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The Loophole Is the Policy: How Accounting Rules Hollow Out the Draft CAFE-III Norms

 **DOWN TO EARTH**

6 August 2026

ENVIRONMENT**SCIENCE & TECH****GS3**

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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GS3



INTERVIEW ANGLE

"A regulation announces a 31 per cent cut in emissions, and independent analysts calculate that the real-world cut will be about 14 per cent. Nobody has lied. Where did the difference come from, and what does that tell you about how you should read any regulatory target?"

Source: [Original editorial](#)
[Down to Earth](#)
 Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

The target is written in the headline. The stringency is written in the annexure, and the annexure is where the cut disappears.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Vehicular emissions usually enter a GS3 answer as a single line about Bharat Stage VI. CAFE norms are a different instrument entirely, and the distinction is examinable: BS-VI regulates **pollutants** per vehicle (particulate matter, oxides of nitrogen), while CAFE regulates **carbon dioxide and fuel consumption** across a manufacturer's **fleet**. One is a health standard applied to every car; the other is a climate and energy-security standard applied to an average.

More valuable than the facts is the method. This editorial is a clean worked example of how a policy can be tightened and weakened in the same document, and the technique of reading past the headline to the compliance rules transfers to forest cover definitions, poverty lines, renewable energy targets and **fiscal deficit** arithmetic alike.

The consultation window on the draft closed on **6 August 2026**, the day this piece was published, which is why the argument was made when it was.

GS Paper 3: Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, **environmental impact assessment**; infrastructure and energy; awareness in the field of science and technology; indigenisation of technology.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
CAFE	Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency, a fleet-average limit on carbon dioxide emissions and fuel consumption across all passenger vehicles a manufacturer sells in a year	Students assume it is a per-model cap; it is not, and the whole argument depends on that
Fleet-average vs per-model standard	A fleet standard judges the sales-weighted average; a per-model standard judges each vehicle	Explains why product mix, sales volumes and weighting rules decide compliance
Super-credit	A multiplier that makes one low-emission vehicle count as more than one vehicle in the fleet average	The core dilution mechanism; BEV 3.0, PHEV 2.5, strong hybrid 1.6
Carbon-neutrality factor (CNF)	An administrative percentage discount applied to reported emissions of certain fuels, on the assumption that their carbon was recently absorbed from the atmosphere	Reduces reported, not emitted, carbon dioxide; a favourite of examiners testing conceptual precision
Weight-based limit curve	A formula that sets a heavier vehicle a more permissive individual target, pivoting around an industry reference weight	A flatter slope favours heavy vehicles and undercuts downsizing
Off-cycle credits	Credits for efficiency technologies whose benefit does not show up in the laboratory test cycle	Capped at 9.0 gCO ₂ /km in the draft; a further deduction from measured performance
MIDC vs WLTP	Modified Indian Drive Cycle, the current Indian test procedure, versus the World Harmonised Light Vehicles Test Procedure used internationally	WLTP is closer to real-world driving; the migration date has not been notified

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

CAFE norms in India are notified under the **Energy Conservation Act, 2001**, and administered by the **Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE)** under the **Ministry of Power**. This matters constitutionally and administratively: emission standards for pollutants sit with the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways and the environment ministry, but fuel efficiency is treated as an energy-conservation subject, which is why the Ministry of Power is the issuing authority.

The rationale is threefold: cutting oil import dependence, reducing carbon dioxide emissions from a rapidly motorising economy, and pushing manufacturers toward efficient powertrains.

PHASE	PERIOD	FLEET-AVERAGE CO ₂ LIMIT
CAFE-I	2017 to 2022	130 g/km
CAFE-II	2022 to 2027	113 g/km
CAFE-III (draft)	FY2027-28 to FY2031-32	94.76 g/km in FY2027-28, tightening to 78.90 g/km by FY2031-32
CAFE-IV (draft, indicative)	2032 onward	around 70 g/km

The draft CAFE-III document was released on **16 July 2026** with stakeholder comments invited until **6 August 2026**, and the norms are proposed to take effect from **1 April 2027**. The fuel-consumption equivalents in the draft run from **3.996 litres per 100 km** in FY2027-28 to about **3.327 litres per 100 km** in FY2031-32.

An earlier consultation draft of September 2025 had proposed a **concession** of about 3 gCO₂/km for petrol cars under 909 kg kerb weight, under four metres in length and below 1200 cc. It was widely read as favouring a single dominant manufacturer, was opposed on the ground that rewarding lighter cars would work against crash safety in a Bharat NCAP era, and was reportedly revised out. The weight question then reappeared in a subtler form, as the reference weight and slope of the limit curve itself.

