body — geopolitics — Discuss the U.S. sanctions law on buyers of Russian oil, the shift to Gulf crude, and the Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb risks; weigh diversification against concentration. 4. Body — strategy — Expand strategic reserves and fill them at low prices; diversify suppliers beyond West Asia and Russia; long-term contracts; rational fuel pricing with targeted subsidies; electrification of transport, biofuels and renewables; efficient use in industry. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that energy security for an importer is built in calm years, through reserves, diversity and demand reduction, not improvised in a crisis.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. As a District Supply Officer, pumps in your district report bulk buyers draining diesel stocks. What do you do? Approach: I would first map stock positions at all outlets with the oil companies' field officers to find where shortages are real. I would ensure priority supply to farmers during the sowing season, public transport, hospitals and emergency services. Where bulk buyers are diverting retail diesel for industrial use in violation of norms, I would act under the applicable supply orders. Clear public communication about stocks would prevent panic buying, which turns a price problem into a shortage.

Q2. As a Joint Secretary in the Petroleum Ministry, how would you advise on the pricing of fuels now?

Approach: I would present the losses of oil companies, the distortion between bulk and retail diesel, and the inflation impact of any increase. I would recommend a staggered, announced increase combined with a temporary cut in excise duty to share the burden between the Centre, companies and consumers. Targeted support for vulnerable users is better than a blanket freeze. I would also propose using the crisis to fast-track reserve filling once prices ease.

Q3. An interview board asks: should India keep buying Russian oil despite the U.S. law?

Approach: India's first duty is to secure affordable energy for its people, and Russian crude has been cheaper. But a 100% tariff on Indian exports would hurt jobs and exporters far more than the discount helps. The sensible course is to preserve the option, reduce volumes where the sanctions risk is high, diversify to other suppliers, and negotiate with Washington. Strategic autonomy means keeping choices open, not taking every risk at once.

3. Agriculture & Food

Both stories today are about food that India grows and then fails to deliver. One slips away before sowing, because a dry August and September leave fields too parched for rabi and push pulse prices up by double digits. The other is lost after harvest, in mandis, cold stores and kitchens that nobody measures well. A country that plans drought relief taluka by taluka but counts household waste almost not at all is managing only half its food problem.

3.1 Pulse Prices Jump Up to 10% in a Month as Drought Threatens Rabi Sowing

THE NEWS Pune and New Delhi. Pulse prices are climbing even though the government has acted to cool cooking oil and sugar, The Economic Times reports; new since the 28 September card are price data, the Centre's rabi plan and a ground report from a drought-declared taluka. Wholesale data from the India Pulses and Grains Association (IPGA), the trade body, show chana, the most consumed pulse, up 11% in a month (ex-Delhi) and 5.5% in a week; tur, the second most consumed, up 6.5% and 2.4%; moong up 10.6% and 4.3%; and matar (dry peas) up 6% and 3%. Year on year, chana is up 23%, urad 24% and matar 47%, while masur and moong rose only 2% and 4%. IPGA secretary Satish Upadhyay blamed worries over rabi sowing because of moisture stress, lower chana supply from Australia, costlier yellow peas (a chana substitute) as Russian supplies shrink because of its war with Ukraine, and festive demand. Traders say El Niño's impact became clear in the last month as Karnataka and Maharashtra declared drought across large areas. El Niño is the periodic warming of the eastern Pacific that tends to weaken India's monsoon. At the National Agriculture Conference – Rabi Campaign 2026 on Monday, Agriculture Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan asked States and districts to check irrigation availability and soil moisture before finalising crop plans, with water-stressed areas prioritising less thirsty pulses and oilseeds to cut import dependence. He said the deficit was not severe enough to hit water availability nationally, but flagged drought in Maharashtra and Karnataka, where central teams will assess the ground. The Indian Express reports from Sakri in Dhule district, one of 265 of Maharashtra's 358 talukas declared drought-affected last week, covering 32 of 36 districts. The State got 798.2 mm of rain between June 1 and September 26 against a normal of 970.9 mm, an 18% deficit. Sakri's total was near average, but had no rain on 67 of 102 days to September 11, including a 22-day dry spell. The declaration under the Drought Management Code uses a trigger of at least 21 consecutive days without significant rain and brings a land-revenue waiver, crop-loan restructuring and a stay on loan recovery; crop compensation waits for panchnamas (field inspection reports). Most Sakri farmers are Bhil, Kokna, Gamit, Naikda and Pardhi tribespeople who have tilled forest land for generations with individual forest-rights claims pending; a 2019 Government Resolution promised relief to such claimants, but they say Sakri got none. In The Hindu, historian Priyambada Jayakumar, marking M.S. Swaminathan's death anniversary, argues that his National Commission on Farmers treated distress as an income problem, not a yield problem. The syllabus link is GS3 on cropping patterns, MSP and food security, and GS1 on drought.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

El Niño weakens the monsoon and August–September turn dry after a hopeful June → kharif pulses and coarse grains wilt and soil moisture for rabi collapses → Maharashtra declares 265 talukas and Karnataka large areas drought-hit → traders price in a smaller chana crop, costlier imports from Australia and Russia, and festive demand → pulse prices rise up to 10% in a month → the Centre asks States to plan rabi by water availability and push pulses and oilseeds

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. Drought is declared by States under a national manual, and the trigger is a combination of indicators, not rainfall alone** — The Ministry of Agriculture's Manual for Drought Management, first issued in 2016 and revised later, sets out how a drought is assessed and declared. It uses mandatory rainfall indicators, such as the deviation from normal rainfall and prolonged dry spells, followed by impact indicators covering crop sowing, satellite-based vegetation health, soil moisture and hydrology such as reservoir and groundwater levels. The State government declares drought, usually by taluka or block, and classifies it as moderate or severe after field verification. Maharashtra's own Drought Management Code applies these principles, which is why the Sakri report speaks of a 21-day dry-spell trigger followed by panchnamas.
- 2. Drought relief is financed through the disaster response funds under the Disaster Management Act, 2005** — The Disaster Management Act, 2005 provides for a State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) in every State under Section 48 and a National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) under Section 46. Drought is a notified disaster for which relief

	is paid from the SDRF according to norms fixed by the Ministry of Home Affairs, with the Centre contributing the larger share of the SDRF. For a drought of severe nature, a State submits a memorandum and an Inter-Ministerial Central Team visits to assess damage before additional money is released from the NDRF. The central teams Mr. Chouhan mentioned belong to this assessment process. 3. Minimum Support Price and PM-AASHA are the instruments meant to make pulses worth growing — The Minimum Support Price (MSP) is announced by the Union government on the recommendation of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) for 22 mandated crops, including the major pulses; it has no statutory backing. The Pradhan Mantri Annadata Aay Sanrakshana Abhiyan (PM-AASHA), launched in 2018, has three parts: the Price Support Scheme for physical procurement of pulses, oilseeds and copra, the Price Deficiency Payment Scheme that pays farmers the gap between MSP and market price, and a Private Procurement and Stockist pilot. The Price Stabilisation Fund, run by the Department of Consumer Affairs, finances a buffer stock of pulses that is released into the market when prices spike. Together they are meant to protect farmers when prices fall and consumers when prices rise. 4. The National Commission on Farmers redefined farm policy around income, not output — The National Commission on Farmers was constituted in 2004 under Prof. M.S. Swaminathan and submitted five reports, the last in 2006, together with a draft National Policy for Farmers. Its best-known recommendation was that the MSP should be at least 50% more than the weighted average cost of production, commonly read as the comprehensive C2 cost plus 50%. It also recommended land reform, water-use efficiency, cheaper institutional credit, a crop-insurance system that covers the whole country and a knowledge connectivity network for farmers. The Commission's central insight, as the Hindu op-ed stresses, was that farmers' incomes and livelihood security should be the test of agricultural policy.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS3 asks directly about cropping patterns, MSP and the economics of pulses — The GS3 syllabus lists major crops and cropping patterns, irrigation, MSP and public distribution, and food security. UPSC has repeatedly asked why India remains an importer of pulses and edible oils despite self-sufficiency missions, and how MSP distorts crop choice. The Rabi Campaign 2026 instruction to shift water-stressed areas to pulses and oilseeds is a live example for any answer on crop diversification. 2. Drought management is tested in GS3 disaster management and in GS1 geography — Questions have asked about the difference between meteorological, hydrological and agricultural drought, and about drought-prone area management. The Sakri case, where total rainfall was near average but a 22-day dry spell destroyed crops, shows why agricultural drought is about the timing of rain, not only its quantity. Prelims has asked about El Niño and the Indian Ocean Dipole, so the monsoon mechanism behind the prices is fair game. 3. Tribal land rights and relief access link the story to GS2 welfare of vulnerable sections — The Forest Rights Act, 2006 and the question of whether cultivators with pending claims can receive crop compensation connect agriculture to GS2 on the protection of vulnerable sections. Anthropology and Sociology optionals ask about tribal land alienation and agrarian vulnerability, and this report is a precise case study.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● Under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, the National Disaster Response Fund is constituted under Section 46 and the State Disaster Response Fund under Section 48. ● Drought is declared by the State government, based on indicators set out in the Manual for Drought Management issued by the Union Ministry of Agriculture

and Farmers Welfare.

- The Minimum Support Price is announced by the Union government on the recommendation of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices and does not have statutory backing.
- PM-AASHA (2018) comprises the Price Support Scheme, the Price Deficiency Payment Scheme and the Private Procurement and Stockist Scheme.
- The Price Stabilisation Fund, which finances a buffer stock of pulses, is administered by the Department of Consumer Affairs.
- The National Commission on Farmers (2004–06) was chaired by M.S. Swaminathan and recommended that MSP be at least 50% more than the weighted average cost of production.
- Under the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, the Gram Sabha is the authority that initiates the process of determining individual and community forest rights.

ANALYSIS

- 1. The price data show a supply shock that imports can no longer easily cover** — The sharpest year-on-year rise is in matar, 47%, and matar is mostly an imported pulse used as a cheap substitute for chana. When the substitute becomes expensive because Russian supply has shrunk, and Australian chana is also short, the usual safety valve of cheap imports stops working. That is why an editorial on 28 September urged duty-free imports. The counter-view is that cutting duties now would help consumers but signal to farmers, just before rabi sowing, that the government will not let prices stay high, which weakens the very incentive Mr. Chouhan wants them to respond to.
- 2. Advising farmers to switch to pulses is sensible, but advice without price assurance rarely moves sowing** — Pulses need less water than wheat or paddy and fix nitrogen in the soil, so the Rabi Campaign's logic is agronomically sound. But farmers choose crops by the certainty of returns, and wheat and paddy have assured procurement at MSP while pulse procurement under PM-AASHA is limited and uneven across States. A farmer in a water-stressed district will switch only if he believes the government will buy chana or masur at MSP when the harvest comes in and prices fall. The test of the campaign is therefore procurement in March and April, not advisories in September.
- 3. Sakri shows that drought declaration captures timing better than it once did, but relief still depends on paper** — Sakri received near-average seasonal rain and would have escaped a declaration based only on total rainfall; the dry-spell trigger is what brought it in. This is a real improvement in drought assessment. Yet the tribal farmers there till forest land with individual forest-rights claims pending, and without a title their losses may not be recorded in panchnamas or linked to land records. A declaration that reaches the taluka but not the cultivator reproduces the gap the Swaminathan Commission warned about, where policy is judged by coverage on paper rather than by income protected.
- 4. The Swaminathan op-ed explains why each drought becomes a debt crisis** — About 86% of farmers own less than two hectares and around half of farmed land relies entirely on rain, the Hindu op-ed notes, while agriculture contributes 15–18% of GDP but employs about 46% of the workforce. Such farmers have no savings buffer, so when kharif fails after they have invested everything, they borrow for rabi, and a second failure doubles the debt. A Sakri farmer said exactly this: two cycles of debt. Loan restructuring defers the burden but does not remove it. The deeper answer is the Commission's idea of livelihood security, including non-farm income, so that one bad monsoon does not wipe out a household.
- 5. Food inflation from pulses hurts the poor twice, as consumers and as producers** — Pulses are the main protein source for vegetarian and poor households, so a 23%

	annual rise in chana is a nutrition problem, not just a price problem. At the same time, the small farmers in drought areas who might gain from high prices have no crop to sell. The gains therefore go to farmers in irrigated areas and to traders holding stock. This is why the Price Stabilisation Fund buffer and targeted distribution matter more in a drought year than broad import duty cuts.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	“India’s recurring pulse inflation is less a failure of production than a failure to align water, prices and procurement.” Discuss in the context of the 2026 drought and the Centre’s call to shift water-stressed areas to pulses and oilseeds. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Open with the IPGA data: chana up 11% in a month and 23% in a year, with El Niño-linked drought declared in 265 of Maharashtra’s 358 talukas and large parts of Karnataka. Note the Rabi Campaign 2026 advice to prioritise pulses and oilseeds in water-stressed areas. 2. Body — the water dimension — Explain that pulses need less water than wheat and paddy, and that the dry-spell trigger in drought declaration shows agricultural drought is about the timing of rain. Use Sakri’s 67 dry days out of 102 as evidence. 3. Body — the price and procurement dimension — Explain that MSP-backed procurement is assured for wheat and paddy but thin for pulses under PM-AASHA, so farmers rationally avoid pulses. Discuss the Price Stabilisation Fund buffer and the dilemma of duty-free imports, which help consumers but weaken sowing incentives. 4. Body — the livelihood dimension — Draw on the National Commission on Farmers: small holdings, rain dependence and lack of non-farm income turn each drought into a debt spiral. Mention tribal cultivators with pending forest-rights claims who may miss compensation. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that self-sufficiency in pulses needs assured procurement, crop plans based on water budgets and quick, inclusive drought relief, so that the farmer’s income, not just output, becomes the measure of success.
ADMINISTRATOR’S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are the Collector of Dhule. Tribal farmers with pending forest-rights claims fear they will be left out of drought compensation. What do you do? Approach: I would direct revenue and forest staff to record crop loss on forest land in the panchnamas even where titles are pending, using the claim records held by the Sub-Divisional Level Committee as proof of cultivation. I would place the relevant 2019 Government Resolution before the State for clarity on whether it applies this year. In parallel, I would expedite disposal of pending individual claims through special Gram Sabha sittings. Relief that excludes the most vulnerable cultivators defeats the purpose of the declaration. Q2. As Agriculture Secretary of a drought-hit State, how would you make the Rabi Campaign’s advice to grow pulses actually work? Approach: I would prepare crop plans at the block level using reservoir, groundwater and soil-moisture data, and supply certified pulse and oilseed seed through cooperatives before sowing. I would seek an early commitment from the Centre on procurement under the Price Support Scheme and publicise procurement centres before sowing, not after harvest. I would also use crop insurance enrolment drives so that farmers who switch are not taking the whole risk alone. Q3. An interview board asks: should India cut import duties on pulses when prices rise, even if it hurts farmers? Approach: Consumers, especially poor households, rely on pulses for protein, so prices cannot be allowed to spiral. But sudden duty cuts just before sowing tell farmers that

high prices will not last, which deepens import dependence over time. A better approach is to use the buffer stock and targeted release first, keep any duty relief time-bound and announced in advance, and pair it with assured procurement for the next harvest. Policy predictability helps both farmer and consumer.

3.2 FAO Says India Leads on Post-Harvest Loss Data but Lags on Retail and Household Waste

THE NEWS New Delhi. September 29 is the International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste, and in The Hindu Konda Reddy Chavva, Officer-in-Charge of the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) Representation in India, argues that cutting food loss and waste can give India a "triple win": stronger food security and nutrition, less pressure on natural resources and emissions, and better incomes and productivity. Food loss means food that drops out of the chain between harvest and the shop, through poor storage, drying or transport; food waste means food discarded by shops, restaurants and households. India, he writes, produces enough to feed its 1.4 billion people yet loses a significant share across the value chain. It is the only country to have run three national post-harvest loss surveys: the Ministry of Food Processing Industries assessed 45, 45 and 54 commodities in 2005-07, 2012-14 and 2020-22, from farm to retail, and a fourth round is under way. These surveys support India's reporting of the Food Loss Index under the Sustainable Development Goals, but they mainly cover farm and supply-chain losses; data on waste in retail, hotels, restaurants and households are far less developed. The scope for cutting losses, he writes, is greatest through better storage, drying, cooling, moisture management and processing, with digital traceability helping further. Assessments by the FAO and the Council of State Agricultural Marketing Boards (COSAMB) found that major wholesale markets can generate up to 100 tonnes of organic waste a day, and in some cities up to a fifth of all urban organic waste reaching landfills comes from them. Nationally this adds up to about 3.5 million tonnes a year which, if treated, could offset roughly 3.3 million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent emissions annually, close to \$30 million in carbon credits. A 50-tonne-a-day bio-CNG plant in Surat, run through a private partnership for over five years, reportedly cuts methane-related emissions by about 7,500 tonnes a year. The FAO and the Small Industries Development Bank of India (SIDBI) are mapping food-loss hotspots to climate-resilient technologies such as drying, moisture control, efficient cooling and storage, with SIDBI arranging finance for small and medium enterprises. The FAO is also preparing a "Package of Practices" to help cities measure, prevent, reduce, redistribute and valorise waste across households, wholesale markets, retail and food service. His conclusion: India now has the data, technology and viable models, and must close data gaps, direct investment and build loss reduction into farm, food-processing, urban and climate policy. The syllabus link is GS3 on food processing, supply chain management and storage, and on food security.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Rising output outpaces storage, drying and cold-chain capacity → a significant share of produce is lost between farm and retail, and mandis dump organic waste in landfills where it emits methane → India measures farm-to-retail loss through three national surveys, but not household and retail waste → SDG 12.3 and the Food Loss Index create a reporting obligation → the FAO urges finance-led loss reduction and waste-to-energy models such as Surat's bio-CNG plant

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. SDG target 12.3 separates food loss from food waste and gives each its own index —** Sustainable Development Goal 12 is about responsible consumption and production. Target 12.3 aims, by 2030, to halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and to reduce food losses along production and supply chains, including post-harvest losses. It is measured by two indicators: the Food Loss Index, for which the FAO is the custodian agency and which covers losses from after harvest up to but not including retail, and the Food Waste Index, for which the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) is the custodian and which covers retail, food service and households. India's three post-harvest surveys feed the first; the absence of household data is why the second is weak.
- 2. The International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste was created by the UN General Assembly —** The United Nations General Assembly designated 29 September as the International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste in 2019, and it was first observed in 2020. The FAO and UNEP lead its observance. It is distinct from World Food Day on 16 October, which marks the founding of the FAO in 1945. The FAO is

	headquartered in Rome. 3. India's policy response has been built mainly around processing and cold chains — The Pradhan Mantri Kisan SAMPADA Yojana of the Ministry of Food Processing Industries is an umbrella scheme that funds mega food parks, integrated cold chains and value-addition infrastructure, agro-processing clusters and backward and forward linkages. Operation Greens, announced in the Union Budget of 2018-19, targeted price stability for tomato, onion and potato, the TOP crops, and was later extended to more perishable fruits and vegetables. The Agriculture Infrastructure Fund, launched in 2020, gives interest subvention on loans for post-harvest infrastructure such as warehouses and cold stores. These schemes address food loss; almost no national scheme addresses household food waste. 4. Waste-to-energy links food loss to climate policy — Organic waste decomposing in landfills produces methane, a greenhouse gas far more potent than carbon dioxide over a short period. The SATAT initiative (Sustainable Alternative Towards Affordable Transportation) of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, launched in 2018, encourages compressed biogas plants that turn biomass and organic waste into fuel, and GOBARDhan supports similar plants from cattle dung and farm waste. The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 require segregation of waste at source by households and bulk generators, which is the precondition for treating mandi and kitchen waste as a resource.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS3 names storage, supply chains and food processing explicitly — The syllabus lists storage, transport and marketing of agricultural produce, food processing and related industries, and supply chain management. UPSC has asked about the constraints on food processing in India and the role of cold chains in reducing wastage. The FAO op-ed gives current, citable evidence: three national surveys, 3.5 million tonnes of mandi waste and a working bio-CNG model. 2. Prelims likes the distinction between custodian agencies and indicators — Questions on SDGs and international reports often test which agency publishes what. The difference between the FAO's Food Loss Index and UNEP's Food Waste Index, and the dates of international days, fit this pattern exactly. 3. Essay and GS3 answers on food security increasingly link it to climate — UPSC essay topics have touched on sustainability and consumption. A candidate who can show that reducing food loss is simultaneously food security, emissions reduction and farm income policy writes a stronger answer than one who treats them separately.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● SDG target 12.3 aims to halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels and reduce food losses along production and supply chains by 2030. ● The FAO is the custodian agency for the Food Loss Index and UNEP is the custodian agency for the Food Waste Index under SDG indicator 12.3.1. ● The International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste is observed on 29 September, while World Food Day is observed on 16 October. ● Pradhan Mantri Kisan SAMPADA Yojana is implemented by the Ministry of Food Processing Industries. ● Operation Greens, announced in the Union Budget 2018-19, initially covered tomato, onion and potato. ● The SATAT initiative for compressed biogas is an initiative of the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas. ● The Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016 mandate segregation of waste at

	source.
ANALYSIS	1. India measures the loss it can blame on infrastructure, but not the waste it would have to blame on consumers — The three surveys cover farm to retail, where losses can be fixed by building cold stores and warehouses, which is the kind of project governments like to announce. Household and restaurant waste is harder: it needs behavioural change, municipal systems and data collection inside homes. That India leads the world on the first and lags on the second is not an accident but a reflection of what is politically easier. Until household waste is measured, India cannot credibly report half of SDG 12.3. 2. The mandi waste numbers turn a sanitation problem into an energy business — About 3.5 million tonnes of organic waste a year from wholesale markets is concentrated, relatively clean and predictable in quantity, which is exactly what a biogas plant needs. The Surat plant shows it can run for five years through a private partnership. The obstacle is not technology but institutions: agricultural produce market committees run mandis, municipalities run waste, and oil companies buy the gas, and none owns the problem fully. A model contract that assigns roles among them would do more than another subsidy. 3. The \$30 million carbon-credit figure is modest, and that is a useful reality check — Offsetting 3.3 million tonnes of CO₂-equivalent is worth close to \$30 million a year, which is small against the cost of national infrastructure. Carbon finance will therefore not by itself pay for waste treatment. The real value lies in avoided landfill costs, the fuel produced and compost for soils. Presenting carbon credits as the main incentive risks disappointment; they are a supplement, not a business model. 4. Loss reduction is the cheapest way to raise effective food supply in a drought year — In a year when drought is shrinking the rabi prospect and pulse prices are rising, every tonne saved after harvest is a tonne that does not have to be imported. Better drying and moisture control for pulses and grains protect farmers from distress sales, because stored produce can wait for better prices. This makes post-harvest investment an anti-inflation tool, not merely an efficiency measure. The counter-view is that storage without market access only delays distress, so warehouses must come with warehouse-receipt finance. 5. Using grain for fuel raises the same question from the other side — A letter in The Economic Times asks for an immediate halt to the diversion of rice to ethanol, noting that about 65% of the population mainly eats rice, that India consumes about 145 million tonnes a year, and that 16 States have rainfall deficits of 15–40%. Whether diverting surplus grain to fuel is prudent depends on how large the surplus really is after a bad monsoon. The logic of food loss applies here too: food that leaves the food chain, whether into a landfill or a distillery, is food not eaten, and a drought year is when that trade-off should be reviewed.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	“India has the world’s best data on post-harvest food loss and among the weakest on food waste.” Examine the implications of this imbalance for India’s food security and climate commitments, and suggest measures to address food loss and waste across the value chain. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Define food loss and food waste using SDG 12.3 and its two indices. Mention that India has conducted three national post-harvest loss surveys in 2005-07, 2012-14 and 2020-22, covering 45, 45 and 54 commodities. 2. Body — the imbalance — Explain that surveys cover farm to retail, while retail, hotel and household waste is poorly measured. Argue that this skews policy toward infrastructure schemes such as PM Kisan SAMPADA and Operation Greens and away

from municipal and behavioural measures.

- 3. Body — food security and climate** — Link loss reduction to food availability in drought years and to methane from landfills. Use the FAO-COSAMB estimate of 3.5 million tonnes of mandi waste a year and the Surat bio-CNG plant as evidence.
- 4. Body — measures** — Suggest household and food-service waste surveys, source segregation under the Solid Waste Management Rules, 2016, mandi-level biogas through SATAT, SIDBI-backed finance for drying and cooling technologies in SMEs, and warehouse-receipt finance for farmers.
- 5. Conclusion** — Conclude that treating food loss as a data, finance and institutional problem, not just an infrastructure gap, gives India a triple win on food security, climate and farm incomes.

ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH

Q1. As Municipal Commissioner of a city with a large wholesale vegetable market, how would you deal with its daily organic waste?

Approach: I would first measure the waste stream with the market committee, then enforce segregation of organic waste at the source within the market. I would invite bids for a compressed biogas plant on a private partnership model, with the market committee providing land and assured feedstock, and link the plant to an oil company offtake under SATAT. Compost from the residue can go to farmers. Clear division of responsibilities between the civic body and the market committee is the key.

Q2. You head the district food and civil supplies office. How would you reduce losses of grain in storage?

Approach: I would audit storage conditions in all godowns, including covered and plinth storage, and prioritise moving grain out of open storage before rains. I would enforce first-in-first-out issue, fumigation schedules and moisture checks, and publish monthly loss figures by godown. Officials responsible for avoidable losses should be accountable, since grain lost is public money and food denied to beneficiaries.

Q3. An interview board asks: is household food waste a matter for the state at all?

Approach: Household choices are private, but their consequences, landfill methane, municipal costs and pressure on food supply, are public. The state need not police kitchens, but it can measure waste, run awareness campaigns, enforce segregation and enable redistribution of surplus food from events and restaurants. Measurement comes first, because what is not counted is not managed.

4. International Relations

India's diplomacy today runs through infrastructure and institutions rather than speeches. It talks to Pakistan only inside the SCO's rulebook, it answers China's loans in Nepal and Bhutan with transmission lines and a market for their power, and it binds the UAE with investment pledges and a rupee-dirham settlement channel that keeps trade moving while Hormuz is at risk. The common thread is that interdependence, carefully chosen, is India's most usable form of leverage.

