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MONTHLY MAINS QUESTIONS

February 2026 — Mains Practice Repository

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February 2026 | 28 Questions | Model Answers Included

GS PAPER 1 — HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY & SOCIETY

Q1. International Mother Language Day commemorates the 1952 Bengali Language Movement — a watershed moment in the politics of linguistic identity in South Asia. Examine the historical significance of the Ekushey movement and analyse how language has shaped state formation and social identity in post-independence India.

[GS-1 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: International Mother Language Day (February 21) commemorates the Bengali Language Movement of February 21, 1952, when students at Dhaka University were killed by police while protesting Pakistan's imposition of Urdu as the sole state language. Martyrs Abul Barkat, Rafiquddin Ahmed, Abul Jabbar, and Shafiqur Rahman became symbols of linguistic nationalism. Bengali was recognised as a co-official language of Pakistan only in 1956, and the movement's legacy was central to Bangladesh's independence in 1971.

Language and State Formation in India: India's States Reorganisation Act, 1956 — based on the Fazl Ali Commission (1953) — reorganised states on linguistic lines, creating Andhra Pradesh (Telugu, 1953 after Potti Sriramulu's death), Karnataka (Kannada), Kerala (Malayalam, November 1, 1956), and others. The Eighth Schedule of the Constitution lists 22 languages (Articles 344 and 351), but India has ~6,000+ languages/dialects, of which ~197 are endangered (UNESCO Atlas). Language movements have continued: the anti-Hindi agitations in Tamil Nadu (1965) led to the indefinite continuation of English as an associate official language under the Official Languages Act, 1963 (amended 1967).

Social Identity Dimensions: UNESCO data shows 40% of global students lack access to education in their home language — a structural driver of school dropout, particularly among tribal communities. NEP 2020 mandates mother tongue instruction up to Class 5 (preferably Class 8), but implementation

requires teacher training in hundreds of languages. The February 2026 renaming of Kerala to "Keralam" under Article 3 — following precedents of Madras to Tamil Nadu (1969) and Orissa to Odisha (2011) — demonstrates that linguistic identity remains a live political force.

Critical Analysis: Language policy in India operates at the intersection of identity, federalism, and equity. The three-language formula has been unevenly implemented; Hindi-belt states rarely teach a southern language, creating asymmetric bilingualism.

Way Forward:

Operationalise NEP 2020's mother tongue instruction policy with dedicated teacher training programmes in all 22 Eighth Schedule languages and major tribal languages

MOSPI should develop a Linguistic Vitality Index for India's endangered languages, modelled on UNESCO's Language Vitality and Endangerment framework

State governments should establish Translation Missions (on the model of the National Translation Mission, 2008) to produce quality textbooks in regional and tribal languages

Q2. The approval of India's first underwater rail-cum-road tunnel beneath the Brahmaputra River represents a significant infrastructure intervention in a geologically fragile region. Analyse the geographical challenges of building infrastructure in the Brahmaputra valley and evaluate the strategic significance of this project for Northeast India's connectivity.

[GS-1 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: The Union Cabinet approved India's first underwater rail-cum-road twin tunnel beneath the Brahmaputra River in February 2026 — a 15.79 km dual-tube tunnel connecting Gohpur (Biswanath district, north bank) to Numaligarh (Golaghat district, south bank), with a total corridor length of 33.7 km and a cost of Rs 18,662 crore. The project reduces a 240 km detour via the Kaliabhomora Bridge to a direct 33.7 km crossing and is only the second combined underwater rail-road tunnel in the world.

Geographical Challenges:

Fluvial dynamics: The Brahmaputra is a braided river with a width of 10–15 km in Assam, carrying enormous sediment loads (~400 million tonnes annually). Channel migration — the river shifts course by hundreds of metres over decades — creates engineering uncertainty for any fixed crossing. The tunnel must be designed to withstand scouring, shifting riverbed profiles, and variable water depth.

Seismicity: The Brahmaputra valley lies in Seismic Zone V — the highest earthquake risk category. The 1897 Assam earthquake (estimated magnitude 8.1) and the 1950 Assam-Tibet earthquake (8.6) are among the most powerful in recorded history. Tunnel infrastructure must be designed for extreme seismic loading, with flexible joints and reinforced segmental lining.

Flooding: Annual monsoon flooding inundates large areas of the Brahmaputra floodplain. The tunnel's all-weather, flood-proof design addresses this directly — unlike bridges, which face periodic closure during high water levels.

Strategic Significance:

The tunnel connects 4 railway stations, 2 airports, 2 inland waterway terminals, and provides direct access to Numaligarh Refinery (currently 3 MMTPA, expanding to 9 MMTPA). Northeast India's "chicken's neck" vulnerability (the Siliguri Corridor, only 22 km wide at its narrowest) means alternative connectivity infrastructure is a national security priority. The project complements the Bogibeel Bridge (4.94 km, opened December 2018) and the Sela Tunnel (all-weather access to Tawang, opened 2024) in creating redundant connectivity to the northeast.

Critical Analysis: Infrastructure in the northeast has historically suffered from cost overruns and time delays — the Bogibeel Bridge took 16 years to complete. The EPC mode of execution for the Brahmaputra tunnel must incorporate milestone-linked payment mechanisms and real-time geological monitoring to avoid similar delays.

Way Forward:

- Establish a dedicated Brahmaputra Infrastructure Authority to coordinate tunnel construction with Inland Waterways Authority of India (IWAI) development on National Waterway 2
- Mandate independent seismic risk assessment reviews at the 25%, 50%, and 75% construction milestones
- Integrate the tunnel project with the PM Gati Shakti Master Plan to ensure last-mile multimodal connectivity at both terminals
- Commission a comprehensive environmental impact assessment for Brahmaputra channel dynamics, with a 50-year hydrological modelling framework

Q3. The Sulawesi rock art discovery — confirming the world's oldest known figurative cave art at 51,200+ years — challenges Eurocentric narratives about the origins of human cognitive and artistic development. Discuss the significance of this discovery for understanding human prehistory.

[GS-1 | 10 Marks | 150 Words]

Introduction: Research confirmed that a pig painting at Leang Karampuang cave, Sulawesi, Indonesia, dates to at least 51,200 years — making it the world's oldest known figurative cave art, significantly older than the previously record-holding Altamira cave paintings in Spain (~36,000 years) and Lascaux in France (~17,000 years).

Significance: The discovery challenges the long-standing Eurocentric narrative that complex symbolic cognition — including figurative representation, narrative thinking, and artistic expression — originated in Upper Palaeolithic Europe. Sulawesi demonstrates that Homo sapiens in Southeast Asia developed these capabilities contemporaneously with, or before, European populations. This supports the Out-of-Africa dispersal model's implication that cognitive modernity was carried by migrating populations rather than emerging independently in Europe.

Way Forward:

Integrate Southeast Asian prehistory into UPSC GS-1 world history curricula, which currently over-represent European archaeological sites

Fund collaborative archaeological surveys in comparable limestone karst regions of India (Bhimbetka, Ajanta) using the same uranium-series dating methods employed at Sulawesi

Q4. The February 2026 Bangladesh elections — the first post-Yunus transition — have significant implications for India-Bangladesh relations and the broader geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal region. Examine the historical context of India-Bangladesh relations and analyse the challenges posed by the political transition.

[GS-1 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: Bangladesh held its first elections under the National Coordination Committee (NCC) governance framework in February 2026, following the removal of PM Sheikh Hasina (August 2025) and the interim administration led by Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus (Grameen Bank; Nobel Peace Prize 2006). The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) under Tarique Rahman emerged as the largest party, with the Awami League barred from contesting.

Historical Context: India played a decisive role in Bangladesh's liberation in 1971 — the Mukti Bahini was supported by the Indian military, and India recognised Bangladesh on December 6, 1971. The Awami League under Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (and later Hasina) maintained close ties with India, enabling the Land Boundary Agreement (2015, implementing the 100th Constitutional Amendment),

Teesta water-sharing negotiations, and transit arrangements. The BNP, historically closer to Pakistan and China, has been more critical of Indian influence — particularly on water management (Farakka Barrage concerns, Teesta dispute) and perceived Indian interference in Bangladeshi domestic politics.

Challenges for India: The new BNP-dominated government is likely to: (1) slow or stall ongoing connectivity projects (Agartala-Akhaura rail, Mongla-Khulna port access); (2) revisit water-sharing agreements through a more adversarial lens; (3) deepen engagement with China (which invested $38 billion in Bangladesh under BRI); and (4) raise Hindu minority protection as a diplomatic leverage point rather than a governance obligation.

Critical Analysis: India's over-reliance on one political party (Awami League) as its primary interlocutor left Indian diplomacy structurally vulnerable to political transition — a systemic flaw in India's neighbourhood policy.

Way Forward:

India should pursue a bipartisan diplomatic engagement strategy with Bangladesh, building institutional linkages (foreign ministry-to-ministry, military-to-military) that survive political transitions

Accelerate the Teesta water-sharing framework through multilateral mediation if bilateral channels remain blocked

Strengthen people-to-people ties through expanded medical tourism, educational exchange, and cultural diplomacy programmes

GS PAPER 2 — POLITY, GOVERNANCE & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Q5. The Union Cabinet's approval of renaming Kerala as "Keralam" under Article 3 of the Constitution raises important questions about the constitutional mechanism for altering state names. Examine the process under Article 3 and critically evaluate whether the current procedure adequately protects state autonomy.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The Union Cabinet approved renaming Kerala as "Keralam" in February 2026, following a 2023 resolution by the Kerala Legislative Assembly. The constitutional mechanism is Article 3, which empowers Parliament to alter a state's name, boundaries, or area — but with the mandatory proviso that the President must refer the bill to the state legislature for its opinion.

