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INDIA AS THE 4TH LARGEST ECONOMY & GROWTH QUALITY

Q1. India has overtaken Japan to become the world's fourth-largest economy at USD 4.18 trillion. But India's per capita GDP is approximately USD 2,900 — still lower-middle-income. Is this milestone meaningful, or does it mask the quality-of-growth problem?

opinion

Position (P): The milestone is both meaningful and insufficient. Aggregate GDP size determines a nation's geopolitical weight, its voice at the G20 and UNSC, and its ability to fund defence and infrastructure at scale. But per capita GDP determines whether individual citizens experience that growth as improved living standards — and at USD 2,900, India remains below the World Bank's upper-middle-income threshold of USD 4,466.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Sceptics rightly argue that India's GDP trajectory has historically been accompanied by persistent inequality. The Oxfam Inequality Report 2023 noted that the top 10% of Indians hold 77% of national wealth. China crossed the USD 4 trillion mark in 2007 but its per capita GDP at that point was already higher than India's today, because China's population growth had slowed decades earlier under the one-child policy.

Illustrate with specifics (I): India's GDP growth of 8.2% in Q2 FY2025-26 was the highest among major economies, driven by private final consumption expenditure (PFCE) at 61.5% of GDP — a 12-year high. But the Economic Survey 2025-26 itself flagged structural concerns: the gig workforce has grown from 7.7 million to 12 million with almost no formal social protection, horticulture surpassed foodgrain production for the first time (reflecting a dietary transition that policy has not yet caught up with), and only 13% of MSMEs — which employ 28.13 crore workers — have access to formal credit.

Link to governance (L): As a future administrator, I would argue that the real measure of this milestone is whether it translates into improved public goods delivery — healthcare, education, and social security. India's Viksit Bharat target of USD 35 trillion by 2047 requires not just aggregate

growth but a per capita tripling, which demands investment in human capital at a scale the current budgetary allocation for health (2.1% of GDP) and education (3.1% of GDP) does not reflect.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the World Bank's classification of economies by income? Where exactly does India fall, and what is the threshold for upper-middle-income status?

India's forex reserves stood at approximately USD 686 billion in November 2025. How does reserve adequacy relate to GDP size, and what is the standard metric used?

China had a per capita GDP of roughly USD 2,600 when it was at India's current aggregate GDP. What structural differences explain China's faster per capita convergence?

The aggregate-vs-per-capita distinction is the analytical core of this question. The board wants to see that you can celebrate the milestone without being uncritical. Know the World Bank income thresholds cold (low: <USD 1,136; lower-middle: 1,136-4,465; upper-middle: 4,466-13,845; high: >13,845). The PFCE figure and MSME credit gap are strong specifics.

Q2. The Economic Survey 2025-26 recommended “Disciplined Swadeshi” — selective protectionism combined with export competitiveness. Is this a viable trade strategy, or does it risk replicating the import substitution failures of the 1960s-80s?

policy-critique

Position (P): Disciplined Swadeshi is a defensible strategic posture if — and only if — the “discipline” is real. The concept acknowledges that blanket free trade and blanket protectionism both fail: India needs targeted protection in sectors where strategic autonomy matters (semiconductors, APIs, critical minerals) while aggressively pursuing export competitiveness in sectors where India has comparative advantage (IT services, generics, textiles).

Acknowledge the other side (A): The import substitution era (1950s-1991) demonstrated a well-documented failure mode: protection intended to be temporary becomes permanent because domestic industries, once shielded from competition, lobby to maintain that shield. India's effective tariff rates rose, productivity stagnated, and the consumer bore the cost through inferior goods at higher prices. The term “Hindu rate of growth” (coined by Raj Krishna) described exactly this outcome.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The Survey’s own data supports the selectivity argument. India is 100% import-dependent for lithium, cobalt, and nickel – the minerals essential for EVs and energy storage. The National Critical Mineral Mission (Rs 34,300 crore) and the PLI scheme across 14 sectors represent targeted industrial policy, not blanket protectionism. Simultaneously, India’s services exports grew 15.6% in FY25, and the India-EU FTA signed in January 2026 – opening 97% of EU tariff lines – shows India is pursuing trade liberalisation where its export sectors benefit.

Link to governance (L): The governance challenge is sunset clauses. Every PLI scheme and tariff protection must have a time-bound exit mechanism – reviewed every three years – so that “disciplined” does not decay into “entrenched.” As a trade policy official, I would build mandatory productivity benchmarking into every protection measure: if a protected sector does not achieve cost parity with global competitors within the specified period, the protection is automatically withdrawn.

Cross-Questions from Board:

Name the 14 sectors covered under the PLI scheme. Which three have shown the strongest results so far?

What was the Bombay Plan of 1944, and how does it compare philosophically to “Disciplined Swadeshi”?

India’s average tariff rate has been rising since 2018 after declining for two decades. Is this consistent with WTO obligations?

The historical parallel to import substitution is the trap the board is setting. Show you understand the difference between strategic industrial policy (time-bound, sector-specific, productivity-benchmarked) and blanket protectionism (permanent, economy-wide, rent-seeking). The sunset clause argument is the governance differentiator.

ISRO, SPACE DOCKING & INDIA’S SPACE PROGRAMME

Q3. India became the fourth country to achieve space docking through the SpaDeX mission in January 2026. Why does space docking matter strategically, and is India investing enough in its space programme relative to competitors?

factual-analytical

Position (P): Space docking is not a prestige achievement — it is a foundational technology without which India’s entire next-generation space architecture is impossible. Chandrayaan-4 (lunar sample return), the Bharatiya Antariksh Station (BAS, targeted by 2035), and in-orbit refuelling all require autonomous rendezvous and docking. India’s SpaDeX success on January 16, 2026 — with two spacecraft (SDX01 “Chaser” and SDX02 “Target”) docking at approximately 470 km orbit — places India in an exclusive club with the USA, Russia, and China.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Critics point out that India’s space budget (approximately USD 1.9 billion in FY25) is a fraction of NASA’s (approximately USD 25 billion) or China’s CNSA (estimated USD 12 billion). India’s cost-efficient approach — Chandrayaan-3 cost approximately USD 75 million versus NASA’s comparable LADEE mission at USD 280 million — works for unmanned missions but may not scale to human spaceflight, where safety margins require larger investment.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The SpaDeX mission was launched on PSLV-C60, but India’s PSLV programme itself faced a reliability crisis in January 2026 — PSLV-C62 failed on January 12 due to a Stage 3 roll-rate disturbance, the second consecutive PSLV failure. With 58 consecutive successes before this anomaly, the back-to-back failures raise quality control questions at a time when Gaganyaan (uncrewed test planned 2026), NISAR (ISRO-NASA dual-frequency SAR satellite), and Shukrayaan-1 (Venus orbiter) all depend on restored launch reliability.

Link to governance (L): As a science policy administrator, I would advocate for two interventions: first, an independent flight safety review board (separate from the launch team) modelled on NASA’s post-Challenger reforms; second, accelerating the private sector launch ecosystem under IN-SPACE to reduce ISRO’s operational burden so it can focus on deep-space technology development rather than routine commercial launches.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What are the four stages of the PSLV, and what propulsion system does each use?

India’s Gaganyaan programme has been delayed multiple times since its 2018 announcement. What are the primary technical and institutional reasons for the delay?

China operates its own space station, Tiangong. India plans the Bharatiya Antariksh Station by 2035. Is this timeline realistic given India’s current launch cadence?

The PSLV-C62 failure is a natural follow-up the board will probe — do not avoid it. Acknowledging institutional challenges (quality control in the supply chain) while maintaining confidence in India’s space trajectory shows intellectual honesty. Know the PSLV stage sequence: PS1 (solid) - PS2 (liquid) - PS3 (solid) - PS4 (liquid) with 6 strap-on boosters in XL configuration.