4.1 India Joins SCO Coordinators' Meeting in Islamabad, Its First in Pakistan in Nearly Two Years

THE NEWS New Delhi and Islamabad. A year and a half after Operation Sindoor, India has sent a senior Ministry of External Affairs official to Pakistan for a Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meeting, The Indian Express reports. India's SCO Coordinator, Alok Dimri, an Additional Secretary in the MEA, is attending the first meeting of the SCO Council of National Coordinators (CNC) under Pakistan's chairmanship of the SCO Council of Heads of State (CHS) for 2026-27, held in Islamabad from Monday to Wednesday. National coordinators are the senior officials each member appoints to manage the grouping's day-to-day agenda and prepare its meetings. Pakistan's Foreign Office said on Sunday that the coordinators would discuss the programme of activities under its chairmanship, preparations for upcoming SCO meetings and events, and other matters. The meeting is chaired by Pakistan's National Coordinator for SCO, Dr M. Faisal, and attended by counterparts from member states and representatives of the SCO Secretariat. Pakistan's theme for its term is 'Turning Vision into Action: Connectivity, Innovation and Shared Prosperity'. The Indian delegation's presence marks India's participation in an SCO meeting in Pakistan after almost two years. New Delhi's stated position is that bilateral engagement needs an environment free from terrorism, and that "terror and talks can't go together", especially after the Pahalgam terror attack and the military confrontation of May last year under Operation Sindoor; but it will engage Pakistan within the SCO format. Sources told the paper that India wants to engage with the SCO and that this is why the coordinator was sent. Pakistan is likely to invite Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the summit. On the same day, The Economic Times reports, the foreign ministers of IBSA (India, Brazil and South Africa), meeting in New York on the margins of the UN General Assembly, strongly condemned the killing of civilians in the April 2025 Pahalgam attack and called for concerted action against all UN-listed terrorists and entities, including Al Qaeda, ISIS/Daesh, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Jaish-e-Mohammad, other proxy groups and their facilitators. Separately, Afghanistan's Taliban-run defence ministry claimed its forces killed 28 and wounded 32 fighters, including Daesh or ISIS extremists, who it said had crossed from Pakistan into Kamdesh district of Nuristan province with Pakistani military backing, less than a week after Pakistani airstrikes inside Afghanistan on September 21. Pakistan had not responded. The syllabus link is GS2 on India and its neighbourhood, and on regional groupings involving India.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Pahalgam attack in April 2025 → Operation Sindoor and military confrontation in May 2025 → India freezes bilateral dialogue on the principle that terror and talks cannot go together → Pakistan takes the SCO Heads of State chair for 2026-27 and hosts the first coordinators' meeting → India sends its SCO coordinator to Islamabad to stay inside the multilateral process, while building anti-terror consensus in IBSA

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The SCO grew out of a border-security forum and now spans most of Eurasia** — The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was founded in Shanghai on 15 June 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, building on the earlier 'Shanghai Five' grouping. Its Charter was signed in 2002 at St. Petersburg. India and Pakistan became full members together in 2017 at the Astana summit, Iran joined in 2023 and Belarus in 2024. Its official languages are Russian and Chinese.
- 2. The SCO has a layered structure, from Heads of State to national coordinators** — The Council of Heads of State is the highest decision-making body and meets annually; the member holding its chair hosts the summit. The Council of Heads of Government meets separately and deals mainly with economic and budgetary matters. The Council of National Coordinators handles the organisation's current work and prepares the ministerial and summit meetings. There are two permanent bodies: the Secretariat in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in

	Tashkent. 3. India has used the SCO both to engage and to dissent — India has consistently refused to endorse SCO statements supporting China's Belt and Road Initiative, since its flagship China–Pakistan Economic Corridor passes through Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar attended the SCO Council of Heads of Government meeting in Islamabad in October 2024, the most senior Indian visit to Pakistan in years, while making clear he was there only for the multilateral meeting. In 2025 India declined to sign an SCO defence ministers' joint document that did not mention Pahalgam, and the leaders' declaration later that year did condemn the attack. 4. IBSA and the UN sanctions regime are India's other anti-terror platforms — IBSA was formed by the Brasilia Declaration of 2003 as a trilateral dialogue forum of three large, multi-ethnic democracies from three continents, and runs the IBSA Fund for development projects in poorer countries through the UN. UN-listed terrorists are those designated under the sanctions regime of the UN Security Council committee established by Resolution 1267 (1999), covering Al Qaeda and ISIL. India has pushed since 1996 for a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism at the UN, which remains stuck over the definition of terrorism.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS2 asks about regional groupings and India's place in them — The syllabus lists important international institutions and regional groupings involving India. UPSC has asked whether the SCO serves India's interests given China's and Pakistan's presence in it, and about India's approach to Central Asia. This story shows the SCO's specific value to India: a channel to Pakistan that does not count as bilateral dialogue. 2. India–Pakistan relations are a recurring GS2 and interview theme — Questions have asked about cross-border terrorism as the main obstacle to normal ties and about the role of multilateral forums in managing adversarial relations. The contrast between frozen bilateral ties and continued SCO participation is exactly the kind of nuance examiners reward. 3. Prelims tests SCO structure and membership — Prelims has asked about SCO membership and the location of RATS. The difference between the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government and the Council of National Coordinators is a natural question.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation was founded in 2001 in Shanghai; India and Pakistan became full members in 2017. ● The SCO has two permanent bodies: the Secretariat in Beijing and the Executive Committee of the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure in Tashkent. ● The Council of Heads of State is the highest decision-making body of the SCO, while the Council of National Coordinators coordinates its current activities. ● The official languages of the SCO are Russian and Chinese. ● IBSA is a trilateral forum of India, Brazil and South Africa launched by the Brasilia Declaration of 2003. ● The UN Security Council's 1267 sanctions committee lists individuals and entities associated with Al Qaeda and ISIL (Daesh). ● Kamdesh district lies in Nuristan province of eastern Afghanistan, bordering Pakistan.
ANALYSIS	1. Sending a coordinator, not a minister, is a calibrated signal — An Additional Secretary attending a coordinators' meeting is the lowest level at which India can show up

without being absent. It keeps India inside the SCO's agenda-setting at a time when Pakistan holds the chair and could otherwise shape the programme without Indian input. It also avoids any photograph that could be read as bilateral thaw. The level of the delegation to later ministerial meetings, and whether the Prime Minister accepts an invitation to the summit, will be the real indicators of India's intent.

- 2. Multilateral engagement lets India separate the SCO from Pakistan** — India's interest in the SCO lies in Central Asia, Russia, energy and counter-terrorism cooperation through RATS, none of which should be surrendered because Pakistan chairs the grouping this year. Boycotting would hand Pakistan and China the narrative that India is the obstacle to regional cooperation. The counter-view is that attending in Islamabad lends legitimacy to Pakistan's chairmanship while it faces accusations of terrorism from both India and Afghanistan. India's answer is that attendance is a duty to the organisation, not a concession to the host.
- 3. The SCO summit invitation will test the terror-and-talks doctrine** — If Pakistan formally invites Mr. Modi, India faces a choice between not going, sending a lower-level representative, or attending virtually, as members have done before. Each option has a cost: absence weakens India's voice in the declaration, while attendance may be read domestically as softening after Pahalgam. The likely course, based on India's past practice, is representation by a minister and insistence that the declaration condemn cross-border terrorism, making the text rather than the attendance the contest.
- 4. The Taliban's accusation strengthens India's case but should not be used uncritically** — The Afghan defence ministry's claim that Pakistan backed ISIS fighters crossing into Nuristan is a direct accusation of state involvement from a neighbour that Pakistan once treated as its client. It fits India's long-standing argument that Pakistan uses militant proxies. But the claim is unverified, comes amid open hostility after Pakistani airstrikes on September 21, and the Taliban have their own record with militant groups. India gains more by using multilateral statements like IBSA's, which name UN-listed groups, than by amplifying one side's battlefield claims.
- 5. IBSA's condemnation shows the value of middle-power coalitions** — Brazil and South Africa are also BRICS members and do not always share India's view on Pakistan. Their joint condemnation of Pahalgam and naming of Lashkar-e-Taiba and Jaish-e-Mohammad more than a year after the attack keeps the issue on the Global South's agenda. It also shows India can get language on terrorism from democracies of the South without depending on Western capitals.

POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION

"Multilateral forums allow India to engage adversaries without legitimising them." Examine this statement in the context of India's participation in SCO meetings hosted by Pakistan. What are the limits of this approach? (15 marks, 250 words)

MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION

- 1. Introduction** — State that India sent its SCO coordinator, Additional Secretary Alok Dimri, to Islamabad for the Council of National Coordinators meeting under Pakistan's 2026-27 chairmanship, its first participation in an SCO meeting in Pakistan in almost two years, while maintaining that terror and talks cannot go together.
- 2. Body — why multilateral engagement works for India** — Explain India's interests in the SCO: Central Asia, Russia, RATS and a voice in declarations. Show how participation avoids ceding agenda-setting to Pakistan and China. Cite Jaishankar's 2024 Islamabad visit as precedent for engagement strictly within the multilateral frame.
- 3. Body — the limits** — Point out that SCO decisions are by consensus, so Pakistan and China can block language on cross-border terrorism, as seen in 2025 when India declined to sign a defence ministers' document. Note that repeated attendance may gradually normalise ties without any change in Pakistan's conduct.

ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH

4. Body — complementary platforms — Show how IBSA's condemnation of Pahalgam and the UN 1267 listings supplement the SCO route, and how the Taliban's accusation against Pakistan changes the regional picture.

5. Conclusion — Conclude that multilateral engagement is a useful holding position that keeps India's regional interests alive, but that it cannot substitute for a bilateral settlement, which still depends on Pakistan acting against terror groups.

Q1. You are India's SCO coordinator in Islamabad. The host proposes a programme item on connectivity that praises CPEC. What do you do?

Approach: I would state India's objection on the record, pointing out that CPEC passes through territory that is part of India and that connectivity projects must respect sovereignty and territorial integrity. Since SCO documents are adopted by consensus, I would ensure that India does not join any paragraph endorsing the Belt and Road Initiative. I would stay engaged on the rest of the programme so that India is seen as constructive, not obstructive.

Q2. An interview board asks: is it inconsistent for India to refuse bilateral talks with Pakistan but attend SCO meetings in Islamabad?

Approach: It is consistent if one separates obligations to an organisation from choices in a bilateral relationship. As an SCO member India has duties to take part in its processes, whichever state chairs. Bilateral dialogue is a political choice that India has conditioned on an end to cross-border terrorism. Being present in Islamabad for the SCO does not mean negotiating with Pakistan.

Q3. As a Joint Secretary in the MEA, how would you use the IBSA statement?

Approach: I would circulate it through missions in the Global South as evidence that India's position on Pahalgam has support beyond the West. I would use its naming of UN-listed groups to press for similar language in BRICS and SCO documents. I would also coordinate with Brazil and South Africa on UN counter-terrorism listings, where consensus among developing countries carries weight.

4.2 Nepal Seeks Indian Power After China-Funded Upper Trishuli Collapse, Making Transmission India's Counter to BRI

THE NEWS New Delhi. Transmission lines are the new pathways of India's political power in the neighbourhood and its most effective counter so far to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), argues Pranab Dhal Samanta in his 'State of Play' column in The Economic Times; cards on 19 and 21 September covered the India-Nepal reset, and today's new element is electricity as a strategic lever. BRI is China's programme of loan-financed infrastructure abroad. Nepal, he writes, is rethinking after 300–400 MW were washed off its grid when the China-funded Upper Trishuli power project collapsed in the catastrophic Himalayan floods in August, and it has asked India for power to fill the shortage. The project was financed by a \$149.4 million sovereign loan. The economics favour India because it is the only country in the subcontinent that can import power in large quantities: "China constructs, but doesn't buy." India has made clear over the past few years that it will not import power from China-funded generation in Nepal, so such projects cannot earn export revenue and add to Kathmandu's financial burden. India is Nepal's biggest electricity importer, bringing Nepal \$130.8 million in 2025–26, about \$40 million more than the year before. Yet six Indian projects and the 5,040 MW Pancheshwar project, which the column places in Uttarakhand, remain stuck in Kathmandu's politics. Bhutan, which has no formal diplomatic relations with China, has done better: most government-to-government India-Bhutan projects are complete, and it has a policy that invites Indian private investment. Thimphu earned about \$250 million from power exports to India in 2025, some \$120 million more than Nepal, against over \$190 million the previous year, and the gap will widen because the Tata and Adani groups are each working to generate 5,000 MW through separate joint ventures with the Bhutan government. Sri Lanka is not yet on India's grid, but a 500 MW line connecting New Madurai with Mannar would, in time, let India draw on Sri Lanka's solar and wind potential; the island still burns furnace oil for power and has high tariffs. When the new governments in Nepal and Bangladesh took office, the author notes, their first requirement was additional electricity, and India was the only

country they could turn to. He argues that China's lending can be countered only through credible sovereign income for these countries, that private investment in turnkey projects on win-win models beats China's "sovereign debt dependency" structure, which Colombo experienced through its IMF bailout, and that deeper grid links create interlocking interests against anti-India street sentiment. The syllabus link is GS2 on India and its neighbourhood and GS3 on energy infrastructure.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

China finances hydropower in Nepal through BRI sovereign loans → India refuses to buy power from China-funded plants, and is the only large buyer in the region → the August floods destroy the Upper Trishuli project and Nepal loses 300–400 MW → Kathmandu turns to India for supply → Bhutan's earnings from exports to India outpace Nepal's, showing that grid integration pays → transmission capacity becomes India's strategic lever from Nepal to Sri Lanka

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. Cross-border electricity trade is governed by Ministry of Power guidelines and regulator rules** — The Ministry of Power issued guidelines on the import and export of electricity across borders in 2018, designating the Central Electricity Authority as the nodal authority for approvals. The Central Electricity Regulatory Commission (CERC) framed regulations on cross-border trade of electricity in 2019 covering transmission access and trading. A 2021 CEA procedure under the guidelines restricts imports from generating plants owned or funded by entities of a country that shares a land border with India and has no bilateral power-sector agreement with it, which is the legal basis of India's refusal to buy power from China-funded plants in Nepal. Cross-border trade also takes place through power exchanges.
- 2. India–Nepal power ties rest on river treaties and a long-term trade agreement** — The Mahakali Treaty of 1996 provides for the integrated development of the Mahakali river, including the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project on the India–Nepal border. The Dhalkebar–Muzaffarpur 400 kV line was the first high-capacity cross-border link between the two countries. In 2024 India and Nepal signed an agreement for India to import 10,000 MW from Nepal over ten years, and Nepal began exporting power to Bangladesh through the Indian grid. The Kosi and Gandak agreements of the 1950s are earlier examples of water and power cooperation.
- 3. Bhutan is the model of hydropower partnership with India** — India has built Bhutan's major hydroelectric projects, including Chukha, Tala and Mangdechhu, through intergovernmental agreements that combine grants and loans, and buys the surplus power. Hydropower sale to India is Bhutan's largest source of revenue. Bhutan has no formal diplomatic relations with China and has an unsettled boundary with it. The shift the column describes is from government-to-government projects to private Indian investment.
- 4. One Sun One World One Grid and BIMSTEC connectivity set the wider frame** — Prime Minister Modi proposed One Sun One World One Grid (OSOWOG) at the first assembly of the International Solar Alliance in 2018 as a vision of an interconnected solar grid across time zones. The Green Grids Initiative–OSOWOG was launched jointly by India and the United Kingdom at COP26 in Glasgow in 2021. BIMSTEC members signed a Memorandum of Understanding for the establishment of the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection at the Kathmandu summit in 2018. The Bangladesh–Bhutan–India–Nepal (BBIN) framework also covers energy cooperation.

WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)

- 1. GS2 regularly asks about China's growing presence in India's neighbourhood** — Questions have asked how China's BRI and 'debt diplomacy' affect India's neighbourhood, and how India should respond. This column offers a specific, evidence-based answer: India's market for electricity is an asset China cannot match, and it can be converted into influence.
- 2. GS3 links energy security with infrastructure and renewable integration** — Cross-border grids help integrate variable solar and wind power by balancing across regions.

	UPSC has asked about OSOWOG and the International Solar Alliance. Hydropower from the Himalaya can balance India's solar peaks, which gives the neighbourhood grid an energy-transition rationale beyond diplomacy. 3. Prelims draws on treaties and projects in the neighbourhood — The Mahakali Treaty, Pancheshwar, the BIMSTEC grid MoU and OSOWOG are all standard Prelims material. Projects in Bhutan and the countries they belong to are also frequently asked.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The Mahakali Treaty of 1996 between India and Nepal provides for the Pancheshwar Multipurpose Project. ● The Central Electricity Authority is the designated authority for approvals under India's guidelines on cross-border trade of electricity. ● Chukha, Tala and Mangdechhu are hydroelectric projects in Bhutan built with Indian assistance. ● One Sun One World One Grid was proposed at the first assembly of the International Solar Alliance in 2018, and the Green Grids Initiative was launched at COP26 in 2021. ● BIMSTEC members signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the BIMSTEC Grid Interconnection in 2018. ● Bhutan does not have formal diplomatic relations with China.
ANALYSIS	1. India's leverage comes from being the buyer, not the builder — China can outbid India in building dams, but a dam is worth nothing without a market for its power, and India is the only large market reachable by wire. By refusing to buy from China-funded plants, India turns Chinese loans into potential liabilities, as the Upper Trishuli collapse shows. This is monopsony power: the power of the sole buyer. The counter-view is that neighbours resent being told whom they may borrow from, and a rule that looks like economic coercion can feed the anti-India sentiment the column wants to prevent. 2. Bhutan and Nepal show that domestic politics decide who benefits from interdependence — Both countries have the same rivers and the same Indian market, yet Bhutan earns far more. The difference lies in political stability and a clear policy welcoming investment, while in Nepal six Indian projects and Pancheshwar have been stuck for years. India cannot fix Nepal's politics, but it can offer predictable terms that make delay costly for Kathmandu. Grid diplomacy will succeed only where the partner government can deliver projects. 3. Private capital is a strength and a risk for India's strategy — Replacing government grants with private investment, as in the Tata and Adani joint ventures in Bhutan, reduces the burden on India's budget and gives projects commercial discipline. But it also ties India's diplomatic image to the conduct of private firms. If a project runs into disputes over tariffs, land or environment, the neighbour will blame India, not a company. The government must retain oversight over contract terms precisely because these are strategic, not purely commercial, assets. 4. Sri Lanka's link shows grids flow both ways — The New Madurai-Mannar line is framed as a way for India to access Sri Lankan solar and wind power, not only to sell power to Sri Lanka. That reverses the usual picture of India as supplier and makes the partnership more equal, which is politically important in Colombo. It also helps India balance its own grid with renewable power from another region. The obstacle is cost and Sri Lankan sensitivity about Indian dominance of strategic infrastructure. 5. The argument understates the ecological risks of Himalayan hydropower — The Upper Trishuli collapse in floods is also a warning about building large projects in a fragile, disaster-prone mountain range. If India buys power from Nepal and Bhutan, it

	shares responsibility for the safety of those projects, and Himalayan floods have damaged Indian projects too. A grid strategy must therefore include risk assessment, climate-resilient design and joint early warning, or the same floods that hurt China's projects will hurt India's.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	"In South Asia, India's most effective answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative is not building more, but buying more." Discuss with reference to cross-border electricity trade with Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Start with the collapse of the China-funded Upper Trishuli project in the August Himalayan floods, which removed 300–400 MW from Nepal's grid and led Nepal to seek power from India. 2. Body — the logic of buying — Explain that India is the only large importer of power in the subcontinent, and that its refusal to buy from China-funded plants, backed by the cross-border electricity guidelines, makes such projects financially unviable. Use Nepal's \$130.8 million and Bhutan's about \$250 million earnings from exports to India. 3. Body — country cases — Contrast Bhutan's completed projects and private joint ventures with Nepal's stalled projects and Pancheshwar. Add the proposed 500 MW New Madurai–Mannar line and the Nepal–Bangladesh trade via India. 4. Body — limits — Discuss resentment at restrictions on Chinese-funded plants, dependence on private firms, the political instability of partners and the ecological risks of Himalayan hydropower. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that grid interdependence creates lasting shared interests and gives neighbours sovereign income instead of sovereign debt, but it must be pursued on transparent, fair terms to be seen as partnership rather than pressure.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. As Joint Secretary for Nepal in the MEA, Kathmandu asks India for emergency power after the floods. How do you respond? Approach: I would coordinate with the Ministry of Power and the grid operator to supply power through existing cross-border lines on transparent commercial terms. I would pair the emergency supply with a push to resolve the stalled Indian projects, but without making relief conditional, since conditions during a crisis would feed resentment. Quick help now builds the trust that long-term projects need. Q2. You are the Chief Secretary of a border State through which a new cross-border transmission line must pass. Farmers oppose the towers. What do you do? Approach: I would ensure fair compensation for land under towers and the right-of-way corridor according to current Ministry of Power guidelines, and hold public consultations explaining the route. I would look for route changes that avoid houses and orchards. Because the line is strategic, delay has a national cost, so I would set up a dedicated grievance cell with fixed timelines. Q3. An interview board asks: is refusing to buy power from Chinese-funded plants in Nepal fair to Nepal? Approach: India, as a sovereign buyer, is entitled to decide what it imports on security grounds, especially for a critical system like the power grid. But India should state the rule clearly in advance, so that Nepal can make informed borrowing choices, and should offer credible alternative financing. The fairness of the policy depends on whether India provides a better option, not just a veto.

4.3 UAE Signals Another \$25 Billion for India as Rupee–Dirham Settlement Reaches Double Digits

THE NEWS Mumbai and New Delhi. The United Arab Emirates intends to invest an additional \$25 billion in India in the near future, Commerce and Industry Minister Piyush Goyal said on Monday after co-chairing the 14th India–UAE High-Level Joint Task Force on Investments in Mumbai with Sheikh Hamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Managing Director of the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority (ADIA), the emirate's sovereign wealth fund, The Hindu reports. The UAE has already invested about \$25 billion in India and is its seventh-largest source of foreign direct investment; the new money could take the total to \$50 billion in the near term, with an eventual target of \$100 billion, The Indian Express adds. The two sides agreed to widen cooperation to ports, shipbuilding, energy security, space technology and financial services, and discussed investment, trade facilitation, taxation, logistics, energy, market access and the use of local currencies in trade. Mr. Goyal said the share of bilateral trade settled in rupees and dirhams has reached double digits, The Economic Times reports. Under this local-currency mechanism, Indian exporters can be paid in rupees and UAE exporters in dirhams, with the currencies converted into dollars periodically if required, so trade need not pass through the dollar at every step. Its use is rising as businesses understand its benefits, he said. Trade between the two countries is "very close" to pre-war levels and should recover and exceed them in coming months, amid geopolitical disruption and heightened risk to the Strait of Hormuz, a key route for India's energy and merchandise flows; India's merchandise exports nevertheless rose more than 15% in the first six months of the financial year to September 21. The same day, the Commerce Ministry said Mr. Goyal will visit the United States from September 29 to October 5 for the G20 Trade Ministers' Meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, on September 30 and October 1, and will meet U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer on its sidelines to advance the Bilateral Trade Agreement and finalise an interim deal in line with the joint statement of February 7, 2026. At the G20, India will argue for a rules-based, open, inclusive, transparent, equitable and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system with the World Trade Organization at its core, and for adequate policy space for developing countries. The syllabus link is GS2 on bilateral relations and agreements, and GS3 on investment models and external trade.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

India and the UAE sign CEPA in 2022 and a Bilateral Investment Treaty in 2024 → a local-currency settlement framework lets traders bypass the dollar → the West Asia war disrupts Hormuz and bilateral trade dips → the rupee-dirham share of trade reaches double digits and trade returns close to pre-war levels → the UAE signals another \$25 billion, with a \$100 billion target, and cooperation widens to ports, shipbuilding and space

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. India–UAE ties were raised to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and then anchored by a trade agreement** — India and the UAE upgraded their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2017, when the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince was chief guest at India's Republic Day. The India–UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) was signed in February 2022 and came into force on 1 May 2022, India's first such agreement with a Gulf country. It removed or cut duties on most tariff lines and also covered trade in services. The UAE is among India's largest trading partners and a major source of its crude oil and LPG.
- 2. A Bilateral Investment Treaty protects the capital that the task force is attracting** — India and the UAE signed a Bilateral Investment Treaty in February 2024, drawing on India's 2016 Model BIT but easing some of its terms, after India terminated most of its older investment treaties. A BIT protects investors of one country in the other against expropriation without compensation and unfair treatment, and provides for dispute settlement through arbitration after local remedies. The High-Level Joint Task Force on Investments is the institutional channel that tracks sovereign and private UAE investment in India, and ADIA is one of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds.
- 3. The local-currency settlement framework is part of India's push to internationalise the rupee** — In July 2023 the Reserve Bank of India and the Central Bank of the UAE signed a Memorandum of Understanding to set up a Local Currency Settlement System for the rupee and the dirham, alongside another to link India's Unified Payments Interface with the UAE's instant payment platform. Earlier, in July 2022, the RBI had allowed invoicing and settlement of international trade in rupees through Special Rupee Vostro Accounts held by foreign banks with Indian banks. Local-currency

	settlement reduces conversion costs and exposure to the dollar and to sanctions-related disruption, and it helps develop a direct rupee-dirham exchange market. 4. India and the UAE are joined in two minilateral frameworks — I2U2 groups India, Israel, the UAE and the United States, and held its first leaders' summit virtually in July 2022 with a focus on food security and clean energy. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced through a Memorandum of Understanding at the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023, signed by India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, the United States, the European Union, France, Germany and Italy. IMEC envisages a ship-and-rail route from India to the Gulf and on to Europe, which gives the new cooperation in ports and shipbuilding a strategic context.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS2 asks about India's relations with the Gulf and West Asia — Questions have asked about India's 'Look West' or 'Think West' policy, the importance of the Gulf for energy and diaspora, and IMEC as an alternative corridor. The UAE story shows the relationship moving from oil-and-labour to capital, technology and currency. 2. GS3 tests rupee internationalisation and the external sector — UPSC has asked about the benefits and risks of rupee internationalisation and about sovereign wealth funds as investors. The double-digit rupee-dirham share is concrete evidence for answers on de-dollarisation and trade settlement. 3. Prelims draws on agreements, their dates and signatories — CEPA, the BIT, the local-currency MoU, I2U2 and IMEC are standard Prelims material. Knowing who signed IMEC and when is typical of how the paper frames questions on connectivity corridors.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement was signed in February 2022 and entered into force on 1 May 2022. ● In July 2023, the Reserve Bank of India and the Central Bank of the UAE signed an MoU on a Local Currency Settlement System for the rupee and the dirham. ● I2U2 is a grouping of India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates and the United States. ● The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor was announced through an MoU signed on the sidelines of the G20 New Delhi summit in September 2023. ● Special Rupee Vostro Accounts, permitted by the RBI in 2022, allow international trade to be invoiced and settled in Indian rupees. ● The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority is a sovereign wealth fund of the Emirate of Abu Dhabi. ● India and the UAE elevated their relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2017.
ANALYSIS	1. A signalled \$25 billion is an intention, and its value depends on where it goes — The papers say the UAE has "signalled" or "indicated" its intent, which is weaker than a commitment. Sovereign funds invest where returns are good, so the money is likely to flow into infrastructure, renewable energy, logistics and listed assets rather than into new factories. That still eases India's need for long-term capital, especially while foreign portfolio flows are volatile. The measure of success will be the share that goes into greenfield projects like ports and shipbuilding, which create jobs, rather than into existing assets. 2. Double-digit rupee-dirham settlement is significant, but the dollar has not been replaced — Reaching double digits from almost nothing in about three years shows businesses will use a local-currency channel when it is cheaper and safer. Yet the currencies are still converted into dollars periodically, which means the dollar remains

	the anchor for pricing and balances. The UAE dirham is itself pegged to the dollar, so exchange-rate risk is reduced but not eliminated. The honest description is a partial, practical hedge against disruption, not de-dollarisation. 3. The war has made the UAE more important to India, and India more important to the UAE — With the Strait of Hormuz at risk, India needs reliable Gulf partners for energy and trade routes, and the UAE needs reliable, large markets and investment destinations. Cooperation on ports and shipbuilding reflects both sides' interest in alternative routes and shipping capacity. The counter-view is that deepening dependence on one Gulf partner concentrates risk if the war spreads. India's answer has been to diversify across the UAE, Oman, Saudi Arabia and others. 4. The US visit shows India balancing bilateral deals with multilateral rules — In Milwaukee, India will defend a WTO-centred, non-discriminatory trading system and policy space for developing countries, while negotiating an interim bilateral deal with the United States. These positions are not contradictory, but they are in tension, since bilateral deals are by definition preferential. India uses bilateral agreements for market access and the WTO as insurance against unilateral tariffs. Its credibility at the G20 will depend on showing that its bilateral deals do not undermine the multilateral rules it defends. 5. Trade agreements are becoming investment agreements — The UAE story follows the pattern of India's recent deals, where tariff cuts come with investment pledges. CEPA was followed by the BIT and now a stated \$100 billion target. This is a sensible way to link trade to growth, but investment targets are not enforceable in the way tariff commitments are. India must track actual flows through the task force and publish them, so that pledges do not become diplomatic headlines without economic substance.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	"India's partnership with the UAE has moved from oil and remittances to capital, currency and connectivity." Examine this statement and assess its significance for India's economic security amid disruption in West Asia. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Mention the 14th High-Level Joint Task Force on Investments, the UAE's signal of another \$25 billion on top of about \$25 billion already invested, and the double-digit share of rupee-dirham settlement. 2. Body — capital — Explain the investment architecture: CEPA (2022), the Bilateral Investment Treaty (2024), sovereign fund investment through ADIA and the \$100 billion target. Discuss where such capital is likely to go. 3. Body — currency — Explain the Local Currency Settlement System (2023) and rupee trade settlement, and show how it helps in a disrupted environment, while noting that conversion into dollars continues. 4. Body — connectivity and security — Link cooperation on ports, shipbuilding and space to IMEC and I2U2, and to the risk to the Strait of Hormuz. Mention India's parallel engagement with the US on a trade deal and its defence of the WTO at the G20. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that the partnership has become a pillar of India's economic security, but its value depends on converting pledges into projects and on diversifying across Gulf partners.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are a Joint Secretary in DPIIT tracking the UAE investment pledge. How would you ensure it turns into real investment? Approach: I would create a project pipeline with specific sectors, such as ports, logistics parks and renewable energy, and match them with the UAE fund's preferences. I would

assign a single-window facilitator to resolve approvals and taxation issues quickly. I would report actual inflows at each task force meeting against the pledge so that progress is measured, not assumed.

