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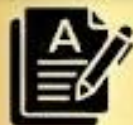
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Israel, the U.S. and a war to build a unipolar West Asia

In February 27, Oman's Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad Al Busaidi, who was mediating talks between the United States and Iran, told an American channel that a deal was within reach. He said Iran had committed not to make a nuclear bomb "ever" and not to stockpile nuclear material. The next day, the U.S. and Israel began bombing Iran, killing its Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and dozens of senior Iranian officials. Israel described the campaign as a "pre-emptive" war to remove "existential threats", while U.S. President Donald Trump urged Iranians to "take over your government," adding, "This will probably be your only chance for generations." It was clear from the way the initial decapitation strike was carried out and the remarks issued by Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu, that what the invading bloc wanted was regime change.

The Iranian government, despite the initial blow, has reorganised itself and is hitting back. West Asia, as a result of the actions of Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu, is witnessing one of its most perilous moments in the post-Second World War era – a conflict whose outcome will define the region for the decades to come.

After the 12-day war in June 2025, Mr. Trump announced that he had "obliterated" Iran's nuclear programme. Mr. Netanyahu declared a "historic victory". So, why did they start another war eight months later? Israel has always wanted regime change in Iran. For Tel Aviv, Iran is the only revisionist country that challenges its supremacy in West Asia. Arab countries, many of them hosting American bases or dependent on American aid, have either established direct ties with Israel or accepted to live with Israel's militarism and its occupation of Palestinian, Syrian and Lebanese territories. But Israel sees Iran, a country of 90 million people with enormous economic potential and an advanced missile programme, as an existential threat.

When then U.S. President Barack Obama signed the nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, his focus was on addressing Iran's nuclear programme. He believed that a non-nuclear Iran would be good news for West Asia, where a "cold peace" between Tehran and its adversaries would be established. But, Israel had a different understanding. Its problem was not merely Iran's nuclear programme but its conventional might. That is why Mr. Netanyahu opposed the 2015 deal with all his might.

Geopolitics of Iran

In recent times, when the U.S. and Iran were engaged in talks, Israel had repeatedly called for a deal to include Iran's missile programme and its support for non-state militias in the region. What Mr. Netanyahu wanted was a total disarmament



Stanley Johny

of Iran – a demand no Iranian leader, except someone installed by Mr. Netanyahu in Tehran – can accept. A Tehran-based security analyst told *The Hindu* on February 24 in unmistakable terms that Iran would not sign a deal with the U.S. on its nuclear programme. He said, "If Iran agrees to surrender its ballistic missiles today to avert war with the U.S., Israel will bomb us anyway a few months down the line. So, the question Iranians ask themselves is why should they give up their last deterrent?"

The only way Israel could meet all its objectives was to bring about a regime change. Regime change would also be geopolitically rewarding. Saddam Hussein's Iraq is gone. Qadhafi's Libya is gone. Bashar al-Assad is in Moscow while a former jihadist is running Damascus. Hezbollah has been weakened. Hamas has been pushed to the ruins of Gaza. The Arab countries are unlikely to do anything other than issue condemnation letters. Iran is the last revisionist power standing. If the Islamic Republic is taken down, the regional balance of power would shift, setting the stage for a unipolar West Asia, with Israel, fully backed by Washington, at its centre. This is more about geopolitics and Israel's own interests than about giving freedom to the Iranians.

Decapitation strategy

But there is one problem. Iran, ring fenced by tall mountains and roughly 70 times bigger than Israel, is a geographical fortress. Israel alone cannot bring about regime change. Typically, regime changes are achieved through a ground invasion – even then it is not guaranteed. Israel pulverised Gaza, a strip of land sandwiched between Israel and the Mediterranean Sea for 24 months and killed at least 70,000 of its people, but has still not unseated Hamas. No country, including the U.S., wants to send ground troops to Iran. If an Iraq-style ground invasion is not possible, the other options are Libya or Syria. But in Libya and Syria, there was armed opposition to the regime that led the battle on the ground.

In Libya, it took months-long bombing by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization to topple Qadhafi's regime. In Syria, which fell into a disastrous civil war in 2012, it took 12 years for Mr. Assad to fall. In Iran, there is no organised armed opposition. So, what Israel tried to do in June 2025 and February 2026 was to carry out decapitation strikes – give a blow so heavy that the regime would not stand up and fight back.

In June 2025, the Iranians recovered from the initial shock fast and began hitting back. Mr. Netanyahu had said that regime change would be a desirable outcome of the war, but he had to ask for American help and then agree to a ceasefire after 12 days. In February 2026, backed by a more willing U.S., Israel has launched a much broader

and more ambitious strike, killing Khamenei. Mr. Trump and Mr. Netanyahu want a quick, decisive victory. But if they thought the assassination of the "leader of the revolution" would lead to the crowds jamming the streets and taking over the institutions bringing down the regime, that has not happened – not as yet. Iran seems prepared for this moment, and is hitting back at American bases across the region, and Israel, widening the war.

A regional war

During the 2025-June war, Iran's response was mainly focused on Israel. It launched a token strike on the U.S. base in Qatar following an American attack on its nuclear facilities and subsequently agreed to a ceasefire. But this time, Iran is hitting American bases across the Persian Gulf kingdoms and Israel. Iranian missiles and drones have targeted a military base in Cyprus and a French base in the United Arab Emirates. Iran has also announced the shutting of the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow chokepoint connecting the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea through which a third of the global energy supply flows. This is a risky gamble.

In two days, Iran has regionalised the war. This is the all-out war almost all critics of Mr. Trump's Iran policy had warned him about. The supporters of the war in Washington had said that Iran was bluffing. But it was not. If Iran continues to attack U.S. bases (some of them were hit hard) in the Gulf monarchies, these countries would be pressed to join the war. And if they do, the cross-Gulf conflict could have disastrous implications for energy trade, severely impacting the global economy. A prolonged conflict would also mean that the missile defence shields that are currently protecting these bases, Israel and other American assets in the region, would be exhausted.

This means that the clock is ticking fast for both sides. It is unclear whether Mr. Trump was prepared for a scenario in which the Iranian state survives the assault. Washington and Tel Aviv aim to destroy Iran's ballistic missile stockpiles and its launchers to blunt its firepower. But if Iran retains its strike capability and continues to widen the war, the pressure on Mr. Trump would intensify.

To be sure, there is a vast gap between the conventional strength of the U.S.-Israel alliance and that of Iran. Yet, conventional superiority alone does not guarantee victory, which depends on clearly defined and attainable objectives. If Mr. Trump seeks a swift and decisive triumph, Iran's doctrine is built precisely to deny it. Mr. Trump wants to kill the guerrilla because, as Henry Kissinger would agree, the guerrilla wins if he does not lose.

This is a perilous conflict that is more about geopolitics and shaped by Tel Aviv's own interests

- Key Terms and Explanations
- **Unipolarity:** A global or regional order dominated by a single power. In this context, it refers to Israel (backed by the U.S.) seeking to establish itself as the central hegemonic power in West Asia.
- **Regime Change:** The deliberate attempt by external forces to topple a government and install a new one aligned with their interests. Examples include Iraq (2003, U.S. invasion) and Libya (2011, NATO involvement).
- **Decapitation Strategy:** A military strategy aimed at eliminating top leadership to weaken or collapse an adversarial state. It assumes that leadership removal leads to systemic paralysis — which history often disproves.
- **Revisionist Power:** A state that seeks to alter the existing balance of power or status quo in international relations. Iran fits this label in West Asia due to its challenge to U.S.-Israeli dominance.
- **Strait of Hormuz:** A critical chokepoint linking the Persian Gulf to the Arabian Sea. One-third of global oil trade passes through it, making it geopolitically sensitive.
- **Deterrence Doctrine:** A defense policy that discourages attack by threatening severe retaliation. Iran's missile capability acts as a deterrent against external aggression.
- **Geopolitical Fortress:** Refers to Iran's strong defensive geographical features (mountainous terrain, extensive territory) making invasion difficult.
- **Pre-emptive War:** An offensive war initiated to prevent an anticipated future attack. It raises controversy under international law about "anticipatory self-defense."



- Main Arguments and Substantive Parts

- **Core Thesis:**

The central idea is that the recent conflict is not merely about nuclear disarmament or counter-terrorism — it reflects a strategic design by the U.S. and Israel to restructure West Asian geopolitics toward a unipolar order with Israel at its center.

- **Key Themes:**

- Attempts at regime change in Iran are motivated by geopolitical ambition rather than peace-building.
- Israel views Iran as the last standing challenge to its regional supremacy.
- U.S. policy vacillates between diplomacy (Obama Doctrine) and militarized dominance (Trump Doctrine).
- Iran's retaliatory capacity and control over energy chokepoints raise global economic risks.
- A conventional military advantage does not guarantee political victory — echoing patterns from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria.

- **Counterarguments & Realism:**

- Regime change efforts often underestimate internal resilience, nationalism, and insurgency dynamics.
- Over-reliance on aerial strikes cannot ensure political transformation.
- The conflict risks destabilizing energy markets and igniting a wider regional war.

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- Historical Evolution of the Issue
 - **1953**: CIA-assisted coup replacing Mossadegh with Shah Pahlavi; deepening U.S.-Iran mistrust.
 - **1979**: Islamic Revolution establishes Iran as anti-Western theocracy.
 - **1980–88**: Iran-Iraq War drains Iran but fails to topple its regime.
 - **1990s–2000s**: U.S. strategic realignment after the Cold War, leading to Gulf Wars and expanded presence.
 - **2015**: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) signed under Obama — Iran agrees to nuclear limits.
 - **2018**: Trump withdraws from JCPOA, reinstating sanctions.
 - **2020s onward**: Growing Israel-Iran proxy confrontations; normalization of Israel-Arab ties through the Abraham Accords.
 - **Present context**: Renewed U.S.-Israeli aggression signals an effort to permanently weaken Iran and re-engineer the regional power structure.
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The Geopolitical Volatility of West Asia: The Quest for a Unipolar Order

THE STRATEGIC LEXICON

Unipolarity vs. Revisionist Power
Regional order dominated by the Israel/U.S. alliance, with Iran acting as a Revisionist Power seeking to change this status quo.

