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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Incredible India, As Told to Parliament: What the Government's Own Numbers Reveal

 NEW INDIAN EXPRESS

9 August 2026 ·

POLITY ·

GS2

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INTERVIEW ANGLE

"If a government can conduct a flawless nationwide election and a voter-by-voter roll revision, what does it say about state capacity that it cannot fill a sanctioned judge's post or a police vacancy with the same administrative energy?"

✓ Every fact web-verified against primary sources

THE LIFT LINE

The Indian state can count a pothole, a litre of contaminated water, and a vacant judge's chair to the decimal. What it cannot yet do is fill them at the same speed it counts them.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

Most governance answers reach for the same three exhibits, the RTI Act, the Citizens' Charter, e-governance portals, as proof that Indian administration is becoming more accountable. This editorial supplies a harder and more useful exhibit: Parliament's own 2026 written answers, which show that measurement capacity and delivery capacity are two different things, and that a state can be excellent at the first while remaining weak at the second. A strong answer distinguishes what the state can count from what it has actually fixed, and treats the gap between the two as the object of analysis.

GS Paper 2: Government policies and interventions for development in various sectors; issues arising out of design and implementation of policies; role of civil services in a democracy; parliamentary oversight (Question Hour, written and starred/unstarred questions) as an accountability mechanism.

GS Paper 3: Infrastructure (roads, urban development, energy); effects of liberalisation on the economy; Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code and resolution of stressed assets.

CONCEPT	MEANING	WHY IT IS TESTABLE
Flailing state	Lant Pritchett's term for a state whose elite policy-making head issues instructions its field-level implementation limbs do not reliably execute	Directly examinable as a diagnostic framework for Indian administrative failure
Parliamentary Question Hour	The first hour of a sitting, reserved for oral and written questions to ministers, one of Parliament's core oversight tools	The evidentiary basis of this entire editorial; a testable process in polity
AT&C losses	Aggregate Technical and Commercial losses, the share of power generated that utilities fail to bill or collect for	Standard economy/infrastructure term, recurring in Economic Survey questions
Haircut (IBC)	The gap between a creditor's admitted claim and what is actually realised under a resolution plan	Tests understanding of insolvency resolution outcomes, not just process
Sanctioned vs working strength	The approved establishment for a post (judges, police, paramilitary) versus the number actually in position	The precise mechanism by which "vacancy" is measured across sectors

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Parliament's Question Hour and written replies are constitutionally embedded oversight tools: MPs can compel ministries to place specific, dated, numerical answers on the record, answers that then become public documents independent of the government's own messaging. Through 2026, a series of such answers, compiled and read together by columnist Shankkar Aiyar, produced a composite picture of Indian governance that differs sharply from the government's own preferred narrative of "continuous progress."

The picture spans sectors with very different politics attached to them. On urban infrastructure, the government reported the **Smart Cities Mission** as substantially complete, 7,790 of 8,064 projects finished at a cost of Rs 1,56,257 crore as on 31 March 2026, while simultaneously disclosing that 55 National Highway stretches had suffered major structural failure or caving-in since 2014, and that urban flooding remained, in its own telling, a state and local-body responsibility despite the Centre funding and designing the largest urban infrastructure programme in the country.

On justice and security, the government's own data showed 341 of 1,122 sanctioned high court judgeships vacant and roughly 7,310 of 30,868 subordinate court posts unfilled, against a backlog exceeding five crore pending cases; and a police force operating at roughly 154 personnel per lakh population against its own sanctioned norm of about 197, itself below the UN-recommended ratio of 222, with tens of thousands of central paramilitary posts also vacant.

On capital, the **Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016**, once presented as a structural fix for India's bad-debt problem, showed persistent implementation strain in the government's own regulatory data: haircuts on admitted creditor claims around 67% by September 2025, and 78% of resolution cases exceeding the Code's mandated timeline in FY25, the highest share since FY21.

THE ANALYSIS

1. Measurement capacity and delivery capacity are not the same thing, and the government's answers prove it. A state that can report Smart Cities spending to the rupee and highway failures stretch by stretch clearly has the administrative machinery to count precisely. That the same machinery has not closed judicial, police and capital-resolution gaps for years is not a measurement problem, it is a prioritisation problem.

2. The urban flooding answer is constitutionally correct and substantively evasive at once. Urban local bodies and states do carry primary responsibility for drainage and flood management under the Constitution's local self-government scheme. But the Centre also runs and funds the country's largest urban infrastructure programme, which means the constitutional defence, while accurate, does not fully answer why the flagship programme has not delivered flood **resilience** where it was meant to.