Q2. As an officer in the RBI's foreign exchange department, how would you increase use of rupee-dirham settlement?

Approach: I would work with banks to reduce the cost and documentation of rupee and dirham transactions and publish clear guidelines for exporters. I would encourage the development of a direct rupee-dirham exchange market so that conversion through the dollar is needed less often. Outreach to small exporters, through export promotion councils, would widen use beyond large firms.

Q3. An interview board asks: is large sovereign wealth investment from a foreign state a risk to India?

Approach: Sovereign funds are usually long-term, patient investors, which is valuable for infrastructure. The risk arises only in sensitive sectors, where foreign state influence could affect security. India manages this through sectoral caps, government approval routes and screening. With those safeguards, investment from a friendly partner like the UAE is an opportunity rather than a threat.

5. Environment & Ecology

Both stories today are about planning before the crisis arrives rather than after it. Delhi has written its winter smog rules into a calendar months in advance, and the reservoir numbers at the end of a deficient monsoon tell the country exactly how much water it carries into the dry season. In each case the science is clear and the unit of the problem — an airshed, an aquifer, a river basin — is larger than the government that has to act on it.

5.1 Delhi Fixes a Winter Pollution Calendar: Non-BS-VI Entry Curbs, 50% Work From Home and Construction Bans

THE NEWS New Delhi. With the southwest monsoon on the wane and the National Capital Region bracing for its winter spike in pollution, Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav on Monday, September 28, chaired a meeting at Paryavaran Bhawan to formalise what The Hindu calls a permanent institutional “action plan” approach. Delhi Chief Minister Rekha Gupta, Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa and officials of the Commission for Air Quality Management in NCR and Adjoining Areas (CAQM) attended. The Indian Express reports that the restrictions were notified on June 23, will operate every year from November 1 to February 28, and run parallel to the Graded Response Action Plan (GRAP), the CAQM’s ladder of curbs triggered by actual air quality. For the first time, several measures become mandatory in advance. From November 1 to January 31, no non-BS-VI vehicle registered outside Delhi may enter the capital; CNG and electric vehicles and emergency services are exempt. BS-VI is the current national emission standard for vehicles. Government and private offices must keep physical attendance to 50%, with hospitals, transport, power, water, sanitation and pollution-control agencies exempt; MCD offices will work 8.30 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Delhi government offices 10 a.m. to 6.30 p.m. Parking charges at authorised sites double from November 1 to February 28 (Express), except at Delhi Metro facilities. Fuel will be sold only against a valid Pollution Under Control Certificate (PUCC), with an Automatic Number Plate Recognition drive at 500 pumps from October 1. The papers describe construction curbs in two tiers, and the difference matters. The Hindu reports a ban on construction and demolition from December 10 to January 20, with dust-generating demolition and outdoor civil construction banned from November 1 to January 31, and targets cement-concrete work to finish by October 31 and bitumen work by November 15. The Express confirms the complete ban from December 10 to January 20, “barring urgent government and emergency works”, and says the November-to-January curb spares essential public infrastructure; it adds 100% CCTV coverage at sites and registration on the ‘Malba App’. The Express also lists targets of 72 lakh daily Metro riders and 42 lakh on DTC buses with 5,088 electric buses, an AI-enabled command centre with 334 enforcement teams, and 11,271 units surveyed with 2,283 sealed or shut. Mr. Sirsa said Delhi generates about 30% of its own pollution while 60-65% comes from or is influenced by the NCR, and called for a “regional airshed approach”. An Economic Times editorial welcomes the early action and the shift from stubble to vehicles and construction, but asks why there is no larger airshed-wide plan from the Centre and warns that firecracker enforcement around Diwali has been weak. The syllabus link is GS3 pollution and GS2 inter-State coordination.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Delhi’s winter smog recurs every year as cold, still air traps local and regional emissions → responses stay episodic, with GRAP curbs imposed only after air turns ‘poor’ or worse → the Delhi government notifies year-round-calendar restrictions on June 23 → the Union Environment Minister’s meeting on September 28 formalises them as a permanent winter plan from November 1 → the debate shifts to whether a city can fix air that is shaped by a whole airshed

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The CAQM is a statutory body with overriding powers over the NCR’s air** — The Commission for Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas was created by the Commission for Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas Act, 2021, after an ordinance in 2020. Its jurisdiction covers the NCR and adjoining areas of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, which is an attempt to match the regulator to the region the pollution comes from. It replaced the Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority that the Supreme Court had set up in the M.C. Mehta litigation. On matters within its remit its directions prevail over those of the State pollution control boards, and it now owns and revises GRAP.
- 2. GRAP is a set of emergency brakes graded by the Air Quality Index** — The Graded Response Action Plan was first notified in 2017 following the Supreme Court’s orders in

	M.C. Mehta v. Union of India, and has been revised by the CAQM since. It has four stages tied to the Air Quality Index: Stage I for 'poor' air (AQI 201-300), Stage II for 'very poor' (301-400), Stage III for 'severe' (401-450) and Stage IV for 'severe plus' (above 450). Measures escalate from dust control and PUC checks to bans on construction, on older diesel vehicles and on truck entry. The revised GRAP can be invoked in advance on the basis of forecasts, but it remains a reaction to bad air rather than a plan to prevent it. 3. BS-VI was a leapfrog, and the Air Act is the parent statute for air regulation — India moved from Bharat Stage IV to Bharat Stage VI emission norms nationwide from April 1, 2020, skipping BS-V altogether; BS-VI sharply lowers permissible particulate matter and nitrogen oxide emissions, especially for diesel vehicles. The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act, 1981 is the parent law for air quality, with the Central and State Pollution Control Boards as its enforcement bodies and powers to declare air pollution control areas. The Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 is the umbrella law under which the Centre notifies ambient and emission standards. The National Air Quality Index, launched in 2014, reports eight pollutants on six bands from 'good' to 'severe'. 4. NCAP sets city targets, while an airshed is the unit the air actually obeys — The National Clean Air Programme was launched by the Environment Ministry in January 2019 for non-attainment cities, those that fail the National Ambient Air Quality Standards over five years; about 130 cities are covered. Its revised goal is a reduction of up to 40% in particulate matter concentrations, with funding linked to city performance. An airshed is a geographical area within which air, and the pollutants it carries, mix and move together because of terrain and weather. The Indo-Gangetic Plain behaves as one airshed in winter, so an administrative boundary like Delhi's cannot stop pollution produced in Haryana or Uttar Pradesh, and the reverse.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. The GS3 syllabus names environmental pollution, and Delhi is the recurring case study — Mains questions have asked about the causes of urban air pollution, the effectiveness of the National Clean Air Programme and the role of crop-residue burning. This plan gives a fresh angle: moving from reactive, AQI-triggered curbs to a pre-fixed calendar, and the governance problem of a regional airshed with several governments. 2. Prelims tests the institutions and standards behind the headlines — UPSC has asked about the pollutants in the National Air Quality Index, about BS-VI norms and about the bodies that regulate pollution. The CAQM's statutory basis, GRAP's stages and the meaning of non-attainment cities are natural candidates, as are the meaning of PUCC and the concept of an airshed. 3. GS2 and Essay link air to federalism and to rights — Clean air is read by courts as part of the right to life under Article 21, and the M.C. Mehta cases are the standard example of judicial governance of pollution. An essay or ethics answer on collective action problems can use Delhi's own 30% versus the NCR's 60-65% as a concrete illustration.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The Commission for Air Quality Management in National Capital Region and Adjoining Areas is a statutory body constituted under an Act of Parliament passed in 2021, and its jurisdiction extends to adjoining areas of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. ● The Graded Response Action Plan has four stages linked to Air Quality Index bands, beginning at 'poor' air quality (AQI 201-300) and ending at 'severe plus' (AQI above 450).

- India adopted Bharat Stage VI emission norms nationwide from April 1, 2020, skipping Bharat Stage V.
- The Air (Prevention and Control of Pollution) Act was enacted in 1981, and the Central Pollution Control Board and State Pollution Control Boards exercise powers under it.
- The National Clean Air Programme, launched in 2019, covers non-attainment cities, defined as cities that do not meet the National Ambient Air Quality Standards over a five-year period.
- The National Air Quality Index reports on eight pollutants, including PM₁₀, PM_{2.5}, nitrogen dioxide, sulphur dioxide, carbon monoxide, ozone, ammonia and lead.
- An airshed is an area in which air and the pollutants in it tend to mix and move together due to topography and meteorology, irrespective of administrative boundaries.

ANALYSIS

- 1. A fixed calendar is a real change in regulatory philosophy** — GRAP waits for the AQI to cross a threshold and then imposes curbs, which means the damage to lungs has already begun and businesses face sudden stoppages. A calendar notified in June tells builders, employers and transporters in advance what they cannot do from November 1, so they can plan work, stock materials and reschedule. The Hindu's detail that concrete work should finish by October 31 and bitumen by November 15 shows the logic: move dusty work out of the dangerous months rather than halt it in mid-flow. The counter-view is that a fixed calendar is blunt, since it bans activity even in a clean week, and it can coexist awkwardly with GRAP stages that impose their own, overlapping curbs.
- 2. The two construction windows show who bears the cost** — The papers agree on a complete construction and demolition ban from December 10 to January 20 and on a lighter curb on dust-generating work from November 1 to January 31, but they describe the exemptions differently. The Express says essential public infrastructure is spared and urgent government works are exempt even from the complete ban; The Hindu does not mention these carve-outs. In practice, therefore, private building stops while public projects continue, and the cost falls on daily-wage construction workers whose incomes vanish for weeks. Earlier bans have been accompanied by court-ordered subsistence payments from construction welfare funds, and the plan as reported says nothing about them; without that, a permanent calendar makes a permanent annual income shock.
- 3. Barring non-BS-VI vehicles from outside is targeted, but it is also the easy option** — Older out-of-state vehicles, including trucks and commercial vehicles, are among the heaviest emitters per kilometre, and BS-VI diesel engines are far cleaner than BS-IV ones, so the rule attacks a real source. It is also politically convenient, because the vehicles affected belong to voters in other States. Delhi's own older vehicles are left to the PUCC check, which has historically been weak, which is why the ANPR-linked 'No PUCC, No Fuel' drive at 500 pumps matters more than it looks. Enforcement at dozens of border entry points, with exemptions for CNG, electric and emergency vehicles, will decide whether the rule changes traffic or only paperwork.
- 4. Sirsa's 30% figure is an argument for the airshed, and also an alibi** — If Delhi generates only about 30% of its pollution, then even perfect action inside the city leaves most of the problem untouched, which strengthens the Economic Times' call for a Centre-led plan across the airshed. The same number, however, lets a city government say that bad air is someone else's fault. The CAQM already has jurisdiction over Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh's adjoining areas, so the institution for an airshed plan exists; what is missing is a common target and shared budget

	across States. A credible plan would publish source-apportionment numbers each season so that every government is judged on its own share. 5. Work from home and parking prices are demand management, which Delhi has rarely tried — Most earlier responses tried to control emissions at the tailpipe or the chimney; halving office attendance, staggering timings and doubling parking fees try to reduce the number of trips in the first place. The Metro and bus ridership targets of 72 lakh and 42 lakh show the government knows that pushing people off cars only works if public transport can absorb them. The limit is that a 50% cap is hard to verify in private offices, and informal workers cannot work from home at all. If attendance rules are enforced only on government offices, the burden will be uneven and the benefit modest.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	“Delhi’s air pollution is a regional problem that is managed through city-level and episodic responses.” Examine this statement in the light of the Delhi government’s permanent winter action plan and the Graded Response Action Plan. What institutional changes would an airshed approach require? (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Open with the plan formalised on September 28, 2026: restrictions notified on June 23, in force from November 1, including entry curbs on non-BS-VI vehicles registered outside Delhi, 50% physical attendance and a complete construction ban from December 10 to January 20. Note Mr. Sirsa’s estimate that Delhi generates about 30% of its pollution. 2. Body — episodic versus planned — Explain GRAP’s four AQI-linked stages and why they are reactive. Show how a fixed calendar changes incentives for builders and employers, and note the risk of overlap and bluntness. 3. Body — the regional problem — Explain the airshed concept and the Indo-Gangetic Plain’s winter meteorology. Use the 60-65% NCR contribution, the CAQM’s multi-State jurisdiction and the Economic Times’ call for a Centre-led airshed plan. 4. Body — institutional changes — Propose common airshed targets under NCAP, seasonal source-apportionment published for each State, pooled funding tied to results, enforcement technology such as ANPR at fuel pumps and entry points, and welfare support for construction workers during bans. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that planning ahead is a real step, but clean air in Delhi depends on shared accountability across the airshed, with the CAQM using the powers it already has.
ADMINISTRATOR’S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are a Deputy Commissioner in Delhi. Construction workers’ unions say the December-January ban will leave lakhs without income. What do you do? Approach: I would first get the list of registered construction workers from the Building and Other Construction Workers welfare board and check who has not been registered. I would push for timely subsistence transfers from the welfare fund during the ban, as has been done in earlier years, and run registration camps at labour chowks before December 10. I would also coordinate with public works that are exempt to absorb some labour. A pollution rule that ignores livelihoods loses public support by the second winter. Q2. As the transport commissioner, how would you actually enforce the entry curb on non-BS-VI vehicles from other States? Approach: Physical checking at every border point would cause jams and invite corruption, so I would rely on number-plate recognition cameras linked to the national vehicle registration database to identify the emission norm automatically. Violators would be fined electronically, with checking teams at a few major entry points for

heavy vehicles. I would publish the list of exempt categories clearly so that CNG, electric and emergency vehicles are not harassed. Weekly data on rejected entries would tell us whether the rule is working.

Q3. An interview board asks: is it fair for Delhi to restrict vehicles from Haryana and Uttar Pradesh when the NCR shares one airshed?

Approach: It is fair to regulate what enters the city, because vehicles emit where they drive, not where they are registered, and the rule is based on emission norm rather than origin alone. But fairness also requires Delhi to apply equal rigour to its own older vehicles and sources. The better answer is a common NCR-wide standard set by the CAQM so that no State appears to be exporting its costs. Unilateral rules are a start; shared rules are the goal.

5.2 Reservoirs at 70% of Capacity, Below the Ten-Year Average, as the Monsoon Ends 12% Short

THE NEWS Bengaluru and Gurugram. As the southwest monsoon season ends on September 30, water stored in 178 reservoirs across India stands at 70% of their total capacity, according to the Central Water Commission's (CWC) live storage report dated September 24, The Indian Express reports. That is below the decadal average for the same period, 76.62%, and below last year's 79%; the paper's headline calls it a 10-year low. The CWC is the Centre's technical body on surface water, and its bulletin tracks how much usable water sits behind major dams. The picture is grim for 92 reservoirs in the south, east and north. The southern region — Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu — has the lowest storage, at 50% (27.926 billion cubic metres) against 87.25% last year, and has received 23% below-normal rainfall as of September 28, per India Meteorological Department (IMD) data. All-India rainfall was 12% short of normal as of September 28. The report coincides with drought declarations in Maharashtra and Karnataka. The southwest monsoon brings over 70% of India's annual rainfall, and El Niño is named as one of the factors behind this season's shortfall. This card continues the 28 September card on the monsoon deficit; what is new is the storage data. The urban side appears in Gurugram, where a Central Ground Water Authority (CGWA) affidavit to the Punjab and Haryana High Court shows groundwater levels fell at six of seven urban monitoring wells between the pre-monsoon seasons of 2025 and 2026. The deepest reading was 50.30 metres below ground level at Kherki Daula; four wells were deeper than 20 metres; falls ranged from 0.08 to 2.34 metres, sharpest at Baliawas, while only the Cell Office well rose, by 1.34 metres. District-wide, Khawaspur rose about 4.23 metres and Karola fell 5.41 metres. The CGWA told the court that regulation within the State is a statutory function of the Haryana Water Resources Authority. On September 22 the Bench of Chief Justice Ashwani Kumar Mishra and Justice Rohit Kapoor said the city floods every monsoon because storm runoff is not channelled into aquifers. The deficit also hides intensity. Odisha recorded 1,453 mm from June to September 25, a 29% excess, after a 47% deficit in June, with 11 systems over the Bay of Bengal, The Hindu's editorial notes. Uttar Pradesh received 66.5 mm against a normal 7.6 mm over three days, with at least 62 dead, as a deep depression interacted with a Western Disturbance, the Express explains. The syllabus link is GS1 on monsoon geography and GS3 on water resources and disaster management.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

El Niño and erratic systems weaken the southwest monsoon, leaving all-India rain 12% short by September 28 → the south receives 23% below-normal rain → reservoir storage falls to 70% nationally and 50% in the south, below the 76.62% decadal average → Maharashtra and Karnataka declare drought while cities like Gurugram keep drawing down groundwater → rabi irrigation, drinking water and hydropower enter the dry season with a thinner buffer

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The CWC measures surface storage; the CGWB and CGWA handle what lies underground** — The Central Water Commission is the apex technical organisation for surface water under the Ministry of Jal Shakti, and it issues a weekly bulletin on the live storage of major reservoirs, compared with last year and with the ten-year average. Live storage is the usable water above the lowest outlet, as opposed to dead storage that cannot be released. The Central Ground Water Board monitors aquifers through a national network of observation wells and assesses groundwater resources

	jointly with the States. The Central Ground Water Authority was constituted under Section 3(3) of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986 to regulate groundwater extraction, though several States now have their own regulators, as Haryana does. 2. IMD classifies a monsoon against its long period average — The southwest monsoon season runs from June 1 to September 30, and all-India rainfall is compared with the long period average (LPA), which is 87 cm for the 1971-2020 base. For the country as a whole, IMD calls a season deficient if rainfall is below 90% of the LPA, below normal between 90% and 95%, normal between 96% and 104%, above normal between 105% and 110%, and excess above 110%. For a region or subdivision, a departure within plus or minus 19% is counted as normal and a shortfall of 20% to 59% as deficient. On this scale a 12% shortfall places the country in the deficient band if it holds to September 30. 3. Groundwater is assessed on the stage of extraction — The dynamic groundwater resource assessment compares annual extraction with annual extractable recharge, and the ratio is the stage of extraction. Blocks are categorised as safe, semi-critical, critical or over-exploited, the last meaning extraction exceeds the annually replenishable resource. Depth to water level, which the Gurugram affidavit uses, is how far below the surface the water table lies; a larger number means a deeper, more depleted table. Water is a State subject under Entry 17 of the State List, subject to Entry 56 of the Union List on inter-State rivers. 4. The Centre's groundwater schemes rely on recharge and community management — The Atal Bhujal Yojana, launched in December 2019 with World Bank support, promotes community-led groundwater management in water-stressed blocks of seven States: Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh. The Jal Shakti Abhiyan: Catch the Rain campaign, launched in 2021, asks districts to build and revive water-harvesting structures to “catch the rain, where it falls, when it falls”. Both depend on local bodies and on rainfall being captured rather than lost as runoff. El Niño, the warm phase of the El Niño Southern Oscillation in the equatorial Pacific, is historically associated with weaker Indian monsoons, though not every El Niño year is a drought year.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS1 asks about monsoon mechanisms and GS3 about water security — UPSC has asked about the factors affecting the Indian monsoon, including El Niño and the Indian Ocean Dipole, and Mains has asked about groundwater depletion and water-use efficiency. Reservoir storage connects the two: it is the bridge between a weak monsoon and the rabi season, drinking water and hydropower. 2. Prelims tests institutions and classifications — Questions have covered which ministry or body does what in water management and how IMD defines a normal monsoon. The CWC's role, the CGWA's statutory origin, groundwater categories and the LPA thresholds are all fair targets. 3. Disaster management questions increasingly ask about extremes within a season — The coexistence of deficit and flood — Odisha's 29% excess, UP's deluge and Gurugram's flooding over falling water tables — suits GS3 questions on disaster management and climate change. Answers that show the difference between total rainfall and rainfall distribution score well.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The Central Water Commission, under the Ministry of Jal Shakti, publishes a weekly bulletin on live storage in major reservoirs of India. ● The India Meteorological Department uses a long period average of 87 cm, based on 1971-2020, for all-India southwest monsoon rainfall. ● For the country as a whole, IMD classifies southwest monsoon rainfall below

ANALYSIS

90% of the long period average as deficient.

- The Central Ground Water Authority was constituted under Section 3(3) of the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- In groundwater assessment, a unit is classified as over-exploited when annual groundwater extraction exceeds the annual extractable groundwater resource.
- The Atal Bhujal Yojana is a World Bank-supported scheme for community-led groundwater management in seven States.
- A Western Disturbance is an extra-tropical storm originating in the Mediterranean region that brings rain and snow to north-western India, and is carried eastward by the subtropical westerly jet stream.

- 1. Storage at 70% is not a crisis nationally, but averages hide the southern emergency** — Seventy per cent is more than two-thirds full, and a year earlier the figure was 79%, so the national number alone would not justify alarm. The alarming number is the south's 50% against 87.25% last year, in a region that has had 23% less rain and depends heavily on reservoirs and tanks for both drinking water and paddy. Southern cities and farms enter the dry season with roughly half the buffer they had a year ago. Water managers should therefore plan releases region by region, prioritising drinking water and standing crops, rather than read comfort into the all-India average.
- 2. Reservoirs and aquifers fail together, which removes the usual fallback** — In a normal dry year, farmers and cities that lose canal water switch to tubewells, drawing down groundwater. Gurugram shows that the fallback is already weak in urban areas: water levels fell at six of seven urban wells even before this deficit, with Kherki Daula at 50.30 metres. When surface and underground stores are low together, drought moves from agriculture into drinking water and urban supply. That is why the drought declarations in Maharashtra and Karnataka should trigger groundwater regulation as well as relief.
- 3. Gurugram's paradox is a failure of urban design, not of rainfall** — The High Court's point is that the city floods every monsoon because storm runoff is sent into drains instead of into the aquifers, while buildings depend on private tubewells. The litigation since 2008 alleges that projects were approved without matching water supply and drainage. Recharge wells, permeable surfaces, protected natural drains and metering of tubewells are known solutions. The counter-view is that aquifer recharge in built-up areas is slow and prone to contamination, so it cannot replace piped surface water; both are needed.
- 4. A deficit season can still be a flood season, and planning must hold both ideas** — Odisha had a 29% excess after a 47% deficit in June, with at least 60 locations receiving more than 100 mm in 24 hours, and Uttar Pradesh received 66.5 mm in three days against 7.6 mm normal. The Hindu cites an Odisha University of Agriculture and Technology study finding that one-day and five-day rainfall bursts are becoming more common while heavy-rain days dip. This means the same monsoon can leave reservoirs short in one basin and cities underwater in another. Storage and drainage infrastructure designed for average rain will fail at both ends, which argues for capturing intense bursts in recharge and storage rather than draining them away.
- 5. El Niño explains part of the shortfall, not the management choices** — The Express names El Niño as one factor, and IMD had forecast about 90% of the LPA partly because an El Niño was expected, The Hindu notes. But a forecast in advance is also a warning in advance, and the right response is early adjustment of crop plans, reservoir release rules and urban supply. States that treated the forecast as a signal to conserve will have more water today than those that did not. Climate variability is a given; the losses depend on whether institutions act on the information they already have.

POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	“India’s water stress is as much a problem of storage and management as of rainfall.” Discuss with reference to reservoir storage at the end of the 2026 southwest monsoon and the groundwater situation in rapidly growing cities. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Cite the CWC report of September 24, 2026: 178 reservoirs at 70% of capacity against a decadal average of 76.62% and 79% last year, with all-India rainfall 12% short and drought declared in Maharashtra and Karnataka. 2. Body — the rainfall side — Explain the monsoon’s share of annual rain, the LPA-based classification, the role of El Niño and the southern region’s 23% deficit and 50% storage. Add the paradox of intense rain in Odisha and Uttar Pradesh within a deficient season. 3. Body — the management side — Use Gurugram: six of seven urban wells falling, the deepest at 50.30 metres, floods every monsoon because runoff is not recharged, approvals without water and drainage networks. Mention groundwater categories, the CGWA and State regulators, and Atal Bhujal Yojana and Catch the Rain. 4. Body — way forward — Suggest region-wise reservoir release rules prioritising drinking water, groundwater metering and regulation, mandatory recharge in urban planning, protection of natural drains, and crop-plan advisories based on seasonal forecasts. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that rainfall sets the supply, but storage, recharge and demand management decide whether a 12% deficit becomes a drought for households.
ADMINISTRATOR’S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are the District Collector of a southern district where the main reservoir is at half last year’s level. What are your first steps? Approach: I would convene the irrigation, drinking water and agriculture officers to prepare a month-by-month water budget until the next monsoon, with drinking water given first claim. I would advise farmers early to shift to shorter-duration or less water-intensive rabi crops, before sowing decisions are made. Tanker plans, repair of hand pumps and protection of drinking water sources would begin now rather than in April. Weekly public reporting of storage and releases would reduce rumours and disputes. Q2. As Commissioner of a city like Gurugram, how would you address both waterlogging and falling groundwater? Approach: I would map the natural drainage lines and clear encroachments on them, and require recharge structures in every large building and public space, checked through inspections. Stormwater drains would be designed to lead into recharge zones and ponds rather than only out of the city. I would push for metering and registration of private tubewells with the State water regulator. New building approvals would depend on a demonstrated water supply and drainage connection. Q3. An interview board asks: should India declare drought on the basis of rainfall alone? Approach: No. Rainfall is one indicator, but crop condition, soil moisture, reservoir storage and groundwater together show whether people and crops are actually in distress. A region with modest rainfall but full reservoirs may cope, while another with near-normal rain but depleted aquifers may not. Using several indicators makes declarations more accurate and less political. It also helps target relief where it is really needed.