Decapitation Strike
A military strategy aimed at removing an adversary's leadership to cause a total collapse of command-and-control.

Asymmetric Warfare & A2/AD
Weaker forces use unconventional tactics like drones and proxies to make entry costly for stronger militaries.

The Chokepoint: Strait of Hormuz
A narrow passage through which 20-30% of global oil flows; its closure acts as an economic poison pill.



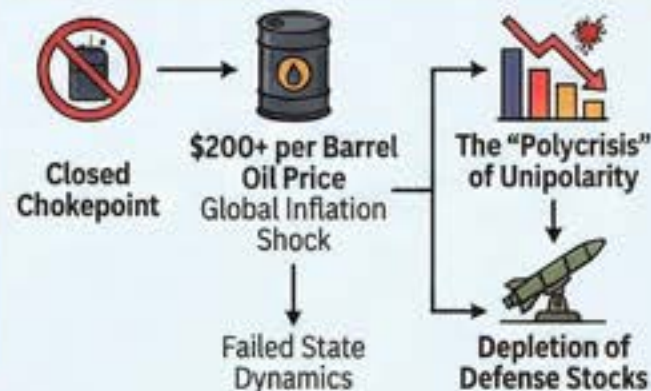
THE GEOPOLITICAL CHESSBOARD (LOGIC & STRATEGY)

The Deterrence Trap
Iran's Missile Deterrent:
Surrender = Vulnerability

Realism vs. The Guerrilla Principle
US/Israel Dominance vs. Iran's Survival Strategy

Failure of Decapitation
IRGC Institutional Resilience

GLOBAL AND NATIONAL CONSEQUENCES



ESCALATION LADDER



THE INDIA FACTOR & UPSC RELEVANCE

Energy and Diaspora Security
60% Oil from West Asia
8M+ Indian Expats

Strategic Projects at Risk
Chabahar Port & INSTC Threatened

Syllabus Linkage:
GS Papers II & III
International Relations & Economy

Regional Security Architecture
Helsinki Accords for West Asia

Chokepoint Stabilization
Multinational Maritime Deconfliction

Strategic Autonomy for India
Diversify Energy, Strategic Reserves, Active Diplomacy

- **Logical and philosophical base**
- **A. Realism (power politics)**
- States seek survival; power and deterrence matter more than declared intentions.
- **Assumption:** A rival's capabilities today become existential tomorrow—so reduction is necessary.
- **B. Security dilemma**
- One side's "defensive" missile shield is seen as "offensive" coercion by the other.
- Action–reaction spirals make mistrust self-fulfilling.
- **C. Coercion theory vs. resilience theory**
- **Coercion logic:** shock + pain leads to compliance or collapse.
- **Resilience logic:** societies under attack often rally; systems adapt via redundancies.
- **D. Just war ideas (often contested in practice)**
- **Jus ad bellum:** right to war (self-defence, necessity, proportionality).
- **Jus in bello:** conduct in war (distinction, proportionality).
- In reality, strategic aims often stretch legal/ethical claims.
- **E. "Ends vs means" dilemma (ethics)**
- Even if the stated end is stability or freedom, the means (civilian harm, sovereignty violation) raise moral hazards and long-term backlash.



- **Multidimensional analysis**

- **Social**

- War stress: displacement, fear, polarisation; diaspora anxieties.
- Communal tensions can rise regionally, including hate narratives online.
- Youth bulge + unemployment in conflict-affected zones creates recruitment pools for militias.

- **Political**

- Legitimacy becomes central: governments justify security choices amid inflation and grief.
- Smaller states hedge: public neutrality, private security alignment.
- Domestic politics in great powers can drive foreign policy swings, hurting diplomacy credibility.

- **Legal**

- Key questions: self-defence, imminence, proportionality, sovereignty, responsibility to protect (often contested).
- Targeted killings and attacks on leaders raise debates about assassination norms and state practice.

- **Ethical**

- Means–ends tension: “freedom” narratives vs. human costs.
- Collective punishment concerns when civilian infrastructure is hit.
- Moral injury and long-term societal damage rarely figure in short-term strategy.


- **International**

- Polarisation in multilateral forums; competing narratives (security vs aggression).
- Spillover into Red Sea, Gulf, Levant; impacts on diaspora and global security.
- Middle powers (including India) face evacuation, energy security, and neutrality dilemmas.

- **Economic**

- Oil/gas price spikes; inflation transmission; shipping insurance jumps.
- Supply chain and aviation disruptions; remittance channels and labour markets in the Gulf get stressed.
- War-driven fiscal strain and reconstruction burdens.

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- **Linkages with NCERTs**
 - **Class 12 Political Science (Contemporary World Politics)**
 - **Cold War, US hegemony, regional conflicts:** helps frame intervention, alliances, and post-Cold War order-making.
 - **Security and power:** understanding deterrence, balance of power, and legitimacy.
 - **Class 12 Political Science (Politics in India Since Independence)**
 - **India's foreign policy principles:** Non-alignment/strategic autonomy, evolving partnerships, diaspora protection.
 - **Class 11 Political Science (Indian Constitution at Work / Political Theory)**
 - **Rights, state, legitimacy, coercion:** connects ethics of force, consent, and authority.
 - **Class 12 Geography (Human Geography / Resource chapters)**
 - **Resource distribution and trade routes:** energy flows, chokepoints, transport corridors.
 - **Class 9–10 History (optional support)**
 - **Imperialism and global conflicts:** roots of modern West Asian geopolitics and boundary-making.
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- **Linkages with UPSC CSE syllabus**
 - **GS Paper II (International Relations) — strongest linkage**
 - India and West Asia: diaspora, remittances, energy security, maritime security.
 - Bilateral/regional groupings; role of external powers; India's balancing strategy.
 - **GS Paper III**
 - **Energy security** (oil price shocks, diversification, strategic reserves).
 - **Internal security spillovers:** radicalisation, terror financing, cyber narratives.
 - **Supply chain resilience** and shipping chokepoints.
 - **GS Paper I**
 - World history/post-war order (broad framing), society impacts of conflict, migration.
 - **GS Paper IV (Ethics)**
 - Just war, proportionality, civilian harm, statecraft vs morality, responsibility and compassion in policy.
 - **Essay**
 - Themes: "Power vs justice," "Security and freedom," "Peace is not absence of conflict," "Geography as destiny."
 - **Optional subjects**
 - **Political Science & IR:** realism, coercive diplomacy, alliance politics, legitimacy.
 - **Geography:** geopolitical chokepoints, resource politics.
 - **Public Administration:** crisis management, evacuation operations, policy coordination.

Way forward

For the region and international community

De-escalation ladders

- Establish clear off-ramps: ceasefire sequencing, no-strike lists, maritime safety corridors.

Chokepoint stabilisation

- Multinational maritime deconfliction mechanisms; transparency on shipping safety; reduce miscalculation.

Arms control beyond one file

- A phased framework: missiles/drones limits, inspection regimes, and reciprocal security assurances.

Regional security dialogue

- A Gulf–Levant security forum focused on non-interference, militia de-escalation, and crisis hotlines.

Humanitarian guardrails

- Independent humanitarian access, infrastructure protection commitments, accountability mechanisms.

For India (exam-relevant policy toolkit)

Diaspora-first crisis management

- Updated evacuation plans, community mapping, emergency flights/sea routes, helplines, employer coordination.

Energy resilience

- Diversify suppliers, strengthen strategic petroleum reserves, hedging strategies, and demand-side efficiency.

Maritime readiness

- Convoy advisories, naval presence for merchant shipping safety, real-time coordination with partners.

Strategic autonomy with active diplomacy

- Talk to all sides; push for de-escalation; avoid being boxed into camps while protecting core interests.

Domestic safeguards

- Monitor misinformation, communal polarisation, and terror-financing risks without undermining civil liberties.

- **UPSC GS Paper 2 (Mains)**

- 2022: “Discuss the significance of West Asia in India’s energy security.”

- 2018: “Examine India’s standing in a multipolar world.”

- 2016: “Impact of instability in West Asia on India’s foreign policy.”

- **UPSC GS Paper 3 (Mains)**

- 2019: “Discuss measures to ensure energy security for India.”

- 2020: “What are the challenges of borderless wars in the 21st century?”

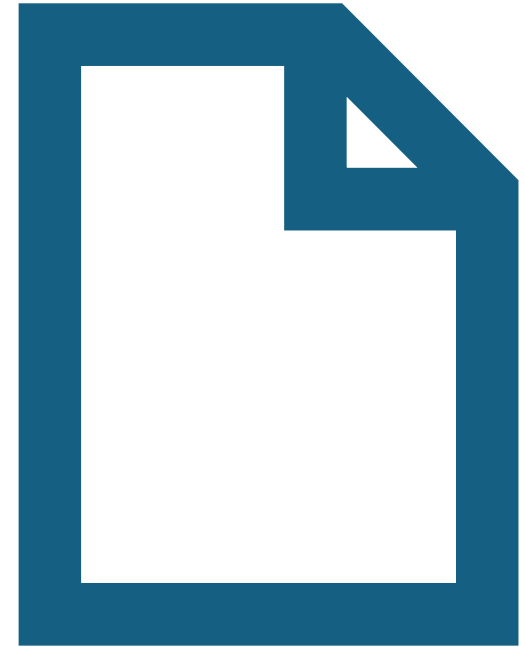
- **Essay Paper**

- “Is power politics the natural order in international relations?”