THE ANALYSIS

1. A fleet standard is an arithmetic, and the arithmetic is negotiable. Because compliance is judged on a sales-weighted average rather than model by model, every rule that decides how a sale is weighted is a rule about stringency. A regulator who wishes to appear ambitious and act cautiously has a menu: keep the headline target and adjust the weighting. That is what critics say has happened here.

2. Super-credits invert the incentive they were designed to create. A multiplier of 3.0 for a battery electric vehicle means one such sale is entered into the fleet average as three sales of a zero-emission vehicle. The manufacturer's measured average falls sharply on a small volume. The intended effect was to seed an electric vehicle market; the practical effect, once the market exists, is that a token electric portfolio buys permission to keep selling high-emission vehicles. Retaining static multipliers into FY2031-32, rather than **tapering** them, is the specific charge.

3. Carbon-neutrality factors substitute assumption for measurement. An 8 per cent discount for E20 to E30 petrol, 22.3 per cent for flex-fuel ethanol vehicles and 5 per cent for compressed natural gas are applied to reported emissions on the reasoning that biogenic carbon was recently absorbed from the atmosphere. The reasoning is not baseless, but it is a full life-cycle claim being applied at the tailpipe, and it ignores the land, water and fertiliser intensity of ethanol **feedstock**. Whatever the merits, the atmosphere responds to emitted carbon dioxide, not to reported carbon dioxide.

4. The weight curve is the quietest and possibly the largest lever. Indexing targets to vehicle mass has a defensible logic: a seven-seat vehicle cannot be held to the same absolute limit as a hatchback. But two adjustments between the September 2025 and July 2026 drafts, raising the industry reference weight from **1,170 kg to 1,229 kg** and flattening the target slope, both move permitted emissions upward for heavy vehicles. With utility vehicles at roughly **65 per cent of passenger vehicle sales in FY26**, this is not a marginal adjustment. It removes the regulatory pressure to downsize in exactly the segment where downsizing would matter most.

5. Off-cycle credits and a buyout complete the picture. Up to **9.0 gCO₂/km** may be claimed through approved technologies whose benefits do not appear in the test cycle. Separately, the draft contemplates a mechanism under which a non-compliant manufacturer may purchase credits at an indicated **Rs 2,500 to Rs 4,500 per gCO₂/km**, against a **statutory** penalty of the order of **Rs 5,000 per gCO₂/km**. Pricing a compliance instrument below the penalty for non-compliance is a design decision with a predictable consequence: rational firms buy the cheaper option, and the standard becomes a tariff.

6. The test is the arithmetic of ambition. The claim that matters is quantitative. On the Centre for Science and Environment analysis, the combined effect of these provisions is that a manufacturer can reach full compliance with an electric vehicle sales share of only about **8 per cent by FY2031-32**, and that the real-world emission reduction falls to roughly **13.8 per cent** against a headline tightening of about 31 per cent. India's stated national ambition is **30 per cent electric vehicle penetration by 2030**. A fuel-efficiency regulation that can be satisfied at a quarter of that share is not merely neutral toward the transition; it removes the regulatory reason to accelerate it.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

CAFE = Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency; notified under the Energy Conservation Act, 2001; administered by the Bureau of Energy Efficiency (BEE), Ministry of Power

Applies to passenger vehicles of gross vehicle weight below 3,500 kg, across petrol, diesel, LPG, CNG, hybrid and electric

CAFE-I (2017 to 2022): 130 gCO₂/km · CAFE-II (2022 to 2027): 113 gCO₂/km

Draft CAFE-III: 94.76 gCO₂/km in FY2027-28 tightening to 78.90 gCO₂/km in FY2031-32, effective from 1 April 2027; draft released 16 July 2026, comments closed 6 August 2026

Fuel-consumption equivalents: 3.996 litres/100 km to about 3.327 litres/100 km

Super-credit multipliers: battery electric and range-extended electric 3.0, plug-in hybrid 2.5, strong hybrid 1.6 (reduced from 2.0), flex-fuel 1.1 (reduced from 1.5)

Carbon-neutrality factors: E20 to E30 petrol 8 per cent, flex-fuel ethanol 22.3 per cent, CNG 5 per cent

Industry reference weight raised from 1,170 kg (September 2025 draft) to 1,229 kg (July 2026 draft); target slope flattened

Off-cycle technology credits capped at 9.0 gCO₂/km

Test cycle: Modified Indian Drive Cycle (MIDC) at present; migration to WLTP referenced but the compliance date is not notified

Utility vehicles were about 65 per cent of Indian passenger vehicle sales in FY26 (SIAM)