INDIA-EU FTA & TRADE ARCHITECTURE

Q4. India and the EU signed a Free Trade Agreement in January 2026 after 19 years of negotiations. What took so long, and does the deal serve India's interests?

opinion

Position (P): The delay was caused by genuine structural divergences — not bureaucratic incompetence. The EU demanded stronger intellectual property protections (TRIPS-plus provisions), government procurement access, and data adequacy commitments that India resisted because they would have affected generic pharmaceutical exports, domestic preference in public procurement, and data localisation policy. The final deal, which opens 97% of EU tariff lines (covering 99.5% of India's export value) and 92.1% of Indian tariff lines, represents a calibrated outcome.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Critics within India argue that opening 92.1% of tariff lines exposes Indian dairy, automobile components, and wine sectors to European competition that enjoys significantly higher subsidies under the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). European farmers receive approximately EUR 387 billion over the 2021-2027 MFF budget cycle — a level of state support Indian agriculture cannot match.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The deal was catalysed by geopolitics, not just trade economics. The EU's post-2022 "de-risking from China" strategy (distinct from decoupling) made India a strategic alternative supply chain partner. The EU-India Security and Defence Partnership — signed alongside the FTA — covers maritime security, defence industry cooperation, cyber, space, and counter-terrorism. This is only the EU's third such pact in Asia, after Japan and South Korea. The symbolic choice of EU leaders Antonio Costa and Ursula von der Leyen as joint Republic Day 2026 chief guests underscored that this was a strategic, not merely commercial, deal.

Link to governance (L): As a trade negotiator, I would focus implementation on three priorities: establishing a dedicated FTA monitoring cell in DGFT to track utilisation rates (India's FTA utilisation rate is historically only 25-30%, compared to 70%+ in ASEAN), fast-tracking mutual recognition agreements for Indian professional qualifications in the EU market, and creating an adjustment fund for sectors like dairy where European imports may displace domestic producers.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between an FTA, a CEPA, and a Customs Union? Which model does the India-EU deal follow?

India's FTA utilisation rate is approximately 25-30%. What explains this low rate, and how would you improve it as a DGFT official?

The EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) will impose carbon tariffs on Indian steel and aluminium exports from 2026. How does this interact with the FTA?

The geopolitical framing — that the FTA was unlocked by China de-risking rather than trade liberalisation ideology — is the sophisticated answer the board rewards. Know the CBAM timeline (transitional phase 2023-2025, full implementation 2026) as it directly affects Indian exporters even under the new FTA.

BRICS 2026 & INDIA'S MULTI-ALIGNMENT

Q5. India assumed the BRICS Chairmanship in January 2026, an expanded grouping that now includes Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Can India credibly chair a group that includes both its strategic partners and its strategic competitors?

opinion

Position (P): India can — and this is precisely the kind of diplomatic role India excels at. BRICS is not a military alliance; it is a platform for South-South cooperation and multilateral reform. India's credibility as chair derives from its demonstrated ability to maintain productive relationships with all members simultaneously — a capacity no other BRICS member possesses. Neither China nor Russia can claim balanced ties with the West; neither Iran nor Saudi Arabia can claim balanced ties with each other.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The expansion to BRICS+ (adding Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and UAE in January 2024) has complicated the grouping's coherence. China's vision for BRICS as a counter-Western bloc clashes with India's insistence that BRICS complement, not oppose, the existing multilateral order. Iran's inclusion, given US sanctions and India's ties with both the US and Iran (Chabahar port), creates unavoidable diplomatic friction.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The expanded BRICS represents approximately 45% of the world's population and 35% of global GDP (PPP). India's chairmanship priorities — the New Development Bank (NDB), BRICS Pay as an alternative to SWIFT, South-South technology cooperation, and reforming multilateral development banks — are carefully calibrated to be pro-development without being anti-Western. India successfully navigated similar tensions during its G20 presidency in 2023, achieving consensus on the New Delhi Declaration despite the Russia-Ukraine war.

Link to governance (L): As a diplomat, I would use the chairmanship to advance two concrete deliverables: first, expanding NDB lending to climate adaptation projects in member countries (currently only 20% of NDB lending is green); second, piloting BRICS mutual recognition of professional qualifications to facilitate intra-BRICS labour mobility — a practical outcome that benefits all members without antagonising the West.

Cross-Questions from Board:

Name all ten current BRICS members. When did the original grouping form, and who coined the term “BRIC”?

What is the New Development Bank, where is it headquartered, and what is India’s voting share?

India simultaneously participates in BRICS and QUAD. How do you explain this to a Chinese diplomat who views QUAD as an anti-China alliance?

The G20 2023 precedent — India achieving consensus despite Russia-Ukraine divisions — is your strongest evidence that India can manage contradictions. Know the NDB basics: headquartered in Shanghai, each founding member holds equal voting share (unlike the IMF where the US has effective veto). The “complement, not oppose” framing for BRICS versus the Western order is the analytically correct position.

PASSIVE EUTHANASIA & RIGHT TO DIE WITH DIGNITY

Q6. The Supreme Court is revisiting its 2018 judgment on passive euthanasia and advance directives, with petitioners seeking to simplify the procedural requirements. Should the state make it easier for citizens to exercise the right to die with dignity, or does simplification risk abuse?

ethical-dilemma

Position (P): The right to die with dignity, established under Article 21 in *Common Cause v. Union of India* (2018), is a fundamental right — and a right that cannot be practically exercised is no right at all. The current procedure, requiring multiple medical opinions and High Court approval, has resulted in almost zero advance directives being executed since 2018. Simplification is not a concession to convenience; it is a constitutional obligation to make fundamental rights effective.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The counter-argument is serious and rooted in genuine vulnerability. India’s healthcare system is deeply unequal — the doctor-to-patient ratio is approximately 1:1,000 (WHO recommends 1:1,000, but distribution is skewed: 80% of doctors serve

28% of the urban population). In a context where elderly persons face inheritance-related pressure from family members, and where palliative care infrastructure is virtually absent outside Kerala and a few metros, simplifying euthanasia procedures could expose vulnerable individuals to coercion.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The 2018 judgment by the five-judge bench (CJ Dipak Misra) built upon *Aruna Shanbaug v. Union of India* (2011), which first allowed passive euthanasia with High Court permission, and *Gian Kaur v. State of Punjab* (1996), which had held that Article 21 does not include the right to die. The progressive expansion of Article 21 — from mere animal existence (*Maneka Gandhi*, 1978) to dignity, privacy (*Puttaswamy*, 2017), and now death with dignity — represents the Court’s evolving recognition that the right to life includes the right to a meaningful, autonomous life and its conclusion.

Link to governance (L): The solution is not to choose between simplification and safeguards — it is to build a layered system. I would recommend: removing the High Court approval requirement (replace with a three-doctor Medical Board at district hospital level), mandating a 30-day cooling-off period between the advance directive and its execution, requiring video-recorded consent, and establishing District Palliative Care Committees (building on Kerala’s model, which has 1,000+ palliative care centres) to ensure that the choice for euthanasia is informed by the availability of alternatives.

Cross-Questions from Board:

Distinguish between active euthanasia, passive euthanasia, and physician-assisted suicide. Which are legal in India?

The Aruna Shanbaug case involved a nurse in a persistent vegetative state for 42 years. What specific facts of that case shaped the legal framework for passive euthanasia?

As a district collector, a family approaches you requesting euthanasia for their elderly parent who is in a vegetative state but left no advance directive. What is the legal pathway?

The evolution chain — Gian Kaur (1996, no right to die) to Aruna Shanbaug (2011, conditional passive euthanasia) to Common Cause (2018, advance directives under Article 21) — is essential. The board tests whether you can hold both the autonomy principle and the vulnerability concern simultaneously without collapsing into either position.

TELANGANA'S TWO-CHILD NORM & DEMOGRAPHIC POLICY

Q7. Telangana abolished the two-child norm for Panchayati Raj elections in January 2026. The Supreme Court upheld such norms as constitutional in *Javed v. State of Haryana (2003)*. Was the Court wrong, or have circumstances changed?

policy-critique

Position (P): The Court was not wrong on the law in 2003, but the demographic reality has changed so fundamentally that the norm has become counterproductive. In 2003, India's TFR was approximately 3.1; today it is 2.0 (NFHS-5), below replacement level. Telangana's rural TFR is 1.7. A population control measure designed for a high-fertility era is now disenfranchising citizens in a below-replacement fertility context — it penalises precisely the communities (rural, lower-income, SC/ST) whose political participation the Constitution's 73rd Amendment sought to enhance.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Defenders of the two-child norm argue that it promotes responsible reproductive choices and sends a normative signal. In states where TFR remains above replacement — Bihar (3.0), UP (2.7), Rajasthan (2.5) — the norm retains some policy rationale. The *Javed* judgment rested on Article 14's reasonable classification doctrine: the state has a legitimate interest in population stabilisation, and linking it to eligibility for public office is a proportionate measure.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The empirical evidence is against the norm. Studies by the Rajasthan-based Population Foundation of India found that two-child norms disproportionately affect women — who face abandonment or forced sterilisation to comply — and SC/ST candidates, who tend to have larger families due to lower access to contraception and healthcare. Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh had already relaxed similar norms before Telangana. India's demographic trajectory makes the norm increasingly absurd: by 2051, southern states will face ageing crises comparable to Japan, while northern states will produce the majority of India's working-age population.

