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28 Questions

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GS PAPER 1 — HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY & SOCIETY

Q1. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026 has been criticised for erasing the identities of third-gender communities rooted in Indian tradition. Examine the historical and sociological significance of Hijra and Kinnar communities in India and analyse how successive legislative frameworks have affected their social status.

[GS-1 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The Transgender Amendment Bill 2026, introduced on March 13 in Lok Sabha, restricts the definition of transgender persons to those “undergoing gender transition” — effectively excluding Hijra and Kinnar communities, whose identity is cultural and social rather than medical.

Historical and Cultural Significance: Hijra communities have occupied a distinctive social role in the subcontinent for over two millennia. Mughal court records document Hijras serving as palace administrators and trusted political intermediaries. The Ramayana and Mahabharata contain references to tritiya-prakriti (third-nature persons) performing auspicious rituals. In South India, Aravanis (Thirunangai) participate in the Koovagam festival linked to the Mahabharata character Aravan — a centuries-old tradition fusing religious identity with gender expression.

Colonial Marginalisation: The Criminal Tribes Act, 1871 categorised Hijras as a “criminal tribe,” criminalising traditional livelihood practices and dismantling social networks. Though repealed in 1952, the stigma embedded by colonial law persisted through police harassment. Independent India’s Constitution guaranteed equality but provided no specific recognition until NALSA v. Union of India (2014), which formally recognised the third gender under Articles 14, 19(1)(a), and 21, and directed reservation as a socially backward class.

Legislative Trajectory: The Transgender Persons Act, 2019 already diluted NALSA by requiring a District Magistrate certification. The 2026 Amendment deepens this by mandating medical board evaluation — functionally excluding non-binary persons who do not seek medical transition, including

traditional Hijra/Kinnar communities whose identity is performative, spiritual, and community-validated rather than medically defined.

Critical Analysis: The definitional narrowing reflects a tension between a medicalised state preference and the court’s sociological-constitutional vision. Communities that predate the modern medical framework cannot be defined by it without erasure.

Way Forward:

Parliament should restore the NALSA principle of self-identification as the default, with medical documentation as an optional pathway — not a mandatory gate

A parliamentary standing committee should conduct consultations with Hijra, Kinnar, and Aravani community representatives before finalising the Amendment

Census 2031 should include a self-identification protocol for gender to generate accurate population data as a basis for targeted welfare delivery

Q2. India’s ranking of 116th in the World Happiness Report 2026 presents a paradox — the country is one of the world’s fastest-growing major economies, yet well-being indicators remain poor. Examine the structural social factors underlying India’s happiness deficit.

[GS-1 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The World Happiness Report 2026, published by the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), placed India 116th out of 147 nations on the Cantril Ladder (a 0–10 self-reported life evaluation scale). Finland ranked first for the ninth consecutive year. India’s GDP growth (7%+) coexists with this low rank, exposing a structural gap between economic output and lived quality of life.

The Six-Indicator Analysis: The Gallup World Poll measures: GDP per capita (PPP), social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity, and perceptions of corruption. India’s weaknesses cluster around: social support (rapid urbanisation eroding joint family networks), freedom to make life choices (caste, gender, and religious constraints for large sections), corruption perception (Transparency International CPI 2024: India ranks 96th globally), and healthy life expectancy (~70 years vs. Nordic average of ~83 years), burdened by anaemia, NCD prevalence, and malnutrition.

Social Inequality as the Core Driver: India's Gini coefficient (~0.35) compares unfavourably with Finland's (~0.27). NFHS-5 data reveals 57% of children under 5 are anaemic — a structural constraint on healthy life expectancy. Female LFPR at ~37% represents a systematic exclusion from economic agency that depresses freedom indicators. Costa Rica ranked 4th despite a per-capita GDP of ~\$14,000 by investing in universal healthcare (CCSS since 1941) and abolishing its army in 1948 — demonstrating that happiness is a policy choice, not a wealth threshold.

Critical Analysis: The CPI score and happiness rank are strongly correlated across countries — India's governance gap (rank 96 on corruption perception) is a structural drag on well-being that GDP growth alone cannot overcome. India's urbanisation without adequate social infrastructure (public parks, community mental health services) produces urban anomie — economic improvement alongside social disconnection.

Way Forward:

Expand PMJAY to cover mental health hospitalisations; NIMHANS estimates 10% of Indians need mental health care but only 1% access it

NEP 2020's social-emotional learning component should be operationalised across all state curricula by 2027

MOSPI should develop a National Happiness Index with annual Gallup-equivalent surveys to complement GDP as a policy metric

Smart Cities Mission should mandate minimum green and community space standards per capita in all project plans

Q3. Six of nine planetary boundaries have been breached, according to the 2023 update published in Science Advances. Analyse the implications for India's biodiversity, water security, and long-term settlement patterns.

[GS-1 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: The planetary boundaries framework, developed by Johan Rockström and colleagues at the Stockholm Resilience Centre in 2009, identifies nine Earth-system processes within which humanity can safely operate. The 2023 Science Advances update formally declared six boundaries breached: climate change (~1.3°C above pre-industrial), biosphere integrity, land system change, freshwater depletion, biogeochemical flows (nitrogen/phosphorus overload), and novel entities (chemical pollution including microplastics). India sits at the intersection of all six breached boundaries.

Biodiversity Implications: India is one of 17 megadiverse countries, hosting 7–8% of all recorded species across ~2.4% of the world’s land area, with four global biodiversity hotspots: the Himalaya, Indo-Burma region, Western Ghats and Sri Lanka, and Sundaland (Nicobar Islands). The IUCN Red List flags 1,212 threatened animal species in India. The biosphere integrity breach manifests in: habitat fragmentation from infrastructure (roads and dams cutting migratory corridors), invasive species proliferation (Lantana camara, water hyacinth), climate-driven altitudinal range shifts compressing alpine species above receding snowlines, and intensifying human-wildlife conflict at forest-settlement margins.

Water Security Implications: The freshwater boundary breach is acutely visible. The Central Ground Water Board identifies 14 states with over-exploited aquifers, including Punjab and Haryana – the core of India’s food security buffer. Himalayan glaciers (losing 40–70 cm water equivalent per year per IPCC AR6) feed the Ganga-Indus-Brahmaputra system, threatening irrigation and drinking water for ~800 million people. The biogeochemical flows breach (nitrogen fertiliser overuse) has created nitrate-contaminated drinking water aquifers above the WHO threshold of 50 mg/L in agricultural districts of UP, Punjab, and Rajasthan.

Settlement Pattern Implications: Three categories of settlements face compound risk: (1) Coastal zones – India’s 7,516 km coastline faces IPCC-projected sea-level rise of 0.3–1 metre by 2100, threatening 40 million coastal inhabitants in low-lying deltaic West Bengal and Odisha; (2) Agricultural plains – CMIP6 models project ±20% monsoon rainfall variability, destabilising Kharif crop production in rain-fed districts across Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, and Jharkhand; (3) Urban heat islands – Delhi, Ahmedabad, and Nagpur recording heat index values above 50°C, generating climate-driven internal migration.

Policy Gaps: India’s forest cover stands at ~24% against the 33% target of the National Forest Policy, 1988. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (COP15, 2022) set a 30×30 target (protect 30% of land and ocean by 2030) – India signed, but Protected Areas cover only ~5% of land. The eight missions of India’s National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) operate in bureaucratic silos that do not reflect the integrated, cascading nature of planetary boundary breaches.

Critical Analysis: The framework’s key insight – that boundaries are interdependent and tipping cascades accelerate when multiple boundaries are simultaneously breached – is absent from India’s sectoral policy architecture. A deforested watershed simultaneously loses carbon storage, water regulation, and biodiversity – single-objective conservation cannot address multi-boundary crises.

Way Forward:

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

Establish a National Ecosystem Accounting System that values forests, wetlands, and mangroves as natural capital in national accounts, internalising biodiversity loss in investment decisions

Accelerate the National Water Mission's 20% water-use efficiency improvement target through PMKSY micro-irrigation expansion, prioritising over-exploited aquifer districts

Integrate planetary boundary metrics into MOSPI's annual statistical compendium alongside the Economic Survey, creating parliamentary accountability for environmental limits

Mandate revised EIA methodology that accounts for cumulative impacts on aquifer recharge and biodiversity corridors, not just project-level point impacts

Q4. Analyse the sociological and economic dimensions of India's declining legal adoption rate and examine the role of law in creating structural barriers to adoption, with reference to the Supreme Court's March 2026 maternity leave ruling.

[GS-1 | 10 Marks | 150 Words]

Introduction: India has approximately 4,000 children registered with CARA (Central Adoption Resource Authority, Ministry of WCD) awaiting adoption against 30,000+ prospective adoptive parents — an 8:1 ratio indicating structural, not attitudinal, barriers.

Structural Barriers: Average domestic adoption wait times of 3–5 years, heavily restricted intercountry adoption post-2015 CARA tightening (from ~6,000/year to ~200/year), and complex matching criteria create prohibitive procedural friction. The Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 centralised all adoption under CARA, removing faster pathways that existed under religious personal laws (Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956). Workplace disincentives compound the barrier: until the SC's March 2026 ruling — which held under Articles 14 and 21 that maternity leave serves parent-child bonding, not physical recovery — employers had no obligation to grant adoptive mothers full maternity leave, making adoption a career penalty.