- “Can moral justification be reconciled with national interest?”

- **APSC GS Paper 2 (Mains)**

- 2021: “Discuss implications of geopolitical tensions in the Middle East for India’s external relations.”



UGC reform debate, faultlines in politics of social justice

Recent debates over proposed changes in regulations issued by the University Grants Commission (UGC) have triggered wider political discussions on caste privileges, social discrimination and the idea of social justice in institutions of higher academics. A section of upper caste elites has opposed the UGC's regulations even as the higher judiciary quickly put the policy reform in abeyance. Media and social networks pushed for its annulment, calling the regulations discriminatory toward the social elites.

Though initiated by the Union government, the Bharatiya Janata Party has also hesitated to defend the UGC rules. This is only logical for the right-wing party to avoid upsetting its core political supporters, mainly the social elite. Yet, such distancing risks alienating Bahujan groups as they have joined the Hindutva bandwagon hoping to expand their representation in power and gain substantive social and class mobility. In the current debate, though Bahujan groups have remained fragmented and leaderless in promoting their interests, they have the potential to harm the electoral prospects of the right-wing party.

Inclusive subaltern Hindutva

The rise of Narendra Modi as the dominant leader in national politics has led to the social character of the BJP changing considerably. It was suggested that the BJP shift from its visible Brahmanical focus to bringing Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi (DBA) groups into the party structure. The BJP's electoral success as a new 'Subaltern Hindutva' party is overly dependent upon the support of the DBA groups, while the social elites have remained its committed support base. The party's new social engineering also checkmates the 'official' parties of the Dalit-Bahujan castes, such as the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh and the Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar. A sizable faction within the vulnerable castes (especially the lower Other Backward Classes, or OBCs) have trusted



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The BJP's 'inclusive Hindutva' faces challenges as the proposed changes in regulations issued by the University Grants Commission spark debate

the BJP more for their welfare, hoping that an inclusive Hindutva platform would offer them social dignity and equitable participation in the power structures.

The shift of certain DBA sections has made the BJP a formidable force. However, in return for their support these groups have only received some tokenistic presence in the power structures. Their class conditions remain precarious, and they often face discrimination and violence from dominant social groups. The lower OBC groups (mainly the artisanal castes, landless labourers and lower middle-class sections of the urban population) have negligible presence in modern state institutions and the urban market economy. Further, limited access to quality higher education keeps their presence in IT-related and other elite professions minimal.

The OBC question

After the release of the Bihar Caste Survey in 2023, a similar factsheet showed that almost 40% of the State's population is considered Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs), a majority of whom are landless or dependent on the rural economy and an education status that is similar to Dalits and Adivasis. It was expected that the ruling establishments, at the State and Centre, would take cognisance of the grave situation and formulate policy for their welfare. However, there was no such initiative.

It appears that the new UGC regulations were drafted to address the growing problems faced by OBC candidates in academic institutions. The Education Ministry faces constant criticism by the Opposition for failing to meet Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe (SC/ST) and OBC quotas in central universities and premier institutes such as the IIMs, IITs, and AIIMS. The parliamentary report on the recruitment of professors in central universities has shown that OBCs constitute less than 3% of central university faculty. Importantly, they also face overt discrimination in the recruitment process (by using the 'not found suitable' rubric). Unlike SC/STs, OBC members

have limited institutional support to protect them from caste-based discrimination on campuses.

In the new UGC regulations, the addition of OBCs and other vulnerable groups (like the EWS) alongside SC/STs is an acknowledgment that a vast section in university campuses survive as vulnerable social groups under the dominant presence of the social elites and, therefore, in need of legal safeguards. The new regulations appeared to be crucial corrective measures in making academic institutions more democratic, inclusive and responsible towards the agenda of social justice. However, the reforms have stalled following backlash, leaving the vulnerabilities that DBA groups face unaddressed.

The BJP's dilemma

The BJP's inclusive Hindutva has captivated sections among the DBA and has presented the party as a promising representative of Hindu unity. The UGC debate has challenged this celebrated idea, revealing that caste-based divisions occupy social space. The counter against the new UGC reforms has shown that the social elites have little concern for the inclusive welfare of marginalised social groups. As social justice policies reveal and disturb the control and hegemony of the traditional ruling elites, such attempts are targeted as anti-national, harmful to meritocracy or as an appeasement of identity politics.

The BJP has failed to convince social elite opponents about the political necessity of such a policy framework that would also ameliorate the deplorable conditions of DBA groups.

The uproar by a section of the social elites has become effective because of the BJP's tacit silence and hesitation to defend the policies of social justice. Such a nexus between the right-wing party and conservative social elites may have relegated the agenda of social justice to the periphery. But it also ignites a new consciousness among vulnerable social groups about their expendability within Hindutva politics, resulting in their exit from the right-wing party.

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Social Justice:** In the Indian context, this refers to the constitutional mandate to ensure equality of opportunity and the removal of historical disabilities based on caste, religion, or gender.
 - *Example:* Reservation in educational institutions (Article 15) and public employment (Article 16).
- **Subaltern Hindutva:** A political strategy where the right-wing expands its base by incorporating "subaltern" or marginalized groups (Dalits, OBCs) into a broader Hindu identity, often using cultural and religious symbols.
- **Bahujan:** Literally meaning "the majority," it refers to the combined population of SCs, STs, and OBCs.
- **Lower OBCs / EBCs (Extremely Backward Castes):** Within the 27% OBC category, these are the artisanal and landless groups who are often more socio-economically marginalized than "dominant" OBC groups (like Yadavs or Jats).
- **'Not Found Suitable' (NFS):** A technical rubric often used by selection committees in universities to leave reserved faculty positions vacant, claiming no candidate met the required "merit" or "standard."
- **Meritocracy vs. Social Representation:** A long-standing debate where "merit" is often viewed as an innate individual trait, while social justice advocates argue that merit is a product of access to social and cultural capital.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- **The Core Thesis**

- The central argument is that recent UGC reforms—intended to institutionalize protections for OBCs and other vulnerable groups in higher education—have hit a political "faultline." This reveals a tension within the ruling dispensation between its traditional elite support base and its newly acquired subaltern (DBA) voter base.

- **Key Points**

- **Institutional Exclusion:** Despite reservations, OBC representation in central university faculties remains abysmal (under 3%), often due to discretionary recruitment practices.

- **The Regulatory Retreat:** The swift withdrawal or abeyance of UGC reforms under pressure from social elites suggests that institutional "merit" is still used as a shield to maintain elite hegemony.

- **Fragile Social Engineering:** The BJP's success is built on "Inclusive Hindutva," but the article argues this is mostly symbolic. When it comes to substantive power-sharing (like faculty positions), the elite base resists, and the party hesitates.

- **The "New Consciousness":** There is a growing risk that DBA groups will realize their "expendability" if symbolic inclusion is not backed by structural academic and economic mobility.



- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Pre-Independence:** The Justice Party movement in Madras Presidency and the efforts of Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar laid the groundwork for caste-based representation.

- **1950s (Kaka Kalelkar Commission):** The first attempt at the federal level to identify "Backward Classes" beyond SCs/STs; however, its recommendations were not implemented.

- **1990 (Mandal Commission Implementation):** The turning point for OBC politics. The V.P. Singh government implemented 27% reservations in central jobs, leading to the "Mandal vs. Kamandal" (caste identity vs. religious identity) era.

- **2006 (93rd Amendment):** Extended OBC reservations to higher educational institutions (including IITs/IIMs), leading to the "Mandal II" protests.

- **2019 (103rd Amendment):** Introduction of 10% EWS (Economically Weaker Sections) reservation, which shifted the debate from purely caste-based to include economic criteria.

- **Present Day:** The debate has shifted from "entry for students" (admissions) to "entry for teachers" (faculty recruitment) and the demand for a National Caste Census.



Ivory Tower

Elite Hegemony

Subaltern Aspirations

The Crisis of Representation



Core Concepts & Definitions



Social Justice in India

The constitutional mandate to ensure equality of opportunity and remove historical disabilities based on caste, religion, or gender (Articles 15 & 16).



The "Bahun" Identity

Refers to "the majority," representing the combined population of Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs).



Subaltern Hindutva

A political strategy incorporating marginalized groups (Dalits, OBCs) into a broader Hindu identity through symbolic inclusion, often creating tension with substantive power-sharing.



<math>< 3\%</math> OBC Faculty



The "NFS" Loophole

Selection committees often use the "Not Found Suitable" (NFS) rubric to leave reserved positions vacant, claiming candidates do not meet a subjective "merit" standard.

Meritocracy vs. Social Representation

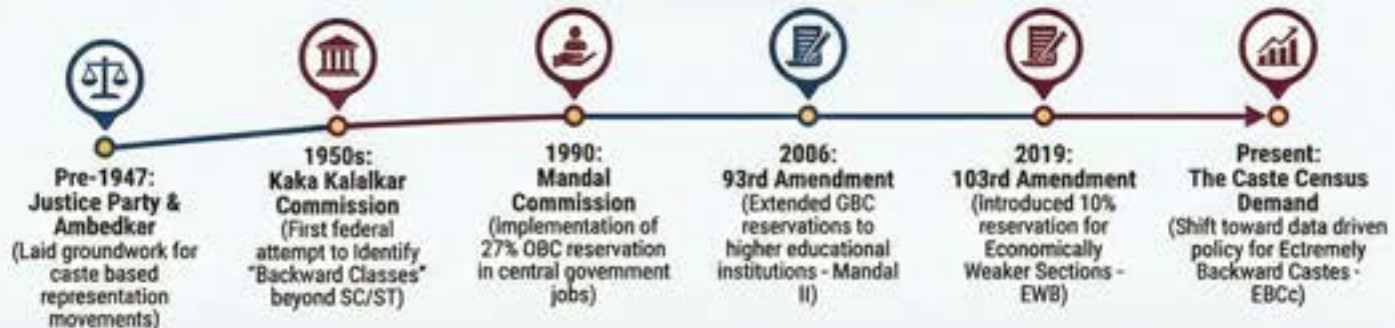


Innate Merit



Social and Cultural Capital

Historical Evolution of Social Justice



The Way Forward (UPSC-Ready Solutions)



Procedural Democratization

Replace subjective NFS outcomes with mandatory, documented justifications and oversight by diverse observers.