Constitutional Process: Article 3 bills require: (1) Presidential recommendation for introduction; (2) referral to the state legislature concerned, which must express its views within a stipulated period; (3) simple majority passage in Parliament — not the special majority under Article 368. Critically, Parliament is not bound by the state legislature's opinion — this creates a structural asymmetry where the Union can override state preferences on matters as fundamental as a state's name and territorial integrity. The First Schedule of the Constitution (listing all states and UTs) is amended through this ordinary legislative route.

Precedents: Successful renamings include Madras to Tamil Nadu (1969), Mysore to Karnataka (1973), Uttaranchal to Uttarakhand (2007), Orissa to Odisha (2011), and Pondicherry to Puducherry (2006). These were all based on state legislative resolutions reflecting linguistic identity — the Article 3 process worked smoothly because Union and state governments were aligned.

Critical Evaluation: The current procedure is adequate for consensual renamings but structurally inadequate as a federal safeguard. Article 3's provision that Parliament is not bound by the state legislature's opinion was designed for the era of state reorganisation (States Reorganisation Act, 1956) — when the Union needed overriding authority to redraw boundaries. For name changes, which are purely identity-related, this override power is disproportionate.

Way Forward:

- Consider a constitutional convention (not amendment) that Union government will not proceed with Article 3 name changes without state legislature concurrence
- The Sarkaria Commission (1988) and Punchhi Commission (2010) recommendations on strengthening inter-state consultation mechanisms should be operationalised
- Fast-track pending renaming requests from other states to avoid politicisation of routine linguistic identity assertions

Q6. The Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority (FNTA) agreement of February 2026 represents the 12th northeast peace/autonomy agreement since 2019. Examine the constitutional framework for autonomous territorial authorities in the northeast and evaluate whether the FNTA adequately addresses the aspirations of eastern Nagaland tribes.

[GS-2 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: A tripartite agreement signed on February 7, 2026 between the Union Government, Nagaland Government, and the Eastern Nagaland People's Organisation (ENPO) established the Frontier Nagaland Territorial Authority (FNTA) — granting 46 state subjects and dedicated financial

autonomy to six eastern Nagaland districts: Tuensang, Mon, Kiphire, Longleng, Noklak, and Shamator. ENPO represents 8 recognised Naga tribes (Chang, Khiamniungan, Konyak, Phom, Sangtam, Tikhir, Yimchunger, Zeliang).

Constitutional Framework: The Sixth Schedule (Articles 244(2) and 275(1)) provides for Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura, and Mizoram — with legislative, judicial, and executive powers over land, forests, customary law, and minor minerals. Nagaland, however, operates under Article 371(A), which safeguards Naga customary law, land rights, and social practices from Parliamentary legislation without state assembly consent. The FNTA is established under the executive powers of the state government, analogous to the Bodoland Territorial Council (BTC, created 2003 under the Sixth Schedule; 4 Assam districts; 46 subjects).

Evaluation of FNTA: The FNTA transfers 46 state subjects — matching the BTC in scope — covering education, health, agriculture, roads, and water supply. However, it falls short of ENPO's original demand for a separate state of "Frontier Nagaland" (which would require Article 3 amendment by Parliament). The critical gap is enforcement: without Sixth Schedule constitutional protection, the FNTA's autonomy depends on executive goodwill and can be modified unilaterally by the state government. The BTC's constitutional backing through the Sixth Schedule provides it with a degree of permanence that the FNTA lacks.

The Broader Naga Peace Process: The NSCN(IM) Framework Agreement of August 2015 — seeking a separate Naga flag and constitution — remains unimplemented. The FNTA does not address NSCN(IM) demands, which cut across Nagaland, Manipur (Naga-inhabited areas), and Arunachal Pradesh. The risk of the FNTA being perceived as a divide-and-settle strategy — addressing eastern Nagaland's geographic identity while leaving the pan-Naga political question unresolved — is real.

Critical Analysis: The northeast's autonomy architecture suffers from a common pattern: agreements are signed as political responses to immediate pressures but lack implementation timelines, monitoring mechanisms, and fiscal guarantees. The Bru-Reang agreement (2020) remains only partially implemented; the NLFT (Tripura) agreement's rehabilitation component faces fund delays.

Way Forward:

- Provide the FNTA with Sixth Schedule constitutional backing through a constitutional amendment — this would give it the permanence and institutional autonomy that executive agreements cannot guarantee
- Establish a dedicated FNTA Implementation Monitoring Committee with quarterly reporting to the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Inter-State Council
- Ring-fence FNTA fiscal transfers through a Finance Commission formula analogous to the Sixth Schedule ADC grants under Article 275(1), ensuring financial autonomy is not hostage to state budget allocations

Parallel-track the broader Naga peace process (NSCN-IM Framework Agreement) through the Naga Peace Talks interlocutor, ensuring the FNTA is additive to the wider settlement, not a substitute for it

Q7. The IT (Intermediary Guidelines) Amendment Rules, 2026 introduce India's first framework for AI-generated content governance. Examine the constitutional basis for these rules and critically evaluate whether India's approach to deepfake regulation is adequate compared to global models.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: MeitY notified the IT (Intermediary Guidelines) Amendment Rules, 2026 effective February 20, 2026, amending the IT Rules 2021 under Section 79 of the IT Act 2000. Key provisions include mandatory prominent labelling of all AI-generated content, a 2-hour takedown window for non-consensual nudity and deepfakes, a 3-hour window for court/government-ordered illegal content, and the loss of Section 79 safe harbour for platforms that "knowingly permit, promote, or fail to act" on violative synthetic media.

Constitutional Basis: The rules are grounded in Article 19(1)(a) (free speech) read with Article 19(2) (reasonable restrictions in the interests of sovereignty, public order, decency, and morality). The K.S. Puttaswamy judgment (2017) established the right to privacy under Article 21, providing the constitutional foundation for protecting individuals against non-consensual deepfakes. The Shreya Singhal v. Union of India (2015) framework requires intermediary liability to be based on actual knowledge, not mere hosting — the 2026 Rules' "knowingly permits" formulation respects this standard.

Comparative Evaluation: The EU AI Act (2024) — the world's first legally binding AI regulation — adopts a risk-based framework with fines up to 35 million euros or 7% of global turnover. China's Deepfake Regulations (2022) mandate real-name registration and mandatory watermarking. India's 2026 Rules are more flexible than both — relying on self-certification and platform-level enforcement rather than a dedicated AI regulator. The critical gap: current AI-detection tools have only 60–85% accuracy, making enforcement structurally dependent on technology that does not yet reliably exist.

Way Forward:

Establish a dedicated AI Safety Authority within MeitY (modelled on the UK's AI Safety Institute) with enforcement powers and technical expertise

Fund domestic AI-detection research through the India AI Mission (Rs 10,372 crore) to bridge the detection accuracy gap

Mandate a statutory review of the 2026 Rules within 24 months, given the rapid pace of generative AI development

Q8. India and the Gulf Cooperation Council signed Terms of Reference for a comprehensive Free Trade Agreement in February 2026 — after nearly 20 years of on-off negotiations. Examine India's strategic and economic interests in the India-GCC FTA and analyse the key negotiation challenges.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: India and the GCC (6 members: Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman; HQ Riyadh; founded 1981) signed Terms of Reference for a comprehensive FTA on February 6, 2026. India-GCC bilateral trade stands at USD 178.56 billion (15.42% of India's global trade). India has approximately 10 million citizens in GCC countries remitting USD 40–45 billion annually. The India-UAE CEPA (signed February 18, 2022; implemented May 1, 2022; negotiated in a record 88 days) is the precedent template.

Strategic Interests: The FTA addresses the China factor — China has been deepening Gulf presence through BRI investments and the China-GCC FTA framework (signed 2023). India's FTA push is partly competitive, ensuring preferential access for Indian exports (engineering goods, rice, textiles, pharmaceuticals) and services (IT, healthcare). The IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, announced at G20 New Delhi, September 2023) envisions India as a trade corridor node — an FTA strengthens institutional linkages. GCC countries provide India ~35–40% of crude oil imports, making energy security a central dimension.

Negotiation Challenges: Three structural tensions dominate: (1) GCC wants petrochemical market access — India protects its domestic refining and petrochemical industry; (2) India seeks services trade liberalisation (Mode 4 — movement of professionals) — GCC labour markets operate under the kafala system (employer-tied visas), creating structural barriers to Indian worker mobility and welfare; (3) investment protection standards — GCC sovereign wealth funds seek investment treaty protections that India has been reluctant to provide since its Model BIT revision (2016).