Way Forward:

CARA should establish a maximum 12-month fast-track timeline with case management reviews

Parliament must amend the Maternity Benefit Act to equalise adoptive mothers' leave at 26 weeks, eliminating the residual 14-week gap with biological mothers

The Code on Social Security, 2020 should extend maternity benefits to gig workers through an industry-funded benefit fund

GS PAPER 2 — POLITY, GOVERNANCE & INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Q5. The near-simultaneous challenge to the Lok Sabha Speaker, the Chief Election Commissioner, and the Collegium system in early 2026 reflects deeper institutional stress in Indian democracy. Critically examine the constitutional safeguards available for these three offices and evaluate whether existing mechanisms are adequate.

[GS-2 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: In early 2026, opposition parties moved a no-confidence notice against the Lok Sabha Speaker under Article 179©, served an impeachment notice against the Chief Election Commissioner under Article 325, and escalating executive delays in Collegium appointments created a new judicial-executive flashpoint. The convergence of these three institutional challenges has been characterised as “institutional capture by stealth” — not through constitutional amendments, but through appointment politics, anti-defection weaponisation, and extra-constitutional executive delay.

Constitutional Architecture — Speaker: Article 93 mandates election of a Speaker from House members. Article 179© permits removal by effective majority with 14 days’ notice. Article 122 insulates parliamentary proceedings from judicial scrutiny. The Tenth Schedule (52nd Amendment, 1985) made the Speaker the sole adjudicator of anti-defection petitions — creating structural bias since the Speaker remains a ruling party member. The Kihoto Hollohan case (1992) upheld the Tenth Schedule but permitted post-decision judicial review. The Nabam Rebia case (2016) held that a Speaker cannot decide defection petitions while their own removal notice is pending.

Constitutional Architecture — CEC: Article 324 establishes the Election Commission. Article 325 protects the CEC with removal equivalent to a Supreme Court judge (parliamentary impeachment by special majority). However, the CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Service Conditions) Act, 2023, enacted in response to the Anoop Baranwal case (2023), removed the Chief Justice of India from the appointment committee, replacing him with a Cabinet Minister — structurally reducing perceived independence.

Constitutional Architecture — Judiciary: The Collegium system (Second and Third Judges Cases, 1993/1998) gives the judiciary primacy in appointments. But the executive retains a de facto pocket veto by not acting on Collegium recommendations — some names pending 2–3 years. The NJAC was struck down in the Fourth Judges Case (2015) as violating judicial independence, leaving the Collegium intact but vulnerable to executive inaction.

Evaluation of Adequacy: Formal safeguards (security of tenure, supermajority removal) exist but are inadequate because: (1) appointment processes remain politicised; (2) the Tenth Schedule creates Speakership conflict of interest; (3) executive inaction over Collegium recommendations is extra-

constitutional yet unchecked; (4) the 2023 Act structurally reduced CEC appointment independence.

Critical Analysis: Comparatively, the UK Speaker conventionally resigns from their party upon election (tradition since 1728), the UK Electoral Commission has no government ministers on its selection panel, and the UK Judicial Appointments Commission operates independently of executive direction. India’s institutional architecture — stronger on paper than in practice — requires structural de-politicisation rather than incremental fixes.

Way Forward:

Transfer anti-defection adjudication from Speaker to Election Commission or an independent tribunal, with a mandatory 3-month hearing timeline (Law Commission recommendation)

Restore the CJI’s participation in the CEC appointment panel through a legislative amendment to the 2023 Act

Amend the Constitution to require a formal presidential rejection with written reasons for any Collegium recommendation not acted upon within 90 days

Establish a Constitutional Offices Independence Commission (statutory, bipartisan) to monitor and report annually on institutional health

Directive word: “Critically examine” requires exposition of the framework AND evaluation of its adequacy — both are addressed above.

Q6. The Supreme Court’s March 2026 ruling on maternity leave for adoptive mothers reframes the purpose of maternity leave from biological recovery to parent-child bonding. Examine the constitutional reasoning and its implications for parental leave law reform in India.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The Supreme Court’s March 2026 ruling held that denying adoptive mothers maternity leave equivalent to biological mothers violates Articles 14 and 21. The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (as amended in 2017) provides 26 weeks to biological mothers (first two children) but only 12 weeks to adoptive mothers — a differential the Court found constitutionally unsustainable.

Constitutional Reasoning: Under Article 14, the classification between biological and adoptive mothers fails the test of rational nexus to the object of the law. The object — ensuring child welfare and parent-child bonding — applies identically regardless of how parenthood was constituted. The intelligible differentia (mode of becoming a mother) has no connection to the law’s protective purpose. Under Article 21, expanded through Francis Coralie (1981) and subsequent judgments to include the

right to dignified life, the Court held that meaningful parenthood — including the bonding phase — is a constitutional entitlement. Article 15(3), permitting special provisions for women and children, provides the affirmative constitutional basis for extending, not restricting, the Act’s protections.

Implications for Parental Leave Reform: The bonding rationale has downstream consequences: (1) it provides constitutional grounding for statutory paternity leave in the private sector (currently absent — only 15 days for central government employees); (2) it applies to same-sex couples who adopt; (3) it highlights the legislative gap of excluding gig and platform workers from the Maternity Benefit Act (applicable only to establishments with 10+ employees). The Rajasthan Platform Workers Act, 2023 attempts state-level coverage — Parliament should follow.

Way Forward:

Amend the Maternity Benefit Act to equalise adoptive mothers’ leave at 26 weeks, completing the equalisation the SC identified as Parliament’s responsibility

Introduce a gender-neutral Parental Leave Act covering fathers, adoptive parents of all genders, and commissioning parents in surrogacy, replacing the current fragmented framework

Operationalise the Code on Social Security, 2020 provisions to extend maternity benefits to gig workers through an industry-funded social security fund

Q7. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Amendment Bill, 2026 replaces self-identification with mandatory medical board certification. Critically examine whether this move is constitutionally sustainable in light of the NALSA judgment (2014).

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The NALSA v. Union of India judgment (2014), delivered by Justices K.S. Radhakrishnan and A.K. Sikri, held that Articles 14, 19(1)(a), and 21 together guarantee the right to self-identify one’s gender without state-mandated surgery, medical diagnosis, or external certification. The Transgender Amendment Bill 2026, introduced on March 13, proposes mandatory evaluation by a medical board (psychiatrist, endocrinologist, surgeon) — a direct contradiction of this fundamental rights ruling.

Article 14 Analysis: The Bill creates a classification: those undergoing medical gender transition vs. all others (including non-binary, gender-fluid, and traditional Hijra/Kinnar identities). For Article 14 to be satisfied, the classification requires both intelligible differentia and rational nexus to the object of the law. The Transgender Persons Act’s protective object applies regardless of medical transition status

— a non-binary person who has not transitioned medically requires identical protection against workplace discrimination and denial of healthcare. The classification therefore fails the rational nexus test.

Article 21 Analysis: NALSA explicitly held that gender identity is an internal, deeply felt experience constituting an inseparable component of Article 21’s right to life with dignity. Requiring medical board validation of this internal experience inverts constitutional logic — it empowers state-appointed doctors to determine whether a person’s selfhood is “real.” This is precisely what NALSA prohibited.

Legislative Override of Constitutional Rulings: Under Article 13(2), laws inconsistent with fundamental rights are void. A parliamentary Act directly contradicting a 5-judge SC bench ruling on fundamental rights requires a subsequent bench of at least equal strength to overrule NALSA. The Amendment, as drafted, will almost certainly be struck down.

Way Forward:

Parliament should instead legislate to strengthen NALSA’s implementation: self-identification as default, welfare scheme access, anti-discrimination enforcement, OBC-equivalent reservation

The definition should explicitly include non-binary, gender-fluid, and traditional community-based identities

The Bill should be referred to a Joint Parliamentary Committee for wider consultation with NHRC, community representatives, and legal experts before final passage

Q8. Evaluate India’s approach to “strategic autonomy” in the context of the 2026 Iran-US-Israel conflict, given India’s simultaneous relationships with Iran (Chabahar), Israel (defence), Gulf Arab states (diaspora/energy), and the United States (QUAD, iCET).

[GS-2 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: The 2026 West Asia conflict — triggered by US-Israel military strikes on Iranian nuclear and energy infrastructure, Iran’s retaliatory closure of the Strait of Hormuz, and attacks on Gulf energy facilities including Qatar’s Ras Laffan LNG complex — has placed India’s strategic autonomy doctrine under its most severe stress test. India’s multi-vector foreign policy simultaneously maintains: Chabahar Port (Iran), ₹20,000 crore+ in defence contracts (Israel), 8 million diaspora and \$40 billion+ annual remittances (Gulf Arab states), and QUAD and iCET cooperation (United States).

India’s Multi-Vector Exposure:

Energy dependency: India imports 85–88% of crude oil, with ~60% from West Asia. India's Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) at Vishakhapatnam, Mangaluru, and Padur holds only 5.33 MMT — approximately 9.5 days of consumption. Qatar supplies ~50% of India's LNG imports through Ras Laffan. The Hormuz closure directly threatens this supply architecture.

Iran relationship: India's \$500 million investment in Chabahar's Shahid Beheshti terminal (operated by India Ports Global Limited) provides strategic access to Afghanistan and Central Asia, bypassing Pakistan. The project has been exempted from US sanctions. Iran's expulsion of IAEA inspectors in February 2026 — marking the formal collapse of the JCPOA (signed July 14, 2015; abandoned by the US in May 2018) — complicates India's engagement.