6. Health & Life Sciences

Courts did the health ministry's thinking this week. The Supreme Court told the food regulator its labelling timeline was too slow, the Madras High Court kept a plastics warning the regulator wanted gone, and the Kerala High Court told the Centre that unaffordable patented cancer drugs are its problem to solve. The survey data on contraception shows the same pattern in a quieter form: policy has left the burden where it always was, on women.

6.1 Supreme Court Rejects FSSAI's Front-of-Pack Warning Timeline; Madras High Court Keeps the Micro/Nano-Plastics Warning

THE NEWS New Delhi and Chennai. The Supreme Court on Monday, September 28, questioned the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) over its timeline for front-of-pack warning labels on packaged foods high in sugar, salt and saturated fat, and reserved its order, saying it will set a "reasonable timeline". This follows the 24 September card on FSSAI's red-hexagon plan; what is new is that the court has rejected its pace. Front-of-pack labelling puts a simple nutrition signal on the front of a packet, instead of leaving the consumer to read the table on the back. Responding to the court's September 10 order, FSSAI's affidavit said the draft regulations needed a four-month consultation and finalisation, proposed notifying the norms by July 1 next year, and then gave food businesses 365 days to transition, The Hindu reports. The papers describe the same proposal differently: The Hindu calls it a timeline of "nearly two years", counting from now to the end of the transition, while The Economic Times focuses on why FSSAI needed "a year", the transition period after notification, and reports that the Bench termed the timeline "unreasonable". The Bench of Justices J.B. Pardiwala and K. Vinod Chandran asked: "Why voluntary compliance for a year? ... You started in 2022. What did you do in the last four years." Additional Solicitor General Brijender Chahar replied that the 2022 exercise concerned the Indian Nutrition Rating, a star-rating system, a different yardstick from warning labels. The court said its directions would be binding and kept the matter pending to monitor compliance. The petitioner, 3S and Our Health Society, through advocate Rajiv Shankar Dwivedi, objected to the distinction between added and total sugar and argued that labels should not wait for a definition of ultra-processed foods. Milind Deora, chairman of the parliamentary committee on subordinate legislation, told ET that six months to a year is "fair", but nutrition information should move to the front "now". Separately, Red Bull moved the Delhi High Court against FSSAI's July order, which does not recognise an 'energy drink' category and gave companies 90 days, to September 30, to drop the term; Red Bull says it got no show-cause notice or hearing. In Chennai, a special Division Bench of Justices N. Sathish Kumar and D. Bharatha Chakravarthy dismissed FSSAI's plea to review a February 6, 2026 order requiring water, sugar and salt in plastic packs to carry, in bold red letters, "This water/sugar/salt may contain micro/nano plastics." FSSAI argued research is inconclusive and the warning could cause "public panic"; the court said it had not found the products unsafe but wanted consumers to decide. The Supreme Court had dismissed FSSAI's appeal on May 18. The syllabus link is GS2 health and GS3 food processing and consumer protection.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Rising consumption of packaged foods high in sugar, salt and fat adds to India's non-communicable disease burden → FSSAI begins a front-of-pack exercise in 2022 around a star rating, which stalls → a PIL seeks warning labels and the Supreme Court orders progress on September 10 → FSSAI proposes notification by July 1 next year plus a 365-day transition → the Bench calls the timeline unreasonable and reserves an order that will bind the regulator

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. FSSAI is a statutory regulator whose labelling power comes from the 2006 Act** — The Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 consolidated earlier food laws, including the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1954, and created the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. Section 23 of the Act prohibits selling packaged food whose label does not carry the information required by regulations, and the Authority frames those regulations with the Centre's prior approval. The Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020 now govern what must be printed on packets, including the nutrition information table. Because these are regulations, that is delegated legislation, they are examined in Parliament by the Committees on Subordinate Legislation.
- 2. Warning labels and rating labels are two different philosophies** — HFSS foods are those high in fat, salt and sugar, which are linked to obesity, diabetes, hypertension and heart disease. A warning label, like the black octagons used in Chile and some

	other Latin American countries, flags only the nutrient that crosses a threshold, and tells the consumer what to avoid. A summary rating, like the Indian Nutrition Rating that FSSAI proposed in 2022 on the lines of health star systems, gives the whole product a score, which lets a product high in sugar still earn a respectable rating because of added fibre or protein. Public health groups prefer warnings because they are harder to game; industry has generally preferred ratings. FSSAI's red hexagon is a warning-style design. 3. The right to health and the directive on nutrition give courts their footing — The Supreme Court has repeatedly read the right to health into the right to life under Article 21. Article 47, a Directive Principle, makes it a primary duty of the State to raise the level of nutrition and to improve public health. The right to information about what one eats is also treated as part of consumer rights under the Consumer Protection Act, 2019. Courts use these to monitor regulators through continuing mandamus, keeping a case pending so that compliance can be reported, as the Bench has done here. 4. The precautionary principle explains the Madras High Court's stand on plastics — In Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996), the Supreme Court held that the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle are part of Indian environmental law, and that lack of scientific certainty is no reason to postpone measures against serious harm. Microplastics are plastic particles smaller than 5 mm, and nanoplastics are far smaller, small enough to cross biological barriers; their long-term effects on human health are still being studied. The Plastic Waste Management Rules, 2016 regulate plastic packaging and waste, but they do not deal with particles that shed into food. A warning that states uncertainty honestly is a light-touch precautionary measure.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS2 health and GS3 food processing both cover food regulation — Mains has asked about the challenges of food safety regulation in India and about the rise of non-communicable diseases. The front-of-pack debate is a clean example of a regulator, an industry and a court pulling in different directions, and the labels debate fits questions on consumer protection. 2. Prelims tests statutes, bodies and principles — UPSC has asked about FSSAI's parent ministry and about principles of environmental law. The Food Safety and Standards Act, the 2020 labelling regulations, the precautionary principle and the difference between micro and nanoplastics are all natural targets. 3. Governance and ethics questions use regulatory delay as a case — The court's question — what did you do in four years — raises regulatory capture, the influence of the regulated industry on the regulator. The energy-drink order, challenged for lack of a hearing, shows the other side: a regulator acting fast can be accused of violating natural justice.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India is a statutory body established under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, and functions under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare. ● Section 23 of the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 deals with the packaging and labelling of food. ● The Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations were notified in 2020. ● HFSS foods are foods high in fat, salt and sugar. ● Article 47 of the Constitution directs the State to regard raising the level of nutrition and the standard of living and improving public health among its

	primary duties. ● In Vellore Citizens' Welfare Forum v. Union of India (1996), the Supreme Court held that the precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle are part of the law of the land. ● Microplastics are generally defined as plastic particles smaller than 5 millimetres in size.
ANALYSIS	1. The two papers' timelines differ in framing, not in fact, and the framing matters — FSSAI proposed about four months to finalise rules, notification by July 1 next year and a 365-day transition. The Economic Times reports the court's objection to the one-year transition; The Hindu counts the whole path and calls it nearly two years. Both are accurate, and together they show why the court was impatient: a process begun in 2022 would reach consumers only in mid-2028 on FSSAI's plan. For a student, the lesson is to read timelines from the start of the process to the day a consumer sees the label, not from notification. 2. The star-rating detour explains four lost years — The Additional Solicitor General's answer that the 2022 exercise was about the Indian Nutrition Rating is a defence, but also an admission that the regulator spent years on a design that public health bodies opposed. A rating system averages good and bad nutrients, while a warning isolates the harmful one; the switch to red hexagons means the earlier consultation is of limited use. The court's scepticism about starting afresh is therefore understandable. The counter-view is that a new legal regime genuinely needs consultation, and skipping it would expose the regulation to challenge by industry, as the Red Bull case shows. 3. Deora's middle path is the most practical proposal on the table — Moving the existing back-of-pack nutrition figures to the front immediately costs little, since companies already have the data, and it gives consumers something now. A proper warning design can follow within the transition. This separates disclosure, which should not wait, from design, which can be refined. The petitioner's point that warnings should not wait for a definition of ultra-processed foods follows the same logic: a label on sugar and salt thresholds does not need that definition. 4. The plastics warning is uncomfortable because it says 'may' — FSSAI argues that a warning without proof of harm will cause panic, and that the study relied upon was only a review of other papers. The court's answer is that it has not declared the products unsafe; it has told consumers that the question exists. That is precisely what the precautionary principle permits: honest disclosure under uncertainty. The risk is warning fatigue, since if every product carries a hedge, consumers ignore all warnings, including the ones that matter. A better regulatory response would be for FSSAI to fund testing of Indian packaged water, sugar and salt, so that the label can soon say something firmer, one way or the other. 5. The energy-drink order shows speed without process is also a failure — FSSAI's July order says the category has no standards and that claims such as 'vitalises body and mind' mislead consumers, which is defensible on substance. But Red Bull's complaint that it received no show-cause notice or hearing goes to audi alteram partem, the rule that no one should be condemned unheard. A senior executive at one of the affected companies told ET that FSSAI had itself allowed energy drinks in 2024. A regulator that is slow on labels for everyone and abrupt on one category invites the charge of inconsistency, which weakens its authority in both.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	Front-of-pack warning labels on packaged foods have been under consideration in India since 2022. Discuss why the regulatory process has been slow and examine the role of the judiciary in pushing food regulation. What design would best serve Indian

	consumers? (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — State that on September 28, 2026 the Supreme Court termed FSSAI's timeline — notification by July 1 next year followed by a 365-day transition — unreasonable, and reserved an order that will bind the regulator. 2. Body — why it has been slow — Explain the shift from the Indian Nutrition Rating (2022) to red-hexagon warnings, industry concerns about stocks and supply chains, the added-versus-total sugar debate and the pending definition of ultra-processed foods. 3. Body — role of courts — Use Article 21, Article 47 and continuing mandamus. Add the Madras High Court's micro/nano-plastics warning and the precautionary principle from Vellore Citizens (1996). Note the risk of courts designing policy and the natural justice issue in the energy-drink case. 4. Body — best design — Argue for nutrient-specific warning labels on thresholds for sugar, salt and saturated fat, immediate front-of-pack disclosure as Mr. Deora suggests, protection for children through advertising limits, and testing to back any contaminant warnings. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that clear labels are a low-cost public health tool and that a regulator that sets and meets its own deadlines will not need courts to set them.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are the CEO of FSSAI after the Supreme Court's remarks. What would you do in the next 30 days? Approach: I would publish a draft of the warning-label regulation with thresholds immediately, using existing consultations as a base, so that the court sees movement rather than promises. In parallel I would require existing nutrition information to be shown on the front of pack as an interim step. I would meet industry on stock transition but set a firm date. Monthly public updates to the court and the public would rebuild credibility. Q2. As a district Designated Officer for food safety, how would you handle the micro/nano-plastics warning on local packaged water units? Approach: I would inform all licensed packaged drinking water units in the district of the High Court's order and the exact wording and colour required. Inspections would check compliance, starting with advice and moving to penalties for repeat violations. I would also collect samples for testing where laboratory capacity exists, so that the district has data rather than only warnings. Small units would get time and guidance rather than immediate prosecution. Q3. An interview board asks: is it right for courts to set timelines for regulators? Approach: Ordinarily, designing regulation is for the executive, which has the expertise and must consult stakeholders. But when a regulator has delayed for years on a matter affecting health under Article 21, a court is entitled to ask for reasons and fix a reasonable time. The court here is setting a deadline, not writing the label, which respects the separation of powers. The healthier outcome is regulators who meet their own timelines, making such orders unnecessary.

6.2 Kerala High Court: Centre May Invoke Patents Act Section 100 for Unaffordable Cancer Drugs

THE NEWS Kochi and New Delhi. The Kerala High Court held on Monday, September 28, that the government can intervene when patented medicines are prohibitively priced, and directed the Centre to collect nationwide data on the affordability of patented life-saving medicines and to assess whether existing price controls and subsidies are ensuring patient access, The Economic Times reports. The case concerned abemaciclib and ribociclib, two patented drugs used for HR-positive,

HER2-negative breast cancer, a type that accounts for around 55-60% of breast cancer cases in India. US drug maker Eli Lilly holds the patent for abemaciclib, and Swiss company Novartis supplies ribociclib. The court held that protecting public health is an important function of the government, and rejected a narrow reading that would confine “government use” to the government’s own departmental or institutional needs or to national security. Section 100 of the Patents Act, 1970 allows the government to make or use a patented invention for the purposes of government without the patent holder’s consent; ET explains that it allows the government to manufacture a patented drug and supply it on a non-commercial basis. According to advocate Maitreyi Sachidananda Hegde, the judgment establishes that when access to a patented medicine is compromised by an exorbitant price and government intervention is needed, Section 100 can be invoked, and that exorbitant cost is itself a ground. The court also rejected the argument of the pharmaceutical companies and the government that a generic version of palbociclib, an older drug of the same class available in India, could meet patients’ need, according to Chetali Rao of Third World Network. But the court left the decision to the government: the Centre must first collate data, decide whether a particular medicine is affordable, and then act under Section 100. It set no timeline. Arathi PM, a women’s rights activist and legal scholar, said denial of access to the two drugs has caused “a large number of avoidable deaths” and urged the Health Ministry to act immediately. K.M. Gopakumar of the Working Group on Access to Medicines and Treatments warned that leaving Section 100 to policy discretion keeps patients dependent on executive action. The access problem extends to rare diseases. In The Hindu, scientists of the Tata Institute for Genetics and Society write that India has reported 1,004 rare genetic disorders, that drugs exist for only about 5% of rare diseases, and that government support of up to ₹50 lakh per patient is often insufficient even for a year; almost 4,000 children are listed on a government crowdfunding platform, with a cumulative annual treatment cost above ₹9,000 crore. The syllabus link is GS2 on health and GS3 on intellectual property rights.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Patented targeted cancer drugs enter India at prices most patients cannot pay → generic alternatives exist only for an older drug, palbociclib → patients and activists approach the Kerala High Court → the court reads “government use” under Section 100 broadly to include unaffordability and orders nationwide data collection → the decision to invoke Section 100 now rests with the Centre, with no deadline

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The Patents Act gives the State several doors into a patent, each with a different key** — Section 84 of the Patents Act, 1970 allows any person to seek a compulsory licence from the Controller after three years from grant, on grounds that the reasonable requirements of the public are not met, that the invention is not available at a reasonably affordable price, or that it is not worked in India. Section 92 allows compulsory licences on a notification by the Centre in circumstances of national emergency, extreme urgency or public non-commercial use. Sections 99 to 103 deal with use of inventions for the purposes of government; Section 100 lets the Centre, or a person it authorises, use a patented invention for government purposes, and Section 102 allows the government to acquire a patent outright. Government use is the least used of these routes.
- 2. India’s first compulsory licence and its evergreening bar are global reference points** — In 2012 the Controller of Patents granted India’s first compulsory licence to Natco Pharma for Bayer’s kidney and liver cancer drug sorafenib tosylate (Nexavar), mainly on the ground that the drug was not available at a reasonably affordable price; the decision was upheld on appeal. Section 3(d) of the Act bars patents on new forms of known substances unless they show enhanced efficacy. In *Novartis AG v. Union of India* (2013), the Supreme Court upheld the rejection of a patent on the beta-crystalline form of imatinib mesylate (Gleevec) under Section 3(d). Together these have made India a leading example of using patent law flexibilities for public health.
- 3. TRIPS permits government use, and the Doha Declaration affirms it** — The WTO’s Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) requires members to grant 20-year product patents but, in Article 31, permits use of a patent without the holder’s authorisation, including by the government, subject to conditions such as adequate remuneration to the patent holder. For public non-commercial use, prior negotiation with the patent holder is not required. The Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health (2001) affirmed that TRIPS should be interpreted

	to protect public health and that each member may determine the grounds for compulsory licences. Section 100 is India's implementation of this flexibility. 4. Price control in India mostly bypasses patented drugs — The National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority, set up in 1997, fixes and enforces ceiling prices under the Drugs (Prices Control) Order, 2013, issued under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955. Ceiling prices apply to drugs in the National List of Essential Medicines, and newly patented drugs are generally not in it. The National Policy for Rare Diseases, 2021 provides financial assistance for treatment, which the Hindu article puts at up to ₹50 lakh per patient, and designates Centres of Excellence. For a patented cancer drug, therefore, the realistic levers are negotiation, bulk procurement, compulsory licensing or government use.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS3 asks about IPR and GS2 about access to health care — Mains questions have covered India's patent regime, Section 3(d), compulsory licensing and the tension between IPR and affordable medicines. This judgment adds a new element — a court reading government use broadly — that can be used in answers on TRIPS flexibilities. 2. Prelims tests the provisions and the international texts — UPSC has asked about TRIPS, patent terms and the WTO. Sections 3(d), 84, 92 and 100, the Doha Declaration and the NPPA's role are fair targets, as is the difference between a compulsory licence and government use. 3. Ethics and international relations questions frame it as North-South — The balance between rewarding innovation and ensuring access is a standard ethics dilemma. In IR, India's use of TRIPS flexibilities has been a friction point with the United States and the European Union, and the rare-disease proposal of benefit-sharing links to the WHO Pandemic Agreement debate.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● Section 100 of the Patents Act, 1970 empowers the Central Government to use a patented invention for the purposes of government without the consent of the patent holder. ● Under Section 84 of the Patents Act, 1970, a compulsory licence may be sought after three years from the grant of a patent, including on the ground that the patented invention is not available to the public at a reasonably affordable price. ● India's first compulsory licence was granted in 2012 to Natco Pharma for Bayer's cancer drug sorafenib tosylate. ● Section 3(d) of the Patents Act bars patents on new forms of known substances that do not result in enhanced efficacy; the Supreme Court applied it in the Novartis (Glivec) case in 2013. ● Article 31 of the TRIPS Agreement permits use of a patent without the authorisation of the right holder, including use by the government, subject to conditions such as adequate remuneration. ● The Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health was adopted in 2001. ● The Drugs (Prices Control) Order, 2013 is issued under the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 and is enforced by the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority.
ANALYSIS	1. The judgment's real contribution is interpretive, not operational — The court did not order the government to invoke Section 100; it removed the argument that it could not. By rejecting the narrow reading that confines government use to departmental needs or national security, it has made unaffordability a lawful ground. That changes the government's negotiating position with patent holders immediately, because a

credible threat of government use often lowers prices without being exercised. But until the Centre acts, no patient gets a cheaper tablet, which is why the absence of a timeline is the judgment's weakest point.

- 2. Rejecting palbociclib as a substitute puts clinicians, not accountants, in charge** — The companies and the government argued that a cheaper generic in the same class meets the need. The court's refusal to accept this means that therapeutic judgment about which drug a patient needs cannot be overridden simply because a cheaper cousin exists. The counter-view is that health systems everywhere use such substitution to manage budgets, and that differences in outcomes between these drugs are debated in the medical literature. The honest middle is a health technology assessment that compares benefit and cost openly, which India's process could formalise.
- 3. Government use is a quieter and possibly stronger tool than a compulsory licence** — A Section 84 licence requires a private applicant, a three-year wait and a quasi-judicial process that the patent holder can contest at every step. Government use is exercised by the State itself for non-commercial supply, for example through public hospitals, and TRIPS does not require prior negotiation for public non-commercial use. That makes it well suited to cancer drugs supplied through government programmes. The risk is diplomatic: trading partners and multinational firms treat such steps as a signal about the investment climate, and India has faced pressure after earlier compulsory licensing. The remuneration paid to the patent holder is the answer to the charge of expropriation.
- 4. Data collection is the right first step but can become a delaying device** — The court asked for nationwide affordability data, which is sensible, because a decision on government use should rest on evidence of prices, incomes and treatment gaps. But the rare-disease evidence in *The Hindu* shows how long patients wait: almost 4,000 children on a crowdfunding platform while the ₹50 lakh ceiling runs out within a year for many. A data exercise without a deadline can last longer than the patients it is meant to help. A time-bound assessment, reported to Parliament, would respect the court's deference while protecting patients.
- 5. Access needs both law and industrial policy** — Section 100 can make an existing drug cheaper, but it cannot create drugs for the roughly 95% of rare diseases that have none. The *Hindu* authors propose incentives modelled on the U.S. Orphan Drug Act of 1983, PLI-style support, advance market commitments through Centres of Excellence and Jan Aushadhi Kendras, and an Indian say in prices for the Global South through benefit-sharing. India's strength as a supplier of 47% of generic prescriptions in the U.S., per the article, is the base for this. Patent flexibilities and incentives for innovation are therefore complements, not opposites.

POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION

"The Patents Act, 1970 contains adequate flexibilities to secure affordable medicines, but they are rarely used." Critically examine this statement in the light of the Kerala High Court's ruling on Section 100 and India's TRIPS obligations. (15 marks, 250 words)

MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION

- 1. Introduction** — Cite the Kerala High Court's ruling of September 28, 2026 that exorbitant price is a ground for government use under Section 100, in a case on abemaciclib and ribociclib for HR-positive, HER2-negative breast cancer.
- 2. Body — the flexibilities** — Explain Sections 3(d), 84, 92 and 100 with *Natco v. Bayer* (2012) and *Novartis* (2013), and TRIPS Article 31 with the Doha Declaration (2001).
- 3. Body — why rarely used** — Discuss trade and investment pressure, lengthy processes, weak data on affordability, the reliance on price control through DPCO that does not reach patented drugs, and executive reluctance, visible in the absence of a timeline in this case.

	4. Body — way forward — Suggest a time-bound affordability assessment, transparent health technology assessment, pooled public procurement, use of Section 100 for supply through public hospitals with fair remuneration, and orphan-drug incentives for rare diseases. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that the law is adequate and now judicially clarified; what is missing is the administrative will to use it in a predictable, rule-based way that reassures innovators while protecting patients.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are a Joint Secretary in the Health Ministry tasked with the affordability assessment the court ordered. How do you design it? Approach: I would define affordability against household income and the cost of a full course of treatment, not the price of one strip. Data would come from public hospitals, insurance claims, cancer registries and the Department of Pharmaceuticals on prices and volumes. I would set a fixed period, say six months, and publish the method in advance so that companies and patient groups can comment. The report would recommend a specific action for each drug: negotiation, procurement, or Section 100. Q2. As head of a State cancer institute, patients cannot afford the two drugs. What can you do before the Centre acts? Approach: I would use State health funds and insurance schemes to cover the drugs for eligible patients and approach the companies for patient-assistance programmes and bulk-purchase discounts. I would document outcomes and costs to feed the national assessment. Where clinically appropriate, I would ensure patients at least get available generic alternatives rather than no treatment. I would also inform patients of the legal position without raising false hopes. Q3. An interview board asks: does using Section 100 discourage pharmaceutical innovation? Approach: It can, if used arbitrarily, because firms invest where they expect to recover research costs. But TRIPS itself provides for government use with adequate remuneration, and a clear, rule-based use of it for public non-commercial supply does not deny the innovator a return. Most innovation incentives come from rich markets, while patients in India are simply priced out today. Predictability — clear criteria and fair compensation — is the key to balancing both concerns.

6.3 NFHS-6: Men Still Carry Almost No Contraceptive Burden as WHO Sets Male-Method Benchmarks

THE NEWS New Delhi. The World Health Organization (WHO) has issued new guidelines on expanding contraceptive options and, for the first time, benchmarks for a new generation of reversible male contraceptives, a Data Point analysis in The Hindu by Bindu Shajan Perappadan and Nitika Francis reports. A chart note says WHO has developed its first “Target Product Profile” for male methods, setting out the safety, effectiveness, acceptability and affordability they should aim for. “Choice is a gender equality issue,” said Pascale Allotey, Director of WHO’s Department of Sexual, Reproductive, Maternal, Child and Adolescent Health and Ageing. WHO said its own research has challenged the assumption that men would not use new contraceptives. The timing matters for India, where fertility has fallen below the replacement level. The paper’s chart, drawing on Sample Registration System data, says India reached the National Population Policy 2000 goal of a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 2.0 in 2021 and that TFR fell to 1.9 in 2025. TFR is the average number of children a woman would bear over her lifetime at current rates. The National Family Health Survey-6 (NFHS-6) for 2023-24 shows unmet need for family planning among married women down one percentage point from NFHS-5 (2019-21). The share of currently married women aged 15-49 using any method rose from 66.7% to 69.1%, but modern methods fell from 56.4% to 52.7%, while traditional methods — mainly rhythm or fertility awareness and withdrawal — rose by six percentage points, from 10.3% to 16.4% per the chart, the largest change in any method between the two surveys. The survey does not establish why; the authors suggest concerns over side-effects, convenience, privacy, partner preferences, access and a wish to avoid

hormonal or invasive methods. Female sterilisation fell marginally from 37.9% to 36.5%, while male sterilisation was 0.5%, up from 0.3%. Over three decades, female sterilisation rose quickly between NFHS-1 and NFHS-3 and has stayed at about 36-38%; male sterilisation fell from 3.4% in NFHS-1 to 0.5%, though the chart plots the NFHS-1 figure as 3.5%. Male sterilisation rose in 22 States between the two surveys, but only Telangana, from 2% to 3.6%, rose by more than one percentage point, even though early low-fertility States might have been expected to do better. The authors note that male sterilisation is less invasive than female sterilisation and can be done under local anaesthesia, and conclude that as India moved to replacement-level fertility, vasectomy went from a visible component of family planning to a marginal one. They urge India to use the WHO guidelines to correct the gender imbalance. The syllabus link is GS1 on population and women's issues and GS2 on health.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

India starts a national family planning programme in 1952 and leans on sterilisation for decades → coercive vasectomy drives during the Emergency make male sterilisation politically toxic → policy shifts to women-centred, target-free services after Cairo 1994 → fertility falls below replacement, but women carry 36.5% sterilisation against men's 0.5% in NFHS-6 → WHO sets benchmarks for reversible male methods, reopening the question of shared responsibility

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. NFHS is India's main household survey on population and health** — The National Family Health Survey is conducted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare with the International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS), Mumbai, as the nodal agency. It is a large, representative survey that provides State- and district-level estimates on fertility, family planning, maternal and child health, nutrition and more. The first round was in 1992-93, and the fifth covered 2019-21. Unmet need for family planning refers to women who want to stop or delay childbearing but are not using any method.
- 2. India was the first country with a national family planning programme** — India launched its National Family Planning Programme in 1952, the first in the world. In the 1970s the programme became target-driven, and the forced sterilisations of the Emergency (1975-77), heavily targeted at men, created a lasting backlash against vasectomy. After the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, which moved global policy from demographic targets to reproductive rights and choice, India abandoned method-specific targets. The National Population Policy, 2000 set the aim of reaching replacement-level fertility and addressing unmet need for contraception.
- 3. Replacement fertility and the method mix explain the numbers** — Replacement-level fertility is a TFR of about 2.1 children per woman, the level at which a population replaces itself over the long run, ignoring migration. Modern methods include sterilisation, IUDs, oral pills, injectables and condoms; traditional methods such as rhythm and withdrawal have much higher failure rates. Tubectomy, female sterilisation, requires entry into the abdomen, while vasectomy, especially the no-scalpel technique, is a minor procedure under local anaesthesia with quicker recovery. The present reversible options for men are essentially limited to condoms, which is why the WHO benchmark on new male methods matters.
- 4. Government schemes widen choice, and India has researched a male injectable** — Mission Parivar Vikas was launched in 2016 to expand access to contraceptives in high-fertility districts. The basket of methods in the public system has been expanded to include the injectable contraceptive under the name Antara and the non-hormonal weekly pill Chhaya. RISUG, reversible inhibition of sperm under guidance, is an injectable male contraceptive developed in India and tested in trials supported by the Indian Council of Medical Research. The Sustainable Development Goals include universal access to sexual and reproductive health services, including family planning, under target 3.7.

WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)

- 1. GS1 covers population and women's issues; GS2 covers health** — Mains has asked about India's demographic transition, the demographic dividend and the gendered

	nature of social policy. The sterilisation gap, 36.5% for women against 0.5% for men, is a compact statistic for answers on patriarchy in health policy. 2. Prelims tests the institutions and definitions of demography — UPSC has asked about the TFR, the replacement level and the conduct of NFHS. The ICPD 1994, the 1952 programme, IIPS as the nodal agency and the meaning of unmet need are all fair targets. 3. Essay and ethics use family planning to discuss consent and coercion — The Emergency's sterilisation drives and later deaths in sterilisation camps are staple examples of how targets can override consent. The rise in traditional methods and the WHO emphasis on choice give a modern counterpoint about rights-based policy.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The National Family Health Survey is conducted under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, with the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, as the nodal agency. ● India launched a national family planning programme in 1952, the first country in the world to do so. ● The International Conference on Population and Development held in Cairo in 1994 shifted population policy from demographic targets to reproductive rights and choice. ● Replacement-level fertility corresponds to a Total Fertility Rate of about 2.1 children per woman. ● Unmet need for family planning refers to women who wish to stop or delay childbearing but are not using any method of contraception. ● No-scalpel vasectomy is a method of male sterilisation that can be performed under local anaesthesia. ● Sustainable Development Goal target 3.7 calls for universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services, including family planning.
ANALYSIS	1. A falling TFR has hidden an unfinished gender agenda — India's family planning success is usually measured by fertility, and by that measure it has succeeded, with TFR at 1.9 by the chart. But the method used to reach it has been overwhelmingly female sterilisation, at 36.5%, against 0.5% for men. A policy that achieves its demographic target by operating on women's bodies has succeeded on its own terms and failed on the terms of Cairo 1994. Now that the numbers no longer demand urgency, the state has room to pursue equity rather than targets. 2. The rise in traditional methods is a warning, not a triumph of choice — Traditional methods rose by six percentage points while modern methods fell from 56.4% to 52.7%. Rhythm and withdrawal have far higher failure rates, so this shift could mean more unintended pregnancies even as total use rises to 69.1%. The authors list side-effects, privacy and a wish to avoid hormonal or invasive methods as possible reasons, which point to a weakness in counselling and in the range of methods offered. The counter-view is that in a low-fertility, better-educated population, some couples choose these methods knowingly. Either way, the data call for better quality of care, not complacency. 3. The male sterilisation gap is social, not medical — The authors point out that vasectomy is less invasive and done under local anaesthesia, so medical risk does not explain why it fell from 3.4% to 0.5% over three decades. The explanations are social: fears about loss of strength or masculinity, the memory of coercion during the Emergency, and a health system whose front-line workers are women talking to women. Even Telangana, the best performer, reached only 3.6%. Changing this requires male health workers, messaging aimed at men and incentives that do not

	become coercion. 4. New male methods could matter more than new messaging — Decades of campaigns have not moved vasectomy numbers, which suggests that the problem is also the lack of reversible options for men apart from condoms. WHO's Target Product Profile gives developers a clear standard for safety, effectiveness, acceptability and affordability, which can speed up research and approval. India has its own candidate in RISUG, developed domestically, and could lead in bringing a male method to market. The caution is that a new method alone does not change who is expected to take responsibility, as the history of the condom shows. 5. Below-replacement fertility changes the policy question itself — With TFR at 1.9, the aim of family planning is no longer to reduce births but to let couples have the number of children they want, when they want them. That shifts attention to spacing methods, quality of care, reduction of unmet need among young and poor women, and male participation. It also brings new concerns, like ageing and regional divergence between low-fertility southern States and higher-fertility northern ones. A programme built on sterilisation targets is poorly suited to this new phase.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	"India has achieved replacement-level fertility, but the burden of contraception continues to rest on women." Discuss in the light of NFHS-6 findings. What steps can increase male participation in family planning? (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Cite NFHS-6 (2023-24): female sterilisation at 36.5% against male sterilisation at 0.5%, with TFR at 1.9 in 2025 per the SRS-based chart, and the WHO's new benchmarks for reversible male contraceptives. 2. Body — the evidence — Use the trend from NFHS-1 to NFHS-6: female sterilisation rising to 36-38%, male sterilisation falling from 3.4% to 0.5%, only Telangana crossing a one-point rise, modern methods falling from 56.4% to 52.7% and traditional methods rising. 3. Body — reasons — Explain social norms around masculinity, the Emergency's legacy, a women-centred delivery system, target-oriented history and the lack of reversible male methods beyond condoms. 4. Body — steps — Suggest male outreach workers, promotion of no-scalpel vasectomy, better counselling, an expanded basket of methods, support for research such as RISUG in line with WHO's Target Product Profile, and rights-based, non-coercive incentives. Link to SDG 3.7 and ICPD 1994. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that with fertility below replacement, family planning should now be judged on choice, quality and equity between partners rather than on numbers.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are a Chief Medical Officer in a district where male sterilisation is almost zero. What would you do? Approach: I would train and deploy male health workers and involve respected local men, such as those who have undergone vasectomy, to talk to men at workplaces and community gatherings. I would organise fixed-day no-scalpel vasectomy services at convenient facilities, with good counselling and follow-up. I would track complications and satisfaction to build trust. Any incentive would be modest and clearly voluntary, to avoid any appearance of coercion. Q2. As Mission Director of the National Health Mission in a State, how would you respond to the rise in traditional methods? Approach: I would first find out, through facility data and quick surveys, why couples

are avoiding modern methods, whether side-effects, lack of supplies or poor counselling. Then I would ensure a full basket of methods at every facility and train staff in counselling that respects choice. Follow-up visits for side-effects would be strengthened. The aim is not to force modern methods but to ensure couples choose with full information.

Q3. An interview board asks: should the government set targets for male sterilisation?

Approach: No. India's own history, especially during the Emergency, shows that targets lead to coercion and destroy trust in the health system for decades. Instead, the government should improve access, information and quality of male methods and measure success by choice and satisfaction. Monitoring the male share can be an indicator for review, but not a quota for workers to meet. A rights-based approach is both ethical and more effective in the long run.

7. Science & Technology

A machine learns only from what it is shown, and India's visual record of the 1980s shows mostly the households that could afford a camera. Today's story is about what happens when that old exclusion becomes the default setting of a popular AI tool. It is a governance question more than a technical one: India has chosen voluntary codes over binding rules, and caste bias is the clearest test of whether that choice works.

7.1 AI Image Models Reproduce Caste Bias as India's AI Rules Lean on Voluntary Codes and Self-Certification

THE NEWS New Delhi. Writing in The Hindu, workers' rights advocate Rejimon Kuttappan argues that India's craze for AI-generated '1980s' images carries a hidden caste bias, and that the government's light-touch approach to AI regulation lets it pass unexamined. Generative image models are software that produce pictures from a text prompt after learning patterns from millions of existing images. Retro-Bollywood portraits became the signature trend, and India became the No. 1 country for Google's Nano Banana image-generation model. The author asks where this aesthetic comes from. The source material, he says, is film stills, magazine spreads, studio portraits and family albums, and in the India of the 1980s all four belonged to households with money and standing, overwhelmingly savarna (upper-caste), urban or landed. He cites the Planning Commission's estimate that in 1983, 44.5% of Indians, some 323 million people, lived below the poverty line. Dalit and Adivasi lives were photographed, but mostly by others: the state for welfare files, activists after atrocities, and anthropologists. He opens with the Karamchedu massacre of July 17, 1985 in coastal Andhra Pradesh, where a dispute at a public drinking-water tank ended with six Madiga (Dalit) men killed, and which gave birth to the Andhra Pradesh Dalit Mahasabha. A model trained on such an archive, he writes, "reproduces the silence, and hardens it". Tests by MIT Technology Review found that GPT-5 chose the stereotypical answer in 80 of 105 sentences. A study at the ACM FAccT conference this year analysed 1,536 images from Gemini's image model, the engine behind Nano Banana, prompted with Indian names and no caste labels; caste surfaced anyway, through food, neighbourhood, work and worship. On policy, he notes that the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology's (MeitY) AI Governance Guidelines name bias and discrimination as risks but lean on voluntary codes and self-certification, and that the Centre has told the Rajya Sabha that no new "horizontal" AI law, meaning one law for all uses of AI, is needed at this stage. The ₹10,371-crore IndiaAI Mission subsidises "sovereign" models, and Union Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw has promised Indian-trained models free of "the bias of other models". A committee is reportedly drafting firmer rules. He asks MeitY and the IndiaAI Safety Institute to say publicly what is in the training data, who labelled it, whether a caste evaluation was done, and when it will be published. In The Indian Express, former ambassador to China Ashok K. Kantha argues that India's weight in the US-China AI contest will rest on compute, chips, models, datasets, talent and the ability to test frontier systems independently. The Economic Times reports that OpenAI lists India among countries whose national AI safety institutes could contribute to global standards. The syllabus link is GS3 on IT and emerging technology, and GS1 on caste.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Photography in 1980s India is largely a privilege of savarna, urban and landed households → the surviving visual archive shows Dalit and Adivasi lives mostly through welfare files and atrocity records → generative models trained on that archive learn the privileged view as 'normal' and link Dalit identity with dirt and menial work → a viral retro-image trend spreads the stereotype at mass scale → India's voluntary, self-certification approach to AI governance leaves no mandatory test for caste bias

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. Generative models learn statistical patterns, so they inherit the skew of their training data** — A generative AI model is trained on a very large collection of examples, such as images with captions, and learns which features tend to occur together; when prompted, it produces the most probable output given what it has seen. It has no understanding of fairness, so if a category of people appears rarely, or only in certain roles, the model reproduces that pattern as the default. Researchers distinguish historical bias (the data faithfully records past discrimination), representation bias (some groups are under-sampled) and label bias (the people who tag the data bring their own assumptions). Algorithmic bias is therefore not a coding error that can be patched once; it has to be measured through audits and evaluations designed for the specific society in which the model is used.

WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)

- 2. Articles 15 and 17 and the Atrocities Act make caste discrimination a constitutional wrong, not a matter of taste** — Article 15(1) bars the State from discriminating on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Article 15(2) goes further and forbids any disability or restriction on these grounds in access to shops, public restaurants, hotels, places of public entertainment, and the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats and roads maintained by the State or dedicated to public use, which is why the Karamchedu water-tank dispute is a constitutional story. Article 17 abolishes untouchability and forbids its practice in any form, and is enforced through the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955. The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 created specific offences and special courts for atrocities against SCs and STs.
- 3. India funds AI capacity through the IndiaAI Mission and has chosen guidelines over a new statute** — The Union Cabinet approved the IndiaAI Mission in March 2024 with an outlay of about ₹10,371.92 crore over five years, implemented by MeitY. Its pillars include subsidised access to computing capacity (GPUs), development of indigenous foundation models, a platform for non-personal datasets, support for AI start-ups and applications, skilling, and a 'Safe and Trusted AI' component. Under that component, MeitY announced an IndiaAI Safety Institute in January 2025 to work on standards, testing and risk assessment. The India AI Governance Guidelines released by MeitY in November 2025 took the position that existing laws such as the Information Technology Act, 2000 and the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 can address most AI harms for now, backed by voluntary commitments and institutional coordination rather than a separate AI law.
- 4. UNESCO's 2021 Recommendation and the EU AI Act are the two global reference points on AI fairness** — The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, adopted by its General Conference in November 2021, was the first global standard-setting instrument on AI ethics; it names fairness and non-discrimination, transparency and human oversight among its core principles and asks states to carry out ethical impact assessments. It is not binding. The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act, which entered into force in 2024, is binding and risk-based: it bans a few 'unacceptable-risk' uses, imposes strict duties on 'high-risk' systems, including data governance to examine training data for possible biases, and requires transparency such as labelling of AI-generated content. India's approach sits between the two: stated principles, but mostly voluntary compliance.
- 1. GS3 asks about IT, computers and the social effects of new technology** — The GS3 syllabus covers awareness in the fields of IT and computers and issues relating to intellectual property, and UPSC has repeatedly asked about the promise and risks of artificial intelligence in governance, health and security. The expected answer has moved from listing uses to weighing risks such as bias, privacy and accountability. This story gives a concrete Indian example of bias, which is exactly what most answers lack.
- 2. GS1 on caste and GS4 on fairness make this a cross-paper case study** — GS1 asks about the salient features of Indian society, social empowerment and the persistence of caste in new forms. GS4 case studies increasingly involve technology and fairness. A candidate who can explain how an old social exclusion re-enters society through an algorithm can use the same example in an essay on technology and equality.
- 3. Prelims tests India's AI institutions and constitutional anchors** — Questions on government missions and their ministries, and on Articles 15 and 17, are standard fare. The IndiaAI Mission, the IndiaAI Safety Institute and the UNESCO Recommendation are the natural Prelims targets from this story, alongside the difference between binding law and guidelines.

PRELIMS NUGGETS

- Article 15(2) of the Constitution prohibits any disability or restriction on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth in access to shops, public restaurants and places of public entertainment, and in the use of wells, tanks, bathing ghats and roads maintained by the State or dedicated to public use.
- Article 17 abolishes untouchability and forbids its practice in any form; the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 is the law that enforces it.
- The Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act was enacted in 1989.
- The IndiaAI Mission, approved by the Union Cabinet in March 2024, is implemented by the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology and includes a 'Safe and Trusted AI' pillar.
- The UNESCO Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, adopted in November 2021, is a non-binding global standard that includes fairness and non-discrimination among its principles.
- The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act follows a risk-based approach, prohibiting certain AI practices and imposing stricter obligations on high-risk systems.
- Algorithmic bias refers to systematic and repeatable errors in an automated system that produce unfair outcomes for particular groups, often because of skewed or unrepresentative training data.

ANALYSIS

- 1. This is bias by omission, and ordinary safety filters are not built to catch it** — Most AI safety work in content moderation looks for toxic output: slurs, violence, explicit material. The problem the author describes is quieter. When a prompt for a 1980s family returns only upper-caste settings, nothing offensive has been produced, yet a whole population has been left out of the picture of the past. Filters cannot flag an absence. Catching it needs representational audits, in which a model is tested with prompts across names, regions and occupations and its outputs are compared systematically, as the FAccT study did. That is a measurement task a public institution such as the Safety Institute is well placed to standardise.
- 2. 'Sovereign' models will not be bias-free by default; they may be more caste-aware in the wrong way** — The Minister's promise that Indian-trained models will not carry the bias of other models assumes the problem is foreign data. But an Indian model trained on Indian films, matrimonial advertisements, news archives and social media may learn caste signals more precisely, because those sources are full of them. Local training is an opportunity only if the data is deliberately curated to include under-represented languages and communities, and if results are tested. Without a published evaluation, the claim cannot be checked, which is the author's point when he asks which bias and tested how.
- 3. Disclosure mandates are a middle path between a heavy AI law and pure self-certification** — The government's case for guidelines is reasonable: a sweeping horizontal law could burden start-ups, lag behind the technology and duplicate the IT Act and data protection law. But self-certification means the firm marks its own homework. The author's four questions point to a lighter tool: mandatory public disclosure of what data a model was trained on, who labelled it and what fairness tests were run, for models used at scale or by the government. Disclosure does not dictate design, yet it lets researchers, courts and users hold firms to account. The counter-view is that training data is commercially sensitive, which can be handled by disclosure to a regulator rather than to the public.
- 4. The invisible labeller is part of the problem and part of the solution** — Data labelling, often done by workers paid per task, decides what a model considers 'Indian enough'

	or 'normal'. If labellers have never seen a basti or a colony, they cannot recognise when a model misrepresents it. This connects AI fairness to labour policy: the composition, training and pay of the labelling workforce shape output quality. Requiring diverse evaluation panels, including Dalit and Adivasi reviewers, for models deployed in public services would be a practical step. It also creates skilled work in regions and communities that the AI economy has so far bypassed. 5. Kantha's case for building at home is also a case for controlling whose values are built in — Kantha argues from geopolitics: India should avoid dependence on either the American or the Chinese AI stack and build compute, models, datasets and independent testing capacity. The caste-bias debate supplies a social reason for the same conclusion. A country that only imports models also imports the evaluation choices of their makers, who have no reason to test for caste. Independent testing capacity is therefore not only a security asset but a guarantee that Indian constitutional values, including Articles 15 and 17, can be checked against the machines Indians use.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	"Artificial intelligence does not invent social prejudice; it inherits it and scales it." Examine this statement with reference to caste bias in generative AI models in India. Suggest a regulatory approach that protects equality without stifling innovation. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Open with the retro-1980s AI image trend and the finding, cited in The Hindu, that caste surfaced in 1,536 images from Gemini's image model even without caste labels, while GPT-5 chose stereotypes in 80 of 105 sentences in MIT Technology Review tests. 2. Body — how bias is inherited — Explain training data in plain terms and the three sources of bias: a historical archive dominated by privileged households, under-representation of Dalit and Adivasi lives, and labellers' assumptions. Use the Karamchedu example and Article 15(2) to show why this touches constitutional equality. 3. Body — current Indian approach — Describe the IndiaAI Mission (₹10,371 crore), the IndiaAI Safety Institute and MeitY's guidelines relying on voluntary codes and self-certification. Give the government's rationale: avoiding premature regulation and using existing laws. 4. Body — a balanced regulatory design — Propose mandatory disclosure of training data sources and fairness evaluations for large or government-used models, India-specific bias benchmarks set by the Safety Institute, diverse labelling and evaluation panels, and funding for community archives as data. Contrast with the EU's risk-based law and UNESCO's non-binding principles. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that India does not need a heavy AI statute to address caste bias, but it does need binding transparency and public testing, because a promise of fairness that cannot be checked is not a safeguard.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You head a State's e-governance department, which plans to use a generative AI tool to create images and text for welfare campaigns. What checks would you put in place? Approach: Before deployment I would ask the vendor to disclose the model's training data sources and any fairness evaluations it has run. I would have a diverse internal panel, including officers from the SC/ST welfare department, test the tool with prompts about different communities and occupations. All public-facing output would pass human review before release. The procurement contract would carry a clause allowing

termination if the tool is found to produce discriminatory content.

Q2. As an officer at the IndiaAI Safety Institute, how would you design a caste-bias evaluation?

Approach: I would build a benchmark of prompts using names, surnames, regions, occupations and everyday scenes, and measure how outputs differ across groups, following the method of the published academic studies. Community organisations and social scientists would help design and validate it. The results for models used by government would be published. Repeating the test on every major update matters, because models change quickly.

Q3. An interview board asks: is it fair to blame a machine for a society's prejudice?

Approach: The machine is not morally responsible, but the people who build and deploy it are, because they choose the data and decide whether to test it. A biased human decision affects one case; a biased model repeats the same error millions of times. So the standard for deployment should be higher, not lower. The remedy is to treat bias testing as a routine part of building AI, not as an afterthought.

8. Society

Both stories today are about public space and the trust that holds it together. In Delhi, the Supreme Court has decided that statements of concern are no substitute for lit parks and patrolled roads. In Ujjain and Punjab, fake videos and unverified messages turned ordinary grievances into violence within hours. In each case the failure lies with institutions, not with the people who were afraid.

8.1 Supreme Court Takes Suo Motu Cognisance of Delhi-NCR Sexual Violence, Orders Four-Week Safety Audit

THE NEWS New Delhi. The Supreme Court on Monday, September 28, took suo motu cognisance of a spate of sexual assault cases against women and minors in the Delhi-National Capital Region (NCR), and directed the Delhi Police to identify vulnerable pockets, step up patrolling and audit lighting and CCTV coverage in public spaces within four weeks, the three papers report. Suo motu means the court acted on its own, without a petition; The Economic Times reports that it directed its registry to register a public interest litigation (PIL). What is new since this magazine's cards of September 24 and 28 is binding judicial direction. A Bench of Justices J.B. Pardiwala and K. Vinod Chandran noted recent cases at Astha Kunj park near Lady Shri Ram College, at Swaroop Nagar, and on a bus that travelled nearly 47 km from Greater Noida to Kashmere Gate without being stopped at a single police picket, The Hindu reports. The court said it could not help but "draw painful parallels" with the 2012 Nirbhaya case. The incidents, it said, "starkly underline" a failure of law enforcement and civil administration to guarantee basic public safety. "The right to live with dignity, free from the fear of violence, is an intrinsic facet of the fundamental guarantee of life and personal liberty enshrined under Article 21," the Bench held; parks, roads, buses and Metro stations cannot become "zones of high risk" due to "grossly inadequate illumination", poor surveillance or lax patrolling. It noted that earlier harassment complaints by Lady Shri Ram College students "failed to serve as a wake-up call". "Expressing solidarity is not the solution to this social evil. What is required is a measurable response, with responsibility and accountability fixed," it said. Interim directions, per The Indian Express: the Delhi High Court is to assign the cases to a designated fast-track special court, with trials concluded preferably within a year; Police Commissioner Anurag Kumar is to form dedicated teams in each police district, headed by an officer not below Deputy Superintendent of Police, to survey vulnerable pockets and prepare district-wise vulnerability maps shared across adjoining police stations; non-functional CCTV and lights are to be restored, and new ones installed wherever citizens report gaps. The police must file a detailed response. The same day, Delhi University women students marched demanding functioning Internal Complaints Committees, street lighting and better transport; The Hindu counts at least 3,000, while The Indian Express calls it the third and largest protest in a week. In an Indian Express op-ed, Mitali Nikore of Nikore Associates notes that ₹5,846.08 crore of the ₹7,712.85 crore allotted under the Nirbhaya Fund was used between 2015 and 2025 and that women are about 10% of the police against the Centre's 33% target. The syllabus link is GS1 (women's issues) and GS2 (rights and the judiciary).

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

The 2012 Nirbhaya case leads to tougher criminal law, the Nirbhaya Fund and safety audits → audits multiply but the gaps they find, such as dark lanes and broken cameras, are not fixed → students' complaints near Lady Shri Ram College go unheeded → a cluster of assaults in parks and on a bus crossing 47 km unchecked exposes the gap → the Supreme Court takes suo motu cognisance and fixes a four-week, measurable duty on the Delhi Police

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. Suo motu PIL grew out of the Supreme Court's decision to relax the rules of who may approach it** — Article 32 gives every person the right to move the Supreme Court for the enforcement of fundamental rights, and the Court may issue directions, orders or writs for that purpose. From the late 1970s the Court relaxed the rule of locus standi, allowing public-spirited persons to litigate for those unable to do so, and began treating letters and news reports as petitions, known as epistolary jurisdiction; S.P. Gupta v. Union of India (1981) is the leading judgment on the widened standing. Taking suo motu cognisance of news reports is the furthest extension of this idea. Article 142 allows the Court to pass any order necessary for doing complete justice, which underpins detailed interim directions such as vulnerability maps and audits.
- 2. Article 21 includes the right to live with dignity, and the State has positive duties to secure it** — In Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi (1981),

	the Supreme Court held that the right to life under Article 21 includes the right to live with human dignity, and not mere animal existence. Later judgments read Article 21 as imposing positive obligations on the State, not merely a duty not to interfere. Article 15(3) permits the State to make special provisions for women and children, which covers measures such as women's help desks and reserved transport. Article 51A(e) makes it a fundamental duty of every citizen to renounce practices derogatory to the dignity of women. 3. The Vishaka guidelines became the POSH Act, which is why students ask for Internal Complaints Committees — In <i>Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan</i> (1997), the Supreme Court used Articles 14, 15, 19 and 21, and India's obligations under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), to lay down binding guidelines on sexual harassment at the workplace in the absence of a law. Parliament replaced them with the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, which requires every employer with ten or more employees to set up an Internal Committee, and the District Officer to set up a Local Committee for other cases. For universities and colleges, the University Grants Commission's 2015 regulations extend the redressal system to women students. Vishaka is also the classic example of the Court filling a legislative gap, which is what the present case attempts for public safety. 4. Police reform directions and delivery schemes already exist; implementation is the weak link — In <i>Prakash Singh v. Union of India</i> (2006), the Supreme Court directed States to set up State Security Commissions, give the DGP a minimum tenure, separate investigation from law-and-order work, and create Police Establishment Boards and Police Complaints Authorities; compliance remains uneven. 'Police' and 'public order' are State List subjects, though in Delhi the police report to the Union Home Ministry. The Nirbhaya Fund, created in 2013, finances Safe City projects, One Stop Centres and women's help desks, and the Fast Track Special Courts scheme had 775 courts functioning as on April 30, 2026, against 790 sanctioned, per the Union government. The Supreme Court's order does not create new institutions; it asks existing ones to show measurable results.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS1 on women's issues and GS2 on the judiciary meet in this case — The GS1 syllabus covers the role of women and issues relating to women, and GS2 covers the functioning of the judiciary and mechanisms for the protection of vulnerable sections. Questions on women's safety have asked why laws passed after 2012 have not reduced crime; this case supplies the answer that enforcement, not law, is the gap. 2. Judicial activism versus judicial overreach is a recurring Mains theme — UPSC has repeatedly asked candidates to examine PIL and judicial activism. A court ordering police patrol patterns and CCTV audits is a live example, and a good answer will weigh the court's constitutional duty under Article 21 against the separation of powers. 3. Prelims draws on the landmark cases and statutes behind women's safety — Vishaka, the POSH Act and its committees, Article 15(3) and the Nirbhaya Fund are frequent Prelims material. Composition and thresholds, such as the ten-employee rule for an Internal Committee, are the kind of detail that is tested.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● Under Article 32, the Supreme Court can issue directions, orders or writs for the enforcement of fundamental rights, and Article 142 empowers it to pass any decree or order necessary for doing complete justice. ● In <i>Francis Coralie Mullin v. Administrator, Union Territory of Delhi</i> (1981), the Supreme Court held that the right to life under Article 21 includes the right to live with human dignity.