Way Forward:

Negotiate kafala reform as a separate bilateral labour protection protocol alongside, not within, the FTA — India-UAE and India-Saudi bilateral agreements can serve as precedents

Use the India-UAE CEPA's early harvest model: implement tariff reductions on non-sensitive goods immediately while complex issues (petrochemicals, investment) follow a phased timeline

Link the FTA to IMEC corridor development through a joint infrastructure investment fund, converting trade liberalisation into connectivity outcomes

Q9. India upgraded its bilateral relationship with France to a "Special Global Strategic Partnership" in February 2026 — placing France at the same tier as the USA and Russia. Examine the strategic rationale for this upgrade and analyse the implications for India's defence, nuclear, and Indo-Pacific policies.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: French President Emmanuel Macron's state visit to India in February 2026 saw the bilateral relationship upgraded from "Strategic Partnership" (established 1998) to "Special Global Strategic Partnership." Three landmark agreements were finalised: 26 Rafale-Marine jets for INS Vikrant (commissioned September 2, 2022, Cochin Shipyard Limited), India's first private-sector helicopter manufacturing facility in Karnataka (Airbus H-125 + Tata Group, 10 helicopters/year), and reaffirmation of the 100 GW nuclear power target by 2047 (Jaitapur, Maharashtra — 6 EPR units x 1,650 MW = 9,900 MW; world's largest planned nuclear park).

Strategic Rationale: France occupies a unique position in India's strategic calculus: it is a P5 UNSC member that backs India's permanent membership bid, an Indo-Pacific power through overseas territories (New Caledonia, French Polynesia, Reunion), a NATO member that exercises strategic autonomy (France left NATO's military command in 1966–2009), and a nuclear technology provider not constrained by NPT/NSG restrictions after India's NSG waiver (September 6, 2008). France is also a technology partner unconstrained by US ITAR (International Traffic in Arms Regulations) controls — making it a preferred source for technologies the US may restrict.

Defence Implications: The 114-Rafale deal (Rs 3.25 lakh crore; 18 fly-away + 96 Made-in-India through HAL-Dassault) is India's largest single defence procurement. Combined with the 36 IAF Rafales (2016 deal) and 26 Navy Rafales, India's total Rafale fleet reaches 176 — creating a single-type combat ecosystem with logistics and training standardisation.

Way Forward:

Accelerate Jaitapur nuclear project execution through a dedicated bilateral implementation committee with quarterly review milestones

Expand India-France Indo-Pacific maritime cooperation through joint patrols and shared maritime domain awareness through IFC-IOR (Gurugram)

Leverage the partnership to access French submarine technology for India's Project 75(I) conventional submarine programme

Q10. The Indus Waters Treaty suspension and the acceleration of the Sawalkot Hydroelectric Project raise fundamental questions about the use of transboundary water resources as instruments of strategic pressure. Examine the legal framework governing India's actions and evaluate the implications for international water law.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: Following India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty (IWT) after the Pahalgam terror attack (April 2025), India floated a Rs 5,129 crore NHPC tender for the Sawalkot Hydroelectric Project (1,856 MW) on River Chenab, Ramban, J&K in February 2026. Pakistan formally invoked IWT consultation procedures, asserting the treaty remains operative.

Legal Framework: The IWT (signed September 19, 1960; brokered by World Bank; between PM Nehru and President Ayub Khan) divides the Indus basin into Eastern Rivers (Sutlej, Beas, Ravi — allocated to India) and Western Rivers (Indus, Jhelum, Chenab — allocated to Pakistan). India's right on Western Rivers is limited to run-of-river hydropower, domestic use, and limited agriculture. The IWT has no exit clause — India's legal position invokes the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, Article 62 (rebus sic stantibus — fundamental change of circumstances). This doctrine is contested: the International Law Commission's commentary on Article 62 establishes a high threshold, requiring the changed circumstances to have been "an essential basis of the consent" of the parties.

Precedent Analysis: The Baglihar Dam dispute (890 MW, 2007 Neutral Expert ruling — India won) and Kishanganga arbitration (330 MW, 2013 PCA ruling — India allowed to build with flow conditions) demonstrate that the IWT framework has historically accommodated Indian hydroelectric development within treaty constraints.

Critical Analysis: India's use of water as strategic leverage carries reputational risk: it may undermine India's own advocacy for cooperative frameworks on the Brahmaputra (where China is the upper riparian) and set a precedent for the weaponisation of transboundary water resources globally.

Way Forward:

Pursue Sawalkot development within IWT parameters (run-of-river design with pondage) to maintain legal defensibility while demonstrating intent

Maintain diplomatic channels for eventual IWT renegotiation — a modernised treaty addressing climate change impacts on Himalayan glacier flows would serve both countries' long-term interests

Avoid setting a precedent of treaty suspension without formal legal process — India should file a formal Vienna Convention Article 62 notification with the UN treaty depository if it intends permanent modification

GS PAPER 3 — ECONOMY, ENVIRONMENT, SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY, DEFENCE

Q11. Union Budget 2026-27 set a fiscal deficit target of 4.3% of GDP while maintaining capital expenditure at Rs 12.2 lakh crore. Critically examine whether India's fiscal consolidation path is compatible with its infrastructure investment needs and evaluate the FRBM framework's adequacy.

[GS-3 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman presented Union Budget 2026-27 on February 1, 2026, with total expenditure at Rs 53.47 lakh crore (+7.7% over FY26 RE), capital expenditure at Rs 12.2 lakh crore (3.1% of GDP), effective capex (including grants to states) at Rs 17.1 lakh crore (4.4% of GDP), and a fiscal deficit of 4.3% of GDP. The FRBM Act, 2003 targets a 50% debt-to-GDP ratio by March 2031; the current ratio stands at 55.6%.

The Consolidation-Investment Tension: Interest payments consume 26% of total expenditure — the single largest expenditure head. Every percentage point of fiscal deficit reduction releases approximately Rs 3 lakh crore of fiscal space. However, India's infrastructure gap (Economic Survey 2025-26 estimates India needs $1.5 trillion in infrastructure investment over 2025–2030) requires sustained capex growth. The Budget's seven High-Speed Rail Corridors (Mumbai-Pune, Pune-Hyderabad, Hyderabad-Bengaluru, Hyderabad-Chennai, Chennai-Bengaluru, Delhi-Varanasi, Varanasi-Siliguri) and the Surat-Dankuni Freight Corridor demand multi-year capital commitments that constrain fiscal consolidation flexibility.

Revenue Performance: Gross tax revenue has grown at ~12% CAGR over FY21–FY26, driven by GST buoyancy (Rs 1.8+ lakh crore monthly average), personal income tax expansion (digital economy formalisation), and improved corporate profitability. The Economic Survey projects FY27 nominal GDP growth at ~10.5%, providing a growing denominator that enables fiscal deficit reduction even with rising absolute spending.

FRBM Framework Evaluation: The FRBM Act's rigid targets do not distinguish between current expenditure (consumption) and capital expenditure (asset creation). A fiscal rule that penalises productive investment identically to consumption spending is structurally flawed. The N.K. Singh Committee (2016) recommended separating revenue deficit and fiscal deficit targets and introducing a debt ceiling anchor — recommendations partially implemented but not fully operationalised.

Critical Analysis: India's fiscal position is structurally stronger than the headline deficit suggests: the Revenue Deficit at 1.5% of GDP indicates that a significant portion of borrowing funds capital assets. The quality of expenditure has improved — capex as a share of total spending rose from ~12% (FY20) to ~23% (FY27 BE).

Way Forward:

Amend the FRBM Act to adopt the N.K. Singh Committee's recommendation of a debt anchor (60% general government debt-to-GDP) with separate revenue and capital deficit targets

Establish a Fiscal Council (independent statutory body) to provide real-time fiscal sustainability assessments, reducing politically motivated expenditure surges during election years

Monetise existing public assets (NMP 2.0 — National Monetisation Pipeline) to fund new infrastructure without additional borrowing, targeting Rs 10 lakh crore in asset recycling over FY26–FY30

Prioritise high-multiplier capex (infrastructure, logistics) over low-multiplier transfers, using the 16th Finance Commission's (Dr Arvind Panagariya, chair) framework to incentivise states to match centre's capex quality

Q12. The Economic Survey 2025-26 recorded India's GDP growth at 7.4% alongside CPI inflation at a historic low of 1.7%. Critically examine whether India's macroeconomic stability is structural or cyclical, with reference to the RBI's monetary policy framework review due in March 2026.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The Economic Survey 2025-26 (tabled January 30, 2026; CEA V. Anantha Nageswaran) reported India's GDP growth at 7.4% for FY26 — the world's fastest-growing major economy for the third consecutive year. CPI inflation (April–December 2025) at 1.7% marked a historic low. Forex reserves stood at USD 701.4 billion (11 months import cover), and Gross NPA fell to 2.2% (September 2025) — a 12-year low. The RBI MPC held the repo rate at 5.25% in February 2026 with a "neutral" stance, after cumulative easing of 125 basis points.

Structural Strengths: Several indicators suggest structural improvement: (1) GST formalisation has expanded the tax base (monthly average collections Rs 1.8+ lakh crore); (2) IBC 2016 has structurally reduced banking system risk (NPA from 11.5% in 2017-18 to 2.2%); (3) Female LFPR rose from 23.3% (FY18) to 41.7% (FY24) — one of the sharpest increases globally; (4) Services exports at a record USD 387.6 billion (+13.6%) and remittances at USD 135.4 billion (world's largest) provide current account stability.

Cyclical Vulnerabilities: The low inflation is partly cyclical — driven by a good kharif harvest and vegetable price normalisation, not structural supply chain reform. India's MPC framework targets 4% CPI with a +/-2% tolerance band. The 5-year review (due March 2026) must address whether the 4% target is appropriate for India's structurally supply-driven inflation (food constitutes 46% of CPI basket). External risks — West Asia conflict, Hormuz closure, commodity price spikes — could reverse the benign inflation environment rapidly.