Israel relationship: Israel is India's second-largest defence supplier after Russia, with bilateral defence trade exceeding \$2 billion annually. Intelligence cooperation is robust. India's silence on Israeli strikes reflects this dependency.

US relationship: QUAD membership and the iCET framework (Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies, launched 2023) involve technology transfer, semiconductor cooperation, and defence technology sharing. These commitments create implicit alignment pressures with the US position.

Evaluation of India's Strategic Autonomy: India did not join Operation Prosperity Guardian (the US-led Red Sea naval coalition) and has maintained official neutrality on the Hormuz closure. This reflects strategic autonomy in form — but substantive autonomy is constrained by energy dependency, defence supply chains, and diaspora welfare obligations.

The JCPOA's failure (US withdrawal in 2018, Iran's gradual enrichment to 90% weapons-grade by 2025) demonstrates that multilateral diplomacy was the only mechanism that reconciled India's multiple interests — engagement with Iran without confronting US sanctions. Its collapse eliminated this space.

Critical Analysis: India's strategic autonomy is strongest when major powers offer it positive-sum options (as in Russia-Ukraine, where both sides wanted Indian neutrality). The Iran crisis is less forgiving — the Hormuz closure directly harms India regardless of its position, and Iran's demand for diplomatic support from friendly nations creates binary pressure.

Way Forward:

India should urgently expand its SPR to 30 days' coverage (from the current 9.5 days), in line with IEA member standards, through a third phase of underground cavern construction

Diversify crude supply through accelerated engagement with African producers (Nigeria, Angola, Congo) and US LNG under the recently signed long-term contracts

Revive the multilateral JCPOA track through a special BRICS+ diplomatic initiative — India, China, and Russia collectively have the leverage to bring Iran back to the verification table

Formally articulate an India-specific “Hormuz Contingency Plan” in the National Security Council’s energy security framework, with pre-agreed alternative supply routing through Cape of Good Hope

Q9. The CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Service Conditions) Act, 2023 removed the Chief Justice of India from the Election Commission appointment process. Analyse the constitutional implications of this change for Election Commission independence and examine whether structural reforms are needed.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: In the Anoop Baranwal v. Union of India case (2023), a 5-judge Supreme Court bench held that until Parliament legislated, the CJI must be part of the Election Commission appointment committee. Parliament’s legislative response — the CEC and Other Election Commissioners (Service Conditions) Act, 2023 — established a new appointment committee comprising the Prime Minister (chair), a Cabinet Minister, and the Leader of Opposition, explicitly excluding the CJI.

Constitutional Implications: Article 324 vests “superintendence, direction and control” of elections in the Election Commission. Article 325 provides the CEC with the highest security of tenure (removal equivalent to a Supreme Court judge). But Article 324 is silent on the appointment process — constitutionally, it is the President who appoints on ministerial advice. The Act’s exclusion of the CJI is constitutionally permissible as legislation — Parliament has the authority to structure the committee — but raises structural concerns about perceived independence.

The core issue: the appointment panel now has two government representatives (PM + Cabinet Minister) against one opposition voice (Leader of Opposition), creating a structural majority for the ruling party. If both government nominees vote uniformly (which the design makes structurally likely), the Opposition member’s presence is tokenistic.

Impact on Independence: Election Commission independence is not formal (constitutional) but practical. The 2024 general elections and multiple state elections saw opposition parties file formal complaints about perceived partisan conduct — including delays in scheduling and enforcement actions during the Model Code of Conduct. Whether these criticisms are fair or not, the Act’s design has deepened the perception deficit. Trust in the EC is a function of both actual independence and institutional design credibility.

Way Forward:

Amend the Act to restore the CJI as a fourth member, creating a 2:1:1 balance (government: opposition: judiciary) — or alternatively establish a 5-member panel including a retired SC judge and the Comptroller and Auditor General

Introduce fixed non-renewable 6-year terms for Election Commissioners, replacing the current retirement-age-based structure, to eliminate late-career incentive distortions

Codify the Model Code of Conduct in statute (currently only convention), giving enforcement decisions a legislative basis that reduces scope for partisan characterisation

Q10. India tightened FDI rules for land-border countries through Press Note 3 (2020) after the Galwan Valley clash. The 2026 Cabinet decision to permit automatic-route FDI where land-border country beneficial ownership is below 10% non-controlling has been described as “calibrated pragmatism.” Examine this characterisation critically.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: Press Note 3, issued by DPIIT (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade) in April 2020, required all FDI from entities where land-border countries (China, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Afghanistan) hold any beneficial ownership to seek government approval under FEMA. The 2026 relaxation permits automatic-route FDI when land-border country beneficial ownership is at or below 10% and non-controlling — responding to the unintended impact on third-country PE and VC funds with incidental Chinese LP stakes.

The Case for “Calibrated Pragmatism”: India’s bilateral trade with China stood at ~\$118 billion in 2024-25, with a trade deficit of ~\$85 billion. India imports ~70% of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) from China; Indian EV manufacturers (Tata, Mahindra) rely on Chinese battery cells (CATL, BYD); solar capacity addition depends on Chinese modules (~80% of global polysilicon). The blanket restriction diverted legitimate global capital (from Singapore, Mauritius, and Cayman-domiciled funds with 2–5% Chinese LP stakes) to competing destinations — Vietnam, Indonesia, Mexico — without meaningfully reducing Chinese economic influence.

The Case for Caution: The relaxation’s enforcement mechanism is weak. FEMA’s beneficial ownership identification relies on self-declaration — opaque offshore structures (nominee shareholding, multi-layer SPVs) can obscure true Chinese control behind technically compliant arrangements. The Companies Act 2013 Section 90 Significant Beneficial Owner (SBO) disclosure framework has limited extraterritorial reach. National security-sensitive sectors (telecom, defence, power grid) require categorical exclusion from any automatic-route relaxation.

Critical Assessment: The 10% non-controlling threshold is defensible on financial theory grounds — below 10% equity without board rights or veto powers confers no significant influence (IFRS 10/IAS 28 standards). But the Mint editorial’s warning is apt: the rule is only as strong as its enforcement, and India’s beneficial ownership verification infrastructure is insufficient for the risk it is being asked to manage.

Way Forward:

Mandate third-party beneficial ownership verification (by SEBI-registered custodians) as a condition for automatic-route FDI from entities with any land-border country connection

Categorically exclude defence, aerospace, 5G telecom infrastructure, power grids, and financial systems from the relaxation, regardless of beneficial ownership percentage

Develop a DPIIT-RBI joint monitoring database tracking FDI flows from land-border-connected entities in real time, with annual parliamentary disclosure

Q11. Analyse the NFRA’s (National Financial Reporting Authority) role in strengthening audit governance in India. What structural reforms does the 2026 inspection report of Big Four-affiliated firms suggest are necessary?

[GS-2 | 10 Marks | 150 Words]

Introduction: NFRA (National Financial Reporting Authority), established under Section 132 of the Companies Act, 2013 and operational from 2018, released inspection reports in 2026 flagging critical governance failures in three Big Four-affiliated audit firms — Price Waterhouse Chartered Accountants (PwCA), BSR & Co (KPMG India), and SRBC & Co (EY India). Deficiencies included audit independence failures, poor documentation quality, inadequate fraud-risk assessment, and weak related-party transaction scrutiny.

Structural Problems: NFRA’s enforcement is structurally limited — it can debar auditors and impose fines up to ₹10 crore on firms, but cannot directly prosecute; referral to SFIO (Serious Fraud Investigation Office) is required. India’s audit failure history — Satyam (₹7,800 crore fraud, 2009), IL&FS (2018), Yes Bank (2020) — demonstrates that each crisis triggers tightening that fails to prevent the next one. The core structural tension is that audit firms derive revenue from both statutory audit (required by law) and lucrative non-audit consulting for the same clients — Section 144 of the Companies Act prohibits some, but not all, such services.

Way Forward:

Give NFRA direct prosecution powers and staff comparable to the US Public Company Accounting Oversight Board (PCAOB, created by Sarbanes-Oxley Act, 2002)

Consider the EU MiFID II model capping non-audit fees at 70% of audit fees for listed company auditors, to structurally reduce commercial capture

Strengthen Section 90 SBO disclosure requirements for audit firm ownership to prevent circular or conflicted shareholding structures

Q12. The World Happiness Report 2026 identifies corruption perception as a key driver of low happiness rankings. Examine the governance reforms India needs to improve its Corruption Perceptions Index ranking and translate improved governance into citizen well-being.

[GS-2 | 10 Marks | 150 Words]

Introduction: The World Happiness Report 2026 (UN SDSN) placed India 116th, with “perception of corruption” as one of six Gallup indicators on which India underperforms. Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) 2024 ranked India 96th globally — reflecting both bureaucratic corruption and the perception of institutional capture in regulatory appointments.

Governance Gap Analysis: The top 20 happiest nations (Finland, Denmark, Iceland) consistently score in the top 20 on CPI as well — the correlation is structural. India’s CPI rank reflects: delayed justice (pendency of 50+ million cases), opacity in government procurement (despite GEM — Government e-Marketplace — progress), weak whistleblower protection (Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014 never notified in full), and the appointment politicisation of regulatory bodies (CEC, CBI, ED) detailed in recent institutional erosion discourse.