	● Article 15(3) enables the State to make special provisions for women and children. ● The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 requires every employer with ten or more employees to constitute an Internal Committee. ● The guidelines on sexual harassment at the workplace were laid down by the Supreme Court in Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1997). ● Renouncing practices derogatory to the dignity of women is a fundamental duty under Article 51A(e). ● In Prakash Singh v. Union of India (2006), the Supreme Court directed the creation of State Security Commissions and Police Complaints Authorities.
ANALYSIS	1. The court has converted a moral outrage into an administrative checklist, and that is its real value — Earlier responses to such crimes were statements, new laws and higher punishments. This order does something plainer: it names an officer rank, a deadline of four weeks, a map, an audit and a report. Measurable duties are harder to evade than expressions of concern, which is the Bench's own point about solidarity. The test will be whether the court keeps the case alive through follow-up hearings, since one-time directions tend to fade once the news cycle moves on. 2. Safety audits have become an end in themselves; the order must be judged by repairs, not reports — Mitali Nikore's argument is that administrations count audits but not fixes; everyone knew of the 500-metre dark zone behind Lady Shri Ram College. The Supreme Court's interim order asks for another audit, which risks repeating the ritual. The difference can come from publication: if vulnerability maps and repair status are made public, residents and students can check whether a reported dark stretch was lit. A court that asks for citizens' reports of inadequate lighting has opened that door, and the Delhi administration should walk through it. 3. The bus that crossed 47 km unchecked shows that policing is organised by jurisdiction, while crime is not — Greater Noida is in Uttar Pradesh and Kashmere Gate in Delhi, and a bus moving between them crosses several police jurisdictions. The court's demand that vulnerability maps be shared across adjoining police stations goes to this weakness: information about habitual offenders and recurring patterns stays within station boundaries. The NCR needs shared data and joint patrolling across State lines. Because Delhi Police reports to the Union Home Ministry while neighbouring districts report to State governments, coordination depends on an institutional mechanism, not goodwill. 4. Money was not the only problem; capacity and women's presence in public jobs matter as much — Roughly three-quarters of the Nirbhaya Fund was spent between 2015 and 2025, per Nikore, so under-spending is part of the story but not all of it. Free bus travel in at least eight States has substituted for investment in safe walking routes and predictable waits. More women in visible public jobs, such as bus drivers, conductors and police, change who occupies public space after dark; Delhi's cut in the height requirement for drivers brought in 34 women drivers. Women at about 10% of the police against a 33% target is a structural gap no audit can fix. 5. Counter-view: the court is running the police, and that has limits — Ordering patrol hours and CCTV installation is executive work, and courts lack the staff and expertise to supervise it. The separation of powers argument is serious, and continuous judicial management can let elected authorities avoid responsibility. The answer is that the court has acted only after repeated administrative failure and has framed its orders as interim, asking authorities to report their own plans. Its intervention is justified to the extent it enforces accountability without trying to design policing itself.

POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	“Expressions of concern, devoid of accountability, fall short of answering the larger institutional question.” In light of the Supreme Court’s suo motu intervention on sexual violence in Delhi-NCR, discuss why legal reforms since 2013 have not made public spaces safe for women, and suggest measures to fix accountability. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — State that on September 28, 2026 a Bench of Justices J.B. Pardiwala and K. Vinod Chandran took suo motu cognisance of recent sexual assaults in Delhi-NCR, drew parallels with the 2012 Nirbhaya case and held that freedom from the fear of violence is part of Article 21. 2. Body — what changed after 2013 — Mention the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2013, the POSH Act, 2013, the Nirbhaya Fund, fast-track special courts and women’s help desks. Note that the law and money exist, with ₹5,846.08 crore of ₹7,712.85 crore of the Nirbhaya Fund used in 2015-2025. 3. Body — why it has not worked — Explain audits without repairs, jurisdiction-bound policing across NCR, low share of women in the police, substitution of free transport for safe infrastructure, ignored prior complaints near Lady Shri Ram College, and uneven implementation of Prakash Singh reforms. 4. Body — fixing accountability — Suggest public vulnerability maps and repair tracking, named officers with deadlines, shared crime data across NCR, functioning Internal Complaints Committees in colleges, more women in police and transport jobs, and continuing judicial review of compliance. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that women’s safety is now a question of measurable delivery, and that the court’s order will matter only if it produces lit streets and working cameras, not another round of audits.
ADMINISTRATOR’S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. You are a Deputy Commissioner of Police in a Delhi district, told to prepare a vulnerability map within four weeks. How do you go about it? Approach: I would combine crime data, emergency call records and complaints from colleges and resident groups with a physical walk-through of parks, bus stops and isolated stretches at night, including women officers and students. Each identified spot would get a specific fix, an owner agency and a deadline, whether lighting, a camera, a patrol or a help point. I would share the map with neighbouring stations and districts. A public version would let citizens report whether fixes have been made. Q2. As the Principal of a women’s college whose students had earlier complained of harassment nearby, what would you do now? Approach: I would ensure the Internal Complaints Committee is properly constituted and that students know how to reach it. I would formally write to the police and municipal authorities listing the unsafe stretches, and follow up in writing until they are fixed. Regular meetings with the local police station and student representatives would keep the issue alive. I would not respond by restricting students’ movement, because safety cannot mean confinement. Q3. An interview board asks: should courts be directing how police patrol a city? Approach: Ideally no, because policing is an executive function and courts are not equipped to manage it day to day. But when repeated failures threaten a fundamental right, the court has a constitutional duty to act. The best judicial orders set outcomes and deadlines and leave the method to the executive, which is broadly what this interim order does. The long-term answer is stronger internal accountability in the police, so that courts do not need to step in.

8.2 AI-Made Fake Videos and Unverified Messages Trigger Clashes in Ujjain and Violence at Two Punjab Universities

THE NEWS Ujjain and Jalandhar. Rumours on social media, including AI-generated videos, set off violence in two States, The Indian Express reports. In Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, clashes broke out on Monday, September 28, between police and a crowd over the removal of a portion of the Shahi Masjid that falls along a road being widened ahead of the 2028 Simhastha, the Kumbh fair held in Ujjain. The Madhya Pradesh High Court had approved the partial demolition on September 9. The Ujjain Municipal Corporation said road-widening had affected about 80 religious places, and portions of 10 temples and a mosque had already been removed; Chief Minister Mohan Yadav had demolished structures outside his ancestral home. Police mobilised 2,500 personnel, and after night-long talks the City Qazi said the matter had been resolved by mutual agreement. On Monday morning stones were pelted, and police used tear gas and lathicharge. Police say a disgruntled faction of the mosque committee mobilised the crowd and some younger members were misled by AI-generated videos that falsely showed the structure being demolished. "One of these videos included a JCB demolishing the entire mosque, which was completely false," Superintendent of Police Pradeep Sharma said. By afternoon the High Court, hearing a writ appeal, was told the Muslim side had agreed to cooperate and disposed of the petition; by evening committee members were themselves demolishing the portion. Police have registered five FIRs against five social media pages or influencers, arrested 15 people, reported more than 100 Instagram accounts, and registered an FIR on the City Qazi's complaint. The row is also a dispute between two factions over who administers the mosque's Waqf property. In Punjab, within about 27 hours and 140 km, two private universities saw protests triggered by unverified claims. At Chitkara University in Rajpura, Patiala, hundreds of students gathered late on September 25 after posts claimed two girl students were missing; police vehicles were damaged. At about 2 a.m. on September 27, a message at Lovely Professional University (LPU), Phagwara, claimed a student had been raped in a girls' hostel; the protest turned into arson and vandalism, and students blocked National Highway-44. A senior officer told the IE there was so far no evidence for the claims at either university; checks at Chitkara found no missing student. The Hindu reports that police registered an FIR against unknown persons and set up a special investigation team at LPU, that the university suspended classes for 10 days, and that three women students said LPU posted a video of them dismissing the rape claim without their consent. The syllabus link is GS3 on the role of social media in internal security and GS1 on communalism.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

A development project, road-widening for the 2028 Simhastha, touches religious structures, and a Punjab campus carries old student grievances → a local dispute over authority or administration creates a group ready to believe the worst → AI-generated videos or unverified messages supply a false trigger within hours → crowds gather faster than officials can verify or explain → stone-pelting, arson and highway blockades follow, and police respond with FIRs against pages and influencers after the damage is done

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The IT Act gives the government blocking powers and makes platforms' legal immunity conditional** — Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 lets the Union government direct the blocking of online content in the interest of sovereignty and integrity, security of the State, public order, or to prevent incitement to a cognisable offence, following the procedure in the 2009 Blocking Rules. Section 79 gives intermediaries such as social media platforms 'safe harbour' from liability for users' content, provided they observe due diligence and act on lawful orders. The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 spell out that due diligence. Per a PIB release, amendments notified on February 10, 2026 require platforms to ensure clear labelling and traceable metadata for permissible AI-generated content and to remove unlawful content within three hours of a court order.
- 2. Shreya Singhal drew the line between free speech and online incitement** — In *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015), the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the IT Act, which punished 'grossly offensive' or 'menacing' online messages, as vague and violative of Article 19(1)(a). The Court held that only speech amounting to incitement, not mere discussion or advocacy, can be restricted on grounds of public order under Article 19(2). It upheld Section 69A because it carries procedural safeguards and reasoned orders. It also read Section 79 to mean that a platform must take down content only on a court order or government notification, not on private complaints.

	alone. 3. The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita punishes rumour-mongering and promoting enmity — The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 (BNS), which replaced the Indian Penal Code from July 1, 2024, carries forward the offence of making or circulating statements, false information, rumours or reports with intent to cause public mischief or to incite one group against another; this is Section 353, the successor of Section 505 of the IPC, and it now expressly covers electronic means. Section 196 of the BNS, the successor of Section 153A of the IPC, punishes promoting enmity between groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, language and similar grounds. Section 103(2) of the BNS makes murder by a group of five or more persons on grounds such as race, caste, community, sex or personal belief a distinct offence, which is how the new code addresses mob lynching. 4. Tehseen Poonawalla set out duties for district administrations against mob violence — In <i>Tehseen S. Poonawalla v. Union of India</i> (2018), the Supreme Court held that the State has a duty to prevent mob violence and lynching, and issued preventive, remedial and punitive directions. States were to appoint a senior police officer, not below the rank of Superintendent of Police, as nodal officer in each district, identify areas prone to such incidents, and act against the dissemination of irresponsible and explosive messages on social media. The Court said police officers who fail to act would face departmental action. These directions remain the template for district-level preparedness against rumour-driven violence.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS3 names social media as an internal security challenge — The GS3 syllabus explicitly lists challenges to internal security through communication networks and the role of media and social networking sites in internal security challenges. UPSC has asked about the role of social media in spreading communal tension and the regulation of fake news. AI-generated video is the newest form of the same problem. 2. GS1 covers communalism and GS4 covers the ethics of information — GS1 includes communalism, regionalism and secularism, and GS4 case studies often place an officer in a tense situation fuelled by rumour. This story gives a model of good practice, early negotiation and verification, as well as a model of failure, where officials were a step behind the rumour. 3. Prelims tests the IT Act and the landmark free-speech cases — Sections 66A, 69A and 79 of the IT Act and the <i>Shreya Singhal</i> judgment are frequent Prelims material. The 2026 labelling amendment for AI-generated content is a likely new question.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● Section 69A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 empowers the Union government to direct the blocking of public access to online information on grounds including sovereignty, security of the State and public order. ● Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 provides conditional 'safe harbour' to intermediaries for third-party content, subject to due diligence. ● In <i>Shreya Singhal v. Union of India</i> (2015), the Supreme Court struck down Section 66A of the Information Technology Act as unconstitutional. ● In <i>Tehseen S. Poonawalla v. Union of India</i> (2018), the Supreme Court directed States to designate a nodal officer, not below the rank of Superintendent of Police, in each district to prevent mob violence. ● The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 replaced the Indian Penal Code, 1860 with effect from July 1, 2024. ● Section 196 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 punishes promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence

	and language.
ANALYSIS	1. The rumour did not create the grievance; it weaponised one that already existed — In Ujjain there was a genuine dispute: a road project affecting some 80 religious places and a quarrel between two factions over control of the mosque's Waqf property. At the Punjab universities, officers speak of a growing discord between students and managements. A fake video works only on people already primed to distrust. That means the first defence is not technology but the credibility of institutions: an administration that explains its decisions openly and in advance leaves less room for a false story. 2. Ujjain shows that consultation works, but only if it reaches everyone before the rumour does — The Ujjain administration did several things right. It obtained a court order, showed even-handedness by removing temple portions and the Chief Minister's own ancestral structures, and negotiated through the night until the City Qazi announced agreement. Yet a section of young people, reached by a video rather than by the negotiators, came out anyway. Agreements made with community leaders must be communicated directly to the wider public, including through the same social media channels, at the same speed as the rumour. 3. FIRs after the event are necessary but cannot be the main tool — Five FIRs, 15 arrests and more than 100 reported accounts signal that spreading such content has consequences. But criminal law acts after the violence. Prevention needs rapid verification: police social media cells that can issue a clear denial, with evidence, within the hour, and platforms obliged to act quickly on AI-generated content that incites violence. The February 2026 amendments requiring labelling and faster takedown help, but a labelled fake still spreads in closed messaging groups where labels are easily stripped. 4. Campus riots show that institutional silence feeds rumour, and institutional spin feeds it too — Students at Chitkara demanded CCTV footage and answers; at LPU the message alleged that the university ignored complaints. When institutions are seen as opaque, students believe the worst. LPU's response, posting a video of three women students dismissing the claim without their consent, deepened the problem by violating their dignity and privacy. The right approach is a standing, trusted grievance mechanism with student representation and police verification that is quick and transparent, not public relations. 5. Counter-view: tough speech policing can chill legitimate protest — Aggressive action against 'rumour' can slide into punishing criticism, and Shreya Singhal warned against vague offences. Students raising safety concerns and communities questioning a demolition are exercising legitimate rights. The line must be drawn at knowingly false content that incites violence, like a fabricated video of a full demolition, not at protest or criticism itself. Precision in charging, and procedural safeguards in blocking, protect both public order and free speech.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	"AI-generated misinformation has shortened the distance between a rumour and a riot." Discuss with reference to recent incidents. What legal, technological and administrative measures can prevent rumour-driven violence without curtailing free speech? (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Cite the Ujjain clash of September 28, 2026, where police said AI-generated videos falsely showed a mosque being fully demolished, and the Chitkara and LPU campus violence triggered by claims that police say were unsupported by evidence so far. 2. Body — why rumours now lead to violence faster — Explain realistic AI video, closed

messaging groups, pre-existing grievances such as land, Waqf administration or campus discord, and slow official communication. Note that the violence came within hours of the trigger.

3. **Body — the legal framework** — Cover Sections 69A and 79 of the IT Act, the IT Rules 2021 and the February 2026 labelling and three-hour takedown amendments, BNS Sections 196 and 353, and Tehseen Poonawalla directions. Mention Shreya Singhal as the free-speech limit.
4. **Body — administrative and technological measures** — Suggest district rapid-response verification cells, pre-emptive communication of agreements and decisions, community and student grievance forums, platform cooperation, digital literacy, and nodal officers under Tehseen Poonawalla. Stress precise charges to protect legitimate protest.
5. **Conclusion** — Conclude that the best defence against a fake story is a trusted institution that tells the true one first, backed by narrow, well-defined law.

ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH

Q1. As District Magistrate, you are about to carry out a court-approved partial demolition of a religious structure for a road project. How do you prepare?

Approach: I would meet all factions and community leaders well in advance, explain the court order and show that structures of all faiths along the route are treated alike. I would put out the facts, with photographs and maps of exactly what will be removed, on official social media before the work starts. A police cyber cell would monitor for fake content and issue rapid, evidence-based denials. I would plan force deployment but let the community itself carry out the work where it is willing, as happened in Ujjain.

Q2. You are the Senior Superintendent of Police and a message about a crime in a university hostel is spreading at 2 a.m. What do you do?

Approach: I would send senior officers to the campus immediately, meet student representatives and start a visible, time-bound verification with the university, including the hostel and any CCTV footage. I would share whatever can be shared publicly without exposing any student's identity. Blocking a national highway cannot be permitted, but force should be the last resort. If the claim is found to be false, the source should be traced; if true, the case should be registered without delay.

Q3. An interview board asks: should the government be allowed to decide what is fake news?

Approach: The executive deciding truth on its own is risky, because it can be used against criticism. Clearly fabricated content that incites violence, such as a fake demolition video, can and should be removed quickly under law with procedural safeguards. For contested claims, the better tools are independent fact-checking, transparency and judicial oversight. The standard should be incitement and demonstrable falsity, not inconvenience to the government.

9. Internal Security

India's internal security challenges are increasingly networks rather than places: terror modules that run across borders, gangsters abroad, and drug routes that shape ethnic conflict in Manipur. The Centre's new counter-terror strategy recognises this in principle by stressing coordination and international cooperation. Manipur shows the harder truth: where the conflict runs through mixed villages and trafficking routes, the state can so far only manage violence, not end it.

9.1 Amit Shah Unveils PRAHAAR's Seven Pillars and an Extradition Portal at a National Counter-Terror Conference

THE NEWS New Delhi. Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Monday, September 28, inaugurated a conference on 'PRAHAAR – CT Policy and Strategy' in New Delhi, calling for an institutionalised counter-terrorism framework with a whole-of-society approach, The Indian Express and The Economic Times report. PRAHAAR is an acronym for seven pillars: Prevention, Response, Aggregating Internal Capacities, Human Rights, Attenuating Conditions for Terrorism, Aligning International Efforts, and Recovery and Resilience. Per a PIB backgrounder, the Ministry of Home Affairs had unveiled PRAHAAR on February 23, 2026 as India's first comprehensive national counter-terrorism policy and strategy; Monday's conference was about putting it into practice. It was attended by the Union Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary, heads of the Central Armed Police Forces and Central Police Organisations, Directors General of Police of 15 States and chiefs of Anti-Terrorism Squads (ATS) of all States and Union Territories. Mr. Shah said the government had adopted a zero-tolerance policy against all forms of terrorism. He called for strengthening PRAHAAR through continuous analysis of terror incidents and a concrete mechanism for the next 10 years, and said its principles must reach the thana (police station) level. The ET reports that he advocated an automated counter-terror response at every level. Between 2019 and 2026, Mr. Shah said, the government brought back 288 fugitive criminals to India from 36 countries. He launched a new "extradition portal" to speed up efforts to bring back fugitives from abroad, and urged State police forces to set up dedicated fugitive-tracking teams. Extradition is the formal surrender of an accused or convicted person by one country to another, usually under a treaty. Better coordination, he said, helped bust more than 40 modules of the Shahzad Bhatti network, allegedly involved in cross-border smuggling of weapons, explosives and narcotics; the ET adds that more than 100 FIRs were registered and 350 persons arrested across 15 States. On the same day, the IE reports, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation added Satinderjeet Singh, alias Goldy Brar, to its Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list and raised the reward from \$50,000 to \$1 million (about ₹9.58 crore). He is wanted for murder, extortion and drug distribution, is alleged to lead the Lawrence Bishnoi group in North America, and is accused of a role in the 2023 killing of Hardeep Singh Nijjar in Canada. The IE also marks ten years since the surgical strikes of September 28-29, 2016, when Army Special Forces struck seven launchpads across the Line of Control after the Uri attack in which 19 soldiers were killed. Government data cited there show 322 militant incidents in 2016 against 12 terror-related incidents in 2025. The syllabus link is GS3 on terrorism, organised crime and security agencies.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

Terror threats shift from large attacks to cross-border modules that combine weapons, explosives and narcotics → operations spread across State police, central agencies and foreign jurisdictions, and gaps in coordination cause delays → the MHA unveils PRAHAAR in February 2026 as the first national counter-terrorism policy → the September conference pushes it down to the thana level with DGPs and ATS chiefs → an extradition portal and fugitive-tracking teams extend the effort to fugitives abroad, such as gangsters now wanted by the FBI

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. The UAPA and the NIA Act are the two pillars of India's counter-terror law** — The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, 1967 (UAPA) was originally a law against secessionist and unlawful associations; after the Prevention of Terrorism Act, 2002 was repealed in 2004, terrorism provisions were added to it. The 2019 amendment allowed the Union government to designate individuals, not just organisations, as terrorists, and allowed NIA officers of the rank of Inspector and above to investigate UAPA cases. The National Investigation Agency Act, 2008 was passed after the November 2008 Mumbai attacks and created a central agency to investigate scheduled offences across States without their prior consent. Its 2019 amendment allowed the NIA to investigate scheduled offences committed outside India against Indian citizens or Indian interests, and added offences such as human trafficking and cyber-terrorism.

	2. Extradition runs through the Extradition Act, 1962, treaties and diplomatic channels — The Extradition Act, 1962 governs both requests from India to foreign states and requests to India, and the Consular, Passport and Visa Division of the Ministry of External Affairs is the central authority. Extradition is usually based on a bilateral treaty; where none exists, it can proceed on the basis of an arrangement or an international convention to which both countries are party. Treaties generally require 'dual criminality', meaning the act must be an offence in both countries, and exclude offences of a political character, although most modern treaties exclude terrorism from the political-offence exception. Mutual Legal Assistance Treaties (MLATs) in criminal matters are a separate channel for gathering evidence, serving summons and tracing assets, with the Ministry of Home Affairs as India's central authority. 3. An Interpol Red Notice is a request to locate a person, not an arrest warrant — Interpol, headquartered in Lyon, France, issues colour-coded notices at the request of member countries. A Red Notice asks law enforcement worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition or similar legal action, but each country decides under its own law whether to act on it. In India, the Central Bureau of Investigation is the National Central Bureau for Interpol and routes such requests. Interpol's constitution bars it from intervening in matters of a predominantly political, military, religious or racial character, which is sometimes invoked to resist notices. 4. Intelligence fusion and financial action complete the architecture — The Multi Agency Centre (MAC) under the Intelligence Bureau is the platform for real-time sharing of terror-related intelligence between central agencies and States, with Subsidiary MACs in State capitals; PIB describes PRAHAAR as formalising such real-time sharing. The National Intelligence Grid (NATGRID), conceived after the 2008 Mumbai attacks, links databases such as travel, banking and telecom records for authorised agencies. Internationally, the Financial Action Task Force (FATF), set up by the G7 in 1989, sets standards against money laundering and terror financing, and India became a full member in 2010. The UN General Assembly adopted the Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in 2006, and India has pressed since 1996 for a Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS3 lists terrorism, organised crime and security agencies by name — The GS3 syllabus covers linkages of organised crime with terrorism, security challenges in border areas, and various security forces and agencies and their mandate. UPSC has asked about the need for a coordinated national counter-terror architecture and about the linkages between drug trafficking and terrorism. The Shahzad Bhatti network, dealing in weapons, explosives and narcotics, is a textbook example. 2. Federalism in policing is a recurring angle — Police and public order are State subjects, while terrorism crosses State borders. Questions on the NIA, NATGRID and the proposed National Counter Terrorism Centre have tested this tension. PRAHAAR's stress on percolating to the thana level and on State fugitive-tracking teams is an attempt to solve it through coordination rather than central control. 3. Prelims favours agencies, laws and international bodies — The UAPA amendments, the NIA's jurisdiction, Interpol notices and FATF membership are regular Prelims material. The difference between an extradition treaty and an MLAT is a likely statement-type question.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	● The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Amendment Act, 2019 empowered the Union government to designate individuals as terrorists. ● The National Investigation Agency (Amendment) Act, 2019 enabled the NIA to investigate scheduled offences committed outside India against Indian citizens

or affecting the interests of India.

- An Interpol Red Notice is a request to law enforcement worldwide to locate and provisionally arrest a person pending extradition; it is not an international arrest warrant.
- The Central Bureau of Investigation functions as the National Central Bureau for Interpol in India.
- The Multi Agency Centre for sharing counter-terrorism intelligence functions under the Intelligence Bureau.
- India became a full member of the Financial Action Task Force in 2010.
- The principle of dual criminality in extradition requires the conduct to be an offence in both the requesting and the requested country.

ANALYSIS

- 1. A written doctrine matters because India's counter-terror response has been episodic** — For decades India responded to terror through agencies created after each major attack: the NIA and NATGRID after 2008, for instance. A written national policy with named pillars sets a common vocabulary for central agencies and State police, and a 10-year horizon forces planning beyond the next incident. The inclusion of Human Rights and Attenuating Conditions for Terrorism as pillars is significant: it concedes that counter-terrorism is not only force but also legitimacy and prevention of radicalisation. The test will be whether these softer pillars get budgets and indicators, or remain words on a slide.
- 2. The thana level is where counter-terrorism is won or lost** — Most terror modules are detected through local clues: a tenant who cannot be verified, a suspicious purchase of chemicals, a pattern of small crimes. Mr. Shah's insistence that PRAHAAR reach the police station level recognises that ATS units and central agencies depend on the beat constable. But thana-level police are overstretched with law-and-order duties and have little training in counter-terror indicators. Without investment in local police capacity, which Prakash Singh-type reforms were meant to support, the policy risks remaining a headquarters document.
- 3. Crime-terror convergence is the real threat, and PRAHAAR must treat gangs and drugs as security issues** — The Shahzad Bhatti network combined weapons, explosives and narcotics smuggling, and the FBI describes the Bishnoi group as engaged in murders, extortion and drug trafficking across North America. Gangs provide logistics, money and deniable foot soldiers that terror groups can use. This blurs the old line between organised crime, a police matter, and terrorism, a national security matter. The more than 100 FIRs and 350 arrests across 15 States show that only coordinated, multi-State action can dismantle such networks.
- 4. Extradition success depends as much on India's credibility abroad as on a portal** — Bringing back 288 fugitives from 36 countries in seven years is a substantial record, and a portal can speed the paperwork and let States track cases. But foreign courts decide extradition on evidence, dual criminality and assurances about fair trial and prison conditions. Well-prepared case files and consistent respect for due process at home strengthen India's requests abroad. The Goldy Brar case shows another route: when a fugitive is also wanted by the host country, cooperation becomes easier, though it also means India may have to wait for that country's own prosecution.
- 5. Counter-view: the surgical-strikes decade shows success brings new risks** — Militant incidents in Jammu and Kashmir fell from 322 in 2016 to 12 terror-related incidents in 2025, per government data cited by the IE, and surveillance is far better. But the threat has moved to Jammu's forests, and former Northern Army Commander Lt. Gen. D.S. Hooda (retd) warns that the risk of escalation has gone up, as seen during Operation Sindoor. A counter-terror strategy that relies on cross-border retaliation must also

	manage escalation between nuclear-armed neighbours. PRAHAAR's pillar on aligning international efforts is the diplomatic side of this equation.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	India has adopted PRAHAAR as its first comprehensive national counter-terrorism policy. Examine how far a written strategy can overcome the challenges of inter-agency coordination, federal policing and crime-terror convergence in India's counter-terror effort. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — Introduce PRAHAAR, unveiled by the MHA in February 2026 per PIB, and the September 28 conference where Amit Shah called for a 10-year mechanism and a whole-of-society approach. List the seven pillars briefly. 2. Body — what a written strategy adds — Common doctrine across agencies, a long horizon, inclusion of human rights and root causes, and an international pillar. Mention the extradition portal and the record of 288 fugitives from 36 countries between 2019 and 2026. 3. Body — structural challenges — Police as a State subject, overstretched thana-level police, crime-terror convergence shown by the Shahzad Bhatti network and the Bishnoi group, and dependence on foreign courts for extradition. Mention the existing architecture: UAPA, NIA, MAC, NATGRID. 4. Body — making it work — Suggest capacity building and training at district level, shared databases and fugitive-tracking teams in States, measurable indicators for each pillar, legal quality in extradition requests, and FATF-aligned action on terror finance. 5. Conclusion — Conclude that a strategy is a necessary start but coordination is a habit built through institutions, training and budgets, and that the rule-of-law pillar strengthens rather than weakens the fight against terror.
ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH	Q1. As a Superintendent of Police in a border district, how would you implement PRAHAAR at the police station level? Approach: I would train station staff on indicators of radicalisation, arms and drug smuggling, and on how to report them quickly to the district intelligence unit. Tenant and employee verification, and monitoring of explosives licences, would be made routine. I would set up a small fugitive-tracking cell as the Home Minister urged. Community policing would be used to build trust, because local information is the best early warning. Q2. You are handling an extradition request for a fugitive in a European country. What are your priorities? Approach: I would make sure the charge sheet and evidence meet the requested country's standards and that the offence satisfies dual criminality. I would anticipate objections on fair trial and prison conditions and prepare assurances through the Ministry of External Affairs. I would coordinate with the CBI on any Interpol notice and use the MLAT channel for additional evidence. Every step would be documented, because a weak file is the most common reason requests fail. Q3. An interview board asks: does a human rights pillar weaken counter-terrorism? Approach: No. Terrorism aims to provoke the state into overreaction that alienates communities and creates recruits. Operations that respect law and rights retain public trust, produce evidence that stands in court, and strengthen India's case in extradition requests abroad. A human rights pillar is therefore part of effectiveness, not a constraint on it.