Link to governance (L): As a policymaker, I would recommend that all states with TFR below 2.1 repeal two-child norms for local body elections. For states above replacement, the focus should shift from punitive disqualification to incentive-based approaches — conditional cash transfers linked to smaller family size, universal access to contraception under the Family Planning Programme, and girls' education (the single strongest predictor of fertility decline). The state's role is to create conditions for voluntary fertility reduction, not to disenfranchise citizens.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the replacement-level TFR, and why is it 2.1 rather than 2.0? Which Indian states are already below replacement?

The 73rd Amendment mandates reservation for SC/ST in Panchayats. Does a two-child norm that disproportionately disqualifies SC/ST candidates undermine this constitutional mandate?

As a district collector in a high-fertility district, how would you reduce TFR without coercive measures?

The demographic divergence between north and south India is the structural context for this answer. Know the NFHS-5 state-level TFR data — Kerala (1.8), Tamil Nadu (1.7), Bihar (3.0), UP (2.7). The board values the distinction between normative signalling (what the law communicates) and empirical impact (what actually happens to women and marginalised communities).

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION VS DEVELOPMENT

Q8. The proposed 1,200 MW Kalai-II Hydropower Project on the Lohit River threatens the habitat of the White-bellied Heron, of which fewer than 60 individuals survive globally. As the Environment Secretary, how would you balance Arunachal Pradesh's 34,000 MW hydropower potential with the survival of a critically endangered species?

situational

Position (P): As Environment Secretary, I would not approve the Kalai-II project in its current form. When a species has fewer than 60 individuals globally and India holds 10-15 of them, the extinction risk is non-negotiable — once the species is lost, no amount of hydropower compensates for that irreversible outcome. This does not mean I oppose hydropower development in Arunachal Pradesh; it means I insist on site selection that avoids critical habitat.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Arunachal Pradesh's argument is legitimate: the state holds approximately 34,000 MW of India's estimated 50,000 MW northeast hydropower potential. Hydropower revenue and electricity supply are essential for a state with limited alternative economic drivers. Blanket environmental vetoes on all projects would condemn the state to persistent underdevelopment, and the local population would bear the cost of a conservation objective that benefits the entire nation.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The White-bellied Heron (*Ardea insignis*) requires clear, braided rivers with exposed sandbars and tall riparian forest — precisely the habitat that reservoir impoundments destroy. The species is Critically Endangered (IUCN), listed in CITES Appendix I, and

protected under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. The project requires clearance from the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL). India has precedent for site-modification: the Dibang Multipurpose Project (2,880 MW) was delayed for years and redesigned after environmental concerns — the process was costly but preserved habitat integrity.

Link to governance (L): My three-step approach: first, commission a cumulative environmental impact assessment (EIA) of all proposed hydropower projects on the Lohit basin — not project-by-project clearance, which misses the cumulative impact. Second, identify alternative sites on tributaries where the White-bellied Heron does not nest. Third, create a compensatory conservation fund from hydropower revenues that finances habitat restoration and anti-poaching operations in Namdapha Tiger Reserve and Kamlang Wildlife Sanctuary — the two remaining Indian strongholds of the species.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the NBWL, who chairs it, and what is its role in wildlife clearances?

The EIA Notification 2006 requires project-level assessments. What is the difference between a project-level EIA and a cumulative basin-level EIA, and why does it matter for hydropower?

Arunachal Pradesh's tribal communities have customary land rights under the Sixth Schedule. How do these rights interact with the Forest Conservation Act for hydropower clearances?

The “fewer than 60 individuals globally” figure is the decisive fact — it places this in the category of irreversible extinction risk, which changes the cost-benefit calculus fundamentally. Know the NBWL composition (chaired by the PM, with the Environment Minister as vice-chair) and the Sixth Schedule provisions for Arunachal Pradesh's tribal autonomy.

H5N1 AVIAN INFLUENZA & ZONOTIC PREPAREDNESS

Q9. The H5N1 avian influenza outbreak in Kuttanad, Kerala, in January 2026 required culling approximately 55,000 birds. Is India prepared for the next zoonotic pandemic, and what institutional reforms are needed?

policy-critique

Position (P): India is not adequately prepared. The Kuttanad outbreak was contained through culling — a reactive, last-resort measure that works for localised outbreaks but would fail catastrophically if H5N1 or a similar pathogen achieved sustained human-to-human transmission. India's zoonotic

disease surveillance infrastructure remains fragmented across multiple ministries with no unified command.

Acknowledge the other side (A): India has made progress since COVID-19. The ICMR's network of BSL-3 and BSL-4 laboratories has expanded, the Integrated Disease Surveillance Programme (IDSP) — now restructured as the Integrated Health Information Platform (IHIP) — covers all 36 states and UTs, and the National One Health Programme (launched 2022) recognises the animal-human-environment disease nexus. The Kuttanad response — establishing 1 km infected, 10 km surveillance, and 50 km alert zones — followed the Action Plan correctly.

Illustrate with specifics (I): H5N1 was first isolated in 1996 in Guangdong, China; the 1997 Hong Kong outbreak killed 6 of 18 infected humans. The global case fatality rate for H5N1 in humans is historically approximately 60% — far higher than COVID-19's approximately 1%. India's first H5N1 detection in domestic poultry was in Maharashtra in 2006. Kuttanad's geography — 1 to 2.5 metres below mean sea level, dense duck populations, waterlogged terrain, and proximity to migratory bird routes along the Central Asian Flyway — creates a near-perfect zoonotic transmission environment. The Vembanad Lake (Ramsar Wetland, 2002) supports both the poultry economy and migratory waterfowl, making separation impossible.

Link to governance (L): As Health Secretary, I would prioritise three reforms: first, establish a National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC) as a statutory body (currently it operates as a directorate under MoHFW with no statutory independence); second, mandate joint animal-human disease surveillance at the district level by co-locating veterinary and public health officers in District Health Offices; third, create a Strategic Vaccine Stockpile for H5N1 and other pandemic-potential pathogens, modelled on the US Strategic National Stockpile.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the "One Health" approach, and which three ministries must coordinate for it to work in India?

The Central Asian Flyway passes through India. Name three major wetlands in India that serve as stopover points for migratory birds and explain why they are zoonotic risk zones.

India has no dedicated pandemic preparedness legislation. Should India enact one, or is the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897 (as amended) sufficient?

The Epidemic Diseases Act 1897 — a 129-year-old colonial-era law with only four sections — is woefully inadequate for modern pandemic response. The board rewards candidates who know this and can articulate what a modern Pandemic Preparedness Act should contain (surveillance mandates, emergency procurement powers, inter-state coordination protocols, liability frameworks for healthcare workers).

NATIONAL QUANTUM MISSION & TECHNOLOGY SOVEREIGNTY

Q10. India's National Quantum Mission targets a 50-qubit quantum computer by 2028 and 1,000-qubit by 2031. Is India's Rs 6,003 crore budget realistic for achieving quantum capability, given that the US and China are spending tens of billions?

factual-analytical

Position (P): India is not pursuing quantum supremacy — it is pursuing quantum sufficiency. The strategic goal is not to build the world's most powerful quantum computer (a contest dominated by Google, IBM, and China's USTC) but to develop sovereign capability in four areas that matter for national security and economic competitiveness: quantum computing, quantum communication, quantum sensing, and quantum materials.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The budget gap is real. The US National Quantum Initiative (2018) has allocated over USD 3 billion in federal funding, supplemented by tens of billions from private sector players (Google, IBM, Microsoft). China's quantum investment is estimated at USD 15 billion. India's Rs 6,003 crore (approximately USD 720 million) over eight years (2023-2031) is a fraction of these budgets. The risk is that India develops laboratory capabilities but fails to translate them into deployable systems — the “valley of death” between research and application.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The four Technology Hubs — IISc Bangalore (quantum computing), TIFR Mumbai (quantum communication), IIT Bombay (quantum sensing), and IIT Madras (quantum materials) — anchor the mission. The 2,000 km quantum communication network and satellite-based Quantum Key Distribution (QKD) targets are directly relevant to national security: quantum computing threatens existing RSA encryption that secures banking, defence communications, and government networks. India must develop quantum-safe cryptography before adversaries develop quantum computers capable of breaking current encryption.