Way Forward:

Operationalise the Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014 fully through a Ministry of Personnel notification — currently pending for over a decade

Expand GEM mandates to cover all state government procurement above ₹5 lakh, not just central procurement

Introduce time-bound disposal mandates (90-day SLA) for all public grievances under the Centralised Public Grievance Redress and Monitoring System (CPGRAMS), with escalation transparency

Q13. Children’s online safety is a governance gap in India. With reference to the World Happiness Report 2026’s findings on social media and youth well-being, examine what India should draw from the UK’s Online Safety Act (2023) in designing a children’s digital safety framework.

[GS-2 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The World Happiness Report 2026 (UN SDSN) established a statistically significant link between social media use above 5 hours/day and declining life satisfaction among teenagers, particularly girls. India’s average teen screen time stands at approximately 6.5 hours/day (FICCI-EY 2025), with social media penetration among 15–24 year olds exceeding 70% (IAMAI, 2025). India’s youth population aged 10–24 totals ~340 million — the world’s largest. Yet no dedicated children’s online safety framework exists.

India’s Regulatory Gap: India’s existing legal architecture does not specifically address algorithmic harms to children: IT Act, 2000 (Section 67B) covers only CSAM; IT Rules 2021 impose grievance redressal obligations on Significant Social Media Intermediaries (SSMIs) but set no age verification or algorithmic safety standards for minors; the DPDP Act, 2023 requires parental consent for processing children’s data but has not operationalised its consent mechanism and imposes no content safety obligation; POCSO Act, 2012 covers sexual offences only; NEP 2020 mentions digital literacy without mandating safety-by-design obligations on platforms.

Learning from UK’s Online Safety Act (2023): The UK’s Act requires platforms to: conduct mandatory Children’s Risk Assessments before product launch; ban addictive design features (infinite scroll, autoplay, late-night push notifications) for users under 18; mandate robust parental controls as default; verify user age before exposing to legal-but-harmful content. Ofcom (the regulator) can fine up to £18 million or 10% of global annual turnover for non-compliance. The safety-by-design principle — making platform architecture safe for children by default — is the Act’s most transferable innovation.

India-Specific Considerations: India’s content moderation gap is structurally different from the UK’s — platforms invest far less in moderating non-English content, leaving Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, and Bengali-language users (the majority of Indian teens) exposed to higher levels of harmful content. A Children’s Online Safety Act for India must mandate non-English language content moderation parity.

Way Forward:

Enact a dedicated Children’s Online Safety Act mandating: (1) age verification before account creation; (2) algorithmic chronological feed as default for under-18 users; (3) bans on addictive design features for minors; (4) non-English content moderation parity

Expand NCPCR’s mandate (National Commission for Protection of Child Rights) to include digital safety enforcement with investigation and penalty powers — modelled on Ofcom

Require MeitY and NCPCR to publish joint annual State of Children’s Online Safety reports, creating parliamentary accountability for platform compliance

Q14. India’s anti-defection law has been called both a shield against horse-trading and a sword against legitimate dissent. Analyse the structural problems with the Tenth Schedule and evaluate the reforms recommended by the Law Commission and Election Commission.

[GS-2 | 10 Marks | 150 Words]

Introduction: The Tenth Schedule (52nd Constitutional Amendment, 1985) was enacted by the Rajiv Gandhi government to curb the destabilisation of governments through horse-trading. It designates the Speaker/Chairman as the sole adjudicator of disqualification petitions — a structural vulnerability, since the Speaker is simultaneously a ruling party member.

Structural Problems: The Kihoto Hollohan case (1992) upheld the Schedule but permitted post-decision judicial review, not pre-decision intervention. The Nabam Rebia case (2016) held that a Speaker under removal notice cannot hear defection petitions — creating strategic litigation avenues. In Manipur (2020), Goa (2019), and multiple other states, defection petitions were kept pending for years while the political value of defecting legislators was served. The 91st Amendment (2003) capped Council of Ministers at 15% of House strength, indirectly reducing merger incentives, but did not address the adjudication mechanism.

Law Commission Recommendations:

Transfer anti-defection adjudication to the Election Commission or an independent tribunal

Impose a mandatory 3-month hearing timeline

Make disqualification decisions automatically subject to Supreme Court review (not post-decision only)

These recommendations have been consistently ignored. The 2026 institutional crisis, featuring a no-confidence motion against the Speaker himself, gives renewed urgency to their adoption.

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

Q15. India revised its GDP base year from 2011-12 to 2022-23 in February 2026. The new series estimates India's economy at approximately ₹318 lakh crore (\$3.8 trillion) for 2024-25 — about 3–4% lower than the old series. Analyse the methodological improvements in the new series and critically examine the challenges that remain in India's national income accounting.

[GS-3 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: On February 27, 2026, the National Statistical Office (NSO), under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI), released India's new GDP series with base year 2022-23, replacing the decade-old 2011-12 base. India's GDP base year history runs: 1948-49 → 1960-61 → 1970-71 → 1980-81 → 1993-94 → 2004-05 → 2011-12 → 2022-23. The 2022-23 revision was necessitated by COVID-19 making 2011-12 structurally unrepresentative, and a decade of major economic reforms (GST, IBC, PLI) that significantly altered sectoral weights.

Key Revised Estimates: Under the new series, India's GDP for 2022-23 stands at ₹261.18 lakh crore; 2023-24 at ₹289.84 lakh crore; and 2024-25 (Advance Estimate) at ₹318.07 lakh crore (~\$3.8 trillion). India retains its position as the 5th largest economy in nominal USD terms (after USA, China, Germany, Japan), though some projections of overtaking Germany/Japan by specific dates require revision. In PPP terms, India remains the 3rd largest economy.

Methodological Improvements: (1) Multi-activity enterprise segregation: Large diversified conglomerates now have their output disaggregated by activity, providing more precise GVA allocation to manufacturing, services, and trade sub-sectors. (2) PLFS integration: The old series used static NSS survey extrapolations for the household/unorganised sector. The new series integrates annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS, launched 2017-18) data, capturing real changes in informal employment dynamically. (3) GST data integration: Post-July 2017, GSTR-1 and GSTR-3B filing data provides near-real-time formal sector coverage. The new series fully integrates this administrative data source. (4) Better informal sector capture: 6th Economic Census data and updated MSME surveys provide more granular coverage of small businesses and street vendors. (5) Sector reweighting: The tertiary sector now constitutes 52.9% of GVA (up from ~50% in 2011-12); manufacturing grew 12.7% in 2023-24 and 9.3% in 2024-25.

Remaining Challenges:

State-level GVA allocation: MCA company data lacks geographic breakdown for multi-state operations. NSO uses proxy variables (ASI data, GSTIN location) that introduce estimation error at the state GDP level — creating inconsistencies between national and state-level estimates.

Informal economy measurement: Despite PLFS improvements, the unorganised sector — employing ~90% of India’s workforce — remains imprecisely measured. Demonetisation (2016), GST formalisation (2017 onwards), and COVID-19 all caused structural shifts in informal employment that household surveys likely still undercount.

Economic Census delays: The 7th Economic Census (required to update enterprise-level data for the base year) has been repeatedly delayed; the 6th was completed only in 2013-14. Without timely census data, future base year revisions face data quality constraints.

Fiscal implications: FRBM Act, 2003 targets (debt-to-GDP ratio, fiscal deficit as % of GDP) are anchored to GDP denominators. A 3–4% lower GDP series means debt-to-GDP ratios appear slightly higher — Parliament and FRBM reviewers must recalibrate consolidation targets accordingly.

International comparability: India has moved to SNA 2008 alignment; however, SNA 2025 (the newest UN revision) is not yet implemented, affecting comparability with advanced economies that have already adopted newer standards.

Critical Analysis: The The Hindu editorial’s argument bears emphasis: the lower absolute size is not economic weakness — it is better measurement. The growth rate trajectory is broadly unchanged. However, the 3–4% revision demonstrates that India’s statistical infrastructure requires continuous investment. The National Statistical Commission (statutory body established 2005) issues non-binding recommendations — converting its advice into binding standards would strengthen data governance.

Way Forward:

Accelerate the 7th Economic Census and establish a 5-year mandatory cycle, rather than the current decade-plus gaps

Give the National Statistical Commission binding authority over statistical methodology standards, ending political discretion over data release timing

Operationalise satellite-based land-use and remote-sensing data in agricultural output estimation to reduce monsoon-period estimation uncertainty

Amend the FRBM Act to incorporate a formal base-year revision adjustment clause, preventing fiscal rules from being mechanically tightened solely due to statistical revisions

Q16. The RBI’s inflation targeting framework is due for a 5-year review in March 2026. Critically examine whether the 4% CPI target with $\pm 2\%$ tolerance band remains appropriate for India’s structurally supply-driven inflation, and evaluate the case for retaining versus modifying the framework.

[GS-3 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: RBI Governor Sanjay Malhotra (appointed December 2024) signalled in March 2026 that India's policy repo rate — at 5.25%, reduced from 6.5% in a rate-cutting cycle beginning February 2025 — may trend further lower as CPI inflation moderates. The MPC's bi-monthly decisions are anchored to a 4% CPI target with a $\pm 2\%$ tolerance band (legal basis: RBI Act, 1934, Sections 45ZA–ZL, inserted by Finance Act 2016). With the framework's mandatory 5-year review due in March 2026, the fundamental question is whether this design is fit for India's inflation structure.

India's Inflation Architecture: Current rates (March 2026): Repo rate 5.25%; SDF (Standing Deposit Facility) 5.00%; MSF (Marginal Standing Facility) 5.50%; CRR 4.0%; SLR 18.0%. February 2026 CPI: 5.1% (core CPI ex-food, ex-fuel: $\sim 3.8\%$; food inflation $\sim 6.2\%$; WPI $\sim 2.4\%$).