Data-Driven Policy

Utilizing national or state-level (e.g., Bihar) Caste Census data to tailor protections specifically for "Extremely Backward Castes" (EBCs).



Institutional Support Cells

Establishing robust grievance redressal mechanisms for OBC/EMS students and faculty, modeled after existing SC/ST cells.





Redefining 'Holistic Merit'

Shifting academic discourse to value diverse lived experiences as essential components of academic excellence.



- **Logical and philosophical base**
- **(A) Justice frameworks behind social justice policies**
- **Compensatory justice**
 - If a group has been historically harmed through exclusion, the State must compensate through special measures.
- **Equality of opportunity (substantive, not just formal)**
 - Treating unequals equally reproduces inequality.
 - So policies must address unequal starting points: school quality, social capital, discrimination.
- **Democratic equality**
 - Democracy needs inclusive public institutions. Universities are not just skill factories; they produce leadership and ideas.
- **Capability approach (Sen/Nussbaum style reasoning)**
 - Focus on real freedoms: can a student actually thrive in a campus environment, not just get entry?
- **(B) Philosophy behind “meritocracy” arguments**
- Meritocracy assumes evaluation measures are neutral.
- Social justice critiques argue measures often encode social advantage (language, cultural style, access to preparation).
- A mature position: **standards matter**, but standards must be defended through **fair processes, transparency, and anti-bias safeguards**, not through exclusion.
- **(C) Assumptions embedded in the debate**
- Universities are arenas of power, not purely neutral spaces.
- Representation affects knowledge production: who researches what, whose experience counts as “legitimate” scholarship.

- 
- **Multidimensional analysis**
 - **Social**
 - Higher education is a ladder of mobility; exclusion freezes occupational hierarchy.
 - Under-representation reproduces stereotypes (“they are not present because they are not capable”).
 - **Political**
 - Social justice reforms often become **symbolic battlegrounds** for electoral narratives.
 - “Inclusive identity politics” can mask unequal distribution of institutional power.
 - **Legal**
 - Balancing:
 - equality,
 - affirmative action,
 - Need for transparent rules to reduce litigation and policy uncertainty.
 - **Ethical**
 - Dignity: beneficiaries must not be treated as charity cases.
 - Fairness: selection must be bias-resistant and evidence-based.
 - Responsibility of institutions: universities are public goods, not closed guilds.
 - **International**
 - Many democracies debate affirmative action:
 - “diversity” frameworks,
 - International rankings and reputation pressures can push universities to claim “standards,” sometimes ignoring inclusion metrics.
 - **Economic**
 - Inclusion improves human capital utilization: under-representation wastes talent.
 - Diverse faculty and student bodies strengthen innovation, social trust, and productivity.
- 



- **Linkages with NCERTs**
- **Class 11 Political Science: *Indian Constitution at Work***
- **Equality, Social Justice, Reservation, Fundamental Rights:** Why special provisions exist; how democracy handles social diversity.
- **Class 12 Political Science: *Politics in India Since Independence***
- **Caste and politics, social movements, political parties and social coalitions:** helps frame how social justice becomes an electoral and policy issue.
- **Class 11 Sociology: *Understanding Society***
- **Caste as a system, social inequality, social exclusion, ideas of merit:** sociological grounding for campus discrimination and privilege.
- **Class 12 Sociology: *Indian Society***
- **Patterns of inequality, change and development, education and social change:** connects higher education to mobility and reproduction of inequality.
- **Class 9–10 Democratic Politics (basic grounding)**
- Equality, rule of law, and the idea of substantive democracy.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE syllabus**
- **GS Paper 1 (strong linkage)**
- Indian society: **caste, social empowerment, inequality**, social change via education.
- Role of education in social mobility.
- **GS Paper 2 (very strong)**
- Governance: policies, implementation, accountability.
- Social justice: welfare schemes and mechanisms for vulnerable sections.
- Issues relating to development and management of **social sector/services: education**.
- Role of institutions; relationship between Union/State and bodies like regulators.
- **GS Paper 3 (moderate)**
- Human resource development.
- Inclusive growth: how unequal access to higher education shapes labor markets and productivity.
- **GS Paper 4 (strong)**
- Ethics in public institutions: fairness, justice, impartiality, empathy, dignity.
- Ethical issues in governance: bias, discrimination, misuse of discretion (e.g., “NFS”).
- **Essay (very strong)**
- “Education and equality,” “Merit vs justice,” “Democracy and social inclusion,” “Caste and modernity.”
- **Optional (high relevance)**
- **Political Science:** justice theories, equality, representation, state and social order, ideology and party systems.
- **Sociology:** caste, social stratification, education and inequality, social movements.
- **Public Administration:** equity in services, personnel administration, recruitment fairness, institutional accountability.

Way forward

A) Make recruitment procedures bias-resistant

Publish clear rubrics for shortlisting and interviews.

Mandatory documentation for “NFS” decisions with reasons mapped to criteria.

External observers/ombudspersons for reserved-category compliance audits.

B) Strengthen Equal Opportunity and anti-discrimination architecture

Empower Equal Opportunity Cells with:

- complaint handling timelines,
- protection against victimization,

Introduce periodic campus climate surveys and publish anonymized results.

C) Capacity building, not tokenism

Mentoring for first-generation scholars:

- research writing support,
- pedagogy training,

Bridge programs (language, academic writing) for students and young faculty where needed.

D) Data transparency as democratic accountability

Annual public dashboards for:

- sanctioned posts vs filled posts,
- category-wise vacancies,

E) Address the “OBC within OBC” reality carefully

Use empirical deprivation indicators (education level, landlessness, occupation vulnerability) to design scholarships and support without fragmenting solidarity.

Avoid crude one-size-fits-all: support should match actual disadvantage.

- **UPSC GS2 / Society / Social Justice**
- Reservation and equality:
 - “Discuss the rationale of reservation in a democracy. How can it be made more effective and less divisive?”
 - “Differentiate between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome. Where does affirmative action fit?”
- Education and inclusion:
 - “Critically examine challenges in higher education governance and suggest reforms.”
 - “How does education become an instrument of social empowerment? What are the constraints?”
- OBC / backwardness / social justice policy:
 - “Do you think social justice policies have achieved their objectives? Discuss with examples of exclusion that still persists.”
- Institutions and discretion:
 - “How can transparency and accountability be strengthened in recruitment and public institutions to prevent discrimination?”
- **UPSC GS4 (case-study style prompts you can expect)**
- A selection committee uses vague criteria to reject candidates from vulnerable backgrounds.
 - Identify ethical issues: bias, fairness, transparency, dignity, abuse of discretion.
 - Suggest ethical course correction and institutional safeguards.
- **UPSC Essay themes that repeatedly appear**
- “The idea of India rests on social justice as much as on economic growth.”
- “Merit without equity is privilege.”
- “Education is the most powerful instrument of social transformation—but only if it is inclusive.”

Rethinking tax searches for the digital age

The Supreme Court in *Vishwasprasad Ahu vs Union of India* (2024) confronts a constitutional question transcending taxation: the lawful reach of sovereign power into the informational life of citizens. Section 132 of the Income Tax Act, historically authorising entry into premises and seizure of undisclosed assets, now has been extended to “computer systems” and “virtual digital space” such as smartphones, cloud accounts, and communication archives. A search architecture forged for cupboards and ledgers now claims access to devices that contain information beyond tax inquiries.

From the physical to the digital

The petitioner anchors the challenge in Puttaswamy’s recognition of informational privacy as intrinsic to dignity. Digital devices differ qualitatively from ledgers. A phone contains years of intimate medical and professional confidences unrelated to tax liability. Unrestricted access converts a specific fiscal search into general exploratory intrusion, disproportionate to its aim. The anticipatory “reason to believe” embedded in Section 132 was historically tolerated against evasion but now authorises entry into entire informational ecosystems. Further, authorisation confined to the executive, and secrecy of recorded reasons impair meaningful review under Articles 14 (right to equality) and 21 (right to personal liberty). The ideas that survived scrutiny in the 1974 *Poosan Mal* judgment, which upheld the constitutionality of search and seizure provisions in the Income Tax Act, demand recalibration in the post-Puttaswamy order.

The Union’s defence rests on settled doctrine sustaining Section 132 as a structured anti-evasion power. Section 132’s authorisation rests on information and a recorded “reason to believe” by senior officers. Courts will review



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While revenue enforcement remains a legitimate and vital state function, its methods must remain proportionate to the liberty of the interests they affect

jurisdictional conditions only to ensure relevant material exists, as reaffirmed in *Laljiibhai Mansala* (2022). Technological expansion, it contends, does not alter this statutory discipline. Anticipatory search under clause (b) remains necessary against evasion’s digital fragility: electronic devices may be erased, encrypted or transferred before summons operate. This makes *Poosan Mal* endure as an authority sustaining intrusive search for fiscal enforcement.

Proportional safeguards

The Bench’s preliminary observations indicate that the dispute will not turn on the existence of search power but on its constitutional calibration in the digital domain. The Court has recognised that electronic devices may be destroyed if advance notice is given yet has also acknowledged that anticipatory searches under clauses (b) and (c) demand a higher degree of satisfaction and scrutiny. The central question is thus whether a framework designed for physical documents can adequately regulate devices containing the informational totality of an individual’s affairs.