3. Judicial vacancies are the sharpest example of a gap within executive control. Judge appointments involve collegium recommendations and government clearance, both processes the state directly influences. A 30% vacancy rate in the high courts and a comparable rate in subordinate courts, sustained over years against a five-crore-plus case backlog, is evidence of an implementation choice, not a resource constraint alone.

4. Policing shows the same pattern with a security dimension. India's sanctioned police strength already falls short of the UN benchmark; that the state additionally under-delivers against its own lower sanctioned norm compounds the problem in exactly the function, law and order, where state capacity is least substitutable by private or market alternatives.

5. The IBC data reveals implementation drag inside a reform designed to fix implementation drag. The IBC exists precisely to make capital resolution faster and more predictable than the pre-2016 regime of the Sick Industrial Companies Act and DRTs. That a majority of cases now exceed the Code's own timeline suggests the reform's institutional capacity, **NCLT** benches, resolution professionals, has not scaled with the caseload.

6. The counter-argument deserves genuine weight. No large federal state fills every sanctioned post or completes every project on schedule; fiscal space, recruitment lead times and genuine state-level bottlenecks are real constraints, and a columnist's data compilation, however well-sourced, can flatten differences between sectors with very different levels of executive control.

7. The election-machinery comparison is the editorial's strongest rhetorical move, and it holds analytically too. The Election Commission's ability to conduct a nationwide poll and a voter-by-voter roll revision demonstrates that when the state treats a task as electorally non-negotiable, it delivers with precision. The implication is not that other gaps are impossible to close, but that they have not yet been made equally non-negotiable.

DATA AND INSTITUTIONS VAULT

PRELIMS-GRADE FACTS:

Smart Cities Mission: 7,790 of 8,064 projects completed, Rs 1,56,257 crore, as on 31 March 2026

National Highway failures: 55 stretches with major structural failure or caving-in reported since 2014 (Kerala, Maharashtra and Bihar among the worst-affected)

High Court judges: sanctioned strength 1,122, working strength 781, vacant 341 (about 30%), as of July 2026

Subordinate court judges: sanctioned strength 30,868, roughly 7,310 vacant (about 24%)

Pending cases nationally: over five crore, per National Judicial Data Grid

Police strength: national average about 154 per lakh population against a sanctioned norm of roughly 197, both below the UN-recommended 222 per lakh

Central Armed Police Forces + Assam Rifles: over 61,000 vacancies against a sanctioned strength of about 10.73 lakh, per a 2026 Ministry of Home Affairs reply to Rajya Sabha

Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016: administered by IBBI and NCLT; roughly 1,194 companies resolved via CIRP by March 2025, creditors realising about Rs 3.89 lakh crore; haircuts on admitted claims around 67% by September 2025; 78% of FY25 cases exceeded the Code's resolution timeline, the highest share since FY21

Samudra Manthan (National Offshore Exploration Scheme): Cabinet-approved outlay of Rs 84,084 crore, targeting reserve accretion of over 600 million metric tonnes of oil equivalent by FY2030-31

"Flailing state": term coined by development economist Lant Pritchett

the exact figure for roads that "caved in" varies across reports depending on whether the underlying Parliament reply covers caving-in alone or "major structural failures" more broadly; do not memorise a single number as gospel, memorise the pattern, that the government's own infrastructure data documents both near-complete flagship schemes and unresolved structural failures in the same reply.

THE DEBATE

Argument FOR reading this as systemic administrative failure. The gaps recur across sectors with very different politics, urban infrastructure, judiciary, policing, capital resolution, and in each case the government's own data, not an opposition claim, is the source. A state able to count precisely but unable to close counted gaps for years is choosing where to apply administrative energy, and that choice is itself the failure the editorial identifies.

Argument AGAINST treating this as proof of a uniquely weak state. Judicial and police vacancies, infrastructure delays and insolvency backlogs exist in most large federal democracies managing comparable populations and caseloads; India's own election machinery shows the state can execute at scale when it prioritises a task, which argues for better prioritisation rather than a verdict of general incapacity. Some of the vacancy figures cited in circulation also carry meaningful date-to-date variation, and treating any single compiled number as final risks overstating precision the underlying data does not support.