The Standard Monetary Transmission Problem: In textbook macroeconomics, raising interest rates reduces inflation by contracting borrowing, investment, and consumption demand, and appreciating the currency (cheaper imports). But India's inflation is historically supply-driven: food price volatility (monsoonal dependence, fragmented cold chains, MSP distortions, TOP commodity 5-year cycles); fuel/energy cost pass-through from global commodity prices; structural wage-price dynamics in construction and services; and oligopolistic mark-up pricing in FMCG and telecom. During the 2022-23 global inflation episode, RBI raised rates by 250 basis points (from 4.0% to 6.5%). Yet food inflation remained elevated because the driver was global commodity disruption — not demand excess.

The Three Review Questions:

Should the 4% target be raised? Arguments for raising to 5–5.5%: India's structural inflation floor is higher than in advanced economies; a 4% target requires aggressive rate hikes that damage growth unnecessarily; emerging markets (Brazil, South Africa) operate with higher targets. Against: raising the target may un-anchor inflation expectations; the framework's credibility depends on maintaining the announced target.

Should food be excluded (core inflation targeting)? Arguments for: food prices are supply-driven and rate-insensitive; including food leads the MPC to raise rates during food price spikes unrelated to demand. Against: food inflation is what the poor experience most acutely — excluding it disconnects monetary policy from household welfare, especially in a country where food constitutes 46% of the CPI basket.

Should MPC external members have greater independence? Government-appointed external members may vote in sync with executive preferences. The Governor's casting vote concentrates power. Reform: renewable terms with explicit independence provisions; transparent voting record requirements.

Critical Analysis: The Economic Times editorial's argument is structurally sound: rate policy is a blunt instrument for supply-driven inflation. The 2022-23 rate hike cycle did not arrest food inflation but did raise borrowing costs for MSMEs and real estate, compressing growth at the margin. The

complementary fiscal and supply-side tools — PM-AASHA (price stabilisation), buffer stock operations through Nafed, cold chain investment under PM Kisan Sampada Yojana, fertiliser subsidy rationalisation, PM Gati Shakti logistics — are more directly targeted to India’s actual inflation drivers.

Way Forward:

Retain the 4% target to preserve credibility, but amend the framework to explicitly recognise that supply-side interventions (buffer stocks, cold chain, logistics) are co-equal tools for inflation management, not subordinate to rate policy

Pilot a dual mandate framework (inflation + growth, as in the US Fed’s model) for the next 5-year period, with the MPC required to report on both objectives in meeting minutes

Amend the MPC structure to allow external members to serve for a single 6-year non-renewable term (from current 4 years), strengthening independence from political business cycles

Require the Ministry of Agriculture to provide the MPC with a mandatory quarterly food supply outlook to improve the accuracy of inflation projections at the source of the problem

Q17. India’s dependence on the Strait of Hormuz — through which ~20% of globally traded oil transits — has been exposed by the 2026 Iran-US-Israel conflict. Examine India’s energy security vulnerabilities and evaluate the adequacy of India’s Strategic Petroleum Reserve and supply diversification strategy.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The Strait of Hormuz — ~33 km wide with navigable lanes of 3 km each way — carries approximately 20–21 million barrels of oil per day (~20% of globally traded oil) and ~20% of global LNG trade. Iran’s March 2026 closure of the strait following US-Israel military strikes on its nuclear and energy infrastructure directly threatens India’s energy supply chain: India imports 85–88% of crude oil, of which ~60% originates from West Asia.

India’s Energy Security Vulnerability Profile: Qatar supplies ~50% of India’s LNG imports through the Ras Laffan complex — targeted in Iran’s retaliatory strikes. India’s Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) — at three underground cavern facilities in Vishakhapatnam (1.33 MMT), Mangaluru (1.5 MMT), and Padur (2.5 MMT) — provides a combined buffer of 5.33 MMT, equivalent to approximately 9.5 days of crude consumption. This falls far short of the IEA’s recommended 90-day strategic reserve standard (applicable to IEA members, which India is not, but uses as a benchmark). A sustained Hormuz closure creates an immediate supply crisis at current reserve levels.

Supply Diversification — Progress and Gaps: India has made progress in diversifying crude sources: Russia’s share rose dramatically post-2022 (from <2% to ~35–40% of imports) following the Ukraine war’s price dislocation; African producers (Nigeria, Angola) and Latin America (Venezuela) have been explored. However, LNG diversification remains limited — GAIL, Petronet LNG, and IOC’s long-term Qatar contracts create structural rigidity. US LNG long-term purchase agreements (recently signed) provide partial mitigation.

Way Forward:

Expand India’s SPR to 90-day coverage — a Phase III of underground cavern construction at two additional sites (Odisha and Karnataka have been assessed) is essential, requiring an investment of approximately ₹35,000 crore

Formulate a Hormuz Contingency Plan within the NSC’s energy security framework, specifying pre-agreed alternative routing (Cape of Good Hope), emergency procurement protocols, and a demand-management trigger mechanism

Diversify LNG through accelerated pipeline and FSRU (Floating Storage and Regasification Unit) investments for US LNG imports, reducing Qatar dependency below 30%

Accelerate domestic renewable energy to 500 GW by 2030 — every percentage point reduction in fossil fuel power generation is a proportionate reduction in West Asia energy exposure

Q18. Drones have fundamentally altered modern warfare. Examine the evidence from Ukraine and West Asia and analyse the gaps in India’s drone manufacturing strategy, counter-drone doctrine, and defence policy framework.

[GS-3 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: The conflicts of 2022–2026 have delivered an unambiguous message: cheap, mass-produced drones — whether loitering munitions (kamikaze drones) or first-person-view (FPV) attack drones — have fundamentally changed the calculus of land and maritime warfare. Defence Minister Rajnath Singh stated in March 2026 that ongoing conflicts in West Asia and Ukraine “conclusively demonstrate” that India must urgently position itself as a global drone manufacturing hub by 2030. The gap between stated ambition and ground reality is substantial.

Strategic Lessons from Live Conflicts: In Ukraine: Iranian-supplied Shahed-136 loitering munitions (cost ~\$20,000/unit) were used at scale to destroy power infrastructure, demonstrating that cheap attritable weapons can impose strategic costs disproportionate to their production cost.

Ukrainian FPV drones (\$500 converted consumer units) have been deployed as anti-tank munitions against main battle tanks costing \$2–5 million — a cost-exchange ratio that fundamentally challenges legacy platform economics.

In West Asia: Houthi drone and missile attacks on Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq facility (2019 precedent) and the 2026 attacks on Qatar's Ras Laffan and UAE's Abu Dhabi LNG terminal demonstrate that drone warfare has reached critical energy infrastructure, with global economic ramifications. Iran's Shahed variants and ballistic missiles breached Gulf air defence systems, including Patriot batteries.

India's Drone Ecosystem — Current State: India's PLI Scheme for Drones (₹120 crore, MoCA) has approved 23 beneficiaries, targeting a drone manufacturing hub by 2030. The MQ-9B Predator deal (31 units from US General Atomics, ~\$4 billion, FMS route) represents India's most significant armed drone acquisition. Indigenous programmes include: CATS Warrior (HAL/DRDO loyal wingman armed drone for Su-30MKI — in development, delayed); Rustom-II/Tapas-BH 201 (DRDO MALE UAV — development repeatedly delayed); ideaForge SWITCH (first military-grade Indian quad UAV, inducted for Ladakh ISR). Defence corridors in UP (Lucknow-Agra-Aligarh-Kanpur) and Tamil Nadu provide manufacturing infrastructure.

Strategic Gaps:

Component indigenisation: India's drone manufacturers (ideaForge, Throttle Aerospace, Garuda Aerospace) can assemble platforms, but key components — motors and ESCs (predominantly Chinese, T-Motor supply chain), flight controllers (Pixhawk or Chinese clones), LiPo batteries (Chinese), EO/IR sensor payloads (Israeli or American) — are imported. In any India-China conflict, this supply chain collapses immediately.

Policy fragmentation: Drone policy spans MoCA/DGCA (civil airspace, Drone Rules 2021, Digital Sky platform), MoD/DAP (military procurement, iDEX), MeitY (electronics ecosystem), DPIIT (PLI scheme), and MHA (critical infrastructure security). There is no single National Drone Authority — unlike IN-SPACE for the private space sector.

Counter-drone doctrine: India has no unified, publicly articulated C-UAS (Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems) doctrine. The Chief of Defence Staff's theaterisation initiative has not yet assigned the C-UAS role to any Theatre Command. Soft-kill capabilities (DRDO's Samyukta EW system, commercial jammers) and hard-kill systems (L-70 anti-aircraft guns, VSHORAD Igla-S MANPADS) are deployed patchwork without integrated architecture.

Critical Analysis: The Hindustan Times editorial's observation is structurally correct: India's PLI scheme (₹120 crore) is inadequate at 1/33rd the scale of even US state-level drone defence funding. iDEX's ₹498 crore corpus supports innovation but cannot fund the component indigenisation (battery chemistry, motor manufacturing, EO/IR payloads) that requires sustained capex investment. The CATS Warrior programme — delayed for 5+ years — illustrates the gap between India's stated ambition and its actual R&D delivery capacity for complex drone systems.