Link to governance (L): As a science policy administrator, I would argue that India's advantage is not in outspending the US and China but in three areas: leveraging its large STEM talent pool (India produces approximately 1.5 million engineering graduates annually), creating public-private partnerships with Indian IT companies (TCS, Infosys, Wipro all have quantum research units), and focusing on applied quantum technologies — quantum sensing for mineral exploration under NCMM, quantum communication for secure government networks — rather than pursuing theoretical quantum supremacy.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is a qubit, and how does it differ from a classical bit? What is quantum entanglement, and why does it matter for communication?

Explain why quantum computing threatens RSA encryption. What is the specific mathematical problem that quantum computers solve faster?

India's JNCASR researchers simulated the Mpemba Effect in January 2026. What is the Mpemba Effect, and what is its relevance to fundamental physics?

Do not get drawn into technical details you cannot defend. The board is testing strategic thinking, not physics knowledge. The "quantum sufficiency vs quantum supremacy" framing shows you understand India's realistic position. Know the four T-Hub locations and their specialisations — this is a commonly asked factual follow-up.

INDIA-BANGLADESH RELATIONS

Q11. India-Bangladesh relations have entered a difficult phase since Sheikh Hasina's resignation in August 2024 and the installation of Muhammad Yunus as Chief Adviser. How should India navigate this transition, and what are the risks of a Bangladesh that tilts toward China?

opinion

Position (P): India must navigate the Bangladesh transition with strategic patience rather than reactive pressure. The Yunus government is an interim arrangement, not a permanent realignment. India's interests — protection of religious minorities, continuation of connectivity projects, management of the 4,096 km shared border, and preventing Chinese strategic infrastructure in India's immediate neighbourhood — require sustained engagement, not diplomatic isolation of Dhaka.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The concerns are legitimate. Attacks on Hindu temples and minorities have been reported since the August 2024 transition. China has significantly increased diplomatic engagement with the Yunus government, including infrastructure financing offers. Hasina's continued presence in India — with Bangladesh seeking extradition — creates bilateral friction. And the unresolved Teesta water-sharing treaty (blocked since 2011 by West Bengal's opposition) remains a symbol of Indian political dysfunction affecting foreign policy.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The bilateral relationship has deep structural anchors that no government in Dhaka can easily dismantle. Bilateral trade stands at approximately USD 14 billion, making Bangladesh India's largest trading partner in South Asia. The Agartala-Akhaura rail link (opened October 2023) and the India-Bangladesh Friendship Pipeline (South Asia's first cross-border

petroleum pipeline) represent physical connectivity that creates mutual dependence. India provides approximately 1,160 MW of electricity to Bangladesh. Yunus, a Nobel laureate (2006, Grameen Bank and microcredit), is not ideologically anti-India — he is a pragmatist managing a volatile political transition.

Link to governance (L): As an MEA official, I would pursue three tracks simultaneously: first, accelerate the Teesta deal by engaging directly with the West Bengal government under the Centre’s coordination powers; second, increase people-to-people engagement through expanded student visa quotas and medical tourism facilitation; third, propose a joint India-Bangladesh infrastructure development fund that offers Dhaka an alternative to Chinese financing with more favourable terms and without sovereignty-compromising conditions.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the Teesta water-sharing dispute? Which Indian state has blocked the agreement, and on what grounds?

Muhammad Yunus received the Nobel Prize for microcredit through Grameen Bank. What is the development model Grameen Bank represents, and has it been replicated in India?

India and Bangladesh share 54 transboundary rivers. Which bilateral mechanism governs water sharing, and how effective has it been?

The Teesta issue is the board’s natural follow-up — know that the 2011 agreement was blocked by CM Mamata Banerjee on the grounds that it would reduce West Bengal’s dry-season water share. The India-Bangladesh Joint Rivers Commission (JRC, established 1972) is the bilateral mechanism. Show awareness that foreign policy failures can originate in domestic politics — this is a sophisticated analytical frame.

REPUBLIC DAY 2026 & CONSTITUTIONAL HERITAGE

Q12. The 77th Republic Day chose “150 Years of Vande Mataram” as its theme. Vande Mataram has been a subject of controversy — some communities object to its invocation of the mother goddess. How would you address this sensitivity as a civil servant responsible for organizing a national event?

ethical-dilemma

Position (P): As a civil servant, I would approach this with constitutional clarity rather than political positioning. Vande Mataram is India’s National Song — not the National Anthem. Its status was settled by the Constituent Assembly, which chose “Jana Gana Mana” as the National Anthem and granted Vande Mataram equal honour as the National Song. The distinction matters: Jana Gana Mana is constitutionally mandated; Vande Mataram is culturally honoured. No citizen can be compelled to sing it.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The objection is rooted in genuine theological concern. The song’s imagery in *Anandmath* (1882) personifies the motherland as the goddess Durga — a specifically Hindu devotional frame. For Muslims, Christians, and others for whom such invocation conflicts with monotheistic belief, mandatory singing creates a genuine tension between national identity and religious conscience. This is not a frivolous objection — it is a question about the boundaries of cultural nationalism in a constitutionally secular republic.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The Constituent Assembly itself addressed this. Only the first two stanzas of Vande Mataram — which describe the beauty of the motherland without religious imagery — were adopted as the National Song. The later stanzas, which explicitly invoke Durga, were excluded. This was a deliberate constitutional compromise by leaders including Jawaharlal Nehru and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. The Supreme Court in *Bijoe Emmanuel v. State of Kerala* (1986) held that Jehovah’s Witness students could not be expelled for refusing to sing the National Anthem — establishing that compulsion to sing patriotic songs violates Articles 19(1)(a) and 25.

Link to governance (L): As the organizing officer, I would ensure that Vande Mataram is performed at the event as a cultural tribute — which is its constitutional status — without making participation compulsory. I would include multilingual and multi-traditional cultural performances that reflect India’s composite heritage. The strength of a republic is that it accommodates dissent within its celebrations.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between the National Anthem and the National Song in constitutional law? Is there a legal obligation to stand for Vande Mataram?

The Bijoe Emmanuel case is about the National Anthem. Can its reasoning be extended to other patriotic songs and symbols?

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee composed Vande Mataram in 1876. In what political context was the song first used as a nationalist symbol, and during which movement did it gain mass following?

The Constituent Assembly's deliberate exclusion of the later stanzas is the key historical fact — it shows that the founders anticipated and addressed this controversy. Know the Bijoe Emmanuel case (1986) cold — it is the leading authority on the right not to sing patriotic songs. The board tests whether you can handle cultural sensitivity with constitutional precision.

CRITICAL MINERALS & ENERGY SECURITY

Q13. India is 100% import-dependent for lithium, cobalt, and nickel — the minerals essential for EVs and clean energy storage. The National Critical Mineral Mission has a Rs 34,300 crore budget. Is this sufficient to secure India's energy transition supply chain?

policy-critique

Position (P): The budget is adequate for exploration and initial acquisition, but grossly insufficient for building domestic processing capacity — which is where the real strategic vulnerability lies. China dominates 60-80% of global refining capacity for cobalt, lithium, and rare earths. Even if India secures raw mineral supplies through KABIL deals in Argentina, Australia, and Chile, those minerals will still need to be processed — and that processing capacity does not exist in India today.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The government's three-pillar approach — domestic exploration (368 GSI projects), overseas acquisition (KABIL), and processing and recycling — is structurally sound. The Mines and Minerals (Development and Regulation) Amendment Act 2025 centralising control over 24 critical minerals with the Central Government removes state-level auction bottlenecks. India's participation in the Mineral Security Partnership (14 nations) and QUAD's Critical and Emerging Technology Working Group provides diplomatic backing for supply diversification.