Way Forward:

Retain the 4% CPI target to preserve framework credibility, but explicitly integrate supply-side interventions (cold chain, buffer stocks) as co-equal inflation management tools

Accelerate the 7th Economic Census (repeatedly delayed) to improve informal sector measurement — 90% of India's workforce remains imprecisely captured in national accounts

Operationalise the National Statistical Commission's recommendations with binding authority over methodology standards

Q13. The CBDC-based Public Distribution System launched in February 2026 represents a paradigm shift from physical entitlements to programmable digital welfare delivery. Examine the potential of programmable CBDC for India's social protection architecture and analyse the risks of digital welfare exclusion.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: India launched the world's first CBDC-based Public Distribution System on February 15, 2026, in Gandhinagar, Gujarat. The e-Rupee (e-R) retail CBDC — launched in pilot in December 2022 by RBI — delivers food grain entitlements as programmable tokens: encoded for food grain purchase only at registered Fair Price Shops, auto-expiring if unused, and generating a full audit trail. India's PDS under the NFSA 2013 serves approximately 81 crore beneficiaries through 5.4+ lakh FPS shops; annual food grain distribution is approximately 61 million tonnes with an annual subsidy of approximately Rs 2 lakh crore.

Potential of Programmable CBDC: Programmable e-R eliminates the 30–40% leakage historically associated with PDS — ghost beneficiaries, diversion at FPS level, and quantity manipulation. DBT since January 2013 has transferred Rs 36+ lakh crore and eliminated approximately 9 crore ghost/duplicate beneficiaries. CBDC-PDS extends this by making the entitlement itself programmable — unlike cash transfers (which can be spent on non-food items) or physical grain distribution (which can be diverted), programmable tokens enforce end-use compliance architecturally.

Risks of Digital Exclusion: India has approximately 140 crore Aadhaar registrations but significant last-mile connectivity gaps — mobile network coverage in tribal and remote areas remains patchy. Biometric authentication failures (rough fingerprints among manual labourers, network failures) have historically excluded genuine beneficiaries. The CBDC-PDS must ensure offline transaction capability; e-R wallets work on feature phones, but even feature phone penetration is not universal among the poorest 20%.

Way Forward:

Mandate offline transaction capability for CBDC-PDS using stored-value chip technology (no internet required)

Establish a grievance redressal mechanism with mandatory 48-hour resolution for CBDC transaction failures

Expand pilot districts to include tribal and remote areas before national rollout to identify exclusion risks early

Integrate CBDC-PDS with PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (free grains through December 2028) as the primary delivery mechanism

Q14. India successfully tested Solid Fuel Ducted Ramjet (SFDR) propulsion technology in February 2026, becoming the 5th country globally to master this technology. Examine the strategic significance of SFDR for India's air combat capability and analyse the gaps in India's missile indigenisation ecosystem.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: DRDO successfully tested SFDR propulsion on February 3, 2026 at ITR Chandipur, Odisha — making India the 5th country globally (after USA, Russia, France, China) to master this technology. SFDR enables air-breathing supersonic cruise using atmospheric oxygen, eliminating the

need to carry oxidiser — delivering dramatically higher range and sustained supersonic speed. Key subsystems validated: nozzle-less booster, SFDR motor, and Fuel Flow Controller (FFC). DRDO labs involved: DRDL (Hyderabad), HEMRL (Pune), RCI (Hyderabad).

Strategic Significance: SFDR is the propulsion backbone for Astra Mk-3 — India's beyond-visual-range (BVR) air-to-air missile with a projected range of 150–300+ km. This directly addresses the capability gap against China's PL-15 (200–300 km BVR range), currently deployed on J-20 stealth fighters. India's IAF currently relies on the French Meteor missile (ramjet; 100+ km range) on its Rafale fleet — SFDR provides domestic self-sufficiency under MTCR constraints (India is a member since 2016). The technology is also applicable to future cruise missiles and anti-ship missiles, multiplying its strategic utility.

Gaps in Missile Indigenisation: India's missile programme has achieved critical mass (Agni series, BrahMos, Akash, Astra Mk-1/2) but faces structural gaps: (1) seeker technology — India imports key EO/IR and radar seekers from Israel and Russia; (2) advanced materials — ramjet combustion chambers require specialised high-temperature ceramics and composites; (3) microprocessor dependency — guidance systems rely on imported components. India's defence exports reached Rs 21,000–23,000 crore (FY25), working toward the Rs 35,000 crore target.

Way Forward:

Establish a dedicated Missile Components Indigenisation Fund under iDEX with a Rs 500 crore corpus focused on seekers, advanced materials, and guidance microprocessors

Fast-track Astra Mk-3 development with a 36-month fixed delivery timeline tied to parliamentary oversight

Leverage BrahMos Aerospace's Indo-Russian joint venture model for SFDR-derived missile exports to friendly nations

Q15. India's announcement of 98 Ramsar sites — the highest in South Asia — coexists with the Meghalaya rat-hole mining tragedy and the Great Nicobar Project approval. Critically examine whether India's environmental governance can simultaneously pursue conservation commitments and development imperatives.

[GS-3 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: February 2026 presented a paradox in India's environmental governance. On one hand, India added its 97th and 98th Ramsar sites (Patna Bird Sanctuary, UP and Chhari-Dhand Wetland Reserve, Gujarat) — a 276% expansion since 2014, the highest in South Asia. On the other

hand, a gas explosion at an illegal rat-hole mine in East Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya killed 27 workers despite the NGT's 2014 ban (*All Dimasa Students Union vs. State of Meghalaya*), and the NGT approved the Rs 81,000 crore Great Nicobar Island Project requiring clearance of 130 sq km of tropical rainforest.

The Conservation Framework: The Ramsar Convention (signed February 2, 1971; India party since 1982) operates on the "wise use" principle. India's wetlands cover approximately 15.9 million hectares (~5% of land area), governed by the Wetlands (Conservation and Management) Rules, 2017 under EPA 1986. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (COP15, 2022) set the 30x30 target — protect 30% of land and ocean by 2030 — but India's Protected Areas cover only approximately 5% of land.

The Development Imperative — Great Nicobar: The Great Nicobar project — conceived by NITI Aayog (2021), implemented by ANIIDCO — comprises an International Container Transhipment Terminal, Greenfield Airport, Township, and Power Plant. Its strategic logic is compelling: Great Nicobar is equidistant from Colombo, Port Klang, and Singapore; Campbell Bay Naval Air Station is India's southernmost military base. But the ecological cost is severe: 130 sq km forest clearance threatens a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (2013), the Leatherback Sea Turtle (IUCN Vulnerable; WPA Schedule I; CITES Appendix I), and the Shompen PVTG (~400 individuals; hunter-gatherer; first contact 2001).

The Enforcement Gap — Meghalaya: Meghalaya is a Sixth Schedule area under Article 244 — its Autonomous District Councils have governance powers over land and minor minerals. Coal lies under privately-owned tribal land (unique in India). The NGT's 2014 ban has been systematically unenforced for over a decade. Workers — overwhelmingly inter-state migrants from Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar — fall outside effective coverage of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 and Employees' Compensation Act, 1923.

Critical Analysis: India's environmental governance suffers from three structural flaws: (1) institutional fragmentation — MoEFCC, NGT, state pollution control boards, and Sixth Schedule ADCs operate in silos with no unified enforcement authority; (2) the EIA process is project-specific and does not account for cumulative impacts across ecosystems; (3) conservation designations (Ramsar, Biosphere Reserves) carry prestige but lack binding legal enforcement — they are administrative labels, not statutory protections.

Way Forward:

Enact a comprehensive Environmental Governance Framework Act that integrates EIA, forest clearance, wildlife protection, and pollution control under a single statutory authority with enforcement powers

Operationalise the Kunming-Montreal 30x30 target through a revised Wildlife Protection Act amendment with a binding Protected Area expansion schedule by 2028

Mandate cumulative environmental impact assessments for mega-projects in ecologically sensitive zones, replacing the current project-by-project EIA methodology

Strengthen Sixth Schedule ADC accountability for mining regulation through mandatory environmental compliance audits by the Comptroller and Auditor General

For Great Nicobar, require a Shompen Impact Assessment under FRA 2006 and the ANI Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation, 1956 before construction commences, with independent monitoring by NHRC

Q16. Budget 2026-27 allocated Rs 20,000 crore over 5 years for a Carbon Capture, Utilization and Storage (CCUS) Mission targeting hard-to-abate sectors. Examine the scientific basis of CCUS, evaluate India's readiness, and analyse whether CCUS is a genuine climate solution or a fossil fuel industry delay tactic.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: Budget 2026-27 allocated Rs 20,000 crore over 5 years for a CCUS Mission targeting cement, steel, and fertiliser manufacturing — sectors that cannot easily electrify. India's NDC targets a 45% reduction in emissions intensity of GDP by 2030 (vs 2005 levels) and net-zero by 2070. Non-fossil fuel power capacity stands at 46.8% of total installed capacity (NDC target: 50% by 2030). Carbon sink created (2005–2023): 2.29 billion tonnes CO2 equivalent (target: 2.5–3 billion tonnes by 2030).

Scientific Basis: CCUS involves capturing CO2 at emission sources through pre-combustion, post-combustion, or oxyfuel combustion methods, then either utilising it industrially (enhanced oil recovery, e-fuels, concrete carbonation) or storing it underground in geological formations (depleted oil/gas reservoirs, saline aquifers, basalt formations). Global CCUS capacity: approximately 45 MTPA (2025) — less than 0.1% of global CO2 emissions of approximately 37 billion tonnes/year.