9.2 Naga–Kuki Clashes in Manipur Cross 50 Deaths Since February as Drug-Route Rivalry Sustains Violence

THE NEWS New Delhi and Imphal. The death toll in clashes between Nagas and Kukis in Manipur has risen to over 50 since the Yumnam Khemchand Singh-led BJP government took office in February after a period of President's Rule, with the latest killings in Kamjong and Senapati districts, The Indian Express reports. This marks a shift from the Meitei–Kuki conflict that began in May 2023. New since this magazine's September 26 AFSPA card is the IE's analysis of why this conflict is harder to contain. A Manipur Police officer explains that when Meitei–Kuki clashes began, the two communities separated within months, Kukis to the hills and Meiteis to the valley, allowing a buffer zone guarded by security forces. "In the hills, the populations are mixed. It is nearly impossible to guard every village." Clashes have been reported across Ukhrul, Kamjong, Senapati and Kangpokpi, and the conflict plays out over roads and highways, disrupting supplies. Tensions first flared at Litan-Sareikhong in Ukhrul over a local altercation. On March 11, 21 Nagas were "abducted" near Mongkot Chephu and released after negotiations. Killings on May 13 in Kangpokpi were followed by retaliatory abductions by both sides and the killing of six Naga men abducted from the Leilon Vaiphei area. Armed groups based in Myanmar widened the conflict, and earlier attacks raised concerns about a Myanmar-based Kuki armed group, KNA-B. Security sources say an economic contest over the illicit drug trade may be sustaining the violence. Moreh in Tengenoupal, once the main transit point for narcotics, has largely come under Kuki control since 2023, and routes through Kamjong, a predominantly Naga area, have emerged as an alternative. "So there is now a competition between groups over access, routes and money," an officer says. A July church-led initiative in Aizawl did not become a political dialogue, and the Kuki Zonal Council and the United Naga Council (UNC) blame each other. The two Deputy Chief Ministers, Nemcha Kipgen for the Kuki-Zo and Losii Dikho for the Nagas, meant to manage competing interests, have become opposing voices. With Assembly elections due early next year, the UNC demands abrogation of the Suspension of Operations pact with Kuki armed groups, action over the six killings and Ms. Kipgen's removal. Its three-month economic blockade of highways through Senapati was suspended on September 26 after a meeting with the Union Home Ministry and the State government, and the Centre assured it the demands would be addressed. "We are largely responding to incidents," a security officer says. One unexpected shift: Kuki leaders are reaching out to Meiteis, and 40 to 50 Kukis enter Imphal daily for healthcare and flights. The syllabus link is GS3 on border-area security and organised crime.

THE CHAIN IN ONE LINE

The Meitei–Kuki conflict from May 2023 separates communities and cuts the old Moreh–Imphal trafficking chain → President's Rule ends and a new government takes office in February 2026 → a local Naga–Kuki dispute in Ukhrul escalates through abductions and retaliatory killings, with Myanmar-based groups involved → drug routes shift to Kamjong and armed groups compete over access and money in mixed hill villages → the UNC blockade and electoral stakes harden positions while security forces can only manage incidents

STATIC SYLLABUS LINKAGE

- 1. Article 371C gives Manipur's hill areas a special constitutional voice** — Article 371C, inserted by the Constitution (Twenty-seventh Amendment) Act, 1971 when Manipur became a State, allows the President to provide for a committee of the Manipur Legislative Assembly consisting of members elected from the Hill Areas. The Governor has a special responsibility to secure the proper functioning of that committee and must report annually, or whenever required, to the President on the administration of the Hill Areas. The executive power of the Union extends to giving directions to the State on the administration of those areas. The provision recognises that the hill districts, home mainly to Naga and Kuki-Zo tribes, differ from the valley in land, custom and administration.
- 2. Manipur's hills are outside the Sixth Schedule, which shapes the politics of land and autonomy** — The Sixth Schedule, under Articles 244(2) and 275(1), provides autonomous district councils with legislative powers in tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram only. Manipur's hill areas instead have district councils created by an Act of Parliament, the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971, with far weaker powers. Demands for greater autonomy, whether a separate administration for Kuki-Zo areas or integration of Naga areas under the Naga peace process, compete over the same hill territory. Because Naga and Kuki villages are interspersed, every territorial demand by one group is seen as a threat by the other.

	3. The Suspension of Operations pact is a ceasefire with conditions, not a peace settlement — The Suspension of Operations (SoO) agreement was signed in 2008 between the Union government, the Manipur government and Kuki armed groups under two umbrella bodies, the Kuki National Organisation and the United People's Front. Under its ground rules, cadres stay in designated camps, deposit weapons in locked storage and receive a monthly stipend, while security forces suspend operations against them. The pact is reviewed and extended periodically. Critics, including Naga bodies and Meitei groups, argue that some signatory groups have violated the ground rules, which is why its abrogation is now a UNC demand. 4. Manipur sits on the route of the Golden Triangle drug trade, governed at home by the NDPS Act — The Golden Triangle is the region where the borders of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet, historically one of the world's largest sources of opium and methamphetamine. Manipur shares a land border with Myanmar, and India's border with Myanmar is about 1,643 km long, running through Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur and Mizoram. The Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985 is India's main anti-drug law, and the Narcotics Control Bureau, set up in 1986, coordinates enforcement. Article 355 places a duty on the Union to protect every State against external aggression and internal disturbance, which is the basis for central forces' role in Manipur.
WHY UPSC LOVES THIS (TREND)	1. GS3 asks about security in border areas and the organised crime–insurgency link — The GS3 syllabus covers security challenges and their management in border areas, and linkages of organised crime with terrorism. UPSC has asked about the Northeast's insurgency, the porous India–Myanmar border and drug trafficking. The drug-route rivalry in Kamjong is a direct illustration of how crime economics sustain ethnic violence. 2. GS2 on federalism and special provisions for the Northeast — Articles 371A to 371H, the Sixth Schedule and the role of the Governor are frequent Prelims and Mains themes. Manipur is a useful contrast: special provisions exist under Article 371C, but the hills are outside the Sixth Schedule, which shapes demands for autonomy. 3. Ethnic conflict questions reward institutional, not partisan, answers — Mains questions on the Manipur crisis expect candidates to explain causes and suggest institutional solutions without taking sides. The shift from a Meitei–Kuki to a Naga–Kuki axis shows why analysts stress land, identity and resources rather than any single community.
PRELIMS NUGGETS	- Article 371C, inserted by the Constitution (Twenty-seventh Amendment) Act, 1971, provides for a committee of the Manipur Legislative Assembly consisting of members elected from the Hill Areas. - Under Article 371C, the Governor of Manipur must report annually, or whenever required, to the President on the administration of the Hill Areas. - The Sixth Schedule applies to tribal areas in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram, and not to Manipur. - The district councils in Manipur's hill areas were created under the Manipur (Hill Areas) District Councils Act, 1971, an Act of Parliament. - The Golden Triangle refers to the area where the borders of Myanmar, Laos and Thailand meet. - Article 355 imposes a duty on the Union to protect every State against external aggression and internal disturbance. - The Narcotics Control Bureau was established in 1986 as the nodal drug law enforcement agency under the Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act,

	1985.
ANALYSIS	1. The buffer-zone model that contained the valley-hill conflict cannot work in mixed hill villages — After May 2023, security forces could hold a line between the valley and the hills because the two communities had separated. The Naga-Kuki conflict has no such line: villages of both communities are interspersed along the same roads, as the Manipur Police officer notes. Security forces cannot guard every village, so the strategy of separation that brought uneasy quiet to the valley does not transfer. This means the conflict needs a political and community-level solution far more urgently, because a military one is not available. 2. The drug economy turns an identity dispute into a contest over money — When the Meitei-Kuki conflict cut Moreh off from Imphal, it broke an existing trafficking chain, and routes through Kamjong gained value. Armed groups that control a route gain income, and income sustains fighters and weapons. This helps explain why violence continues despite apologies and church-led talks. Any peace effort that ignores the drug economy will fail, which means border management with Myanmar, NDPS enforcement against financiers and alternative livelihoods are as important as dialogue. 3. Power-sharing without a common agenda has hardened the conflict — Two Deputy Chief Ministers representing the Kuki-Zo and the Nagas was meant to give each community a voice inside government. Instead, according to the IE, they have become opposing voices, and accusations between them have made the arrangement part of the conflict. Power-sharing works only when leaders share responsibility for a common outcome, such as security of highways or relief for the displaced. The lesson is that representation must be tied to joint decision-making, not simply the presence of both sides. 4. Blockades and election timing raise the stakes — The UNC's three-month blockade through Senapati choked supplies to the rest of the State, and its suspension came only after the Home Ministry promised to address its demands. With Assembly elections due early next year, each community's leaders have incentives to take visible hard positions. Demands such as abrogating the Suspension of Operations pact touch the interests of other groups and could provoke fresh violence if handled abruptly. The Centre must avoid promises to one side that it cannot keep without alienating the other. 5. Counter-view: the Kuki-Meitei thaw shows conflicts can shift, and that is an opening — The same report notes that Kuki leaders are reaching out to Meiteis and 40 to 50 Kukis enter Imphal daily without facing resistance. That is a small but real sign that relations can change when interests shift. It suggests that sustained contact, access to services and shared economic stakes can reduce hostility. Policy should build on such openings, for instance through safe access to hospitals, markets and airports for all communities, rather than treat Manipur's divisions as permanent.
POSSIBLE MAINS QUESTION	The conflict in Manipur has shifted from a valley-hill divide to clashes among hill communities. Examine the role of territorial overlap, cross-border drug trafficking and political representation in sustaining this violence, and suggest measures for durable peace. (15 marks, 250 words)
MODEL APPROACH TO THE MAINS QUESTION	1. Introduction — State that Naga-Kuki clashes have killed over 50 people since the new government took office in February 2026, per The Indian Express, marking a shift from the Meitei-Kuki conflict of May 2023. 2. Body — territorial overlap — Explain mixed villages in Ukhrul, Kamjong, Senapati and Kangpokpi, the failure of the buffer-zone model, overlapping autonomy claims, Article

371C and the absence of the Sixth Schedule in Manipur.

3. **Body — the drug economy and cross-border links** — Explain the shift of trafficking from Moreh to Kamjong routes, competition over 'access, routes and money', Myanmar-based armed groups, the Golden Triangle and the NDPS framework.
4. **Body — representation and politics** — Discuss the two Deputy Chief Ministers becoming opposing voices, UNC demands on the Suspension of Operations pact, the blockade suspended on September 26 and the coming elections. Suggest community dialogue backed by the State, action against drug financiers, border management, safe access to services and joint development projects.
5. **Conclusion** — Conclude that security forces can contain incidents but peace requires a political process that addresses land, autonomy and the drug economy together, building on openings such as the Kuki–Meitei thaw.

ADMINISTRATOR'S BRAINSTORM — Q & APPROACH

Q1. As Deputy Commissioner of a hill district with mixed Naga and Kuki villages, how would you prevent retaliatory violence after a killing?

Approach: I would immediately meet leaders and church bodies of both communities together, make a public commitment to a fair investigation, and ensure security presence in vulnerable villages on both sides. Rumour control through verified information would be essential, because retaliation often follows false reports. I would keep highways open and supplies moving so that no community feels besieged. Relief and compensation would be given on the same terms to all affected families.

Q2. You are a Joint Secretary in the Home Ministry dealing with the UNC's demands. How do you respond?

Approach: I would acknowledge the legitimate concern for justice over the killings and ensure the investigations are fast and credible. On the Suspension of Operations pact, I would review compliance with the ground rules and act against violations, rather than make an abrupt political decision that could provoke another group. Any assurance given to one side would be discussed with others to avoid a fresh grievance. Regular, documented engagement would reduce the need for blockades as a bargaining tool.

Q3. An interview board asks: is Manipur's conflict mainly about drugs or about identity?

Approach: It is both, and they reinforce each other. Identity and land provide the grievance and the mobilisation, while the drug economy provides the money that sustains armed groups. Treating it only as identity conflict ignores the incentives that keep violence going; treating it only as crime ignores genuine fears over land and autonomy. A durable solution must address both.

9. Ethics & Administrator's Corner — Integrative Case Studies

These three case studies stitch together stories from today's papers into GS4-style scenarios. Work through the prompts on paper before reading the Model Approach, which is written as named points so you can compare your own structure against it, not just your conclusions.

Case 1 — Thirty-Five Religion-Wise Questions, and the State Secretary Asked to Answer Them

SCENARIO The High-Level Committee on Demographic Changes (HLCDC), set up under the Union Home Ministry, has sent the States a questionnaire of 35 questions, as reported in The Hindu. It seeks religion-wise data for the past 15 years on birth registrations, vehicle registrations, school enrolment and property transactions; district-wise details of religious structures established in the past 15 years, including any GIS mapping used to identify them; GIS mapping of religious educational institutions, including madrasas; “details of districts showing unusual school enrolment trends inconsistent with historical birth rates, along with reasons”; year-wise voter registration of individuals “without prior-generation birth certificates or familial legacy records”; changes in the religious composition of Scheduled Tribe populations and intelligence assessments on conversion among tribal communities; and unusual increases in Aadhaar, voter ID and ration-card registrations. States have been asked to collate data on Hindus, Sikhs, Christians, Muslims, Parsis and Buddhists in every category. State officials told the paper that, apart from birth registration (where the newborn’s religion is recorded on the certificate) and the number of undocumented migrants apprehended or deported, departments simply do not maintain such data religion-wise, and several said the secular construct of the Constitution prohibited its collection. Now imagine you are the Principal Secretary of the State’s Home Department, the nodal officer to whom the questionnaire has been marked. Your Chief Secretary wants a reply within a fortnight. Some of what is sought — trends in forged identity documents, delayed birth registrations, detention centres — is legitimate administrative information the State already holds. Some of it can be produced only by asking district officers, teachers and registrars to tag every school admission, every vehicle registration and every land deed by the religion of the person concerned, data that has never been collected and that, once compiled district by district, could be used to single out communities. A junior officer has already begun drafting a circular asking sub-registrars to “identify religion from names” for the past 15 years of property sales. You believe parts of the exercise go beyond what the Constitution permits, but the committee is a lawful body of the Union government and you are not the final judge of its mandate.

- Q1.** What ethical and constitutional considerations should guide a senior civil servant when a lawful superior authority asks for information that the officer believes the State should not collect in that form?
- Q2.** Between full compliance, compliance with recorded dissent, and refusal, which course would you take, and how would you handle the junior officer’s draft circular asking sub-registrars to infer religion from names?
- Q3.** Is there a meaningful difference between collecting data by religion for welfare targeting, as the Sachar Commission did, and collecting it for a security-oriented demographic study? Explain with reference to the purpose-limitation principle.

MODEL APPROACH

- 1. Stakeholders, and why the neutral civil servant is the Constitution’s last filter** — The stakeholders are the Union Home Ministry and its committee, the State government that must answer, the district officers and teachers who would do the tagging, and above all the citizens of every faith whose admissions, deeds and vehicle registrations would be sorted by religion without their knowledge. The Principal Secretary stands between a political request and an administrative machine that will execute whatever circular leaves his office. His neutrality is not a private disposition but a constitutional function: the civil service exists precisely so that the State’s coercive and record-keeping apparatus is used according to law and not according to whichever purpose is fashionable. That makes him neither the committee’s adversary nor its clerk, but the officer who must make sure that what the State does in answering is lawful, proportionate and honest.
- 2. Constitutional morality: secularism is a limit on the State’s gaze, not only on its favours** — The Constitution does not forbid the State from ever knowing a citizen’s religion; the Census records it and birth certificates may carry it. What Articles 14, 15 and 25, read with the Preamble’s commitment to a secular republic, forbid is the State treating citizens differently on the ground of religion alone. A data exercise that tags property transactions or school admissions by religion, with a stated interest in “unusual” clustering, creates the raw material for exactly such differential treatment, and Justice K.S. Puttaswamy (2017) requires that any intrusion into personal data pass the tests of legality, legitimate aim, necessity and proportionality. The officer’s question is therefore not “is this committee lawful?” but “is this particular collection

necessary and proportionate to a legitimate aim, and is it authorised by law?" For much of the questionnaire, the honest answer is that no law authorises it and no necessity has been shown.

3. **Compliance with recorded dissent is the proper channel, not refusal or silent obstruction** — Outright refusal would substitute the officer's judgment for that of the elected government and the committee, which is not his role, and would also withhold legitimate data the State does hold. Silent foot-dragging — letting the fortnight lapse — is worse, because it is dishonest and leaves no record. The correct course is to reply in full on items that are lawful and already maintained, such as delayed birth registrations, forged identity documents and detention centres; to state plainly, item by item, where the data does not exist religion-wise; and to place on file a reasoned note, through the Chief Secretary, explaining why generating new religion-wise data from scratch raises constitutional concerns and seeking the committee's legal basis. This is what the conduct rules and the tradition of frank advice envisage: dissent in writing, through the proper channel, before the decision, not public protest after it.
4. **The draft circular must be stopped: inferring religion from names is both inaccurate and discriminatory** — The junior officer's circular asking sub-registrars to identify religion from names is the point at which a questionable request becomes an unlawful act on the ground. Names are an unreliable proxy, so the resulting figures would be false; and the act of profiling thousands of citizens by their surnames, without consent or statutory basis, is itself a discriminatory classification. The Principal Secretary should withdraw the draft, explain to the officer why, and record the decision, because a circular once issued acquires a life of its own in district offices and cannot easily be recalled. Caring for the junior officer here means correcting him without humiliating him: he was trying to meet a deadline, and the failure is an institutional one of not telling him where the line lies.
5. **Purpose limitation separates welfare data from surveillance data** — The Sachar Commission, appointed in 2005, used religion-wise data to measure the social, economic and educational deprivation of a community so that the State could remedy it; the data served the citizen. A questionnaire framed around "unusual" enrolment, "demographic clustering" and ownership patterns, and asking for intelligence assessments, is oriented towards the citizen as a potential problem. The same numbers can serve either purpose, which is why the purpose must be fixed before collection and the data must not be repurposed afterwards — the principle of purpose limitation that the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 also embeds. An officer who insists on knowing the purpose, and on aggregate rather than individual-level data where aggregate will do, is not obstructing policy; he is making the policy defensible.
6. **Integrity includes telling the truth about what the State does not know** — The easiest way to meet the deadline would be to fill the tables with estimates dressed up as data. That would be the gravest lapse of all, because a national committee would then draw conclusions about communities from numbers that were invented at district level. The Principal Secretary's reply should say, for each question, whether the data exists, in what form, and with what reliability, and should refuse to manufacture what does not exist. Stating an institution's ignorance honestly is an act of integrity that protects both the committee's eventual findings and the citizens they concern, and it is the one contribution that no one else in the chain can make.

Case 2 — A Catheter Billed at Many Times Its Cost, and the Hospital Administrator Who Signs Off the Tariff

SCENARIO A September study by Maharashtra's Food and Drug Administration, through its State Price Monitoring Resource Unit, found differences of as much as 2,841% between the procurement prices and the declared maximum retail prices (MRPs) of certain hospital consumables, according to an opinion article in *The Economic Times* by a former Secretary of the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs. The State FDA commissioner has asked the Department of Pharmaceuticals and the National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority (NPPA) to examine margin rationalisation and greater price oversight. The article's core argument is about information asymmetry: a patient in an ICU does not ask whether another hospital can supply a cheaper oxygen mask, and a family rushing someone into emergency care does not bargain over the price of a catheter; "MRP is a ceiling, not a certificate of economic reasonableness." It also notes that on September 9 a five-judge Bench of the Supreme Court dismissed a curative petition against the 1995 judgment in *Indian Medical Association v. V.P. Shantha*, which held that medical services rendered for consideration are a "service" under consumer law, so paid hospitals remain answerable before consumer commissions for deficiency in service. Now imagine you are the newly appointed medical superintendent-cum-administrator of a large trust-run hospital in a Maharashtra city. The hospital is not-for-profit on paper but depends on its pharmacy and consumables margin to fund a charity ward, cardiac subsidies for poor patients and salaries. Reviewing the tariff file, you find that dozens of consumables — cannulas, syringes, dressing kits, catheters — are billed to patients at the printed MRP, several times what the hospital pays. This is legal, since no item exceeds its MRP, and the finance committee has set a revenue target that assumes the margin continues. Two insurers

have begun querying the hospital's bills, and a family has written to you asking why a single dressing kit cost more than the day's bed charge.

- Q1.** Is charging patients the full MRP for consumables, when the hospital procures them at a fraction of that price, ethically justified if it is legal and funds charity care? Discuss the ethical issues involved.
- Q2.** As the administrator, what changes would you propose to the finance committee, and how would you answer the family's letter?
- Q3.** What does the V.P. Shantha principle — that paid medical care is a service accountable under consumer law — imply for the ethics of hospital billing, beyond questions of negligence?

MODEL APPROACH

- 1. The ethical issue is exploitation of a captive buyer, not illegality** — No law is broken when an item is sold at or below its MRP, and that is exactly why the case is an ethical one. The patient is a captive buyer: he cannot compare prices, cannot walk out of the ICU, and often does not know what was used until the bill arrives. Charging him several times cost because he cannot refuse is the extraction of a rent from vulnerability, and it would be condemned at once if a shopkeeper did it to a person in distress. Legality sets a floor for conduct; it does not settle what a hospital, which exists to care for people at their weakest, owes them. The administrator's first task is to name the practice honestly in the file — as a margin taken from patients who have no bargaining power — rather than hiding behind the MRP.
- 2. Fiduciary duty runs to the patient, not only to the balance sheet** — A hospital stands in a relationship of trust with its patients, much as a doctor does: the patient surrenders judgment and information in the belief that the institution will act in his interest. That fiduciary character is what distinguishes a hospital from an ordinary seller and what the V.P. Shantha line of cases reinforces by making paid care a "service" with a standard of reasonableness. The administrator also owes duties to the trust — solvency, the charity ward, staff salaries — and these are real. But a fiduciary may not pursue the institution's interest by exploiting the very person he is bound to protect; he must find revenue in ways that the patient, fully informed, would accept as fair.
- 3. Cross-subsidy can be legitimate only if it is transparent, proportionate and consented to** — The strongest counter-argument is that the margin funds care for the poor, so the better-off patient is in effect paying a charity surcharge. Cross-subsidy is a respectable principle in public finance, but it has three conditions that the present practice fails: it must be transparent, it must be proportionate, and it must fall on those able to bear it. A hidden multiple on a catheter falls equally on a daily-wage earner who has sold land to pay for surgery and on a wealthy insured patient, and it is disclosed to neither. The administrator can defend a modest, declared service margin, graded by ward category, and a visible charity contribution; he cannot defend an undisclosed markup of many hundred per cent levied on whoever happens to be sick.
- 4. What to propose: itemised transparency, a capped margin and a revised target** — The administrator should place before the finance committee a costed proposal: bill consumables at procurement cost plus a fixed, published handling margin; display for major consumables, as the article suggests, the procurement band and the amount charged; issue itemised bills as a matter of course; and revise the revenue target to recover the gap through room tariffs, packages and fund-raising for the charity ward, openly described. He should also volunteer the hospital's data to the NPPA exercise rather than wait for regulation. If the committee refuses, he should record his dissent in the minutes, because a professional who signs off a tariff he believes exploitative without objection shares responsibility for it.
- 5. Answering the family: candour, correction and a route to redress** — The family's letter deserves a direct answer, not a form reply citing MRP. The administrator should explain truthfully how the charge was arrived at, acknowledge that it was far above cost, refund the excess over the revised policy if the committee adopts one, and in any case inform the family of their right to approach the National Consumer Helpline (1915) or file through e-Jagriti. Telling a complainant about the remedies available against one's own institution may feel disloyal, but it is what integrity and accountability demand, and it signals that the hospital is prepared to have its conduct judged. Trust once lost in healthcare is regained only by visible fairness, and this letter is the first test.

Case 3 — Teachers as Booth-Level Officers During Exam Season, and the Officer Who Must Keep Both the Roll and the Classroom Going

SCENARIO Delhi is in the middle of a special intensive revision (SIR) of its electoral rolls. It has 14,947 polling booths and as many Booth Level Officers (BLOs), many of them school teachers, The Hindu reported. Their work has stretched from a six-month pre-SIR mapping and enumeration phase to serving notices on 33.1 lakh electors, collecting and uploading documents, and handling claims and objections, enrolment camps and verification. The Delhi Chief Electoral Officer's office

has now said that electors who received notices over “no mapping” or “logical discrepancies” will not have to visit centres: BLOs will visit their homes to collect documents, which will then be uploaded on the ECINet platform for the Electoral Registration Officer (ERO) to decide eligibility. The paper quoted teachers whose names it changed at their request. One, assigned as a BLO in July last year, had barely taken a day off since December; on the morning of September 22 she was invigilating an examination in her school in Mustafabad while her phone rang with calls from voters, and by the next day complaints had reached the election office that she was not responding. “Nobody asks us before adding extra work,” she said. A BLO in Timarpur had delivered about 40% of his 275 notices while teaching Class 11 — “Who will be responsible for students who have board exams?” Another in north-east Delhi had spent ten days delivering notices until 11 p.m., with special camps on Sundays. The BLOs said they had not been paid for a year, and when they asked for overtime they were told they were already getting ₹33 a day. Now imagine you are the ERO — a Sub-Divisional Magistrate — for an Assembly constituency in north-east Delhi. The revision schedule is fixed by the Election Commission and you are statutorily responsible for the roll. Complaints about unresponsive BLOs are rising, the district’s schools are entering their examination period, and the principal of one school has written to you that three of her teachers are now missing classes every week.

- Q1.** Identify the competing public duties in this situation. Is it ethically acceptable for the State to meet one public obligation — an accurate electoral roll — by quietly degrading another — the education of students before board exams?
- Q2.** As the ERO, what would you do within your own powers this week, and what would you take up with the Chief Electoral Officer?
- Q3.** What does care for subordinates require of a senior officer when the subordinates are on deputation from another department and have no voice in the work assigned to them?