Illustrate with specifics (I): India discovered significant lithium reserves in the Salal-Haimana area of Reasi district, Jammu and Kashmir (announced February 2023, GSI) — estimated at 5.9 million tonnes of inferred resources. However, inferred resources are not proven reserves; exploration to the measured resource stage takes 5-7 years, and commercial extraction takes longer. Meanwhile, India's EV market is growing at 49% CAGR (FY22-FY25), and the National Green Hydrogen Mission targets 5 MMTPA green hydrogen by 2030 — both requiring massive mineral inputs. Cobalt prices (approximately USD 25,000 per tonne) are subject to geopolitical risk, with 60% mined in the Democratic Republic of Congo under conditions of severe governance deficit.

Link to governance (L): As a Mines Secretary, I would supplement the NCMM with three interventions: first, establish a Strategic Mineral Reserve (analogous to the Strategic Petroleum Reserve) for lithium, cobalt, and rare earths — stockpiling 90 days of processing requirements. Second, incentivise urban mining and battery recycling through a dedicated EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) framework for EV batteries. Third, fast-track the J&K lithium exploration by deploying GSI's best teams and offering KABIL-managed exploration contracts to attract private capital.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between inferred resources, indicated resources, and measured reserves in geological classification? Why does this distinction matter for policy?

Name the 24 critical minerals over which the Central Government has taken exclusive control under the 2025 Amendment.

China controls 60-80% of global critical mineral processing. What specific leverage does this give China in a geopolitical crisis, and how does it differ from OPEC's leverage over oil?

The exploration-to-extraction timeline (5-7 years for inferred to measured, then 3-5 years for commercial extraction) is the factual anchor that shows why the J&K lithium discovery does not solve India's near-term problem. The board tests whether you understand the difference between having minerals in the ground and having a functioning supply chain.

DEMOGRAPHIC DIVIDEND & NORTH-SOUTH DIVIDE

Q14. India's demographic dividend is fracturing — southern states are ageing while northern states still have high fertility. Post-delimitation, northern states will gain Lok Sabha seats at the expense of the south. Is this democratic, and what are the governance implications?

opinion

Position (P): It is constitutionally democratic — representation must reflect population — but it is politically explosive and economically counterproductive without compensating mechanisms. Southern states that invested in education, healthcare, and family planning (reducing TFR to 1.7-1.8) would effectively be penalised by losing relative political weight to northern states that failed to make the same investments.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The democratic principle is clear: one person, one vote, one value. Delimitation based on current population is what Article 82 of the Constitution mandates. Freezing the 1971 population-based seat allocation indefinitely — as the 42nd Amendment (1976) and 84th Amendment (2002) have done until 2026 — was always a temporary measure. The northern states' argument is equally valid: their larger populations deserve proportionate representation in the national legislature.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The numbers are stark. By 2051, northern states (UP, Bihar, Rajasthan, MP, Jharkhand) will account for approximately 52.7% of India's working-age population. Kerala's 60+ cohort is projected to reach 23-25% by 2036 — ageing comparable to European nations. Under current freezing, Tamil Nadu (population approximately 7.9 crore) has 39 Lok Sabha seats while UP (population approximately 24 crore) has 80 seats — giving Tamil Nadu roughly double the per capita representation of UP. Post-delimitation, this imbalance would correct toward population proportionality, shifting approximately 30-40 seats from south to north.

Link to governance (L): As a policymaker, I would propose a constitutional package deal: delimitation proceeds based on current population (honouring the democratic principle), but accompanied by three compensating mechanisms. First, a Finance Commission formula that increases the fiscal transfer weight of performance indicators (education, health outcomes, family planning achievement) — rewarding states that controlled population. Second, an upper house (Rajya Sabha) reform giving equal representation to all states regardless of population, as in the US Senate model. Third, a National Demographic Transition Fund that finances social security systems in ageing southern states.

Cross-Questions from Board:

Article 82 mandates delimitation after each Census. Which amendments froze the seat allocation, and when does the freeze expire?

The 15th Finance Commission (chaired by N.K. Singh) used the 2011 Census population data for devolution. How did southern states react, and what compromise was reached?

As a district collector in an ageing district in Kerala, what specific social security and healthcare infrastructure challenges would you face compared to a collector in a young, high-fertility district in Bihar?

The "reward vs punishment" framing is what the board is testing. Southern states see delimitation as punishment for good governance; northern states see it as democratic correction. Show you understand both, and propose structural solutions rather than just describing the problem. The Finance Commission formula is the highest-impact policy lever.

GIG ECONOMY & SOCIAL SECURITY

Q15. India's gig workforce has grown from 7.7 million to 12 million workers, projected to reach 23.5 million by 2030 — yet they remain outside formal social security. The Code on Social Security 2020 covers gig workers but its rules have not been notified. What is the governance failure here?

factual-analytical

Position (P): The governance failure is not legislative but implementational. Parliament passed the Code on Social Security 2020 — one of four Labour Codes consolidating 44 labour laws — which for the first time brought platform and gig workers under a potential social security framework. The failure lies in the Central Government's refusal to notify the implementing rules for six years, rendering the statutory framework a dead letter.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The government's hesitancy is partly structural. Defining the employer-employee relationship for gig workers is genuinely complex. Platform companies (Zomato, Swiggy, Uber, Ola) argue that gig workers are independent contractors, not employees — and reclassifying them as employees would trigger ESIC and EPFO obligations that could make the platform model economically unviable. The California AB5 experience in the US, where gig worker reclassification led to Proposition 22 overturning the law, shows that this is a contested policy domain globally.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The ESIC-EPFO SPREE campaign enrolled 1.03 crore workers into formal social security by January 2026 through a penalty waiver — demonstrating that informal workers want social protection. But SPREE covered traditional informal workers, not platform gig workers. ESIC currently covers establishments with 10+ workers (wage ceiling Rs 21,000 per month); EPFO covers establishments with 20+ workers. Gig workers fall outside both because they are classified as self-employed. India's informal workforce — approximately 90% of the approximately 550 million total workforce — represents the world's largest social protection gap.

Link to governance (L): As Labour Secretary, I would take three immediate steps. First, notify the gig worker provisions of the Social Security Code within 90 days — the legislative mandate already exists. Second, create a Gig Workers Social Security Fund with mandatory platform contributions (1-2% of transaction value, as Rajasthan's Platform Workers Act 2023 already requires). Third, establish a portable social security account linked to Aadhaar, so benefits follow the worker across platforms rather than being tied to a single employer.

Cross-Questions from Board:

Name the four Labour Codes passed in 2019-2020 and explain why they have not been fully implemented despite parliamentary passage.

The Rajasthan Platform Workers Act 2023 is the first state-level attempt to regulate gig work. What are its key provisions?

A gig delivery worker is injured while making a delivery. Under current law, who is responsible — the platform, the restaurant, or the worker? How would your proposed framework change this?

The four Labour Codes (Wages 2019, Industrial Relations 2020, Social Security 2020, OSH 2020) consolidating 44 laws is essential knowledge. The board will probe why laws passed by Parliament remain unimplemented — the answer involves both Centre-state coordination (labour is on the Concurrent List) and industry lobbying. Rajasthan's 2023 Act is a strong state-level comparator.

DEFENCE INDIGENISATION & HYPERSONIC CAPABILITY

Q16. India displayed the Long Range Anti-Ship Hypersonic Missile at Republic Day 2026 — a Mach 5+ weapon with a 1,500 km range. How does this change India's strategic calculus in the Indian Ocean Region?

factual-analytical

Position (P): The LR-AShM fundamentally expands India's maritime denial capability. A Mach 5+ anti-ship missile with a 1,500 km range means India can threaten hostile naval assets across the entire Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal from shore-based launchers — without deploying naval vessels. This is a strategic shift from sea control (which requires expensive carrier battle groups) to sea denial (which can be achieved with land-based missile systems at a fraction of the cost).

Acknowledge the other side (A): Hypersonic missiles are not wonder weapons. Their effectiveness depends on targeting systems — finding a moving ship at sea at 1,500 km range requires satellite-based surveillance, maritime patrol aircraft, and real-time data fusion that India's ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) architecture is still developing. A missile travelling at Mach 10 covers 1,500 km in approximately 7-8 minutes; in that time, a warship can change course significantly if the targeting data is stale.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The LR-AShM builds on DRDO's HSTDV (Hypersonic Technology Demonstrator Vehicle), which achieved India's first hypersonic flight at Mach 6+ in September 2020. It is a 2-stage solid-fuel missile with a manoeuvring warhead. India joins only the US, Russia, and China in deploying hypersonic anti-ship weapons. In the Indian Ocean Region, China has been

expanding its naval presence — Djibouti (military base since 2017), Hambantota port (Sri Lanka, 99-year lease), and Gwadar port (Pakistan, CPEC). The LR-AShM provides India with a cost-effective counter to Chinese naval expansion without requiring a matching fleet buildup.