India's Readiness: India's geological storage potential is estimated at 200+ billion tonnes (sufficient for centuries at current emission rates) — primarily in the Deccan Traps basalt formations (Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh), coastal sedimentary basins, and depleted oil fields. However, India has zero operating commercial-scale CCUS facilities. ONGC has conducted pilot CO2 injection at Ankleshwar field (Gujarat), but at research scale only. The technology readiness gap between pilot and commercial deployment is typically 10–15 years and $1–5 billion per facility.

Critical Analysis: Environmental critics argue CCUS is a "moral hazard" — providing fossil fuel industries a justification to continue operations rather than transitioning to renewables. The global track record supports scepticism: the Petra Nova project (Texas, USA) — the world's largest post-combustion CCUS on a coal plant — was shut down in 2020 due to economic non-viability.

Way Forward:

Focus CCUS allocation on genuinely hard-to-abate sectors (cement, steel) where electrification is not feasible, not on extending coal plant lifespans

Establish a National Geological CO_2 Storage Atlas through GSI (Geological Survey of India) mapping within 24 months as a prerequisite for site selection

Require all CCUS projects to demonstrate additionality — captured CO_2 must result in net emission reduction, not merely enhanced oil recovery that produces additional fossil fuel

Q17. The Defence Acquisition Council approved the procurement of 114 Rafale jets at Rs 3.25 lakh crore — India's largest single defence deal. Examine the implications for India's defence industrial ecosystem and critically evaluate whether large single-platform acquisitions serve India's strategic interests.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The DAC, chaired by Defence Minister Rajnath Singh, approved 114 Rafale jets in February 2026 — structured as 18 fly-away (direct from France) + 96 Made-in-India (HAL-Dassault partnership). India's total Rafale fleet post-deal: 176 jets (36 IAF from 2016 + 26 Navy + 114 new). The deal proceeds through the Inter-Governmental Agreement (IGA) route with minimum 30% offset requirements under DAP 2020.

Defence Industrial Implications: The 96 Made-in-India component creates a manufacturing ecosystem: HAL gains experience in producing 4.5-generation fighter aircraft, with technology transfer in avionics integration, composite airframe manufacturing, and engine assembly. This builds capacity for India's indigenous AMCA (5th-generation, expected approximately 2035) and LCA Tejas Mk2 programmes. Offset obligations (approximately Rs 97,500 crore) should channel investment into Indian defence and aerospace suppliers — creating Tier-2 and Tier-3 component ecosystems.

Critical Evaluation: Single-platform dependency creates strategic risk: if the Rafale supply chain is disrupted (sanctions, French domestic politics, wartime production constraints), India's entire fighter fleet capability is affected. Historically, India's MiG-21 dependency (inducted 1963, still operational at retirement) demonstrated how single-platform reliance creates obsolescence traps. The IAF currently

has approximately 31 operational squadrons against a sanctioned strength of 42 — the Rafale deal addresses quantity but deepens platform concentration. The opportunity cost is significant: Rs 3.25 lakh crore invested in indigenous programmes (Tejas Mk2, AMCA) could potentially produce more aircraft with full technology sovereignty.

Way Forward:

Cap single-platform share at 40% of total fighter fleet to maintain platform diversification as a risk management strategy

Mandate technology transfer milestones (engine manufacturing, AESA radar production) within the 96 Made-in-India component with contractual penalties for non-delivery

Accelerate LCA Tejas Mk1A (83 ordered) production to create a high-low fleet mix, reducing per-unit costs for lower-threat scenarios

Q18. Chandrayaan-4's landing site identification at Mons Mouton-4 near the lunar south pole marks a critical step toward India's first lunar sample-return mission. Examine the technological challenges and analyse how Chandrayaan-4 positions India in the emerging geopolitics of lunar resource competition.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: ISRO identified Mons Mouton-4 (MM-4) at 84.289 degrees S, 32.808 degrees E near the lunar south pole as the primary candidate landing site for Chandrayaan-4 — India's first lunar sample-return mission. The site selection used Chandrayaan-2 Orbiter's High Resolution Camera (OHRC) imagery analysed by the Space Applications Centre (SAC), Ahmedabad. Chandrayaan-4 aims to collect approximately 3 kg of regolith and return it to Earth — making India the 4th country (after USA, USSR, China) to achieve this milestone.

Technological Challenges: The mission requires mastery of six critical technologies: (1) precision landing on lunar south pole terrain (permanently shadowed regions with temperatures approximately 40 Kelvin); (2) sample collection and containerisation; (3) Moon ascent from lunar surface; (4) rendezvous and docking in lunar orbit; (5) trans-Earth injection and re-entry; (6) Earth recovery. The prerequisite SPADEX mission (Space Docking Experiment, launched December 2024) demonstrated orbital docking with SDX01 Chaser and SDX02 Target spacecraft. China's Chang'e 5 (2020) returned 1.731 kg from Mons Rumker; Chang'e 6 (2024) returned approximately 1.9 kg from the lunar far side.

Lunar Geopolitics: The south pole's permanently shadowed regions contain confirmed water-ice — a future resource for crewed missions and in-situ propellant production. The US-led Artemis Accords (signed by 40+ nations; India is a signatory) and China's ILRS (International Lunar Research Station, with Russia) represent competing governance frameworks for lunar resource extraction. Chandrayaan-4 positions India as a credible lunar science power with independent access to south pole resources.

Way Forward:

Establish a dedicated Lunar Science and Resources Division within ISRO to coordinate Chandrayaan-4/5 with long-term lunar resource utilisation planning

Pursue dual-track lunar governance engagement — maintain Artemis Accords participation while engaging with ILRS on a science cooperation basis, preserving strategic autonomy

Leverage Chandrayaan-4 data for commercial partnerships with private space companies (Axiom, iSpace) for future lunar surface operations

Q19. Budget 2026-27 allocated Rs 1,000 crore to India Semiconductor Mission 2.0 alongside the foundation of India's first Quantum Valley at Amaravati. Examine how these initiatives address India's strategic technology dependencies and evaluate India's prospects for semiconductor and quantum computing self-sufficiency.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: Budget 2026-27 allocated Rs 1,000 crore to ISM 2.0, building on ISM 1.0 (launched December 2021; Rs 76,000 crore outlay; 10 projects worth Rs 1.60 lakh crore approved). Key ISM 1.0 units: Tata Electronics (28nm fab in Dholera, Gujarat), Micron Technology and CG Power (ATMP in Sanand, Gujarat). ISM 2.0 targets 70–75% semiconductor self-sufficiency by 2029 and 3nm/2nm advanced fab capability by 2035. India currently imports 95%+ of semiconductors. Separately, India's first Quantum Valley was founded at Uddandarayunipalem, Thullur, Amaravati, Andhra Pradesh — featuring a 133-qubit quantum computing centre (IBM hardware, TCS integration, L&T construction).

Strategic Technology Dependencies: India's semiconductor market is USD 45–50 billion (FY25), projected at USD 100–110 billion by 2030. The 95%+ import dependency creates strategic vulnerability: in a geopolitical crisis (Taiwan Strait scenario affecting TSMC), India's electronics, defence, telecom, and automotive sectors face immediate supply disruption. The National Quantum Mission (NQM, launched April 2023; Rs 6,003.65 crore; 2023–31) targets 50–1,000 qubit systems and 2,000 km quantum communication — essential for future cryptographic security.

Evaluation of Prospects: ISM 1.0's 28nm fab at Dholera targets mature-node chips (IoT, automotive, defence) — not cutting-edge logic chips (5nm/3nm). The gap to advanced nodes requires $15–20 billion per fab, specialised talent (India produces approximately 1,000 semiconductor design engineers annually vs. Taiwan's 10,000+), and an EDA (Electronic Design Automation) tool ecosystem dominated by three US companies (Synopsys, Cadence, Siemens EDA).

Way Forward:

Focus ISM 2.0 on ATMP (Assembly, Testing, Marking, Packaging) and mature-node fabs where India has competitive advantage, rather than attempting leading-edge logic fab competition with TSMC/Samsung

Scale the WISER Quantum Talent Hub target (35 lakh students by 2035) through mandatory quantum computing modules in IIT/NIT curricula

Negotiate technology transfer agreements with Japan (Rapidus), EU (CHIPS Act partners), and South Korea as alternatives to exclusive US dependency

GS PAPER 4 — ETHICS, INTEGRITY & APTITUDE

Q20. The Meghalaya rat-hole mining tragedy — killing 27 workers despite a decade-old NGT ban — raises fundamental questions about institutional failure, regulatory capture, and the ethics of governance in Sixth Schedule areas. Examine the ethical dimensions of this governance failure.

[GS-4 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: A gas explosion at an illegal rat-hole mine in Thangkso area, East Jaintia Hills, Meghalaya killed 27 workers in February 2026 — the worst mining tragedy in Meghalaya since the December 2018 Ksan flooding disaster (15 miners trapped, no survivors). The NGT banned rat-hole mining in 2014 (*All Dimasa Students Union vs. State of Meghalaya*) citing acid mine drainage (River Lukha turning blue), violations of the Mines Act, 1952 and MMDR Act, 1957. The ban has been systematically unenforced for over a decade.

Ethical Dimensions:

Institutional duty of care: The state has a constitutional duty under Article 21 (right to life) to enforce mining safety regulations. A decade of non-enforcement is not administrative delay — it is constructive complicity. The Directorate General of Mines Safety (DGMS), state mining departments, and ADCs all

bear responsibility. When enforcement institutions know of violations and do not act, they become morally culpable for foreseeable harm.