MODEL APPROACH

- Two legitimate public duties are in conflict, and neither can simply be subordinated** — An accurate electoral roll is the foundation of free and fair elections, and the ERO answers for it by law; a roll revision that deletes eligible voters because notices were not served would injure the most basic right of citizenship. But the right of students to be taught, especially in the months before board examinations, is also a public duty the State owes, and it falls on children who have no say in the matter. The ethical error is to treat the roll as the only duty that counts because it is the one with a statutory deadline and a watchful Commission behind it. A mature administrator recognises both obligations as real and looks for the arrangement that honours each, rather than letting the less visible one absorb all the cost.
- Fairness to the BLOs: the ₹33 answer is itself an ethical failure** — Teachers serving notices until 11 p.m., working Sundays and unpaid for a year, told that they already receive ₹33 a day, are being treated as a free resource. Whatever the formal position on honoraria, the institution has asked people to do a second full-time job without consultation, without payment on time and without a way to refuse. Fairness requires that work be matched to capacity and that compensation promised be paid. An ERO who takes the complaints about unresponsive BLOs at face value, and issues show-cause notices to a teacher who was invigilating an examination when voters called, would be punishing the subordinate for a failure of planning above her.
- What the ERO can do this week within his own powers** — The ERO should first get the facts: a list of BLOs who are teachers, their notice backlog and their school examination schedules. He can redistribute notices so that no teacher-BLO carries a heavy backlog during examination weeks, deploy non-teaching staff and Assistant EROs to clear arrears, schedule door-to-door document collection for evenings and weekends in rotation rather than every day, and set up a phone-and-helpdesk arrangement so that voters are not dependent on a teacher answering during class. He should also write to the school principal acknowledging the problem and agreeing a timetable that protects board-exam classes. None of this needs anyone’s permission, and all of it reduces harm at once.
- What to take upward: honest reporting rather than a comfortable progress figure** — The ERO must report to the Chief Electoral Officer the true position — the backlog, the teacher shortage, the unpaid honoraria — rather than a progress figure that looks good while notices go unserved. He should recommend release of pending payments, additional non-teaching manpower, and, if needed, a realistic extension for his constituency so that the choice is not between a rushed roll and a wrecked school term. Speaking truth upward is a core duty of a civil servant; a superior who hears only that everything is on track cannot correct a schedule that is failing. If the Commission holds to its timetable, the ERO will at least have placed the cost on record and asked for the resources to bear it.
- Care for subordinates: voice, protection and accountability that runs upward** — BLOs on deputation from the Education Department are doubly vulnerable: they answer to the election machinery for the roll and to their own department for

their teaching, and neither master sees the whole of their burden. Care for subordinates means giving them a voice in how work is assigned, shielding them from complaints that arise from structural overload, and ensuring that when things go wrong the accountability runs upward to those who designed the schedule, not downward to the teacher who could not be in two places at once. It also means recognising good work publicly. An officer who looks after the people who do the field work of democracy is not being soft; he is protecting the quality of the roll itself, which depends on BLOs who are not exhausted and resentful.

10. Prelims Quick-Revision Facts

These are written to the pattern UPSC Prelims actually uses — the provision, the parent Act, the appointing or administering authority, the composition, the definition, the treaty year and the threshold written into law. The news gives the hook; the permanent fact behind it is what gets asked. Transient numbers that no objective question can be built on have been left out on purpose.

TOPIC	EXAM-PATTERN FACTS
Tenth Schedule — the Speaker decides defection as a tribunal, and must do so within a reasonable time	Under the Tenth Schedule (anti-defection law), the Speaker or Chairman decides disqualification petitions acting as a tribunal; Kihoto Hollohan v. Zachillhu (1992) upheld the Schedule but made the Speaker's decision subject to judicial review, and Keisham Meghachandra Singh v. Speaker, Manipur Legislative Assembly (2020) held that such petitions must be decided within a reasonable time, suggesting three months; relying on it, the Supreme Court told the West Bengal Speaker on 28 September to conclude the Trinamool Congress faction's disqualification petitions by October 8.
Paragraph 15 of the Symbols Order, 1968 — the Election Commission settles splits in recognised parties	Paragraph 15 of the Election Symbols (Reservation and Allotment) Order, 1968 empowers the Election Commission to decide which of two rival groups of a recognised party is that party, and so who gets its name and symbol; the Supreme Court upheld the Order in Sadiq Ali v. Election Commission (1971), and on 28 September it gave the Commission three months, after four weeks of pleadings, to decide the Trinamool Congress dispute, in which the Commission had frozen the party's name and 'flowers and grass' symbol by an interim order.
Article 3 and the J&K Reorganisation Act, 2019 — why only Parliament can restore Statehood	The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019, passed by Parliament using its power under Articles 3 and 4 to form and alter States, split the State into two Union Territories — Jammu and Kashmir with a legislature and Ladakh without one — so restoring Statehood needs a fresh parliamentary law; the J&K Assembly's resolution of 28 September seeking "full Statehood", moved by the Chief Minister and backed by around 60 of the 90 legislators, has no binding legal effect.
Sixth Schedule — Articles 244(2) and 275(1), four States and district councils of up to 30	The Sixth Schedule, governed by Articles 244(2) and 275(1), provides for Autonomous Districts in the tribal areas of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram; the Governor creates or alters an Autonomous District by public notification, and each is governed by a district council of not more than 30 members, of whom up to four are nominated by the Governor and the rest elected by adult suffrage.
Proposed Article 371-K for Ladakh — a special provision in Part XXI	For Ladakh, a Union Territory without a legislature since the 2019 reorganisation, the Union government has proposed a new Article 371-K in Part XXI of the Constitution (Temporary, Transitional and Special Provisions); the Delhi precedent for special provisions for a Union Territory lies in Articles 239AA and 239AB, inserted by the Constitution (Sixty-ninth Amendment) Act, 1991.
State of Rajasthan v. Union of India (1977) — the 'amphibian' federation	In State of Rajasthan v. Union of India (1977), the Supreme Court described Indian federalism as "amphibian": federal in ordinary times but capable of becoming effectively unitary during an Emergency, a characterisation frequently cited alongside S.R. Bommai (1994) on the limits of Article 356.
Article 324(5) — the Chief Election Commissioner is removable only like a Supreme Court judge	Under Article 324(5), read with Article 124(4), the Chief Election Commissioner can be removed only in the manner and on the grounds of a Supreme Court judge — "proved misbehaviour or incapacity" through a parliamentary address; other Election Commissioners can be removed only on the CEC's recommendation, and appointments are now governed by the Chief Election Commissioner and Other Election Commissioners Act, 2023.
Electoral Registration Officer and Section 32 of the RP Act, 1950	Under the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and the Registration of Electors Rules, 1960, each Assembly constituency has an Electoral Registration Officer (ERO), usually of Sub-Divisional Magistrate rank, responsible for its roll, assisted in the field by Booth Level Officers; Section 32(1) of the 1950 Act makes it a criminal offence for an election official, without reasonable

TOPIC	EXAM-PATTERN FACTS
	cause, to commit any act or omission in breach of official duty in preparing the roll.
Section 29C of the RP Act, 1951 — parties report donations above ₹20,000	Section 29C of the Representation of the People Act, 1951 requires every political party to report to the Election Commission, in Form 24A, each contribution above ₹20,000 received from a person or company in a financial year; filing this report is a condition of the party's income-tax exemption under Section 13A of the Income-tax Act, 1961, which is why total donations are always higher than those declared.
Section 24(4) of the RTI Act — exempting a State's security organisations	Section 24(4) of the Right to Information Act, 2005 lets a State government, by notification, exclude its intelligence and security organisations from the Act, but Section 24(5) requires every such notification to be laid before the State legislature, and information on allegations of corruption and human rights violations cannot be excluded; Tamil Nadu's September 21 order exempting its Public (Law and Order) Department under this power was withdrawn after protests.
Core Investment Company — the 90% test	Under RBI rules, a Core Investment Company (CIC) is a non-banking financial company that holds at least 90% of its net assets in equity, preference shares, bonds, debentures or loans of group companies; Tata Trusts has proposed merging operating firms into Tata Sons so that, with group investments of ₹1.77 lakh crore out of net assets of ₹2 lakh crore, it falls below the 90% threshold and escapes the CIC and upper-layer NBFC classification under RBI's Scale-Based Regulation framework.
Rule 19A of the SCRR, 1957 — 25% minimum public shareholding	Rule 19A of the Securities Contracts (Regulation) Rules, 1957 requires every listed company to maintain minimum public shareholding (MPS) of at least 25%, which Sebi enforces; Sebi has settled proceedings against four listed companies of one business group over alleged MPS violations through two foreign portfolio investors.
Section 40B of the Insurance Act, 1938 — the cap on expenses of management	The Insurance Act, 1938 empowers the Insurance Regulatory and Development Authority of India (IRDAI) to limit an insurer's expenses of management (EoM), for life insurers under Section 40B; IRDAI has proposed bringing life insurers to a company-level EoM limit of 12.5% of gross direct premium income over a five-year glide path from around 16% now.
Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007 and the UPI merchant fee	The Supreme Court has issued notice on a challenge to the government's 0.4% merchant discount rate (MDR) on person-to-merchant UPI payments above ₹2,000, capped at ₹300 for transactions of ₹75,000 and above, due from October 15, 2026; the petition attacks the amended Section 10A of the Payment and Settlement Systems Act, 2007 for unguided delegation, while Section 269SU of the Income-tax Act, 1961 (now Section 187 of the Income-tax Act, 2025) obliges merchants above a turnover threshold to offer prescribed electronic payment modes.
Section 100 of the Patents Act, 1970 — government use of a patented drug	Section 100 of the Patents Act, 1970 allows the Central government, or anyone it authorises, to use a patented invention "for the purposes of government" without the patentee's consent, distinct from compulsory licences under Sections 84 and 92; the Kerala High Court held on 28 September that exorbitant price can justify invoking Section 100 for two patented breast-cancer drugs, abemaciclib and ribociclib, and directed the Centre to collect nationwide affordability data.
NEET-SS — the single super-speciality entrance, conducted by NBEMS	NEET-SS is the only entrance examination for DM, MCh and DrNB super-speciality courses, conducted by the National Board of Examinations in Medical Sciences (NBEMS), an autonomous body under the Union Health Ministry, while medical education as a whole is regulated by the National Medical Commission under the NMC Act, 2019; on September 17 the Centre accepted the Supreme Court's suggestion to cut the qualifying percentile for NEET-SS 2025 from 50 to 30, and Tamil Nadu's 50% in-service quota under G.O. Ms. No. 462 was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2022.
Three-language formula — NEP 2020 and the CBSE's third language	The National Education Policy, 2020 retains the three-language formula with flexibility, requiring that at least two of the three languages a child learns be native to India; the Supreme Court on 28 September directed the CBSE to extend to Class 6 the relaxation given to Classes 7 to 9, under

TOPIC	EXAM-PATTERN FACTS
	which the third language is assessed only through internal school-based evaluation with no pass or fail linked to the Class 10 Board result.
The four Labour Codes and the 'Shram Samvad' campaign	India's 29 central labour laws have been consolidated into four Codes — the Code on Wages, 2019, the Industrial Relations Code, 2020, the Code on Social Security, 2020 and the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020; the Labour Ministry launched 'Shram Samvad' on 28 September, an awareness campaign covering industrial clusters in 316 districts across all 36 States and UTs over 90 days.
H-1B — the 85,000 annual cap	The United States caps new H-1B skilled-worker visas at 85,000 a year — 65,000 under the regular cap and 20,000 reserved for holders of a master's or higher degree from a US university — with the lottery held in March–April; per USCIS data cited by ET, 71% of all H-1B visas go to Indians, and a new \$100,000 fee and a lottery overhaul favouring higher-paid workers now apply to new petitions.
EU CBAM at the WTO — India a third party	The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), a charge on the embedded carbon of imports such as steel, aluminium and cement, took effect on January 1, 2026; the WTO's Dispute Settlement Body has agreed to establish a panel on Russia's challenge to it, and India is among 18 members, with the US, UK and China, that have reserved third-party rights, while India builds its own Carbon Credit Trading Scheme under the Energy Conservation Act, 2001.
'Critical' coal stock at a thermal power plant	A coal-based power plant is classed as having 'critical' fuel stock when its coal on hand falls below 25% of its normative stock — the quantity the Central Electricity Authority requires thermal plants to keep onsite to ensure uninterrupted generation; ET reports a sharp depletion of stocks as rain in coal-bearing regions disrupted coal transport.
Coast Guard Act, 1978 and oil-spill response at sea	The Indian Coast Guard, constituted under the Coast Guard Act, 1978 under the Ministry of Defence, is the central coordinating authority for marine oil-spill response in Indian waters under the National Oil Spill Disaster Contingency Plan; it rescued the Belize-flagged tanker MT Seagull 9, carrying 9,000 tonnes of palm oil, about 37 nautical miles east-southeast of Paradip after engine failure and ballast-tank flooding, deploying a Pollution Control Vessel against any spill.
Kaladan project and Myanmar's Rakhine State	The Kaladan Multi-Modal Transit Transport Project links Kolkata by sea to Sittwe port in Myanmar's Rakhine State, then by the Kaladan river to Paletwa in Chin State and by road to Mizoram; Rakhine, largely controlled by the Arakan Army, saw a military air strike on a market in Kyauktaw that killed 33 people, amid a civil war that began with the 2021 coup.
Witness protection — the 2018 scheme and the Sohrabuddin appeal	In Mahender Chawla v. Union of India (2018), the Supreme Court approved the Witness Protection Scheme, 2018 and made it binding until Parliament legislates, and Section 398 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita, 2023 requires every State to notify a witness protection scheme; the Court has issued notice on a plea against the Bombay High Court's acquittal of all 22 accused in the Sohrabuddin Shaikh encounter case, noting that 92 witnesses turned hostile.
Electronic enforcement of traffic offences — Section 136A of the Motor Vehicles Act	Section 136A of the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, inserted by the 2019 amendment, provides for electronic monitoring and enforcement of road safety, the legal basis of e-challans; a Bench of Justices J.B. Pardiwala and K.V. Viswanathan suggested that States add unpaid e-challan dues to electricity bills and block registration renewal, ownership transfer and fitness certificates until fines are paid.
Jaswant Singh Rawat and the Battle of Nuranang, 1962	Rifleman Jaswant Singh Rawat of the 4th Battalion, Garhwal Rifles was killed fighting Chinese forces at the Battle of Nuranang in the then North-East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh) in the 1962 war and was posthumously awarded the Maha Vir Chakra, India's second-highest wartime gallantry award; Jaswant Garh War Memorial stands about 24–25 km from Tawang, and his ancestral home in Pauri Garhwal is to become a museum.
Pakistan's first astronaut and China's Tiangong	Two Pakistani pilots are training at the China Astronaut Research and Training Center in Beijing, one of whom will become the first foreign astronaut aboard China's Tiangong space station as a "payload specialist", under a mission conceived in 2019 with SUPARCO, Pakistan's space agency;

TOPIC	EXAM-PATTERN FACTS
	Tiangong's three modules — the Tianhe core and the Wentian and Mengtian laboratory modules — weigh about 77 tonnes, and a Pakistani rover is due to fly on China's Chang'e 8 lunar mission around 2028.
Order XXI Rule 54 of the CPC — attachment 'by beat of drum' ends in Kerala	Rule 54 of Order XXI of the Code of Civil Procedure, 1908 governs the attachment of immovable property in execution of a decree, and its sub-rule (2) provided for proclamation of the attachment, traditionally by beat of drum; the Kerala High Court's Rules Committee, using the High Courts' power under Section 122 of the CPC to amend the procedural rules, has decided to remove the drum-beating provision.

Source note: All items are drawn from *The Hindu*, *The Indian Express* & *The Economic Times* (Delhi Editions) — 29 September 2026, supplemented where indicated by official releases and PRS Legislative Research. Facts, figures and quotes are reproduced as reported on that date; verify currency (ongoing legal proceedings, evolving numbers) before using in an answer.

11. Essays of the Day

Two essays, on prompts phrased the way the Essay paper actually sets them, written the way a top-ranked candidate writes under time. Read them for structure and for the sweep of examples — not to memorise.

ESSAY 1 · Essay · Section A · 6 min read

A rumour only has to be believed; the truth has to be proved.

Themes: Truth and society · Technology and ethics · Institutions of trust

Early in 1857 a story moved through the cantonments of the Bengal Army. The cartridges of the new Enfield rifle, which a sepoy had to bite open, were said to be greased with the fat of cows and pigs. The authorities denied it, then withdrew the greased cartridges and allowed sepoys to grease their own. It made no difference. By the time the explanation arrived, Mangal Pandey had fired at his officers at Barrackpore and the regiments at Meerut had risen. Historians have since found that the story was not wholly false: animal tallow had been used, and no one had asked where it came from. That detail matters. The rumour did not win because it was invented. It won because the sepoys already distrusted the Company, and the Company had given them no reason to believe its denials.

This essay argues that the contest between rumour and truth is unequal by nature. A rumour needs only a listener who is ready for it; the truth needs evidence, time and a witness whom people trust. We cannot make the truth as fast as a lie, and we should not try to do so by appointing the State as the judge of what is true. What a society can do is build witnesses before the crisis: institutions whose word is trusted, platforms that slow down what is dangerous, and citizens who have learned to ask for proof.

Why does a rumour need so little? Because its listener supplies most of the proof. In Othello, Iago never produces evidence of Desdemona's infidelity; he produces a handkerchief and a hint, and Othello's jealousy does the rest. Shakespeare put the point exactly: "Trifles light as air / Are to the jealous confirmations strong / As proofs of holy writ." On 21 September 1995, reports that idols of Ganesha were drinking milk spread across India and to temples abroad within a day. Scientists explained on television that surface tension and capillary action drew the liquid from the spoon, and the explanation, though correct, travelled much more slowly than the wonder. A study by Soroush Vosoughi, Deb Roy and Sinan Aral, published in *Science* in 2018, examined about 126,000 stories on Twitter and found that falsehood spread "farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth". The main reason was not automated accounts. It was people, who share what is new, surprising and frightening.

Technology has not changed the psychology; it has changed the cost. In July 2018, five men were beaten to death in Rainpada, a village in Dhule district of Maharashtra, after messages on WhatsApp warned of child-lifters. The messages were false, and more than twenty people died in similar attacks across India that year. WhatsApp responded by limiting how many chats a message could be forwarded to. Today the forgery is no longer a crude message but a video. In Ujjain and at two universities in Punjab, AI-generated clips and unverified messages have just set crowds against the police and against each other. A quieter version of the same problem appears in generative image models. Trained on an archive in which the 1980s were photographed mostly by the privileged, they produce a past that looks upper-caste and urban. A machine that has absorbed our prejudices returns them as though they were neutral facts, which makes it a very efficient spreader of rumour.

The truth, by contrast, needs a witness, and a witness has to earn trust. In 1998 *The Lancet* published a paper by Andrew Wakefield linking the MMR vaccine to autism. It took years of work by other scientists, and an investigation by the journalist Brian Deer, before the journal retracted it in 2010. By then vaccination rates had fallen and measles had returned in several countries. The Mahabharata shows what happens when the most trusted witness is used for a lie. Yudhishtira, who was known never to lie, said "Ashwatthama is dead" and added softly that it was the elephant. Drona

put down his weapons. The epic says that Yudhishtira's chariot, which had always moved just above the ground, touched the earth from that moment. Courts, science and a free press are our versions of that witness. Their value depends on the belief that they would not bend the truth even when it would be useful.

There is a serious counter-argument. A rumour is not always a lie. The sociologist Tamotsu Shibutani, in his book *Improvvised News* (1966), described rumour as news that people improvise, the explanation people build when official channels are silent or not trusted. The sepoys' rumour was partly true. During the Emergency, when newspapers were censored from June 1975, many Indians relied on the BBC and on word of mouth, and much of what they heard was accurate. Even the truth-tellers make mistakes: the story that Orson Welles's radio play *The War of the Worlds* caused mass panic across America in 1938 was greatly exaggerated by the newspapers that reported it. A society that sets out to eliminate rumour will usually end up eliminating dissent. That is why the Bombay High Court in 2024 struck down the amendment to the IT Rules that allowed a government fact-check unit to label content about the Union government as false. The judge who gave the deciding opinion found the provision vague and liable to chill speech. John Stuart Mill argued in *On Liberty* (1859) that "He who knows only his own side of the case, knows little of that." A State that decides what is true for its citizens takes away their practice in deciding it for themselves.

The objection does not defeat the essay's argument; it defines the remedy. The answer to rumour is not a ministry of truth but a better supply of trusted truth. First, public institutions must speak early and plainly, because silence gives rumour its opening; a district administration that publishes its road-widening plan and its reasons before the bulldozers arrive leaves less room for a forged video. Second, platforms can add friction without censorship: limits on forwarding, visible labels on synthetic media, and quick takedown under law, as Shreya Singhal (2015) allows, for content that incites violence. Third, those who build AI systems should be required to audit them for caste and gender bias, instead of certifying themselves. Fourth, and most lasting, is education. Finland has built media literacy into its school curriculum, and its citizens are regularly found among the most resistant in Europe to misinformation. A citizen who habitually asks "How do we know?" is the only fact-checker who can work at the speed of a rumour.

The Company's denials in 1857 failed not because they came late but because the people hearing them had no reason to trust them. That is the real lesson. Truth cannot win a race against rumour; it can only be prepared in advance. It needs witnesses who have earned trust before the crisis, and citizens who expect proof. A rumour asks only to be believed. A democracy has to ask for more, of its institutions and of itself.

Built from today's cards: AI-Made Fake Videos and Unverified Messages Trigger Clashes in Ujjain and Violence at Two Punjab Universities · AI Image Models Reproduce Caste Bias as India's AI Rules Lean on Voluntary Codes and Self-Certification

ESSAY 2 · Essay · Section B · 6 min read

Scarcity does not create conflict; it reveals how we share.

Themes: Resources and justice · Federalism and water · Food security

In 1943 a nine-year-old boy at Santiniketan watched starving people walk through the town on their way to Calcutta. Nearly four decades later, as an economist, Amartya Sen went back to the figures of the Bengal famine, in which about three million people died. In *Poverty and Famines* (1981) he showed that the amount of food available in Bengal in 1943 was not unusually low. It was higher than in 1941, when there had been no famine. What had collapsed was the ability of labourers, fishermen and artisans to buy food, as wartime prices rose far faster than their wages, while the government made sure that Calcutta and the war effort were supplied first. The famine was not simply caused by a shortage of rice. It was caused by the way the available rice was shared.

Scarcity is a fact of nature; a monsoon can fail and a river can run low. But whether a shortage becomes a quarrel, a riot or a famine depends on the rules for sharing it. This essay argues that scarcity works like a test. It shows three things that plenty hides: whether the rules for sharing were agreed before the shortage, whether the weakest are protected first or the loudest are served first, and whether those who share trust the information they are given. Where these three are present, a scarce resource can be shared peacefully. Where they are absent, even a modest shortage turns into conflict.

Rivers show this most clearly. The Mahanadi rises in Chhattisgarh and flows into Odisha, whose Hirakud dam and delta depend on it. For decades the two States shared it without much difficulty. The dispute sharpened after Chhattisgarh built barrages upstream, and it is felt most in dry years, when Odisha fears that less water reaches Hirakud. A tribunal was constituted in 2018, and the States are now trying direct talks. The Cauvery tells the same story over a longer period. Karnataka and Tamil Nadu have quarrelled over it since the agreements of 1892 and 1924. The tribunal's award of 2007 and the Supreme Court's judgment of 2018 fixed shares for a normal year, but the flare-ups of 2016 and 2023 came in years of poor rain, when there was no agreed way to share the shortfall. The Court itself placed drinking water above all other uses, which is a statement about fairness, not about hydrology.

Where rules exist before the crisis, scarcity can be managed even between enemies. The Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 survived the wars of 1965 and 1971 and was kept alive for more than six decades, until India placed it in abeyance in 2025 after the Pahalgam attack. Researchers led by Aaron Wolf at Oregon State University, studying recorded interactions over shared rivers in the second half of the twentieth century, found that cooperation was far more common than conflict. Villages have shown the same thing. In 1974 Vilasrao Salunke began the Pani Panchayat at Naigaon in Pune district, a drought-prone area. Water from a shared lift-irrigation scheme was allotted according to the number of people in a family rather than the amount of land it owned, so landless families also received a share, and water-hungry sugarcane was not allowed. The water was still scarce, but the rules made it possible to share it without conflict.

Scarcity also exposes waste that plenty conceals. In *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Steinbeck describes Californian farmers destroying oranges and potatoes to keep prices up while the children of migrant workers go hungry: "There is a crime here that goes beyond denunciation." The United Nations Environment Programme's Food Waste Index Report 2024 estimated that over a billion tonnes of food were wasted in 2022, while hundreds of millions of people went hungry. India has improved its measurement of post-harvest loss but still knows little about waste in shops and homes. In a year when the monsoon ended about 12 per cent below normal and pulse prices rose by up to a tenth within a month, a poor family does not stop eating; it gives up protein first. Shortage falls on the people who have no stock to fall back on.

The distribution of gains is tested in the same way. Mining brings revenue to the State but dust, blasting and lost land to nearby villages. District Mineral Foundations, created by the 2015 amendment to the Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Act, were meant to return part of that wealth to the people who bear the cost. The CAG has now found that Odisha's foundations spent ₹2,578.73 crore under a category that the rules never created. The money was not

scarce; the voice of those it was meant for was. Article 39(b) of the Constitution asks the State to distribute the material resources of the community “as best to subserve the common good”, and that duty is most important when there is little to go round.

The counter-argument is strong. Scarcity does sometimes cause conflict by itself. When a reservoir is empty, no formula can satisfy everyone, and scholars have linked prolonged droughts to unrest in several regions. Rationing in the name of fairness also has a poor record: India’s controls on kerosene, sugar and cement produced black markets and diversion, and Friedrich Hayek argued in “The Use of Knowledge in Society” (1945) that prices carry information about scarcity that no planner can gather. These points are valid. But they show that absolute scarcity is rare and that the method of sharing matters even more when it occurs. Prices ration efficiently, but they cannot guarantee that the poorest will eat. Sen’s Bengal had working markets. What it lacked was a government answerable to the people who starved.

The legitimacy of sharing also depends on whether sacrifice is shared. In Britain during the Second World War, rationing applied to everyone, and many poor families ate better than before the war. In 1965, facing a food shortage and pressure over American wheat supplies, Lal Bahadur Shastri asked Indians to give up one meal a week and followed that practice himself. People accept shortage when they see it shared fairly, and they resent it when a few are protected. As the war in West Asia raises the price of crude and diesel is rationed, the question the public will ask is not only how much fuel there is, but who is being asked to manage with less.

The remedies follow from this. Agree on rules for sharing distress before the dry year comes, whether in the Mahanadi talks or in reservoir management. Publish the data, from reservoir levels to foundation accounts, so that each side can check what it is being told. Protect the weakest first: drinking water before industry, the landless before the large landowner, the village beside the mine before the district headquarters. Sen observed that no major famine has occurred in a functioning democracy with a free press, because governments that must face voters and newspapers cannot ignore starvation. Scarcity will return with every weak monsoon and every distant war. It does not decide whether we fight. It shows whether we have agreed, in advance and in good faith, on how to share.

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