European Union comparator: a mass-indexed limit curve with a fleet target of 93.6 gCO₂/km (WLTP) for 2025 to 2029 and a 100 per cent reduction, that is zero tailpipe carbon dioxide, from 2035 under Regulation (EU) 2023/851

Author: Anumita Roychowdhury of the Centre for Science and Environment, writing in Down To Earth, 6 August 2026

WATCH THE TRAP: DO NOT WRITE THAT CAFE-III SETS A TARGET OF 70 G/KM. THAT FIGURE BELONGS TO THE INDICATIVE CAFE-IV PHASE. CAFE-III RUNS FROM 94.76 TO 78.90 GCO₂/KM. EQUALLY, DO NOT CONFUSE CAFE WITH BHARAT STAGE VI: BS-VI IS A PER-VEHICLE POLLUTANT STANDARD UNDER MOTOR VEHICLE RULES, CAFE IS A FLEET-AVERAGE CARBON DIOXIDE AND FUEL CONSUMPTION STANDARD UNDER THE ENERGY CONSERVATION ACT. AND NOTE THAT SUPER-CREDITS ARE NOT SUBSIDIES, THEY ARE ACCOUNTING MULTIPLIERS, SO THEY COST THE EXCHEQUER NOTHING AND COST THE ATMOSPHERE A GREAT DEAL.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR the flexibilities. India is not Europe. Per capita vehicle ownership is low, personal mobility is still aspirational, and a regulation that raises the price of an entry-level car suppresses a legitimate welfare gain. Charging infrastructure and battery supply chains are immature, so a standard calibrated to a mature electric

vehicle market would simply be missed rather than met, producing penalties instead of cleaner cars. Super-credits were designed precisely to bridge that gap. Carbon-neutrality factors are internally consistent with a national policy that mandates E20 blending, and it would be incoherent for the state to require ethanol blending and then refuse to recognise it. A weight-indexed curve is standard international practice, including in the European Union. Predictable, gradual tightening keeps the industry inside the process rather than litigating outside it.

Argument AGAINST. Every one of those defences is an argument for a **transition**, and a transition requires a sunset. What the draft does instead is keep static multipliers to FY2031-32, expand off-cycle credits, raise the reference weight and flatten the slope in the same revision that claims to tighten the standard. The cumulative effect is measurable and it is large: an 8 per cent electric vehicle share suffices for compliance, and the real-world cut collapses from about 31 per cent to about 14 per cent. Meanwhile the weight curve subsidises the fastest-growing and least efficient segment in a market where utility vehicles are already two of every three cars sold. A buyout priced below the statutory penalty tells manufacturers, in the plainest possible terms, that non-compliance is a budget line rather than a breach.

Balanced verdict. Flexibility mechanisms in a fleet standard are not a scandal; they are how such standards are made politically survivable everywhere, including in the European Union. The serious objection is not that they exist but that they are static, uncapped in aggregate effect, and applied simultaneously with a weight-curve adjustment that pushes in the same direction. The correct design is a tapering schedule announced in advance, an aggregate cap on credits any single manufacturer may claim, neutrality factors grounded in measured life-cycle evidence and revised periodically, a steeper rather than flatter weight curve, and publication of the modelled real-world trajectory alongside the headline target. None of that requires abandoning gradualism. It requires only that the announced ambition and the achievable outcome be allowed to face each other in public.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern is: **the target sets the headline, the accounting sets the outcome.**

Whenever a regulator announces a numerical target, three questions follow before you accept the number.

What is the unit of compliance? A standard applied to an average behaves nothing like a standard applied to each item. Averages can be met by composition changes rather than by improvement, and the weighting rules decide everything.

What deductions are permitted before the measurement is compared to the target? Multipliers, discount factors, banking, trading, carry-forward and technology credits all sit between the measured quantity and the compared quantity. Each is individually reasonable; their product is often decisive.

What happens on failure, and what does that cost relative to compliance? If the price of non-compliance is set below the cost of compliance, the regulation has priced itself out of effect.