A single device contains vast historical data, reveals networks of third-party interactions, preserves years of behaviour, and can be copied in its entirety. The constitutional implications of such digital informational access are correspondingly amplified. While revenue enforcement remains a legitimate and vital state function, its methods must remain proportionate to the liberty of the interests they affect. As investigative capacity expands into the digital space, the safeguards governing that capacity must expand in equal measure.

If digital search powers are to remain constitutionally valid, their exercise must satisfy demonstrable constraints reflecting informational privacy doctrines. A constitutionally calibrated digital tax search should therefore be governed by the

following criteria: firstly, particularised scope, where authorisation should specify the digital accounts, devices or data categories reasonably connected to the tax inquiry, preventing exploratory access to unrelated personal material; second, a necessity threshold, wherein digital search should be invoked only where less intrusive statutory measures are inadequate or likely to fail; third, a temporal and subject limitation where the examination of data should be confined to relevant periods and subject matter linked to the investigation; fourth, ensuring that mechanisms exist to segregate legally privileged or unrelated third-party communications from investigative review; and finally, making sure that search processes are recorded and reviewable in order to prevent misuse.

Such criteria do not disable enforcement; they only work to align its exercise with constitutional proportionality.

A constitutional balance

The case thus presents a classic constitutional recalibration where we need to adapt inherited statutory power to transformed technological realities. The Court may uphold the statutory scheme while reading in digital safeguards or require greater transparency in authorisation. What it cannot ignore is that digital searches implicate a deeper intrusion than their physical predecessors.

The challenge in *Vishwasprasad Ahu*, therefore marks a constitutional moment in India’s fiscal jurisprudence – the transition of tax searches from the spatial to the digital. Whether existing doctrine suffices for that transition or must evolve to preserve the balance between revenue and liberty, will shape the future architecture of state power in the information age. The legitimacy of fiscal authority ultimately rests not only on its capacity to detect evasion, but on the restraint with which it enters the citizen’s digital personhood.

- Key terms and explanations
- a) Sovereign power and “informational life”
- **Sovereign power:** Authority of the State to make and enforce laws, including powers of taxation, search, and seizure.
 - Example: Income Tax Department conducting raids under law.
- **Informational life of citizens:** The totality of data about a person – financial records, messages, browsing history, photos, health data, location trails, etc., now stored digitally on phones, laptops and cloud accounts.
 - Example: Your smartphone today reveals more about you than a cupboard full of files.
- b) Search and seizure under tax law
- **Section 132, Income Tax Act, 1961:** Provides search and seizure powers when there is “reason to believe” that a person has undisclosed income or is likely to hide or destroy evidence.
 - Earlier focus: premises, cupboards, lockers, physical books of accounts.
 - Current extension: access to “*computer systems*” and “*virtual digital space*” – phones, laptops, cloud storage, emails, chats.
- **Section 247, Income Tax Act, 2025:** The new provision (yet to fully come into force) specifically enabling searches of digital devices and virtual spaces, challenged for violating privacy and lacking adequate safeguards.
- c) “Reason to believe” and anticipatory search
- **Reason to believe:** A jurisdictional precondition; senior tax officers must have some credible information leading them to *believe* that the person will not produce documents or has undisclosed income.
 - Courts usually review only whether some relevant material existed, not whether the belief was correct.
- **Anticipatory search (clause (b)/(c) type):** Search based on apprehension that a person *may not* cooperate or *may* hide/destroy material in future.
 - Example: Officials suspect that if they send a notice, the person will wipe data from phone → they raid without prior notice.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**
- **Core thesis**
- The state's legitimate interest in **revenue enforcement** remains strong, but **digital searches are qualitatively more intrusive** than physical searches.
- Therefore, search powers must be **recalibrated with stronger safeguards** so that enforcement remains constitutional in the information age.
- **Why digital is different from physical**
- **Scale and depth:** One device can contain years of data: financial, medical, personal, political, location, social networks.
- **Network effects:** A device reveals **relationships** and **third-party communications**, not just the target's records.
- **Replicability:** Digital content can be **copied fully** (forensic imaging), potentially creating permanent state possession of a person's informational life.
- **Rights-based challenge (conceptual structure)**
- **Informational privacy and dignity:** Access to whole-device data can turn a targeted fiscal investigation into a broad exploratory intrusion.
- **Disproportionate intrusion:** If the authorization is broad, it risks becoming a **general search** rather than a **specific inquiry**.
- **Weak reviewability:** If recorded reasons are secret and authorization stays within the executive, meaningful challenge becomes difficult → concerns under **Articles 14 and 21**.
- **The state's defence (conceptual structure)**
- **Search powers are structured, not unfettered:** There is a legal requirement of "reason to believe," recorded by senior officers.
- **Judicial review exists:** Courts can check whether relevant material existed for the search.
- **Digital necessity:** In the digital world, summons or notices may fail because evidence is easily deleted/encrypted/transferred.
- **Likely judicial centre of gravity**
- The key issue is not "whether" the state can search digitally, but "how" it should do so:
 - **Scope and precision**
 - **Necessity**
 - **Procedural safeguards**
 - **Auditability and review**

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**
- **A. Pre-independence background**
- Colonial administration relied heavily on **revenue extraction** (land revenue, customs, excise), with powers designed for **control and compliance**.
- Investigative state powers grew around **record-based bureaucracy**, where evidence was largely physical.
- **B. Post-independence: building a tax enforcement state**
- With welfare-state goals, the state needed robust revenue → enforcement architecture expanded.
- **Income-tax Act, 1961** created modern mechanisms, including **search and seizure** as exceptional powers aimed at combating black money.
- **C. 1970s–1990s: black money and exceptional enforcement**
- Search powers became central to anti-evasion strategy.
- Courts generally upheld search provisions as constitutionally permissible if exercised within statutory limits.
- The legal culture leaned toward: **revenue interest is legitimate; safeguards lie in “reason to believe” + limited judicial review.**
- **D. 2000s–2010s: digitisation phase**
- Economy increasingly digitised: e-banking, digital invoices, emails, messaging apps, online accounting.
- Tax administration moved toward technology:
 - e-filing, PAN/Aadhaar linkage, information reporting systems, data analytics.
- **E. Post-privacy jurisprudence (late 2010s onward)**
- Privacy became a stronger constitutional anchor: **informational privacy, dignity, autonomy.**
- This changed the lens: state access to data needs **tight justification and proportionality.**
- **F. Mid-2020s: the “digital search” constitutional moment**
- Search powers designed for cupboards and ledgers now seek access to:
 - smartphones, cloud accounts, and communication archives.
- The constitutional question becomes sharper: **Can an old search framework govern the informational totality inside modern devices?**

The Digital Tax Raid: Balancing State Power vs. Informational Privacy

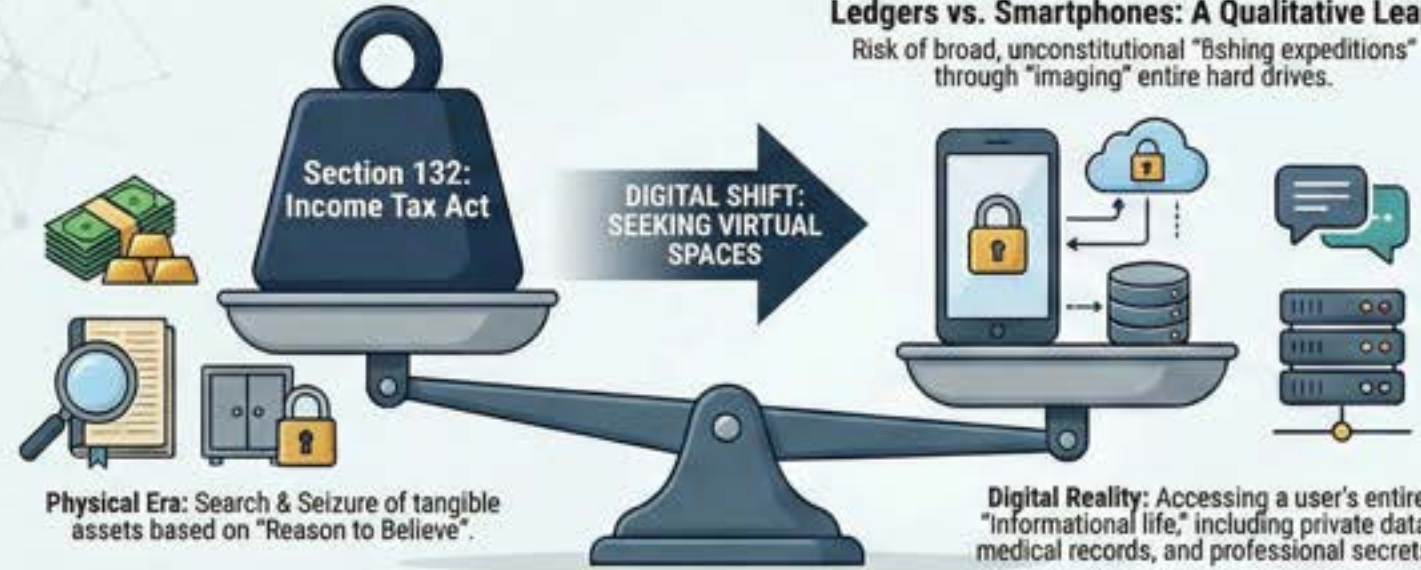
Educating UPSC aspirants on the constitutional tension between Section 132 of the Income Tax Act and the Right to Privacy in the digital age.