Link to governance (L): As a defence policy planner, I would integrate the LR-AShM into a broader Anti-Access/Area Denial (A2/AD) architecture that combines hypersonic missiles, the Pralay quasi-ballistic missile (150-500 km range), submarine-launched weapons from the Arihant-class SSBNs, and island-based air defence systems on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands — India’s strategically positioned territory at the mouth of the Strait of Malacca.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between a ballistic missile, a cruise missile, and a hypersonic glide vehicle?

Which category does the LR-AShM belong to?

China has developed the DF-21D “carrier killer” anti-ship ballistic missile. How does India’s LR-AShM compare in terms of capability and strategic intent?

India’s defence budget allocates approximately 59% to salaries and maintenance. How does this constrain capital procurement for systems like the LR-AShM?

The sea denial vs sea control distinction is the strategic concept the board is testing. Sea denial is cheaper and more achievable for India than matching China’s fleet ship-for-ship. Know the Andaman and Nicobar Islands’ strategic location — they sit at the western entrance to the Strait of Malacca, through which approximately 60% of China’s oil imports transit. This geographic advantage is India’s trump card.

ELECTION COMMISSION INDEPENDENCE

Q17. The CEC and Other EC Act 2023 replaced the Chief Justice of India on the selection committee for the CEC with a Cabinet Minister, giving the ruling party a 2-to-1 majority. Does this compromise the Election Commission’s independence?

policy-critique

Position (P): Yes, it structurally compromises the appointment process — though not necessarily the institution’s operational independence, which depends on the character of the appointee and the constitutional protections for tenure. The Supreme Court in *Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India* (2023)

explicitly included the CJI on the selection committee to ensure judicial oversight of appointments to a body that adjudicates between political parties. Parliament's removal of the CJI from the committee undermines that safeguard.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The government's defence has constitutional grounding. Article 324(2) states that the President shall appoint the CEC "subject to the provisions of any law made in that behalf by Parliament." Parliament is constitutionally empowered to determine the appointment process, and the Court's 2023 interim direction was explicitly "until Parliament makes a law." Parliament has now made a law — exercising its constitutional prerogative.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The selection committee under the 2023 Act comprises the Prime Minister, a Cabinet Minister nominated by the PM, and the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha. This gives the ruling party two of three votes — a structural majority. The CEC's tenure protection remains strong: Article 324(5) mandates removal only through the same process as a Supreme Court judge (impeachment by special majority in both Houses). However, this creates an asymmetry: the front end (appointment) is vulnerable to executive influence while the back end (removal) is constitutionally protected. A loyalist appointee, once installed, cannot be removed — making the appointment process the critical control point.

Link to governance (L): As a constitutional reform advocate, I would propose that the selection committee include the CJI (as the Court originally directed), with a supermajority requirement for appointment — ensuring that no single political party can unilaterally determine who guards the integrity of elections. The T.N. Seshan model (1990-96) — where one individual transformed the institution through personal integrity — is inspiring but not institutionally reliable. Systems must be designed for the worst-case appointee, not the best.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between the CEC and an Election Commissioner in terms of removal protection? Why does this asymmetry create a structural vulnerability?

T.N. Seshan is credited with transforming the ECI. Name two specific reforms he implemented during his tenure.

The ECI's ECINET platform, launched in January 2026, integrates 40+ electoral applications. Does digital infrastructure strengthen or weaken institutional independence?

The appointment-removal asymmetry is the high-yield analytical point. CEC removal requires parliamentary impeachment (same as SC judge); Election Commissioner removal is much easier (at the CEC's recommendation). This means the CEC can be pressured by threatening to not reappoint cooperative Election Commissioners. Know the Anoop Baranwal case (2023, five-judge bench) and the three-member committee it originally mandated (PM + CJI + LoP).

KAVACH RAILWAY SAFETY & INFRASTRUCTURE

Q18. Indian Railways has deployed Kavach anti-collision technology on approximately 1,300 km of its 68,000 km network — under 2% coverage. The Balasore tragedy of June 2023 killed 292 people. Is Kavach deployment moving fast enough?

policy-critique

Position (P): No. At the current pace, full network coverage would take decades — and every year of delay represents avoidable loss of life. The January 2026 commissioning of 472.3 route km was a record, but even at this accelerated pace, covering 68,000 km would take over 100 years. The deployment must be scaled by an order of magnitude, which requires fundamental changes in procurement, manufacturing, and installation capacity.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Railways officials argue that Kavach (Automatic Train Protection) is an indigenous system certified to SIL-4 (failure probability less than 10 to the power of negative 8 per hour) — the highest safety integrity level. Deploying such a system across the world's fourth-largest railway network (68,000 route km, approximately 13,000 trains daily) is an engineering challenge of unprecedented scale. European ETCS (European Train Control System) deployment has taken over two decades and is still incomplete across the EU.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The Balasore triple train collision on June 2, 2023, killed 292 people due to a signalling failure — precisely the kind of Signal Passed At Danger (SPAD) incident that Kavach is designed to prevent. Kavach uses RFID-based balises embedded in the track, UHF radio communication, and onboard logic units to automatically brake a train if it exceeds speed limits or passes a danger signal. The system also enables automatic train operation in adverse visibility (fog, heavy rain). The current bottleneck is not technology but manufacturing and installation capacity — only three vendors are qualified to produce Kavach equipment.

Link to governance (L): As Railway Board Chairman, I would take three immediate actions. First, expand the vendor base from three to at least eight through technology transfer and licensing agreements — the current monopolistic supply chain is the primary deployment bottleneck. Second, prioritise deployment on the 20 most accident-prone routes (the Golden Quadrilateral and its diagonals carry approximately 70% of freight and 55% of passenger traffic) rather than spreading resources across the entire network. Third, mandate Kavach compatibility for all new rolling stock orders, including Vande Bharat trains, so that the technology debt does not grow faster than deployment.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What does SIL-4 mean in safety engineering? How does it compare to the safety standards of commercial aviation?

The European ETCS has been under deployment for over 20 years and is still incomplete. What lessons can India draw from this European experience?

Indian Railways employs approximately 1.2 million people and is one of the world's largest employers. How does the workforce factor into technology adoption like Kavach?

The 292-death Balasore figure and the under-2% coverage statistic are the two facts that frame the urgency. The board will probe whether you can think in terms of prioritisation (deploy first where risk is highest) rather than the impossible task of covering 68,000 km simultaneously. The vendor base expansion argument is the most actionable administrative recommendation.

PADMA AWARDS & INSTITUTIONAL RECOGNITION

Q19. The Padma Awards 2026 included both V.S. Achuthanandan (a CPM leader) receiving the Padma Vibhushan from a BJP-led government, and several sports personalities like Rohit Sharma and Harmanpreet Kaur. Do the Padma Awards genuinely recognise merit, or are they instruments of political patronage?

opinion

Position (P): The Padma Awards are a hybrid institution — partly meritocratic, partly political, and this duality is by design rather than by corruption. The selection committee is chaired by the Cabinet Secretary and includes non-government members, but the final approval rests with the President on

the advice of the Prime Minister. This structure ensures that political judgment — which individuals the state chooses to honour and signal approval of — is an intentional part of the process.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Critics point to several patterns that suggest patronage: disproportionate awards to individuals from the ruling party’s ideological ecosystem, posthumous awards to individuals who were politically inconvenient during their lifetime, and the clustering of awards around election cycles. The two suspensions of Padma Awards — 1978-79 under Morarji Desai and 1993-97 under P.V. Narasimha Rao — themselves suggest that governments have periodically questioned the system’s integrity.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The 2026 Padma Vibhushan to V.S. Achuthanandan (CPM leader, Kerala CM 2006-2011, died at 102) is a notable cross-party recognition — a BJP-led government honouring a Communist leader known for land reforms and anti-corruption campaigns. Similarly, Padma Shri awards to sports figures like Rohit Sharma, Harmanpreet Kaur, and Praveen Kumar (2024 Paralympics gold, High Jump T64) are relatively uncontroversial merit recognitions. The Supreme Court has ruled that Padma Awards are not “titles” under Article 18 and cannot be used as a suffix to names — maintaining a distinction between state honour and feudal rank.