Way Forward:

Establish a National Drone Authority modelled on IN-SPACE — single-window authority for civil and military drone regulation, procurement, and indigenisation coordination

Create a Defence Drone Technology Fund under iDEX with a ₹500 crore+ corpus dedicated specifically to component indigenisation (motors, ESCs, batteries, indigenous EO/IR payloads)

Mandate a minimum 50% domestic content requirement for all military drone procurement under DAP 2020, with a 5-year glide path to 80%

Fast-track CATS Warrior by assigning it a fixed delivery timeline (24 months) under the Critical Defence Technology initiative, with Defence Research and Development Organisation accountability to a parliamentary oversight committee

Develop a public C-UAS doctrine document — articulating India’s counter-drone architecture for critical infrastructure, border surveillance, and field combat — to guide service-level procurement decisions

Q19. “Green growth — the idea that economies can simultaneously expand GDP and reduce their environmental footprint — is proving increasingly illusory in practice.” Critically examine this claim with reference to the planetary boundaries breach and India’s NDC commitments.

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: Green growth is the dominant global policy paradigm — the idea that renewable energy deployment, circular economy models, and efficiency improvements can decouple economic expansion from environmental degradation. Down to Earth’s 2026 analysis of the planetary boundaries framework challenges this paradigm: six of nine boundaries are breached, global CO₂ emissions hit a record ~37 billion tonnes in 2024, and current NDC trajectories project 2.8–3.2°C warming by 2100 against the Paris Agreement’s 1.5°C target.

The Decoupling Problem: Relative decoupling (emissions per unit of GDP declining) is common — India’s NDC commits to a 45% reduction in emissions intensity of GDP by 2030 from 2005 levels. But relative decoupling does not guarantee absolute decoupling (total emissions falling as GDP rises). If GDP grows faster than the efficiency gain, absolute emissions rise. The Jevons Paradox (William Stanley Jevons, 1865) compounds this: efficiency gains reduce the cost of energy, encouraging more consumption and partially negating the efficiency improvement. Embodied carbon in international trade further distorts national accounting — high-income countries appear to have decoupled because they outsourced manufacturing (and its emissions) to China, India, and Vietnam.

India's Climate Reality: India is the 3rd largest global emitter (after China and USA). Renewable capacity stands at ~250 GW against a 500 GW 2030 target; solar (~100 GW), wind (~47 GW), hydro (~47 GW). Non-fossil share of installed capacity is ~45% — but thermal still dominates actual generation (capacity factor disparity). India's net zero target is 2070 — the latest among major economies. The 20 billion tonne/year emissions gap between current NDC pledges and the 1.5°C pathway demonstrates that pledged green growth is insufficient even globally.

India's Specific Tension: India faces the equity argument for high-carbon development that advanced economies deny: India's per capita historical emissions are a fraction of the US or EU. Asking India to accept degrowth-aligned policies is politically and ethically contested. The Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (30×30 target, COP15 2022) India signed — but Protected Areas cover only ~5% of land.

Way Forward:

Accelerate India's 500 GW renewable target with a binding annual installation schedule; consider a Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism exemption claim to the EU CBAM based on India's NDC commitments

Integrate climate and biodiversity objectives by designating forest corridors as both carbon sinks AND Protected Area extensions — one bureaucratic action, dual boundary impact

Champion at COP31 a Loss and Damage fund architecture that explicitly funds adaptation for countries (including India) that contributed minimally to cumulative historical emissions

Q20. Analyse India's FDI policy framework for land-border countries in the context of India's supply chain dependencies on China in pharmaceuticals, electronics, and clean energy. What is the appropriate balance between economic pragmatism and national security?

[GS-3 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: India's Press Note 3 (2020), issued by DPIIT following the Galwan Valley clash (June 15, 2020, 20 Indian soldiers killed), required all FDI from land-border country-linked entities to seek government approval under FEMA. The 2026 Cabinet relaxation — permitting automatic-route FDI when land-border country beneficial ownership is at or below 10% non-controlling — reflects India's inability to fully decouple from Chinese supply chains.

Supply Chain Dependency Analysis: India imports ~70% of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (APIs) from China — the generic drug industry, which accounts for India’s ~\$25 billion pharmaceutical export, depends on this supply. Chinese companies (CATL, BYD) supply battery cells to Tata and Mahindra for their EV platforms. Solar capacity addition relies on Chinese modules (~80% of global polysilicon and module production). PLI schemes for electronics (₹41,000 crore), solar (₹45,000 crore), and clean energy components aim at indigenisation over a 5–7 year horizon — but the dependency is structural in the near term.

The National Security Dimension: The Galwan precedent demonstrated that economic integration does not translate to political stability — India-China bilateral trade exceeded \$118 billion in 2024-25 (India’s trade deficit: ~\$85 billion), yet military confrontation was possible simultaneously. Sensitive sectors — defence, telecom (5G), power grid critical infrastructure, financial systems — require categorical exclusion from any liberalisation regardless of beneficial ownership percentage.

Appropriate Balance: The 10% non-controlling threshold is defensible as a financial control standard (IFRS 10/IAS 28). But enforcement infrastructure (beneficial ownership verification, real-time monitoring) must match the policy’s intent. Economic pragmatism (accessing capital pools that incidentally include Chinese LPs) and national security (preventing Chinese state-directed control of strategic Indian assets) are reconcilable through precise sector-specific rules, not blanket restrictions or blanket openings.

Way Forward:

Accelerate API import substitution through PLI-pharma by setting API indigenisation benchmarks (e.g., 50% domestic API for the top-100 generic drugs by 2030)

Develop a National Critical Supply Chain list (analogous to the US DPA list) identifying the 20 most strategically sensitive import dependencies and assigning each a dedicated indigenisation roadmap

Create a Manufacturing Diversification Fund offering concessional finance for companies that shift sourcing from China to ASEAN, Africa, or domestic suppliers in critical categories

Q21. India’s audit quality has been flagged as a systemic governance risk. Analyse the structural conflict between commercial incentives and audit independence, and evaluate whether India should adopt a mandatory separation of audit and non-audit services.

[GS-3 | 10 Marks | 150 Words]

Introduction: NFRA (National Financial Reporting Authority), established under Section 132 of the Companies Act, 2013, released 2026 inspection reports flagging audit independence failures, poor documentation, inadequate fraud-risk assessment, and weak related-party transaction scrutiny across PwCA, BSR & Co (KPMG), and SRBC & Co (EY). India’s audit failure history — Satyam (₹7,800 crore fraud, 2009), IL&FS (2018), Yes Bank (2020) — demonstrates that each regulatory response fails to prevent the next crisis.

Structural Conflict: Section 144, Companies Act, 2013 prohibits specific non-audit services to audit clients. But the Big Four derive substantial revenue from consulting, tax advisory, and risk management to the same entities they audit — creating commercial dependency that structurally compromises independence. The mandatory audit firm rotation (10 years, Section 139) reduces but does not eliminate capture.

Way Forward:

Adopt the EU MiFID II model: cap non-audit fees at 70% of audit fees for listed company auditors; this preserves commercial viability while reducing dependency

Strengthen NFRA with direct prosecution powers (currently must refer to SFIO) and technical staffing comparable to the US PCAOB (Public Company Accounting Oversight Board, Sarbanes-Oxley Act, 2002)

Require public disclosure of audit fee vs. non-audit fee ratios for all listed companies’ auditors in annual reports — transparency itself creates accountability

GS PAPER 4 — ETHICS, INTEGRITY & APTITUDE

Q22. The World Happiness Report 2026 establishes a statistically significant link between heavy social media use (5+ hours/day) and declining life satisfaction among teenagers. A social media company claims it is a platform for free expression and that restricting use infringes individual liberty. As a policymaker, examine the ethical dimensions of this conflict between corporate freedom and the state’s duty of care toward minors.

[GS-4 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The tension between platform freedom (grounded in autonomy and free expression) and child protection (grounded in the state’s *parens patriae* responsibility) is one of the defining ethical governance challenges of the digital age. The World Happiness Report 2026 (UN SDSN)

elevates this from theoretical to empirical — providing statistical evidence that 5+ hours/day of social media use significantly reduces life satisfaction among teenagers, particularly girls, with the decline onset correlating with 2012 smartphone mass adoption.

Ethical Framework Analysis:

Utilitarian perspective: Platforms produce net social harm when their design demonstrably reduces the well-being of ~200 million Indian internet users under 18. Utilitarian calculus requires the state to intervene when aggregate harm exceeds aggregate benefit — the WHR 2026 data provides this empirical threshold.

Rights-based perspective: Children’s rights (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, ratified by India 1992) include the right to protection from harm. Article 21 of the Indian Constitution’s expanded interpretation (right to life with dignity) encompasses the psychological well-being of minors. These rights can legitimately constrain corporate freedom.

Capability approach (Amartya Sen/Martha Nussbaum): The relevant question is not whether platforms offer choice, but whether the choices made available actually expand genuine human capabilities. A teenager trapped in an algorithmic content loop promoting self-harm is not exercising meaningful autonomy — they are responding to deliberately engineered psychological compulsion.

The Corporate Ethics Dimension: Platforms are not neutral conduits — they are designed to maximise engagement through variable reward schedules (like dopamine feedback loops), infinite scroll (no natural stopping point), and algorithmic personalisation that traps vulnerable users in harmful content cycles. Jonathan Haidt’s “The Anxious Generation” (2024) and internal platform documents (Frances Haugen leaks, 2021) confirm that companies know of these harms but prioritise engagement metrics. This constitutes an ethics of corporate irresponsibility — profiting from harm to a vulnerable population.