Regulatory capture in Sixth Schedule areas: Meghalaya's ADCs have governance powers over land and minor minerals under Article 244. Coal lies under privately-owned tribal land — creating a structural incentive for ADC members (who are often themselves landowners or politically connected to mine operators) to resist enforcement. This is textbook regulatory capture — the regulatory body is captured by the interests it is supposed to regulate.

Exploitation of migrant workers: Workers were overwhelmingly inter-state migrants from Assam, West Bengal, and Bihar — invisible to formal regulatory systems, outside trade union coverage, and without access to Employees' Compensation Act protections. Their exploitation reflects what Amartya Sen would describe as capability deprivation — the absence of basic conditions for functioning as a human being.

Ethical Framework: John Rawls' "veil of ignorance" test is instructive: no person, unaware of whether they would be born as a mine operator, an ADC member, or a migrant worker, would consent to a governance system that allows known lethal conditions to persist unchecked for a decade.

Way Forward:

Establish mandatory mine safety audits by the DGMS in all Sixth Schedule areas, with ADC governance powers explicitly subordinated to federal safety jurisdiction

Create a migrant worker registration system linked to e-Shram (which already has 30 crore+ registrations) with automatic accident insurance and compensation

Institute personal criminal liability for ADC officials who demonstrably fail to enforce NGT orders within their jurisdictions

Q21. The Great Nicobar Island Project pits strategic infrastructure against the survival of the Shompen — a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group of approximately 400 individuals. As the Secretary, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, how would you advise the Cabinet on balancing development and tribal rights?

[GS-4 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: The Rs 81,000 crore Great Nicobar Island Holistic Development Project — comprising an International Container Transhipment Terminal, Greenfield Airport, Township, and Power Plant — requires clearing 130 sq km of tropical rainforest in a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (2013). The island is

home to the Shompen tribe — a PVTG of approximately 400 individuals, hunter-gatherers with first friendly contact only in 2001, protected by the ANI Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation, 1956 and the Forest Rights Act, 2006. India has 75 PVTGs.

Identifying the Ethical Conflict: This case presents a genuine dilemma, not a false equivalence: (1) the strategic interest is real — Great Nicobar is equidistant from Colombo, Port Klang, and Singapore; Campbell Bay Naval Air Station is India's southernmost military base; the Andaman and Nicobar Command is India's only tri-service command; (2) the tribal rights interest is also real — the Shompen are among the most vulnerable human communities on Earth, with no capacity to advocate for themselves in modern political systems.

Ethical Framework:

Duty of trusteeship: India's Constitution (Article 46 — DPSP) directs the state to promote the educational and economic interests of Scheduled Tribes with special care and protect them from social injustice and exploitation. For PVTGs, this is an enhanced duty — their survival as a people depends on state protection. The state is their trustee, not merely their administrator.

Kantian categorical imperative: Using the Shompen's homeland for infrastructure development without their meaningful consent treats them as means to a strategic end — violating the foundational ethical principle of treating every person (and community) as an end in themselves.

Capability approach (Amartya Sen): Development that destroys the Shompen's way of life — their subsistence ecology, cultural practices, and territorial integrity — does not expand their capabilities. It eliminates them. True development, in Sen's framework, expands the freedoms people have reason to value. The Shompen have never expressed a desire for a container terminal.

Recommendation as Secretary:

Step 1 — Commission an independent Shompen Impact Assessment under FRA 2006, conducted by anthropologists with established relationships with the community, not by ANIIDCO (the implementing agency). The assessment must address habitat loss, food security disruption, disease exposure risk, and cultural integrity.

Step 2 — Redesign the project to create a Shompen Exclusion Zone of at least 50 km radius from all known Shompen settlement areas, with the township component relocated or eliminated entirely. The ICTT and airport can potentially be sited on the northern coast with reduced ecological impact.

Step 3 — Establish a Shompen Protection Authority (statutory, modelled on the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti) with veto power over any construction activity within the exclusion zone, and a dedicated annual budget funded from project revenues.

Step 4 — Require the project to adopt a "no-contact protocol" — all construction workers, military personnel, and future residents must be prohibited from entering Shompen territory, with criminal penalties for violations.

Ethical Principle: A nation that cannot protect 400 of its most vulnerable citizens from a Rs 81,000 crore project has failed the most basic test of governance ethics: that the measure of a civilisation is how it treats those who cannot fight for themselves. Strategic necessity does not extinguish ethical obligation — it requires more creative policy design, not less.

Q22. The India AI Impact Summit's New Delhi Declaration was endorsed by 88 countries, positioning India as a Global South AI governance leader. As a senior bureaucrat in MeitY, you discover that a major domestic AI deployment in a government welfare scheme is producing systematically biased outcomes against SC/ST applicants due to training data imbalances. Identify the ethical issues and recommend a course of action.

[GS-4 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: India hosted the India AI Impact Summit 2026 (February 22, 2026) resulting in the New Delhi Declaration on AI Impact — built on seven "Chakra" pillars including secure/trusted AI and social empowerment. The India AI Mission (Rs 10,372 crore; MeitY) funds public AI deployment. The discovery that a government welfare scheme's AI system produces systematically biased outcomes against SC/ST applicants creates a direct conflict between India's global AI governance leadership and domestic practice.

Ethical Issues:

Algorithmic injustice: The AI system reproduces and amplifies historical discrimination embedded in training data. If SC/ST applicants were historically under-represented in welfare scheme approvals (due to bureaucratic bias, documentation barriers, or caste discrimination), the algorithm learns to replicate this pattern. This is not a technical error — it is structural discrimination automated.

Constitutional violation: Article 14 (equality), Article 15 (non-discrimination on grounds of caste), and Article 46 (DPSP — promote welfare of SCs/STs) collectively require that government systems not discriminate. An AI system that systematically disadvantages SC/ST applicants violates these provisions regardless of whether the bias is intentional.

Institutional integrity: MeitY's credibility as the nodal ministry for the New Delhi Declaration depends on domestic AI governance matching its global advocacy. Hypocrisy — championing ethical AI abroad while deploying biased AI domestically — is an institutional integrity failure.

Course of Action: Step 1 — Immediately suspend the AI module for SC/ST applicant categories and revert to manual processing until bias is corrected. Step 2 — Commission a mandatory algorithmic audit by an independent technical body (IIT/IIIT consortium) with specific testing for caste, gender,

and geographic bias. Step 3 — Mandate pre-deployment bias testing for all government AI systems as a standard MeitY protocol, establishing an AI Ethics Review Board within the ministry. Step 4 — Report findings transparently to Parliament through a departmental standing committee, demonstrating institutional accountability.

Q23. "Development that destroys what it cannot replace is not development — it is extraction." Evaluate this proposition in the context of the Congo Basin peatlands research and India's own environmental trade-offs in February 2026.

[GS-4 | 10 Marks | 150 Words]

Introduction: ETH Zurich research published in *Nature Geoscience* (February 2026) found that 40% of CO_2 emissions from DRC's Lake Mai-Ndombe and Tumba originates from peat older than 3,000 years. The Congo Basin's Cuvette Centrale peatland (145,500 sq km) stores approximately 30 billion tonnes of carbon — equivalent to 20 years of US fossil fuel emissions. Once released, this carbon cannot be recaptured on human timescales.

Ethical Evaluation: The proposition distinguishes between development (which creates lasting value) and extraction (which depletes irreplaceable natural capital). Peatlands storing 3,000-year-old carbon, tropical rainforests hosting endemic species (Nicobar Megapode), and PVTG homelands are irreplaceable in any meaningful sense. Destroying them for infrastructure generates GDP but eliminates ecological and cultural assets that no amount of money can reconstruct.

India's February 2026 choices illustrate the tension: the Great Nicobar project (Rs 81,000 crore, 130 sq km forest clearance) creates strategic infrastructure but destroys a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve. The ethical question is whether the project design exhausted all alternatives that could achieve strategic objectives with lower irreversible costs.

Conclusion: The ethics of intergenerational justice — our obligation to future generations — require that development decisions internalise the irreversibility criterion. What we cannot replace, we have no right to destroy without having exhausted every alternative.

GS ESSAY PRACTICE

Q24. "A budget is not merely a financial statement — it is a moral document that reveals a nation's true priorities." Elaborate with reference to Union Budget 2026-27.

[Essay | 1000–1200 Words]

Essay Outline and Key Arguments:

Introduction — The Budget as Mirror: Union Budget 2026-27, presented by Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on February 1, 2026, sets total expenditure at Rs 53.47 lakh crore. But beyond the fiscal arithmetic, a budget is a value statement — it answers the question: what does the state consider important enough to fund? The allocation of Rs 3.25 lakh crore for 114 Rafale jets, Rs 20,000 crore for CCUS, Rs 12.2 lakh crore for capital expenditure, and the continuation of PMGKAY free food grains for 81 crore people through December 2028 — these are not just line items. They are ethical choices about who gets what, and why.

Article 112 — The Constitutional Frame: The Budget is governed by Article 112 (Annual Financial Statement) — a constitutional requirement that the executive present its spending plan to Parliament for approval. This is not a formality — it is the foundational democratic accountability mechanism. The Consolidated Fund of India (Article 266) cannot be drawn upon without Parliamentary authorisation. The moral weight of the budget derives from this democratic mandate: every rupee spent represents a citizen's tax contribution redirected toward collective purposes.