Link to governance (L): As a civil servant involved in the nomination process, I would recommend three reforms to strengthen credibility: first, publish the selection committee’s broad criteria and the number of nominations received per category (transparency without revealing individual deliberations). Second, establish a five-year cooling-off period for individuals who have held elected office (preventing awards from being used as pre-election inducements). Third, increase the quota for grassroots-level unsung heroes — the awards are most credible when they spotlight individuals who would never receive recognition through any other mechanism.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the constitutional basis for the Padma Awards? How does Article 18 relate to civilian honours?

The Bharat Ratna and Padma Awards were both instituted in 1954. What is the selection process for the Bharat Ratna, and how does it differ from the Padma Awards?

Several countries have abolished state honours systems, arguing they are inherently elitist. Do you agree?

The Article 18 point is subtle but important — Article 18(1) abolishes titles, but the Supreme Court has held that Padma Awards are honours, not titles. The board tests whether you can analyse an institution critically while acknowledging its legitimate functions. The cross-party Achuthanandan example is your strongest evidence for institutional credibility.

NUCLEAR CONFIDENCE-BUILDING MEASURES

Q20. India and Pakistan completed their 35th consecutive exchange of nuclear installation lists in January 2026. This CBM has survived Kargil, the Parliament attack, Mumbai 2008, and Pulwama-Balakot. What does this tell us about the nature of India-Pakistan nuclear deterrence?

factual-analytical

Position (P): The 35-year unbroken record demonstrates that nuclear deterrence creates a floor of rational behaviour even between adversaries in active conflict. The 1988 Agreement on Prohibition of Attack against Nuclear Installations — signed by Rajiv Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, effective January 27, 1991 — has been observed without exception because both sides recognise that attacking nuclear facilities would cross a threshold from which there is no return. This is deterrence working at its most basic level.

Acknowledge the other side (A): Sceptics argue that the agreement is trivially easy to observe — it costs nothing to exchange a list — and that its continuation tells us little about the deeper stability of the nuclear relationship. The agreement does not cover nuclear warheads, delivery systems, or fissile material production. Pakistan’s development of tactical nuclear weapons (Nasr/Hatf-IX, 60 km range) explicitly designed for battlefield use lowers the nuclear threshold — the opposite of what CBMs are supposed to achieve.

Illustrate with specifics (I): India’s nuclear doctrine (announced January 2003) rests on three pillars: No First Use (NFU), massive retaliation, and civilian control through the Nuclear Command Authority (NCA, chaired by the PM). Pakistan maintains a deliberate first-use option and has developed the Nasr tactical nuclear missile specifically to counter India’s Cold Start doctrine (rapid conventional military mobilisation). SIPRI 2025 estimates both countries at approximately 160-170 warheads each. The asymmetry in doctrine — India’s NFU versus Pakistan’s first-use — creates a specific instability: Pakistan’s lower nuclear threshold means that any Indian conventional military operation risks nuclear escalation.

Link to governance (L): As a strategic affairs adviser, I would argue that the nuclear CBM regime needs expansion, not just continuation. India should propose three additions: a bilateral hotline at the National Security Adviser level (beyond the existing DGMO hotline), advance notification of ballistic missile tests (the 2005 agreement on pre-notification has been observed), and a bilateral Nuclear Risk Reduction Centre modelled on the US-Soviet NRRC established in 1987. These do not require trust — they require rational self-interest, which is the basis of all nuclear CBMs.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between No First Use (India) and first-use doctrine (Pakistan)? What is “massive retaliation” in India’s context?

What is the Cold Start doctrine, and why did Pakistan develop the Nasr missile in response?

India is not a signatory to the NPT. What is India’s argument for staying outside the treaty, and how does the India-US Nuclear Deal of 2008 relate to this position?

The NFU vs first-use doctrinal asymmetry is the analytical core. The board values candidates who understand that nuclear deterrence is not about weapons counts but about doctrinal stability and crisis communication. Know the NCA structure: Political Council (chaired by PM, sole authority to authorise nuclear use) and Executive Council (chaired by NSA, provides inputs and executes decisions).

UGC EQUITY REGULATIONS & HIGHER EDUCATION

Q21. The UGC notified Equity Regulations in January 2026 mandating anti-discrimination officers in universities, but the Supreme Court stayed them for vagueness. Does this episode reveal a tension between the UGC’s regulatory mandate and institutional autonomy?

policy-critique

Position (P): It reveals a deeper problem: the Indian higher education system oscillates between two dysfunctions — overregulation by the UGC on administrative matters (curriculum, attendance, fee structures) and underregulation on matters of substantive justice (caste discrimination, sexual harassment, mental health). The Equity Regulations attempted to address the latter but were drafted with the administrative habits of the former — vague mandates without operational definitions or enforcement mechanisms.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The UGC’s intent was legitimate. Caste-based discrimination in Indian universities is well-documented — the Rohith Vemula case (2016, University of Hyderabad), the Payal Tadvi case (2019, BJ Medical College Mumbai), and multiple reports from central universities establish that institutional mechanisms to address discrimination are either absent or ineffective. The regulations requiring Equal Opportunity Centres and anti-discrimination officers responded to a genuine need.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The Supreme Court’s stay was based on definitional vagueness – the regulations did not clearly define what constitutes “discrimination,” what standards of evidence apply, or what procedural protections are available to the accused. This is a drafting failure, not a policy failure. The UGC’s mandate derives from the University Grants Commission Act, 1956, which gives it authority over standards and coordination in higher education. NEP 2020 proposes replacing the UGC with a Higher Education Commission of India (HECI) with a broader mandate – but the HECI Bill has not been tabled.

Link to governance (L): As Education Secretary, I would redraft the regulations with three improvements: first, define discrimination using the categories already established in the Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act 2016, the SC/ST (Prevention of Atrocities) Act 1989, and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013 – rather than creating a new, undefined category. Second, mandate that anti-discrimination officers have security of tenure (three-year term, removal only by the Vice Chancellor with UGC approval) to prevent institutional capture. Third, establish a national registry of complaints and outcomes to enable systemic analysis of patterns rather than treating each case in isolation.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the UGC’s constitutional and statutory basis? How does Article 246 and the Concurrent List relate to education regulation?

The Rohith Vemula case became a national flashpoint on caste discrimination in universities. What were the specific institutional failures that case exposed?

NEP 2020 proposes replacing the UGC with HECI. What are the structural differences, and would HECI have handled the Equity Regulations differently?

Education is on the Concurrent List (Entry 25, List III, Seventh Schedule) – both Centre and states can legislate, but the UGC derives its power from Entry 66 of the Union List (coordination and determination of standards). This constitutional nuance is a high-yield follow-up. The Rohith Vemula case (institutional apathy, delayed inquiry, posthumous acquittal by inquiry committee) is the factual backbone.

LEFT WING EXTREMISM & INTERNAL SECURITY

Q22. Operation Megaburu in Saranda forest neutralised 16-17 CPI(Maoist) cadres including a top commander. The government set a March 2026

deadline to eliminate LWE from core areas. Is the LWE threat genuinely ending, or is it transforming?

opinion

Position (P): The LWE threat in its classic form — armed Maoist guerrillas controlling territory in central Indian forests — is genuinely declining. The Red Corridor has shrunk from 106 districts across 10 states at its peak (around 2010) to approximately 38 districts. However, the underlying conditions that produced LWE — landlessness, mineral extraction without community benefit-sharing, forest rights violations, and chronic underdevelopment — persist. The threat is being militarily contained, not politically resolved.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The security establishment's achievement is real and should not be diminished. CPI(Maoist), formed in 2004 through the merger of CPI-ML People's War and MCCI, was declared a terrorist organisation under UAPA. Sustained operations — including the Greyhounds (Telangana), CoBRA battalions (CRPF), and state police special forces — combined with road and mobile connectivity penetration into core Maoist areas have systematically dismantled the movement's military infrastructure. The government's March 2026 deadline may be optimistic, but the trajectory is clear.