State Power (Revenue & Anti-Evasion)

The Core Conflict: Physical Era vs. Digital Reality

Ledgers vs. Smartphones: A Qualitative Leap

Risk of broad, unconstitutional "fishing expeditions" through "imaging" entire hard drives.



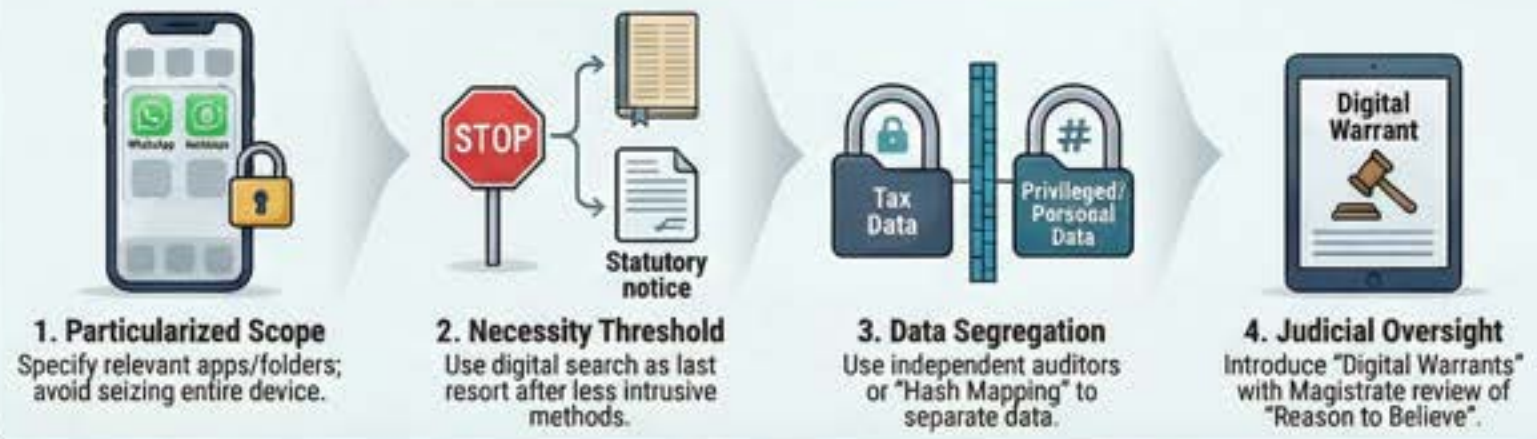
The Constitutional Shield (Legal Anchors)

2017:
Justice K.S. Puttaswamy vs. Union of India
Landmark judgment declaring Privacy & Fundamental Right. Shifted test to Proportionality.



Articles 14 & 21: The Bedrock of Rights
Art 14: Non-arbitrariness. Art 21: Dignity & Informational Self-determination.

Proposed Solution: "Constitutional Calibration"



UPSC Syllabus Linkages (The Expert Edge)

GS Paper 2: Constitution & Governance
Fundamental Rights (Art 14, 21), Judicial Review, "Rule of Law".

GS Paper 3: Economy & Security
Taxation, money laundering, cybersecurity ethics, data governance.

GS Paper 4: Ethics
Ethical balance: "Duty to Pay" (Public Interest) vs. "Right to be Left Alone".



- **Logical and Philosophical Base**
- **A. Competing constitutional values**
- **Revenue as public interest**
 - Taxes fund rights, welfare, and governance.
 - Evasion undermines fairness and the social contract.
- **Liberty, dignity, and privacy**
 - A person is not just a taxpayer; they are a rights-bearing citizen.
 - Digital data is closely tied to identity, autonomy, and dignity.
- **B. Underlying assumptions being tested**
- **Earlier assumption:** Search = limited intrusion into physical evidence relevant to evasion.
- **New reality:** Search may expose one's entire life-history → intrusion is deeper and broader.
- **C. Ethical logic**
- **Rule of law:** Coercive power must be bounded, reviewable, and non-arbitrary.
- **Due process:** The more intrusive the power, the higher the procedural safeguards required.
- **Non-fishing principle:** A lawful search is not a general rummaging expedition.
- **D. Political philosophy angle**
- A constitutional democracy must avoid turning into a “surveillance state” under the cover of fiscal enforcement.
- Yet, it must also avoid becoming a “weak state” unable to enforce legitimate taxes.
- The balancing tool is **proportionality + procedural safeguards**.

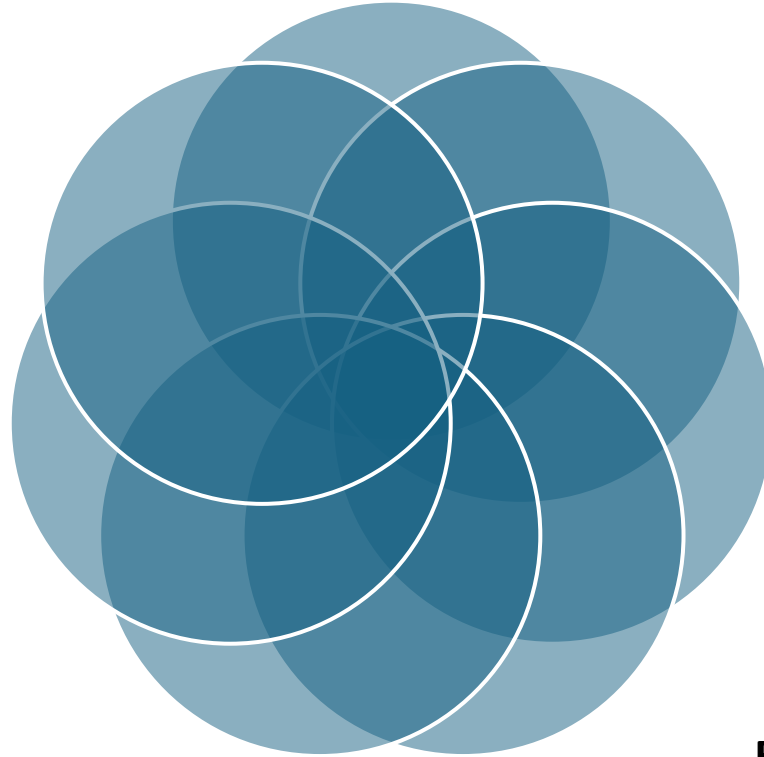
- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social dimension**
- **Trust and legitimacy:** People comply more when enforcement feels bounded and fair.
- **Vulnerable groups:** Overbroad digital searches can disproportionately harm those with less legal support.
- **Professional confidentiality:** Doctors, lawyers, journalists hold sensitive third-party info on devices.
- **Political dimension**
- **Risk of selective enforcement narrative:** Broad powers can trigger allegations of targeting opponents.
- **Institutional credibility:** Strong safeguards protect both citizens and the legitimacy of the tax department.
- **Legal dimension**
- **Core constitutional tension:** State interest in revenue vs privacy/dignity.
- **Doctrinal shift:** From “search power is valid if statutory conditions exist” to “search power must also be proportionate in digital context.”
- **Due process modernization:** Better reviewability and procedural safeguards.
- **Ethical dimension**
- **Ends vs means:** Even legitimate goals can’t justify unlimited intrusion.
- **Data minimisation ethics:** Collect only what is needed.
- **Accountability:** Audit trails and oversight reduce misuse.
- **International dimension**
- Democracies globally face similar issues:
 - digital devices store total-life data,
- Cross-border data issues:
 - cloud servers abroad,
- **Economic dimension**
- **Positive:** Better tools against evasion improve revenue and fairness.
- **Compliance costs:** Clear protocols reduce uncertainty; vague powers increase litigation and compliance burden.

Linkages with NCERTs

Executive and rule of law: limits on state power; accountability.

Fundamental Rights: Article 14 and 21; constitutionalism; judiciary as interpreter.

Class 12 – Political Science (Indian Constitution at Work)



Class 11 – Political Theory

Rights and Liberty: meaning of liberty, reasonable restrictions, and dignity.

Equality: non-arbitrariness and fairness in state action (conceptual base for Article 14).

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus (GS 1–4, Essay, Ethics, Optionals)**
- **GS Paper 2 (Strongest linkage)**
- **Indian Constitution:** Fundamental rights (Article 14, 21), judicial review, constitutional interpretation.
- **Governance:** accountability, transparency, due process, citizen-centric administration.
- **E-governance and technology:** balancing efficiency with rights.
- **GS Paper 3 (Strong linkage)**
- **Economy:** taxation, black money, compliance, enforcement frameworks.
- **Cybersecurity and data governance:** risks of data misuse/leakage.
- **Internal security angle:** not in a policing sense, but “digital ecosystem risks” and secure handling of sensitive seized data.
- **GS Paper 4 (Ethics)**
- **Public service values:** integrity, accountability, fairness in coercive powers.
- **Ethical governance:** proportionality, restraint, respect for dignity.
- **Case studies:** misuse of power vs lawful enforcement.
- **Essay**
- Topics like:
 - “Technology and the future of liberty”
 - “A strong state vs a free citizen”
 - “Privacy, trust, and governance in the digital age”

Way Forward

A. Legal and procedural reforms

1. Statutory/SOP-based particularisation

1. Mandatory specification in authorization: device/account + data categories + rationale.

2. “Necessity” as a recorded requirement

1. Officers should record why lesser measures won’t work.

3. Time-bound access and retention

1. Clear retention limits; delete/return irrelevant data promptly.

4. Privilege and third-party protection protocol

1. Sealed cover / independent screening / special procedure for disputed privileged data.

B. Institutional safeguards

1. Digital Search Audit Trail

1. Logs of access, keywords used, files copied, and chain-of-custody.

2. Internal oversight

1. Periodic review by a supervisory committee; random audits to detect misuse.

3. Standardised forensic imaging rules

1. Prefer selective extraction; full imaging only with strong recorded justification.

C. Capacity building

•Train officers in:

- digital forensics,
- privacy law,
- data minimisation and cybersecurity.