Apply the same three questions to renewable purchase obligations, to fiscal deficit targets that permit **off-budget borrowing**, to forest-cover targets that count plantations as forest, and to carbon-neutrality pledges that lean on offsets. The structure recurs exactly.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

THE HEADLINE

CAFE-II: 113 gCO₂/km → CAFE-III: 78.90 gCO₂/km by FY2031-32
(a tightening of about 31%)

THE ACCOUNTING LAYER (where the cut leaks out)

Measured fleet CO₂

|
 | x SUPER-CREDITS → BEV 3.0 | PHEV 2.5 | Strong hybrid 1.6
 | (a few clean sales outweigh many dirty ones)
 |
 | minus CARBON-NEUTRALITY → E20-E30: -8% | Flex-fuel: -22.3% | CNG: -5%
 | FACTORS (discount by assumption, not measurement)
 |
 | minus OFF-CYCLE CREDITS → up to 9.0 gCO₂/km
 |
 | compared against a WEIGHT-INDEXED TARGET
 | reference weight 1,170 kg → 1,229 kg
 | slope FLATTENED
 | (heavier car = more permissive target = SUVs rewarded,
 | in a market that is already 65% utility vehicles)



AND IF STILL SHORT: buy credits at Rs 2,500-4,500 per gCO₂/km
(statutory penalty is about Rs 5,000 per gCO₂/km)

THE OUTCOME

Real-world cut falls to about 14% Compliance needs only ~8% EV share
National ambition: 30% by 2030



LEVER: taper the multipliers, cap total credits, steepen the weight curve, base CNFs on measured life-cycle data, notify the WLTP date, publish the real-world trajectory

TAKEAWAY BOX

A fleet emission standard is not tightened by lowering the target. It is tightened by refusing to lower the passing grade.

*CAFE notified under the **Energy Conservation Act, 2001**, administered by **BEE, Ministry of Power**; CAFE-I **130 g/km** (2017-22), CAFE-II **113 g/km** (2022-27), draft CAFE-III **94.76 to 78.90 g/km** (FY2027-28 to FY2031-32) effective **1 April 2027**; draft released **16 July 2026**; super-credits BEV **3.0**, PHEV **2.5**, strong hybrid **1.6**; CNF E20-E30 **8 per cent**, flex-fuel ethanol **22.3 per cent**, CNG **5 per cent**; off-cycle credit cap **9.0 gCO₂/km**; reference weight **1,170 kg to 1,229 kg**; MIDC to WLTP migration undated; utility vehicles about **65 per cent** of PV sales in FY26; EU fleet target **93.6 g/km (WLTP) 2025-2029** and **zero tailpipe CO₂ from 2035**.*

a technically accurate regulation whose annexures ensure a far smaller effect than its headline implies has told no lie. Is there an ethical obligation on a regulator to disclose the expected real-world outcome of a rule, not merely its stated target? Consider this against the administrative values of transparency, non-arbitrariness and the public trust doctrine, and against the reality that the affected public here, breathing urban air, is not represented in the consultation while the regulated industry is.

UPSC has examined vehicular emission standards and the BS-VI transition, the relationship between energy security and import dependence, and the design of India's electric mobility policy including FAME and the National Electric Mobility Mission Plan. This editorial gives you the current regulatory instrument and, more usefully, a critique of it that is quantitative rather than rhetorical.

"The effectiveness of an environmental standard is determined less by its stated target than by its compliance accounting." Examine this statement in the light of India's draft CAFE-III norms, and suggest design reforms.

Sources: *Down To Earth, Bureau of Energy Efficiency, Ministry of Power, SIAM*

Source: The Loophole Is the Policy: How Accounting Rules Hollow Out the Draft CAFE-III Norms — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

• KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

The draft CAFE-III norms released by the Ministry of Power in July 2026 tighten the fleet-average carbon dioxide target from 113 grams per kilometre under CAFE-II to 94.76 g/km in FY2027-28 and 78.90 g/km by FY2031-32, but the accompanying accounting rules, retained super-credit multipliers, generous carbon-neutrality factors, a heavier industry reference weight with a flattened target slope, expanded off-cycle credits and a cash buyout for non-compliance, together mean that a manufacturer can achieve full compliance with an electric vehicle sales share of roughly 8 per cent, against a national ambition of 30 per cent by 2030, converting a stringent-looking standard into a paper compliance exercise.



SUPPORTING

- CAFE is a fleet-average standard, not a per-model standard, so what matters is not how clean any single car is but how the fleet average is computed. Every multiplier, discount factor and weight adjustment enters that computation, and each of them lowers the passing grade without changing the headline number.
- Super-credits let one low-emission vehicle count as several vehicles in the fleet average: 3.0 for a battery electric or range-extended electric vehicle, 2.5 for a plug-in hybrid, 1.6 for a strong hybrid. A manufacturer therefore meets the target by selling a small number of electric vehicles while continuing to sell a large number of high-emission ones, which is the opposite of what a fleet standard is meant to do.
- Carbon-neutrality factors discount tailpipe emissions by assumption rather than by measurement: 8 per cent for E20 to E30 petrol, 22.3 per cent for flex-fuel ethanol vehicles and 5 per cent for compressed natural gas. These are administrative deductions applied to a measured quantity, and they reduce reported emissions without reducing emitted emissions.
- Raising the industry reference weight from 1,170 kg in the September 2025 consultation draft to 1,229 kg in the July 2026 draft, and flattening the target slope, both raise the permitted emissions of heavier vehicles. In a market where utility vehicles reached about 65 per cent of passenger vehicle sales in FY26, a weight-indexed curve rewards precisely the segment driving fuel consumption upward.