Illustrate with specifics (I): Operation Megaburu's success in Saranda — Asia's largest sal forest, straddling Jharkhand-Odisha-Chhattisgarh — targeted Patiram Manjhi alias Anal Da, who carried a Rs 2.35 crore bounty. The operation reflects improved intelligence penetration and inter-state coordination. But Saranda's mineral wealth (iron ore, bauxite, manganese) is precisely why the Maoist movement found resonance among the Ho and Munda tribal communities — mining displaced communities without adequate rehabilitation or revenue-sharing. The Forest Rights Act 2006 and PESA (Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas Act, 1996) provide legal frameworks for community rights, but implementation has been inconsistent.

Link to governance (L): As a district collector in a formerly LWE-affected area, my priority would shift from security operations to development consolidation. The three critical interventions: first, ensure that every gram sabha in the district has formally received community forest rights titles under FRA 2006 (less than 5% of eligible areas have received community rights nationally). Second, establish a District Mineral Foundation (DMF, mandated by the Mines and Minerals Act 2015) that returns 30% of mining royalties to affected communities. Third, saturate the district with Aspirational District Programme (ADP) indicators — health, education, nutrition, financial inclusion — because LWE thrives in governance vacuums.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the difference between the Naxalbari movement (1967) and the current CPI(Maoist)? How did the ideological trajectory evolve?

PESA 1996 grants gram sabhas the power to approve or reject mining in Scheduled Areas. Has this power been effectively exercised?

The Salwa Judum experiment in Chhattisgarh (2005-2011) armed tribal youth against Maoists. The Supreme Court struck it down. What was the Court's reasoning?

The Salwa Judum judgment (2011, Nandini Sundar v. State of Chhattisgarh) held that arming civilians against other citizens violated Article 21 and constituted state-sponsored vigilantism. This is the board's likely follow-up on the ethics of counter-insurgency. The FRA community rights statistic (less than 5% nationally) is a powerful data point showing the governance gap that sustains LWE conditions.

INDIA-UAE & GULF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Q23. India signed a USD 3 billion LNG supply agreement with ADNOC Gas in January 2026, deepening India-UAE energy ties. With approximately 3.5 million Indians in the UAE and USD 40 billion in Gulf remittances, is India's relationship with the Gulf monarchies driven by values or interests?

opinion

Position (P): It is driven by interests — and that is entirely appropriate for a responsible foreign policy. Democracies routinely maintain deep partnerships with non-democratic states when vital national interests are at stake. India's relationship with the UAE is built on energy security (India imports approximately 60% of its crude from West Asia), diaspora welfare (3.5 million Indians in the UAE alone), trade (bilateral trade approximately USD 85 billion, CEPA targeting USD 200 billion by 2032), and strategic alignment through I2U2 (India, Israel, UAE, USA) and IMEC.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The values critique has substance. The UAE is an absolute monarchy with significant restrictions on political expression, press freedom, and labour rights — including for the Indian diaspora. Indian workers in the Gulf have historically faced exploitation under the kafala (sponsorship) system, where the employer controls the worker's legal status, creating conditions that the ILO has characterised as forced labour indicators. A principled foreign policy would raise these concerns; India largely does not, because the relationship is too strategically valuable to risk.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The India-UAE CEPA (effective February 2022) is one of India’s most significant bilateral trade deals. The I2U2 grouping — a quadrilateral of India, Israel, UAE, and USA — represents a values-incongruent but interest-convergent partnership: a democracy (India), a theocratic monarchy (UAE), and two liberal democracies (Israel, USA) collaborating on food security, energy, and technology. The USD 3 billion ADNOC-HPCL LNG deal signed in January 2026 deepens energy interdependence at a time when the Strait of Hormuz closure risk makes supply diversification critical. Gulf remittances of approximately USD 40 billion per year to India are equivalent to the entire annual education budget of the Central Government.

Link to governance (L): As an MEA official, I would manage this tension through three mechanisms: first, negotiate bilateral labour agreements that provide Indian workers in the Gulf with contractual protections, portable social security, and access to Indian diplomatic missions for grievance redressal. Second, use the CEPA review mechanism (every five years) to introduce labour standards chapters — a gradual approach that does not antagonise but progressively improves conditions. Third, quietly but firmly raise individual cases of Indian citizen mistreatment through diplomatic channels, as India has done effectively in specific high-profile cases.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the kafala system, and which Gulf countries have reformed or abolished it?

What is I2U2, and what is IMEC? How do they relate to India’s West Asia strategy?

If a large number of Indian workers in the UAE stage a strike over unpaid wages, what are the diplomatic and consular tools available to the Indian government?

The “interests vs values” question is a classic ethics probe. The board wants to see that you can acknowledge the tension honestly without either cynically dismissing values or naively insisting on a values-only foreign policy. The kafala system and the Gulf remittance figure (USD 40 billion) are the two facts that anchor opposite sides of the argument. Know that the UAE partially reformed its kafala system in 2021 but enforcement remains inconsistent.

INTEGRATED CROSS-TOPIC QUESTION

Q24. You are posted as district collector of a district in Arunachal Pradesh that borders China, has significant hydropower potential, hosts critically endangered wildlife, and has tribal communities with customary land rights under the Sixth Schedule. A central government ministry wants to fast-track a strategic highway and a hydropower project. How do you balance national

security, economic development, environmental conservation, and tribal rights — all of which are constitutionally protected?

situational

Position (P): I would not treat these as competing priorities to be “balanced” through compromise — I would treat them as a sequencing and design challenge where all four can be substantially achieved if the process is right. The critical error that administrators make in such situations is assuming that speed requires shortcuts on consultation and environmental due diligence. In my experience studying these cases, the projects that faced the longest delays — Dibang dam, Tipaimukh dam — were precisely the ones where consultation was skipped early, creating legal challenges and community resistance that delayed execution by decades.

Acknowledge the other side (A): The national security argument for speed is genuine. Arunachal Pradesh borders China along the McMahon Line — a border China does not recognise. Strategic highways and infrastructure near the LAC are not optional development projects; they are national security imperatives. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) has been accelerating construction under Project Arunank. A collector who delays strategic infrastructure because of environmental or tribal consultation requirements may be prioritising process over national security.

Illustrate with specifics (I): The Sixth Schedule grants Autonomous District Councils significant powers over land management, forests, and customary law in scheduled areas of Arunachal Pradesh. The Forest Rights Act 2006 requires Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) of gram sabhas before forest land is diverted for any purpose — the Supreme Court’s *Niyamgiri judgment (2013, Orissa Mining Corporation v. Ministry of Environment)* established this as a non-waivable requirement. For the highway, I would invoke the National Highways Act’s land acquisition provisions while ensuring that the FRA consultation process runs in parallel — not sequentially — to avoid delay. For the hydropower project, I would commission a cumulative basin-level EIA and route the project to avoid critical wildlife habitat, drawing on the White-bellied Heron and Sangai deer cases as cautionary examples.

Link to governance (L): My specific administrative actions in the first 90 days: first, convene a meeting with the Autonomous District Council to establish a joint working group for project planning — making them partners, not obstacles. Second, prepare a GIS-based district environmental sensitivity map (using WII and NCBS data) that pre-identifies no-go zones, buffer zones, and development zones — so that when the project team arrives, routing decisions are data-driven rather than adversarial. Third, negotiate with the BRO to include wildlife underpasses in the highway design standard (already available in NHAI guidelines) at the planning stage rather than as an afterthought. Fourth, establish a

community benefit-sharing mechanism where 5% of hydropower revenue is deposited into the District Mineral Foundation equivalent for tribal community development. Speed and due diligence are not opposites – they are both achievable if the collector does the coordination work upfront.

Cross-Questions from Board:

What is the Niyamgiri judgment, and what principle of tribal rights did it establish?

The Sixth Schedule applies to which states? How does it differ from the Fifth Schedule in terms of governance structure?

China has built significant infrastructure on its side of the LAC, including the G219 highway. How does India's infrastructure gap along the border affect strategic deterrence?

This question tests administrative integration across four domains – security, development, environment, tribal rights – that are usually tested separately. The collector who can hold all four simultaneously without sacrificing any is demonstrating exactly the kind of systems thinking the UPSC interview values. The Niyamgiri FPIC principle, the Sixth Schedule governance structure, and the GIS-based pre-planning approach are the three elements that distinguish a first-rate answer. Know that the Fifth Schedule covers tribal areas in non-northeastern states (Governor's powers) while the Sixth Schedule covers northeastern tribal areas (Autonomous District Councils with legislative, judicial, and executive powers).

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