•Build secure infrastructure for storage of seized digital data.

D. Citizen-facing fairness measures (without weakening enforcement)

•Provide post-search information:

- what categories were accessed,
- what was seized/copied,
- how to contest privilege/irrelevance.

•This reduces arbitrariness and strengthens legitimacy.



- **UPSC Prelims – likely theme areas (question patterns)**
- Privacy as a fundamental right; implications for state action.
- Article 14: arbitrariness and equality before law.
- Article 21: due process, dignity, personal liberty.
- Governance tools: accountability, transparency, rule of law.
- Digital evidence, cybersecurity, data protection concepts.
- **UPSC Mains (GS2/GS4) – commonly repeated core questions (practice set)**
- **GS2:** “Discuss the scope of Article 21 in contemporary governance. How should the state balance public interest with individual privacy?”
- **GS2:** “Examine the doctrine of proportionality in restricting fundamental rights. Illustrate with technology-enabled governance.”
- **GS2:** “How does Article 14 act as a check on arbitrary state power? Apply it to investigative and regulatory actions.”
- **GS2:** “Judicial review is a basic feature of the Constitution. Explain its role in regulating executive discretion.”
- **GS3/GS2 overlap:** “Technology can improve enforcement but also deepen state intrusion. Discuss with suitable examples.”
- **GS4:** “Ethics in public administration demands restraint in the use of coercive powers. Discuss with examples.”

Easing key bottlenecks in cities

WAY FORWARD. Delegating financial and planning power to locally elected officials can improve urban governance



ASHIMA GOVAL

Many Indians say it does not feel their country is growing at 7-8 per cent. Growth creates its own tensions, with both concentrated in cities, which lag in facilities, in air quality, in resources and in governance. Overcrowding, congestion, constant construction, pollution—all reduce the quality of life. Animals freely roam the streets threatening themselves, local populations and livelihoods. Shelters and nesting, even if mandated, are not implemented.

The Centre and major regulators have embarked on a drive to simplify regulations. But business does not find life getting any easier since the local officials it has to deal with are largely untouched by change.

The key bottleneck is governance more than resources. It has its genesis in the over-centralisation and control mechanisms inherited from the British. Independence added planning or developmental institutions to the Constitutional, Central and State agencies to be found in every city. There is no clear coordination or hierarchy across multiple agencies. It is the State, not city governments, that control vital functions such as water supply and some types of transport.

Politicians respond to numbers and the majority of population was rural. As the belief that India lives in its villages became ingrained, the bulk of resources were directed to rural areas. The fear of losing these has prevented budding urban clusters from declaring themselves as cities and providing the required services. But the belief lags reality. The last census was only in 2011 and measured 53 per cent of India's population as living in cities. Private estimates that include satellite data and night-light imaging, suggest it may be above 70 per cent. If peri-urban areas are added. Even so, there is no policy framework to ease the ongoing transition from rural to urban. The absence of adequate data compounds the problem.

Even so, large amounts have been spent on city infrastructure, but results remain inadequate in the absence of coordination and attention to user needs. For example, if congestion is



GAAP. Indian cities' own source revenue is only 20-40 per cent of municipal expenditure

alleviated on one stretch, it springs up in another in the absence of planned city-wide expansion. Even if public transport improves, its use is not enough to ease congestion since last-mile connections are not thought through. While low-income housing is being created, large slum areas are demolished together, displacing people from their places of work rather than staggering so that some rebuilding is completed and rehousing in the same area is possible.

The smart city initiative has designed many digital systems to improve public services, but operational silos continue. One department does not share data with another, let alone train own use-based AI on the data.

RESPECTING THE CONSTITUTION

In 1992 the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments did lay the framework for decentralisation, recommending the transfer of funds and

Large amounts have been spent on city infrastructure, but results remain inadequate in the absence of coordination and attention to user needs.

functions to local governments based on awards of State Finance Commissions. But most States either do not set up the commissions regularly or do not listen to them. It is difficult to give up funds and power and there are always excuses such as local corruption or lack of capacity. But the latter cannot survive for decades, as they have done, if strong local systems are in place for accountability and there is sincere training.

There are signs, at last, that the critical bottleneck is being recognised and acted on. Both NITI Aayog and the Economic Survey have flagged the necessity of a master plan for cities. The latter gives the example of Noida in UP where a single authority has delivered much better outcomes than Gurgaon, Haryana, where there are three overlapping authorities. But how is this to be achieved?

In the OUP Handbook I had edited 10 years ago I had suggested that constitutional institutions should have priority and coordination authority. Today technology can enable coordination, once a clear hierarchy is established. In East Asian countries decentralisation is incentivised since local authorities, as residual claimants, benefit from prosperity. In most global cities an empowered mayor is elected and responsible for outcomes. In Indian

cities the elected mayor tends to be a ceremonial head while the Municipal Commissioner, an IAS officer appointed by the State Government, is the real executive. Financial and planning power is not delegated to the locally elected official, who is more likely to be responsive to voter needs.

USING FINANCE

While governance, not finance, is the real constraint, financial powers with constitutional bodies can be used to improve delegation to local authorities. Executive power follows financial power.

The latest Budget does focus on city-economic regions, with an allocation of ₹5,000 crore per region over five years based on reform-cum-growth results. Coordination worsens as peri-urban areas expand with their own authority structures. A single elected authority, with incentives aligned to development, could be imposed as a pre-condition for the region.

The 16th Finance Commission (FC) has a number of initiatives for urban areas. While tax devolution is a State right and has to be formula-based, conditionalities can be imposed on grants. The FC has made liberal use of this freedom. The overall allocation to urban local bodies has doubled and the untied component grew up to 80 per cent giving them more freedom to respond to local needs, but the rest is tied to sanitation systems and audit requirements, including for parastatals, to improve capacity, transparency and accountability. An urbanisation premium of ₹30,000 crore will reduce the incentive to remain rural and deny urban services.

Indian cities' Own Source Revenue (OSR) varies between 20 and 40 per cent of municipal expenditure. Property tax at 0.15 per cent of GDP is much below the 0.3 for low-income and up to 3 per cent for high-income countries. The FC has linked performance grants to OSR growth, and State transfers of at least 20 per cent of the FC basic grant to local governments, thus delinking devolution from underperforming State PCs. Own revenues create natural residual claimants with decision powers.

There is a beginning in relaxing the vital choke points and aligning incentives to improve urban governance and delivery. These changes may also help reverse the underperformance in actual Central spending on urban development over the last three years.

The writer was a member of the previous NPC.

Key Terms and Explanations

Urban governance

• **Meaning:** How a city is planned, financed, regulated, and serviced (water, sanitation, roads, public transport, housing, waste, safety).

Bottlenecks

• **Meaning:** Points where the system “chokes” and slows outcomes even if money is available.

• **Meaning:** Too much decision-making concentrated at State/Centre or in higher bureaucracy, leaving city governments weak.

Urban Local Bodies (ULBs)

• **Meaning:** Constitutionally recognised city governments—**Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, Nagar Panchayats.**

73rd & 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992)

• **Meaning:** Constitutional framework for **decentralisation** to local self-government:

- **73rd:** Panchayats (rural)
- **74th:** Municipalities (urban), with **12th Schedule** (18 functions).

“Funds, Functions, Functionaries” (3Fs)

• **Meaning:** Real decentralisation requires:

- **Functions:** Clear responsibilities
- **Functionaries:** Staff under local control
- **Funds:** Money to deliver

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**
- **Core thesis**
- **Urban India's biggest constraint is governance**, not merely money. Without empowered, accountable city leadership and coordinated institutions, infrastructure spending yields limited improvements in liveability.
- **Key arguments (structured)**
- **Growth is increasingly urban, but quality of life is lagging**
 - Congestion, pollution, overcrowding, chaotic construction, unsafe streets (including unmanaged stray animals) reduce “felt growth”.
- **Regulatory simplification at the top doesn't reach the ground**
 - Businesses and citizens mostly deal with **local** interfaces—permits, inspections, utilities—where reforms often don't penetrate.
- **Institutional fragmentation is the central disease**
 - Multiple agencies operate in the same city without a clear hierarchy or coordination.
 - States retain control over core city functions (water, transport parts), weakening local accountability.
- **Urban transition is under-acknowledged and under-measured**
 - Census lag + fast peri-urban expansion → policy blind spots.
 - Lack of accurate, granular data blocks credible planning and funding.
- **Infrastructure projects are not integrated around user needs**
 - Fixing one choke point shifts congestion elsewhere.
 - Public transport upgrades fail without **last-mile connectivity**.
 - Slum clearance without phased redevelopment breaks livelihoods.
- **Technology exists, but governance silos prevent full benefits**
 - Smart systems are built, but data sharing and institutional learning are weak.
 - City-specific AI requires integrated datasets and capacity.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**
- **Colonial roots (pre-1947)**
 - Municipal administration developed primarily as **bureaucratic control** for sanitation, policing, taxation—limited democratic accountability.
 - Strong district/state oversight created a habit of **top-down governance**.
- **Early post-independence phase (1950s–1980s)**
 - Developmental state expanded planning institutions; cities grew, but local governments remained fiscally weak.
 - Urban policy often remained secondary to rural development priorities.
- **Decentralisation constitutional moment (1992–1993)**
- **74th Amendment** introduced:
 - Constitutional status to municipalities
 - 12th Schedule functions
 - Ward committees, State Election Commission, State Finance Commission provisions
- In practice, **devolution remained partial**.
- **Reform and mission-mode governance (2000s)**
 - Urban reforms pushed through large programmes (e.g., municipal reforms linked to funding).
 - Emphasis on infrastructure creation, but institutional coordination and local autonomy stayed limited.
- **Smart city / AMRUT-era (2010s–2020s)**
 - Greater investment + tech layers (command centres, e-governance).
 - Yet: operational silos, fragmented authorities, and weak mayoral power constrained outcomes.
- **Current direction (mid-2020s onwards, conceptually)**
 - Stronger recognition that **planning + governance architecture** is decisive:
 - City economic regions idea
 - Grants linked to reforms, audits, OSR improvement
 - Incentives to acknowledge urbanisation rather than stay “rural” on paper