Duty of Care: The state’s duty of care toward minors (Article 15(3), permitting special provisions for children) requires proactive action, not reactive prohibition. Safety-by-design mandates (as in the UK’s Online Safety Act, 2023) — requiring age verification, banning addictive features for under-18 users, mandating chronological feeds as default — represent a proportionate, targeted intervention that restricts corporate design choices, not individual expression.

Conclusion: Individual liberty is not absolute when the individual is a minor whose neurological development makes them structurally vulnerable to engineered addiction. The state’s duty of care is not paternalistic overreach — it is the constitutional and ethical recognition that children cannot be treated as fully autonomous actors in algorithmic commercial environments designed to exploit psychological vulnerabilities.

Q23. “Happiness cannot be mandated, but governance can create or destroy its conditions.” Evaluate this proposition in the context of the World Happiness Report 2026’s findings and India’s governance gaps.

[GS-4 | 10 Marks | 150 Words]

Introduction: The World Happiness Report 2026 (UN SDSN), placing India 116th on the Cantril Ladder, empirically connects governance quality to national well-being. Finland’s 9th consecutive top rank is inseparable from its universal healthcare, high-trust institutions, low corruption (top 5 globally on CPI), and social safety nets. Afghanistan’s last rank (147th) reflects a governance failure of the most complete kind.

Governance as Happiness Infrastructure: The six Gallup indicators are fundamentally governance outputs: social support (public healthcare, disability benefits), freedom to make life choices (anti-discrimination enforcement, rule of law), corruption perception (institutional accountability), and healthy life expectancy (public health investment). None of these is a matter of personal disposition — they are governance deliverables.

India’s specific governance gaps: Corruption Perceptions Index rank 96 (Transparency International 2024); NIMHANS estimate that 10% of Indians need mental health care but only 1% access it; judicial pendency of 50+ million cases constraining rule of law access; and the structural exclusion of 90% of the workforce from formal social protection.

Ethical Implication for Public Servants: GS-4 ethics framework requires public servants to internalise that governance decisions are well-being decisions — not merely administrative acts. A district magistrate who delays a disability pension, a regulator who ignores a whistleblower complaint, or a legislator who blocks mental health budget allocation is making a choices with direct happiness consequences for identifiable citizens.

Q24. The Transgender Persons Amendment Bill, 2026 introduces mandatory medical board certification, replacing self-identification. Examine the ethical dimensions of allowing the state to medically validate — or invalidate — a person’s gender identity.

[GS-4 | 15 Marks | 250 Words]

Introduction: The NALSA judgment (2014) held that gender identity is an “internal and individually experienced” phenomenon and that requiring medical certification as a condition for its recognition violates the right to life with dignity (Article 21). The Transgender Amendment Bill 2026’s mandatory medical board evaluation raises fundamental ethical questions about the relationship between the state, medical authority, and personal identity.

The Ethics of Medicalisation: Medicalisation — subjecting a phenomenon to medical authority and defining it as a medical problem — is ethically neutral when applied to health conditions but ethically problematic when applied to identity. Gender identity is not a pathology; the American Psychiatric Association removed “Gender Identity Disorder” from the DSM in 2013 (replacing it with “Gender Dysphoria,” a clinical condition distinct from identity). Requiring a psychiatrist, endocrinologist, and surgeon to validate a person’s identity treats the deeply personal as the externally verifiable — a category error with dignity consequences.

Kantian Analysis: Kant’s categorical imperative requires treating persons as ends in themselves, not merely as means. A medical board that adjudicates whether a person’s self-reported identity is “valid” uses the person as an object of bureaucratic determination — denying the rational self-authorship that grounds human dignity. It is instrumentalisation of identity.

The Yogyakarta Principles (2006): These international human rights standards (persuasive authority in NALSA) establish that gender identity is “each person’s deeply felt internal and individual experience of gender, which may or may not correspond with the sex assigned at birth.” The phrase “internal and individual” is ethically determinative — it is definitionally outside the competence of external medical authority.

Institutional Ethics Dimension: Medical professionals placed on such boards face their own ethical conflict: the medical ethics duty of patient-centredness and non-maleficence (do no harm) conflicts with the bureaucratic role of identity gatekeeper. Requiring doctors to validate or reject a person’s identity rather than treat their health needs violates core medical ethics principles established by the World Medical Association (Declaration of Geneva).

Conclusion: The ethical objection to mandatory medical board certification is not procedural — it is foundational. Identity is constitutively beyond the reach of external validation. A state that conditions civil recognition on medical approval of personhood has fundamentally misunderstood what identity is, what dignity requires, and what Article 21 protects.

Q25. You are the Principal Secretary to the State Government and discover that a senior Minister is directing your department to delay anti-defection petitions filed against legislators who recently defected to the ruling party. No

explicit order has been given — only informal pressure through intermediaries. Identify the ethical dilemma, the competing obligations, and the course of action you would take.

[GS-4 | 20 Marks | 350 Words]

Introduction: This case study involves a clash between institutional integrity, rule of law, constitutional obligation, and the practical reality of political power. The Principal Secretary's ethical position sits at the intersection of bureaucratic neutrality, constitutional accountability, and personal courage.

Identifying the Ethical Dilemma: The dilemma has two poles: (1) comply with the informal directive — preserve ministerial goodwill, protect career security, avoid direct confrontation; (2) refuse to comply — uphold constitutional obligation (the Tenth Schedule requires the adjudicating authority to process petitions in good faith; the Nabam Rebia case, 2016 established that pending petitions cannot be instrumentalised for political purposes), risk career consequences, and possibly face informal retaliation.

Competing Obligations:

Constitutional obligation: The Principal Secretary's service oath requires fidelity to the Constitution. Anti-defection petitions are constitutional proceedings — delaying them for political convenience violates the Tenth Schedule's intent and the Nabam Rebia principle. The officer is not a neutral instrument of ministerial will; they are a constitutional functionary.

Accountability to law: All Rules of Business procedures require government actions to be based on lawful authority. An informal direction through intermediaries (not a written order) has no legal standing — acting on it would mean implementing an unlawful directive.

Personal integrity and UPSC values: The UPSC GS-4 framework grounds public service in integrity (acting consistently regardless of consequences), impartiality (not allowing political considerations to dictate administrative actions), and dedication to public interest (the interests of all citizens, including petitioners, not just the politically powerful).

Proposed Course of Action: Step 1 — Document the pressure: Record all communications through intermediaries in writing, noting dates and persons involved. This creates a contemporaneous record and ensures evidence is preserved.

Step 2 — Seek written instructions: Request the Minister's office to confirm any directive in writing through the official channel (file noting). Informal pressure rarely survives the demand for written authority — because it creates a paper trail of misconduct.

Step 3 — Continue regular processing: Process anti-defection petitions as per the standard timeline and procedure. Inaction based on informal pressure is constructively unlawful — the absence of a written order to delay means the standard timeline applies.

Step 4 — Escalate if pressure intensifies: If formal adverse action is threatened, escalate to the Chief Secretary and, if necessary, to the Election Commission’s observer mechanism or directly to the Speaker’s Secretariat (since the petition processing would involve the Speaker’s office).

Step 5 — Use whistle-blower mechanisms if necessary: The Whistle Blowers Protection Act, 2014 (though not yet fully notified) and the Lokayukta mechanism provide formal channels. If overt pressure is applied, a formal disclosure protects both the public interest and the officer.

Ethical Principle: An IAS officer’s effectiveness over a career is proportional to the reputation for integrity under pressure. Short-term compliance with political pressure is self-defeating — it creates permanent vulnerability to future pressures and erodes the officer’s institutional credibility. Courage, as Aristotle noted, is the foundational virtue — the one that makes all other virtues possible under adversity.

GS ESSAY PRACTICE

Q26. “An economy that grows but does not make its people happier has measured the wrong things.” Elaborate.

[Essay | 1000–1200 Words]

Essay Outline and Key Arguments:

Introduction — The GDP Orthodoxy and Its Cracks: For most of the 20th century, GDP growth was treated as the master variable of national success. The logic was intuitive: richer societies could afford better healthcare, education, and welfare systems, producing better lives. But the World Happiness Report 2026 ranking India 116th despite 7%+ growth, the US 24th despite the world’s highest GDP per capita, and Costa Rica 4th despite a fraction of G7 income levels, cracks this orthodoxy open.

The Measurement Problem: GDP measures economic throughput — the total value of goods and services produced. It counts cigarette production and cancer treatment equally; it counts environmental destruction as a positive (logging, mining) and ignores unpaid care work (parenting, eldercare, community support). Robert Kennedy observed in 1968 that GNP “measures everything

except that which makes life worthwhile.” The six Gallup indicators of the World Happiness Report — social support, life expectancy, freedom, generosity, and corruption perception, alongside income — are a richer empirical map of what actually constitutes a good life.

India’s Paradox: India’s GDP has grown at 7%+ consecutively for years. Yet: 57% of Indian children under 5 are anaemic (NFHS-5); India ranks 96th on the Corruption Perceptions Index 2024; female LFPR is ~37% — half of comparable economies; NIMHANS estimates 10% of Indians need mental health care but 1% access it; and judicial pendency exceeds 50 million cases. These are not incidental failures alongside growth — they are the texture of daily life for the majority of Indians.

The Nordic Evidence: Finland, Denmark, and Iceland have dominated happiness rankings for a decade. Their secret is not exotic — it is high social trust, universal healthcare, free education, strong rule of law, low corruption, and generous but fiscally sustainable social safety nets. Finland’s Gini coefficient is 0.27; India’s is approximately 0.35. The Nordic model demonstrates that happiness is an outcome of governance choices: how tax revenue is allocated, whether institutions are trusted, whether the most vulnerable are genuinely protected.