COUNTER

The industry case for these flexibilities is not frivolous. A fleet standard that ignores vehicle weight punishes manufacturers whose product mix serves a genuine market rather than a

regulatory preference, and a pure per-model standard would raise the price of entry-level cars in a price-sensitive market where personal mobility is still aspirational.

Super-credits were designed as transitional incentives to seed an electric vehicle market that had no charging infrastructure, and carbon-neutrality factors follow logically from a national ethanol blending policy that the same government mandates: it is incoherent to require E20 blending and then refuse to recognise it in emission accounting. Withdrawing the flexibilities abruptly, before charging networks and battery supply chains mature, risks stranding investment and hardening industry opposition to the next phase.

The honest counter is that the flexibilities should sunset, not that they should never have existed.



WAY FORWARD

Make the accounting as transparent as the target. Publish the modelled real-world emission trajectory alongside the headline number, so the gap between the two is visible before notification rather than after.

Taper super-credit multipliers on a pre-announced schedule and cap the total credit any manufacturer may claim, which is the design the European Union adopted. Base carbon-neutrality factors on measured well-to-wheel life-cycle evidence and revise them periodically instead of fixing them administratively.

Steepen rather than flatten the weight curve so that heavier vehicles carry a stringency penalty. Notify a firm date for migration from the Modified Indian Drive Cycle to the World Harmonised Light Vehicles Test Procedure.

Finally, reconsider the buyout clause: a mechanism priced below the statutory penalty converts a legal obligation into a purchasable commodity.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

The stringency of an emission standard lies not in its headline target but in its compliance accounting. Critically examine this proposition with reference to India's draft Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency (CAFE-III) norms. (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

An emission standard has two parts: the target, which is announced, and the compliance accounting, which is not. India's draft Corporate Average Fuel Efficiency norms for the third phase, released by the Ministry of Power in July 2026 for the period FY2027-28 to FY2031-32, illustrate how far the two can diverge. The headline tightens the fleet-average carbon dioxide limit from 113 grams per kilometre to 78.90 g/km, a reduction of about 31 per cent, while independent analysis suggests the real-world reduction may be closer to 14 per cent.

BODY

The divergence arises from four accounting devices, each defensible in isolation. First, CAFE is a fleet-average standard: compliance is judged on a sales-weighted average across a manufacturer's portfolio, so the rules that determine how each sale is weighted are decisive. Second, super-credits multiply the weight of low-emission vehicles in that average, 3.0 for battery electric vehicles, 2.5 for plug-in hybrids and 1.6 for strong hybrids, allowing a manufacturer to offset a large volume of high-emission vehicles with a small volume of clean ones. Third, carbon-neutrality factors reduce reported emissions by assumption, 8 per cent for E20 to E30 petrol, 22.3 per cent for flex-fuel ethanol and 5 per cent for compressed natural gas, on the reasoning that the carbon in biofuel was recently absorbed from the atmosphere, a reasoning that is contestable once cultivation, water and land-use effects are counted. Fourth, the target is indexed to vehicle weight through a limit curve whose reference weight was raised from 1,170 kg to 1,229 kg between drafts and whose slope was flattened, so heavier vehicles receive a more permissive individual target. In a market where utility vehicles reached roughly 65 per cent of passenger vehicle sales in FY26, this systematically rewards the segment whose growth is driving fuel consumption. The combined result, on the Centre for Science and Environment analysis, is that full compliance is achievable at an electric vehicle sales share of about 8 per cent by FY2031-32, against a national ambition of 30 per cent by 2030. A proposed buyout allowing manufacturers to purchase paper credits at a price below the statutory penalty completes the picture.

CONCLUSION

The lesson generalises beyond automobiles. A standard is only as strong as the arithmetic that decides who has met it, and that arithmetic is usually settled in technical annexures that attract no political attention. The remedy is procedural rather than ideological: publish the modelled real-world trajectory alongside the headline target, sunset the flexibilities on a pre-announced schedule, ground the neutrality factors in measured life-cycle evidence rather than assumption, and notify a firm date for the shift to the World

Harmonised Light Vehicles Test Procedure. Stringency that exists only in the press release buys neither cleaner air nor energy security.

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

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