Unlocking India's Cities: Solving the Governance Bottleneck

The Problem: The Governance Choke-point

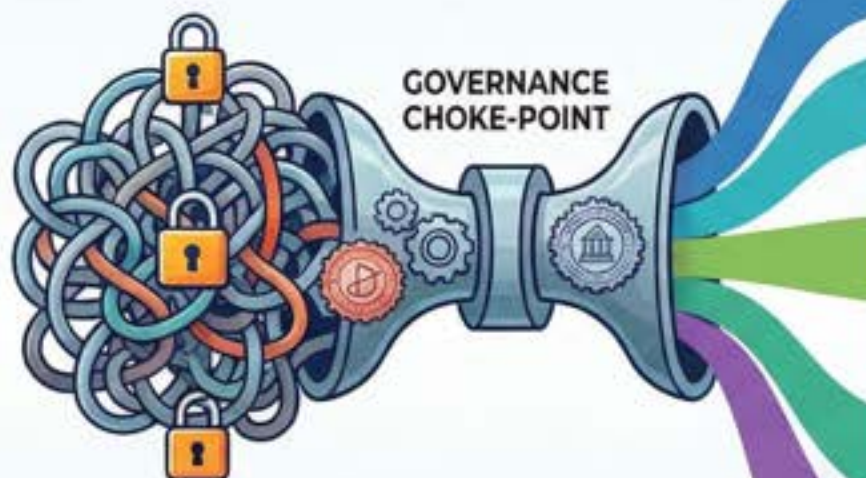
The Paradox of "Hidden Urbanisation"



The "3 Fs" Deficit



Ceremonial Mayers vs. Powerful Commissioners



The Solution: A Roadmap for Reform

Empowered Executive Mayors



Boosting Own Source Revenue (OSR)



Governance Model Comparison

Noida Model



Single Unified Authority: Streamlined coordination & better performance.

Gurugram Model



Multiple Overlapping Agencies: Fragmented accountability & jurisdictional crisis.

Breaking Departmental Data Silos

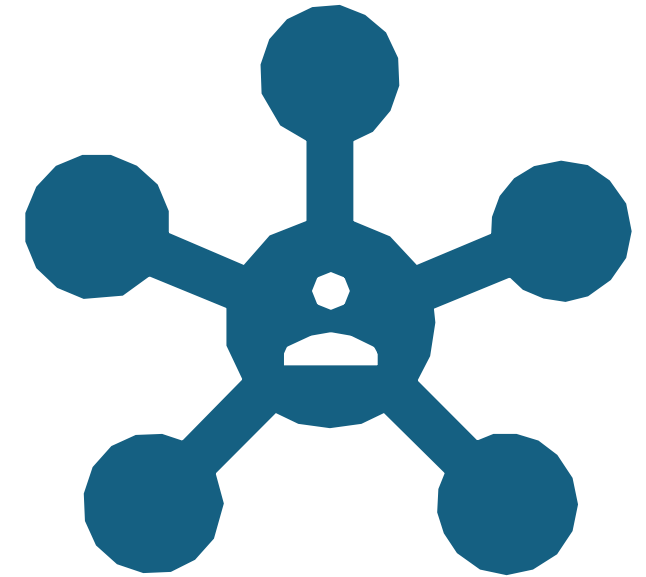


- **Logical and Philosophical Base**
- **(A) Principle of subsidiarity**
- **Idea:** Decisions should be taken at the **lowest effective level**.
- **Logic:** City services are local and need fast feedback loops; higher levels are too distant for micro-priorities.
- **(B) Democratic accountability and legitimacy**
- **Elected executives** are more responsive because voters can reward/punish them.
- When the real executive is appointed, accountability becomes blurred.
- **(C) Fiscal federalism & “finance follows function”**
- If a city has responsibilities, it must have predictable funds and revenue tools.
- **Executive power follows financial power**—who controls budgets controls outcomes.
- **(D) Public choice / principal–agent problem**
- Citizens (principals) want services; multiple agencies (agents) dilute responsibility.
- Fragmentation produces “buck-passing” and low performance.
- **(E) Urban citizenship and dignity**
- Liveable cities relate to dignity: clean air, safe streets, commuting time, housing security.
- Governance failure becomes a justice issue, not only an efficiency issue.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social dimension**
 - Commute time, pollution, and housing insecurity affect health and family life.
 - Poor last-mile connectivity disproportionately hurts women, elderly, and disabled.
 - Displacement breaks informal work networks.
- **Political dimension**
 - Weak mayors dilute democratic accountability.
 - Urban voters often lack a clear “single throat to choke” for failures.
 - Devolution changes power equations across State–local levels.
- **Legal dimension**
 - 74th Amendment provides framework, but State laws and rules decide actual devolution.
 - Issues around municipal powers to levy taxes/fees and enforce bylaws.
 - Need for clear legal basis for metropolitan/regional governance across peri-urban zones.
- **Ethical dimension**
 - Fairness in taxation (property tax updates) vs ability to pay
 - Transparency in procurement and permissions
 - “Right to the city” ethos—participation, inclusion, non-discrimination
- **International dimension**
 - Global best practices: empowered mayors, integrated transport authorities, participatory budgeting.
 - Climate commitments and SDGs push cities to be central actors (clean air, resilient infrastructure).
- **Economic dimension**
 - Cities drive productivity; governance failures impose hidden costs:
 - time lost in traffic
 - health costs from pollution
 - higher logistics and compliance burdens
 - Better OSR + planning improves investment climate and job creation



- **Linkages with NCERTs**
- **NCERT Civics**
- **Class 6, Social and Political Life:** Local government basics; why local governance matters.
- **Class 9, Democratic Politics:** Democratic institutions and accountability (useful for mayor vs commissioner debate).
- **Class 10, Democratic Politics:** Power sharing and federalism—apply logic to third tier.
- **NCERT Political Science**
- **Class 11, Indian Constitution at Work:** Federalism, local self-government, constitutional institutions.
- **Class 12, Politics in India since Independence:** Governance challenges, development priorities, state capacity.
- **NCERT Geography**
- **Class 12, Fundamentals of Human Geography:** Urbanisation, migration, urban systems, settlement patterns.
- **Class 12, India: People and Economy:** Urban growth, regional development, infrastructure.
- **NCERT Economics**
- **Class 11, Indian Economic Development:** Infrastructure and human development (urban services as productivity drivers).
- **Class 12, Macroeconomics (select themes):** Public finance logic (revenues, grants, fiscal capacity).



- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper 2 (Core linkage)**
- **Local governance:** Devolution of powers and finances to local bodies
- **Governance:** Transparency, accountability, citizen charters, e-governance
- **Welfare delivery:** Urban services, housing, sanitation
- **GS Paper 1**
- **Urbanisation:** Problems and remedies; population, migration, slums, planning
- **Society:** Exclusion, informal sector livelihoods
- **GS Paper 3**
- **Infrastructure:** Urban transport, housing, sanitation, logistics
- **Environment:** Air pollution, waste management, urban resilience
- **Inclusive growth:** Urban inequality and service access
- **GS Paper 4 (Ethics)**
- Public service delivery ethics, accountability, integrity in urban regulation
- Ethical issues in data use, surveillance, displacement, prioritisation under scarcity
- **Essay**
- “Urbanisation and India’s development model”
- “Good governance as the real infrastructure”
- “The lived experience of growth”



- **Way Forward**
- **A) Fix governance architecture first**
- **Clarify “who does what”** through State municipal laws aligned with 12th Schedule.
- Create **single-point accountability** for city-wide outcomes (especially transport + land use + utilities coordination).
- Strengthen **Metropolitan Planning Committees** where applicable; make them functional, not symbolic.
- **B) Empower elected leadership meaningfully**
- Move towards a model where the **Mayor (or elected city executive)** has:
 - Real planning authority
 - Budget control
 - Power over key functionaries
- Define the Commissioner’s role as professional executive support with performance accountability, not parallel sovereignty.
- **C) Use finance levers to force real devolution**
- Design grants around:
 - **Audit compliance**
 - **OSR growth**
 - **Service delivery KPIs** (water continuity, waste processing, road quality)
- Ensure predictable State transfers to ULBs so cities can plan multi-year projects.
- **D) Build OSR fairly (not painfully)**
- **Property tax reforms:**
 - GIS mapping, rational valuation, regular updates
 - Improve compliance through nudges + enforcement
- **User charges with equity:**
 - Lifeline tariffs for the poor
 - Cross-subsidy where justified
- Ring-fence revenues for visible service improvements to build trust.

- **UPSC CSE (Mains)**
- **2023 – GS Paper 2 (10 marks, 150 words):**
“The states in India seem reluctant to empower urban local bodies both functionally as well as financially.” Comment.
- **2024 – GS Paper 2 (10 marks, 150 words):**
Analyse the role of local bodies in providing good governance at local level and bring out the pros and cons of merging the rural local bodies with the urban local bodies.
- **UPSC (Prelims) – common recurring themes (question-style areas)**
- 74th Amendment: provisions, 12th Schedule, ward committees, types of municipalities
- Finance Commission grants and local body reforms (audit, accounts)
- Property tax, user charges, municipal finances (conceptual)





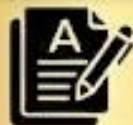
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