What the 2026-27 Budget Prioritises: Capital expenditure at Rs 12.2 lakh crore (3.1% of GDP) — the highest in India's history — signals that the state prioritises infrastructure-led growth: seven High-Speed Rail Corridors, Brahmaputra tunnel, 20 National Waterways, and Surat-Dankuni Freight Corridor. The moral argument: infrastructure creates long-term productive capacity, generates employment (the tunnel alone creates approximately 80 lakh person-days), and reduces regional inequality by connecting underserved areas. This is intergenerational investment — spending today that creates value for the next generation.

What the Budget Reveals About Trade-offs: Interest payments consuming 26% of total expenditure represent the cost of past fiscal choices — accumulated debt from previous governments' spending decisions. Every rupee spent on interest is a rupee not available for healthcare, education, or social protection. The FRBM Act's 50% debt-to-GDP target by March 2031 is fundamentally a moral commitment: that this generation will not leave an unpayable burden to the next.

The Social Protection Dimension: The NFSA 2013 serving 81 crore people with free food grains, PM RAHAT providing Rs 1.5 lakh cashless hospitalisation for accident victims within 7 days, and Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY savings of Rs 1.25 lakh crore to beneficiaries — these represent the budget's moral claim: that the state exists to protect its most vulnerable citizens. The CBDC-PDS pilot (February 2026, Gandhinagar) — programmable e-Rupee tokens eliminating 30–40% leakage — demonstrates that the moral imperative is also about delivery integrity: spending matters less than what actually reaches citizens.

The Defence Allocation Question: The 114-Rafale deal (Rs 3.25 lakh crore) is approximately 6% of the annual budget. Is this moral? Security is a prerequisite for all other freedoms — Article 355 (duty of the Union to protect states against external aggression) establishes a constitutional obligation. The IAF's 31 squadrons against a sanctioned 42 represents a capability gap with direct moral consequences: if the state cannot defend its citizens, all other spending is precarious. But the opportunity cost — Rs 3.25 lakh crore could fund universal mental healthcare (NIMHANS estimates 10% of Indians need care but 1% access it) for decades — reveals the moral tension inherent in every allocation decision.

The Missing Items: What a budget does not fund is equally revealing. India's R&D spending at 0.64% of GDP (vs. Israel's 5.4%, South Korea's 4.8%) reveals a structural underinvestment in knowledge creation. Mental health receives no dedicated budget line despite the NIMHANS data. Environmental conservation is dwarfed by infrastructure spending. The 197 endangered languages identified by UNESCO receive no dedicated preservation funding.

International Comparison — Budgets as Moral Documents: New Zealand's 2019 "Wellbeing Budget" explicitly prioritised mental health, child poverty, and domestic violence alongside GDP growth — treating well-being as a policy objective, not a by-product. Bhutan's Gross National Happiness index structures budget priorities around psychological well-being, cultural resilience, and ecological diversity. These are not superior economic models — they are different moral frameworks encoded in fiscal architecture.

Conclusion: A budget that grows the economy without asking whether the growth reaches the poorest, protects the most vulnerable, and preserves what cannot be replaced, has measured its success by the wrong metric. Budget 2026-27 is stronger than its predecessors in capital investment, social protection delivery, and fiscal discipline. But the moral test of a budget is not what it achieves for those who already have — it is what it achieves for those who have the least. The Rs 53.47 lakh crore is not just a number — it is a portrait of what India, as a democratic society, has decided to value.

Key concepts: Article 112; fiscal democracy; intergenerational equity; opportunity cost as moral choice; the Rawlsian "veil of ignorance" applied to budget allocation; the difference between expenditure and outcome; delivery integrity (CBDC-PDS); the ethics of defence vs. welfare trade-offs.

Q25. "A nation's strategic autonomy is only as real as its supply chains allow." Discuss with reference to India's semiconductor, energy, and pharmaceutical dependencies revealed in February 2026.

[Essay | 1000–1200 Words]

Essay Outline and Key Arguments:

Introduction — The Supply Chain as Sovereignty: In February 2026, three data points illuminated the structural constraints on India's strategic autonomy: India imports 95%+ of semiconductors (ISM 2.0 announced to address this); 85–88% of crude oil (GCC FTA signed as energy diversification); and approximately 70% of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients from China (PLI-pharma targets indigenisation). Strategic autonomy — the ability to pursue national interests without external constraint — is a foreign policy doctrine. But it is operationalised or negated in supply chain architecture, not diplomatic declarations.

The Semiconductor Dependency: India's semiconductor market (USD 45–50 billion, projected USD 100–110 billion by 2030) is almost entirely import-dependent. ISM 1.0 (Rs 76,000 crore) approved 10 projects, but the Dholera fab targets 28nm — mature-node chips for IoT and automotive, not the 5nm/3nm logic chips that power smartphones, AI accelerators, and advanced military systems. A Taiwan Strait crisis would immediately disrupt India's electronics, defence, automotive, and telecom sectors. ISM 2.0's target of 70–75% self-sufficiency by 2029 is ambitious — but semiconductor manufacturing requires not just fabs but an entire ecosystem: EDA tools (monopolised by Synopsys, Cadence, Siemens EDA), photolithography equipment (ASML's monopoly on EUV), ultra-pure chemicals, and 10,000+ trained engineers.

The Energy Dependency: India's crude oil import dependency (85–88%) and LNG import dependency make energy security the most immediate constraint on strategic autonomy. The India-GCC FTA ToR signing (February 6, 2026) acknowledges this structurally: India-GCC bilateral trade at USD 178.56 billion is dominated by energy imports. India's SPR at 5.33 MMT (9.5 days of consumption) falls far short of IEA's 90-day standard. Budget 2026-27's CCUS Mission (Rs 20,000 crore), renewable energy push (520 GW total installed, targeting 500 GW RE by 2030), and seven HSR corridors (reducing road transport fuel consumption) represent long-term autonomy-building strategies — but the transition timeline is decades, not years.

The Pharmaceutical Dependency: India is the "pharmacy of the world" — the world's largest generic drug producer by volume with approximately USD 25 billion in pharmaceutical exports. Yet approximately 70% of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients come from China. The COVID-19 pandemic (2020–21) exposed this vulnerability when Chinese API supply disruptions threatened Indian drug

production. PLI-pharma (Rs 15,000 crore) and the Biopharma SHAKTI mission (Rs 10,000 crore, Budget 2026-27) target API indigenisation, but building fermentation and chemical synthesis capacity requires 5–7 years.

The Quantum-AI Frontier: The Amaravati Quantum Valley (133-qubit centre) and the National Quantum Mission (Rs 6,003.65 crore, 2023–31) represent investments in future sovereignty — quantum computing and AI will determine military capability, cryptographic security, and economic competitiveness by 2040. Nations that depend on others for quantum hardware and AI chips will be strategically subordinate regardless of conventional military strength.

The Policy Architecture for Supply Chain Sovereignty: India's response in February 2026 reveals an emerging doctrine: diversification (GCC FTA, multiple energy sources), indigenisation (ISM, PLI-pharma, SFDR missile technology), strategic stockpiling (SPR expansion), and alliance-based access (India-France SGS Partnership for nuclear and defence technology). This four-pillar approach is structurally sound but requires decades of consistent implementation.

Conclusion: Strategic autonomy is not a diplomatic posture — it is an industrial capability. India's February 2026 decisions — ISM 2.0, GCC FTA, Biopharma SHAKTI, SFDR test, Rafale deal — are all investments in reducing the gap between diplomatic aspiration and supply chain reality. The test of strategic autonomy is not whether India can vote independently at the UN — it is whether India can sustain its economy, feed its people, and defend its borders if a single foreign supply chain is disrupted. By that measure, India's strategic autonomy is a work in progress — genuine in intent, still fragile in infrastructure.

Key concepts: Supply chain sovereignty vs. strategic autonomy; the semiconductor chokepoint (TSMC, ASML); energy transition as security strategy; API dependency as a national security risk; the distinction between diplomatic autonomy and industrial autonomy; comparative models (Japan's economic security legislation 2022, US CHIPS Act 2022, EU Chips Act 2023).

Q26. You are a member of a government committee reviewing the CBDC-PDS pilot for national expansion. A civil society organisation presents data showing that 12% of pilot beneficiaries — predominantly elderly, disabled, and tribal populations — were unable to access their food grain entitlements due to digital literacy barriers. The Ministry wants to proceed with national rollout on schedule to demonstrate success before the next budget session. Advise the committee, detailing the ethical reasoning behind your recommendation.

[Essay / Case Study | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: The CBDC-PDS pilot (launched February 15, 2026, Gandhinagar, Gujarat) represents a transformative innovation — programmable e-Rupee tokens eliminating the 30–40% PDS leakage that has historically denied food security to India's poorest. DBT since 2013 has saved Rs 2.73 lakh crore by eliminating approximately 9 crore ghost beneficiaries. But the pilot data showing 12% exclusion among elderly, disabled, and tribal populations reveals a structural design flaw: the system designed to eliminate leakage is itself creating a new category of exclusion.

The Ethical Conflict: Two legitimate values are in tension: (1) efficiency — CBDC-PDS demonstrably reduces corruption and ensures food grains reach genuine beneficiaries; premature delay means millions continue to lose entitlements to leakage; (2) inclusion — 12% exclusion among the most vulnerable means approximately 10 crore people (12% of 81 crore NFSA beneficiaries) could lose food security access during national rollout — a direct violation of Article 21 (right to life, which includes the right to food per the PUCL v. Union of India case, 2001).