The Costa Rica Alternative: Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948 (Article 12 of its Constitution) and redirected military spending to education and universal healthcare (CCSS since 1941). With GDP per capita of ~\$14,000, it outranks all G7 economies in happiness. The Buen Vivir philosophy — well-being rooted in community, relationships, and ecological harmony rather than consumption — encodes a measurement system that GDP cannot capture.

Youth and the Digital Well-being Dimension: The World Happiness Report 2026 introduces a new variable: the social media-happiness nexus. Teenagers using social media 5+ hours/day show significantly lower life satisfaction — and India’s average teen screen time is 6.5 hours. India has 340 million young people aged 10–24. If this generation’s subjective well-being is being systematically undermined by algorithmic design, GDP growth is producing the wrong kind of future.

Beyond GDP — Policy Implications for India: Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH) index is the most cited alternative — measuring psychological well-being, cultural resilience, time use, good governance, ecological diversity, and living standards. New Zealand adopted a “Wellbeing Budget” in 2019, prioritising mental health, child poverty, and housing alongside fiscal targets. Scotland co-founded the Wellbeing Economy Alliance. MOSPI can develop an India-specific National Happiness Index.

Conclusion: GDP growth is necessary but not sufficient. It is a means, not an end. When a country grows its economy without growing its social trust, reducing corruption, or protecting its children’s mental health, it has optimised the instrument at the cost of the goal. The art of governance is measurement: we get what we measure. If India’s policymakers measure only GDP, they will produce only GDP — and the lived reality of most Indians will continue to diverge from the number.

Key concepts to develop in full essay: GDP vs. GNH vs. Gallup methodology; Sen's capability approach; Maslow's hierarchy; India's specific social equity gaps; international models (Nordic, Costa Rica, New Zealand); MOSPI's role; the 116th rank as a policy accountability document, not just a statistical footnote.

Q27. “Strategic autonomy is the luxury of the powerful. For a nation still dependent on external supply chains, it is an aspiration, not a policy.” Critically examine with reference to India’s position in the 2026 West Asia crisis.

[Essay | 1000–1200 Words]

Essay Outline and Key Arguments:

Introduction — Strategic Autonomy as Doctrine: India’s foreign policy discourse has centred on “strategic autonomy” — the ability to pursue national interests without binding alignment to any single power or bloc. This doctrine emerged from Non-Alignment, was tested in the Cold War, and has been reinvented in the multipolar world as a justification for simultaneous engagement with the US (QUAD, iCET), Russia (defence imports, oil), China (trade), Iran (Chabahar), and Israel (defence). The 2026 West Asia crisis — Iran’s closure of the Strait of Hormuz — is the most severe test this doctrine has faced.

The Structural Dependency Problem: India imports 85–88% of crude oil. The Strait of Hormuz carries ~20% of globally traded oil; Qatar supplies ~50% of India’s LNG through Ras Laffan (attacked in March 2026). India’s SPR holds 5.33 MMT — 9.5 days of consumption against the IEA’s 90-day standard. India’s pharmaceutical API imports (~70% from China), EV battery supply (CATL, BYD), and solar module dependence (~80% Chinese) complete the picture. Strategic autonomy exercised against a supply chain that is not autonomous is aspirational, not operational.

The Multi-Vector Relationships: India’s refusal to join Operation Prosperity Guardian (US-led Red Sea coalition) and its public neutrality on the Hormuz closure reflect strategic autonomy in diplomatic posture. But the substance is more constrained: every day of Hormuz closure threatens an energy supply crisis at current reserve levels; Indian exporters with pharmaceutical and electronics supply chain dependencies on China cannot credibly threaten “decoupling”; and QUAD membership creates implicit alignment pressures with the US position on Iran.

The JCPOA Lesson: The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed July 14, 2015 between Iran and P5+1 (USA, UK, France, Russia, China, Germany) + EU, created a multilateral framework within which India could simultaneously maintain Chabahar engagement and avoid US

sanctions. The US unilateral withdrawal (May 2018), Iran’s graduated enrichment to 90% by 2025, and the collapse of JCPOA revival talks eliminated this diplomatic space. India’s strategic autonomy is maximised when multilateral frameworks create positive-sum options — and minimised when bilateral confrontations force binary choices.

The Powerful Nations Exception: The essay prompt’s thesis has empirical support: the US exercises genuine strategic autonomy because it is energy-independent (world’s largest oil producer), the world’s largest economy, holds the global reserve currency, and has technological dominance in the most critical sectors. India’s strategic autonomy is constrained by energy import dependence, technological gaps in semiconductors and advanced manufacturing, and a defence import bill of \$13 billion+ annually — the world’s largest arms importer for years.

Strategic Autonomy as Long-Run Goal: However, the essay prompt’s claim that autonomy is “an aspiration, not a policy” is too pessimistic. Strategic autonomy is a direction, not a destination — and policy can expand or contract the space for its exercise. India’s 500 GW renewable energy target by 2030 reduces West Asia oil exposure proportionately. SPR expansion to 90 days would convert 9.5 days of vulnerability into genuine buffer capacity. API import substitution through PLI-pharma reduces Chinese leverage. Drone manufacturing indigenisation reduces dependence on Israeli EO/IR systems in any future conflict. These are policies that operationalise the autonomy aspiration.

Conclusion: Strategic autonomy is neither luxury nor illusion — it is a function of supply chain independence, technological capability, institutional quality, and accumulated diplomatic credibility. India is rightly investing in all four. The 2026 West Asia crisis reveals where the gaps are largest (energy reserves, LNG diversification) and where India’s diplomatic tradition of neutrality is most valuable (as a potential JCPOA mediator through a BRICS+ initiative). The lesson is not that autonomy is impossible — it is that it must be earned through decisions taken before the crisis arrives.

Key concepts: Non-Alignment 2.0; Multi-alignment; QUAD as strategic hedge not alignment; Chabahar’s exemption from US sanctions as autonomy-preserving instrument; energy security as strategic autonomy prerequisite; India-China-Russia BRICS architecture; the Hormuz crisis as inflection point for SPR policy.

Q28. A government committee is reviewing whether India should adopt a mandatory minimum age of 16 for social media account creation, following Australia’s 2024 model. You are a committee member. Analyse the arguments for and against, and recommend a course of action with detailed reasoning.

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

Introduction: Australia enacted a Social Media Age Limit of 16+ in 2024, requiring platforms to use “reasonable steps” to verify user age or face significant penalties. The UK’s Online Safety Act (2023) banned under-13 access and imposed strict obligations for under-18 users. The World Happiness Report 2026 provides statistical grounding: teenagers using social media 5+ hours/day show significantly reduced life satisfaction; India’s average teen screen time is 6.5 hours/day; India has ~340 million young people aged 10–24.

Arguments For a Minimum Age Restriction:

- (1) Evidence of harm: The WHR 2026 establishes the 5-hour threshold empirically. Jonathan Haidt’s “The Anxious Generation” (2024) documents the neurological basis for adolescent vulnerability to algorithmic content — the prefrontal cortex (responsible for impulse control and risk assessment) is not fully developed until age 25, making teens structurally more susceptible to engineered engagement addiction.
- (2) *Parens patriae*: The state has a constitutional and legal duty to protect minors from exploitation. Article 21’s expanded scope, Article 15(3), and India’s ratification of UNCRC (1992) collectively require the state to act proactively against proven harm to children.
- (3) Content moderation failure: India’s non-English social media content receives significantly less moderation — platforms invest disproportionately in English-language safety enforcement. A minimum age restriction reduces exposure before content can cause harm.

Arguments Against:

- (1) Enforcement feasibility: India lacks a centralised digital identity verification system that is both mandatory for minors and privacy-preserving. Aadhaar-linked age verification raises significant data security and privacy concerns under the DPDP Act, 2023.
- (2) Digital divide effects: An age restriction enforced through biometric or document verification disadvantages children without access to formal identity documents — typically the most marginalised. Affluent urban teens will bypass restrictions easily; rural first-generation internet users will be excluded formally.
- (3) Information rights: Social media is increasingly a primary news and educational information source. A 16+ restriction may deny younger users legitimate informational access.

Recommendation: A blanket 16+ age restriction is enforceable in Australia (high digital ID penetration) but premature in India given verification infrastructure limitations. The committee should instead recommend a phased approach: (1) Immediately mandate algorithmic chronological feed as the default for all users declared as under-18, with opt-in for algorithmic personalisation with parental notification — this constrains harm without requiring identity verification; (2) Require platforms to implement screen-time transparency tools (daily usage reports, parental access APIs) by law, with Ofcom-equivalent NCPDR digital wing enforcement; (3) Commission an India-specific study

on age verification technologies (mobile number-based, operator-mediated) over 24 months, with legislation to follow based on findings; (4) Enact the Children's Online Safety provisions of a proposed Digital India Act immediately, including bans on addictive design features (infinite scroll, autoplay, variable reward notifications) for users under 18, which can be implemented without age verification.

Ethical Reasoning: The committee's recommendation must be grounded in proportionality — the least restrictive intervention that achieves the protective objective. A blanket age ban is disproportionate given enforcement limitations and access rights trade-offs. Design-level mandates achieve equivalent harm reduction through structural change rather than access prohibition — and are enforceable through NFRA-style periodic audits of platform compliance with design standards.

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