Balanced verdict. The editorial's real claim is narrower than "the Indian state has failed"; it is that the state's own data shows selective, not general, incapacity, and that the selection tracks political salience rather than administrative difficulty. The corrective is not a demand for perfection but for the same sustained attention the state already gives to elections to be extended, through binding, publicly tracked timelines, to judicial vacancies, police staffing and insolvency resolution.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS

The transferable pattern: **when an institution can measure a problem precisely but has not fixed it for years, treat that combination itself as the diagnosis, since it rules out "we did not know" as an explanation and leaves only "we did not prioritise" or "we could not execute."**

Most institutional failures are defended with an information excuse, that the problem was not known, not tracked, not visible until now. Parliament's Q&A data removes that excuse for the Indian state across at least four sectors at once: it demonstrates the state already tracks judicial vacancies, police shortfalls, highway failures and IBC delays in granular, dated detail. Once the information excuse is gone, the only remaining explanations are prioritisation (the gap was known but other tasks came first) or capacity (the gap was known but the machinery to close it did not scale). Distinguishing between these two, rather than treating "government failure" as a single undifferentiated category, is what separates a descriptive answer from an analytical one.

This same diagnostic move applies well beyond this editorial: to a state government that tracks scheme beneficiaries precisely but fails to disburse funds on time, to a regulator that publishes detailed compliance data but rarely enforces penalties, or to a company that measures customer complaints exhaustively but does not act on the same complaints repeatedly. In each case, the presence of good data alongside unresolved outcomes is the tell.

DIAGRAM-IN-WORDS

The measurement-delivery gap, sector by sector

SECTOR	MEASURED PRECISELY	REMAINS UNRESOLVED
Urban infra	Smart Cities: 7,790/8,064 done	55 NH stretches failing since 2014
Judiciary	HC: 341 of 1,122 posts vacant	5 crore+ cases pending
Security	Police ~197/lakh sanctioned	actual ~154/lakh vs UN's 222
Capital resolution	IBC: tracked case-by-case	78% of FY25 cases miss deadline

Common pattern: precise measurement, unresolved gap, for years

Rules out: "we did not know"

Leaves only: prioritisation or execution-capacity failure

The state's own counter-example: elections

executed with precision, proof attention is the missing input

The state that tracks 78% of IBC cases missing their deadline and 341 of 1,122 High Court posts lying vacant cannot claim it did not see the gap. It runs nationwide elections with precision every time, so the missing input across these sectors is sustained attention, not capacity.

TAKEAWAY BOX

A state that can count a pothole cannot claim it did not see the pothole. The excuse Parliament's own data removes is ignorance; what remains is a choice about what gets fixed.

Smart Cities Mission completion data (7,790/8,064 projects, Rs 1,56,257 crore); High Court vacancy (341 of 1,122); subordinate court vacancy (~7,310 of 30,868); police strength (~154 per lakh actual vs ~197 sanctioned vs 222 UN-recommended); Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, 2016, administered by IBBI and NCLT; Samudra Manthan offshore exploration scheme (Rs 84,084 crore); Lant Pritchett's "flailing state" concept.

when an institution has the data to know a problem exists but has not acted on it for years, is the ethical failure one of competence or of will, and does the distinction matter for how the failure should be corrected?

UPSC has repeatedly tested state capacity, implementation gaps in flagship schemes, and judicial vacancies as standalone GS2 themes; this editorial supplies the connecting framework, Pritchett's flailing state, that lets an aspirant unify these previously separate topics into a single analytical argument.

"The Indian state's capacity to measure a problem has consistently outpaced its capacity to resolve it." Examine this claim using Parliament's own 2026 data on infrastructure, judicial vacancies, policing and the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code.

Sources: The New Indian Express, Business Standard, PRS Legislative Research, PIB

Source: Incredible India, As Told to Parliament: What the Government's Own Numbers Reveal — Ujiyari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

● KEY ARGUMENTS AT A GLANCE

Parliament's own written answers, not opposition claims or NGO reports, show a state that has the administrative capacity to count precisely what it chooses to count (roads that caved in since 2014, laboratory water samples, high court vacancies to the exact seat) but leaves chronic gaps in implementation, judicial staffing, policing and capital resolution unaddressed for years, which converts Lant Pritchett's diagnosis of the 'flailing state' from an academic metaphor into a documented, self-reported condition.