Ethical Analysis:

Utilitarian calculus: If CBDC-PDS eliminates 30–40% leakage (benefiting approximately 25–30 crore people) while excluding 12% (approximately 10 crore people), the aggregate outcome is positive. But utilitarian analysis alone is insufficient — it does not account for who bears the cost. The excluded 12% are precisely the people the PDS was designed to protect: the elderly who cannot operate digital interfaces, disabled persons without accessible technology, and tribal populations in areas without mobile network coverage.

Rawlsian justice: The difference principle requires that social institutions be arranged to maximally benefit the least advantaged members of society. A system that improves outcomes for the majority while excluding the most vulnerable fails Rawls' test — even if aggregate welfare improves. The least advantaged must be the design priority, not an afterthought.

Rights-based analysis: The right to food (Article 21, expanded through PUCL; Article 47 DPSP) is non-derogable. No efficiency gain justifies denying food to persons who are unable to access a digital system through no fault of their own. The state's duty is to adapt the system to its citizens, not to require citizens to adapt to the system.

Recommendation:

I would advise the committee to proceed with national rollout on a phased timeline with mandatory inclusion safeguards:

Phase 1 (Months 1–6): Rollout in districts with established digital infrastructure (urban, semi-urban) where exclusion risk is lowest. Simultaneously deploy corrective measures for the pilot districts.

Phase 2 (Months 7–12): Extend to remaining districts, but only after: (a) offline transaction capability is operationalised (stored-value chip technology requiring no internet); (b) assisted transaction protocol is established — trained community volunteers at every FPS for elderly and disabled

beneficiaries; © fallback physical grain distribution is guaranteed for any beneficiary who fails digital authentication three times.

Phase 3 (National coverage): Proceed only when independent evaluation confirms exclusion rate is below 2% across all demographic categories, including tribal and disabled populations.

The Political Pressure Dimension: The Ministry's desire to demonstrate success before the next budget session is understandable but ethically irrelevant. Political timelines cannot override food security rights. A rushed national rollout that excludes 10 crore vulnerable people will create a crisis that damages both the programme and the government's credibility far more than a phased rollout would.

Ethical Principle: The measure of a welfare system is not its average performance — it is its performance for the person least able to advocate for themselves. A system that works brilliantly for 88% and fails completely for the most vulnerable 12% has not solved the welfare delivery problem — it has relocated it from corruption to exclusion. Both are governance failures; both deny food to the hungry.

Q27. The Agni-III ballistic missile test and the SFDR propulsion breakthrough in February 2026 demonstrate India's growing nuclear and conventional deterrence capabilities. As a member of the National Security Advisory Board, a fellow member argues that India should abandon its No First Use (NFU) policy to enhance deterrence credibility. Present the ethical arguments for and against NFU, and state your position with reasoning.

[Essay / Case Study | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: India's Draft Nuclear Doctrine (1999), formalised by the Cabinet Committee on Security in January 2003, rests on five pillars: No First Use (NFU), Minimum Credible Deterrence, Massive Retaliation, Civilian Control, and Safety/Security. The Strategic Forces Command (established January 2003) under the Nuclear Command Authority (Political Council chaired by PM; Executive Council chaired by NSA) manages India's nuclear arsenal. The successful Agni-III test (3,000–5,000 km range) from ITR Chandipur reinforces India's second-strike capability.

Arguments Against NFU (For Abandonment): (1) Deterrence credibility: Pakistan's tactical nuclear weapons (Nasr/Hatf-IX, 60 km range) are designed for battlefield use against Indian conventional superiority — NFU means India absorbs the first nuclear strike before responding, which

may not deter Pakistan's low-threshold nuclear posture. (2) China's opacity: China's declared NFU is disputed — its rapid nuclear modernisation and MIRV development suggest offensive intent. India's NFU against a potentially first-use adversary creates asymmetric vulnerability.

Arguments For Retaining NFU: (1) Moral authority: NFU establishes India as a responsible nuclear power — essential for India's UNSC permanent membership bid, NSG entry, and global governance credibility. (2) Strategic stability: Abandoning NFU increases the risk of pre-emptive strikes during crises (use-it-or-lose-it dynamics) and lowers the nuclear threshold regionally. (3) Second-strike sufficiency: India's nuclear triad (Agni series land-based, INS Arihant SSBN submarine-based, Rafale air-delivered) provides assured second-strike capability — NFU does not mean vulnerability if the retaliatory capability is credible. (4) Gandhian and constitutional values: India's identity as a civilisational state committed to peace (Article 51 DPSP — promote international peace and security) is inseparable from NFU.

My Position: Retain NFU. The ethical case is decisive: first use of nuclear weapons — against any adversary, under any circumstances — cannot be morally justified given the indiscriminate nature of nuclear destruction. Deterrence credibility should be enhanced through survivable second-strike capabilities (more SSBNs, mobile Agni launchers, hardened C3I systems), not by lowering the threshold for nuclear use. The moral authority of NFU is itself a strategic asset — it cannot be recovered once abandoned.

Q28. "In a democracy, the power to rename a state is the power to affirm identity — but it is also the power to redraw belonging." Discuss with reference to the Kerala-Keralam renaming and the broader politics of naming in India.

[Essay | 1000–1200 Words]

Essay Outline and Key Arguments:

Introduction — The Politics of Names: When the Union Cabinet approved renaming Kerala as "Keralam" in February 2026, it completed a journey that began with the Kerala Legislative Assembly's 2023 resolution. The change — from the Anglicised "Kerala" to the Malayalam-original "Keralam" — appears minor. But names carry power. They encode colonial histories, linguistic identities, and political assertions. Every state renaming in India — Madras to Tamil Nadu (1969), Mysore to Karnataka (1973), Uttaranchal to Uttarakhand (2007), Orissa to Odisha (2011), Pondicherry to Puducherry (2006) — has been an act of identity reclamation from colonial or post-colonial naming conventions.

Article 3 — The Constitutional Mechanism: The power to alter a state's name lies with Parliament under Article 3. The President must refer the bill to the state legislature for its views, but Parliament is not bound by the state's opinion. This creates a structural tension: the identity claim originates in the state (through a legislative resolution), but the constitutional authority to validate it resides in the Union. The renaming of Kerala to Keralam was consensual — but the mechanism itself is not designed for consensus. Article 3 was crafted for the era of state reorganisation, when the Union needed overriding authority to create, merge, and redraw states. Applied to identity-driven name changes, it creates a paternalistic dynamic: the state asserts who it is, and the Union decides whether to agree.

The Linguistic Identity Dimension: India's states were reorganised on linguistic lines under the States Reorganisation Act, 1956 (Fazl Ali Commission). Language is not merely a communication tool in India — it is the primary marker of regional identity. Kerala was formed on November 1, 1956 (Kerala Piravi) as a Malayalam-speaking state. The terminal "m" in "Keralam" reflects Malayalam phonology — the name the people of the state use in their own language. The Anglicised "Kerala" was a colonial convenience, not a local choice. Reclaiming "Keralam" is, therefore, an act of decolonisation — reasserting linguistic self-description over inherited colonial nomenclature.

City and Street Renamings — The Broader Pattern: India has witnessed extensive renaming: Bombay to Mumbai (1995), Calcutta to Kolkata (2001), Madras to Chennai (1996), Bangalore to Bengaluru (2014), Allahabad to Prayagraj (2018). These carry different political valences: some reclaim pre-colonial names (Mumbai derives from Mumbadevi temple), others assert Hindu identity over Mughal-era names (Allahabad, named by Akbar, to Prayagraj, its Hindu pilgrimage identity). The politics of naming is therefore not neutral — it can serve decolonisation, linguistic assertion, or majoritarian identity politics. The ethical quality depends on whose history is being affirmed and whose is being erased.

The "Belonging" Question: The essay prompt's insight — that renaming is also "the power to redraw belonging" — is sharpest when applied to renamings that erase rather than reclaim. Renaming Allahabad to Prayagraj erases Mughal-era history from the civic landscape, signalling to Muslim residents that their historical presence is being de-emphasised. Renaming Kerala to Keralam, by contrast, affirms the identity of the state's own population in their own language — it expands belonging rather than contracting it. The ethical distinction is between renaming as self-determination (the people of a place choosing their own name) and renaming as identity imposition (a political majority erasing minority histories).

The Federal Question: If naming is identity, and identity is fundamental to dignity (Article 21), then the power to name should logically rest with the community that bears the name. The current Article 3 mechanism — requiring Parliamentary approval for what is essentially a state's self-description — is federally inadequate. A constitutional convention (or amendment) establishing that state name changes proposed by the state legislature through a simple majority resolution are automatically binding on the Union would better respect the federal principle.

Conclusion: Names are not neutral labels — they are compressed histories, identity claims, and political statements. The Kerala-Keralam renaming is a healthy democratic act: a people reclaiming their own name in their own language through constitutional processes. The moral quality of renaming depends on a single test: does it expand belonging or contract it? Does it affirm a community's right to name itself, or does it impose one community's identity over another's history? By this test, Keralam is decolonisation. What matters is that India applies this same ethical standard consistently — honouring the diversity of its naming histories rather than selectively erasing them.

Key concepts: Article 3; States Reorganisation Act, 1956; linguistic state formation; decolonisation of nomenclature; identity politics of naming; the distinction between self-naming (Kerala to Keralam) and identity imposition (Allahabad to Prayagraj); federal dignity; the First Schedule as a living document.

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