SUPPORTING

- The data-collection capacity is not in doubt: the government tracks 8,064 Smart Cities projects to the rupee (Rs 1,56,257 crore, 7,790 completed as on March 31, 2026), 55 National Highway stretches that suffered structural failure since 2014, and 2.52 crore water-quality laboratory samples since 2023-24, evidence that measurement is not the constraint.
- The vacancy data is the clearest evidence of an implementation gap: 341 of 1,122 sanctioned high court judgeships and roughly 7,310 of 30,868 subordinate court posts stood vacant as government told Parliament in 2026, against a backlog of over five crore pending cases, and the same pattern repeats in policing, where India's actual strength of about 154 personnel per lakh population trails its own sanctioned norm of roughly 197, itself already below the UN-recommended 222.
- The Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, sold in 2016 as a decisive fix for stressed capital, shows the same implementation drag in the government's own regulatory data: haircuts on admitted creditor claims touched roughly 67% by September 2025, and 78% of resolution cases exceeded the Code's mandated timeline in FY25, the highest share since FY21, meaning capital is being slowed inside the very mechanism built to move it faster.
- The Centre's constitutional defence on urban flooding, that it is a state and local-body subject, is technically correct but incomplete, since the same Centre runs and funds the Smart Cities Mission that is meant to build exactly the drainage and resilience infrastructure flooding requires, which means responsibility is being disclaimed even where funding and design authority sit with Delhi.



COUNTER

A large federal republic administering hundreds of thousands of posts, courts and infrastructure projects across 28 states and eight Union Territories will always show some backlog, and treating any vacancy or delay as proof of state failure ignores genuine

constraints, recruitment lead times for judges and constables, state-level land and labour bottlenecks for infrastructure, and fiscal limits that make simultaneous fixes to policing, judiciary, education and power distribution impossible in any single budget cycle.

**WAY FORWARD**

The remedy the editorial itself points to is procedural rather than fiscal: convert vacancy and delay data that Parliament already extracts through Q&As into standing, publicly tracked dashboards with binding fill-by timelines, the way election rolls are revised booth by booth, so that Parliament's oversight function shifts from periodically extracting numbers to continuously enforcing them, making inattention to a known, counted gap politically costly rather than administratively routine.


MAINS ANSWER FRAMEWORK
QUESTION

Critically examine the concept of the 'flailing state' in the Indian context, using Parliament's own data on infrastructure, judicial vacancies, police staffing and the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code as evidence. What does the persistence of these gaps say about the difference between policy capacity and implementation capacity? (250 words)

INTRODUCTION

Development economist Lant Pritchett described a 'flailing state' as one whose head, its elite policy-making apparatus, issues instructions that its limbs, the field-level implementation machinery, no longer reliably carry out. New Indian Express columnist Shankkar Aiyar's reading of 2026 Parliament Q&As gives this diagnosis a documentary basis: the gaps are not alleged by critics but disclosed by the government's own written replies.

BODY

The evidence spans nearly every sector Parliament touched in 2026. Infrastructure: the Centre disclosed 55 National Highway stretches with major structural failures or caving-in since 2014, even as it reported near-complete Smart Cities Mission execution (7,790 of 8,064 projects, Rs 1,56,257 crore, as on March 31, 2026), showing capacity exists but is unevenly applied.

Judiciary: 341 of 1,122 sanctioned high court judgeships and roughly 7,310 of 30,868 subordinate court posts remained vacant even as pending cases crossed five crore, a gap policy alone cannot explain since recruitment and appointment are within executive and judicial control. Security: India's actual police strength of about 154 per lakh population trails its own sanctioned norm of nearly 197, itself below the UN benchmark of 222, while tens of thousands of central paramilitary posts stayed vacant against a sanctioned strength of over ten lakh.

Capital: under the Insolvency and Bankruptcy Code, a flagship 2016 reform, roughly 78% of resolution cases exceeded the Code's own timeline in FY25 and creditor haircuts touched around 67%, meaning even a mechanism explicitly built to move stressed capital faster is itself now a source of delay. In each case, the government's data-collection apparatus, precise enough to count roads, litres and rupees, coexists with implementation gaps the same government has not closed for years.

CONCLUSION

The pattern across sectors is not evidence that the Indian state lacks capacity; it is evidence that capacity is applied selectively, to what is politically visible or electorally urgent, the Union government's own election machinery being the clearest counter-example of what Indian administration can do when it commits sustained attention. The corrective is not a bigger reform but a narrower one: convert the vacancy, delay and failure data Parliament already extracts through Q&As into standing dashboards with enforceable fill-

by and resolve-by timelines, so that measurement, which the state has already proven it can do well, is finally made to discipline implementation, which it has not.

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