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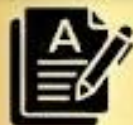
# AXIA IAS ACADEMY

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As Court takes lead in expanding abortion rights and reproductive autonomy, is legislature lagging behind?

## Court shows the way, law must follow



SNEHA BANERJEE

**T**HE MEDICAL Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, 1971, which was most recently amended in 2021, expanded the permissibility of abortions from 20 weeks up to 24 weeks of gestation. Beyond this limit, petitioners have approached the courts for permission and in many instances medical boards and doctors have opposed the requests. In two notable cases this year, the Supreme Court (SC) has permitted abortion beyond 24 weeks with explicit observations upholding women's reproductive autonomy. While the repeated necessity of court intervention, it is true that legislative guarantees towards the right to reproductive autonomy were expanded for late-term abortions.

The most recent case where the SC overturned a Delhi High Court (HC) judgment involved a 33-year-old who contracted through a consensual relationship with a 17-year-old and was not aware of it. On the notification of the minor's mother, a medical consultation revealed a pregnancy at 27 weeks. What followed was an ordeal to access abortion after approaching the Delhi HC, which eventually denied permission based on the recommendation of a medical board at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS). One of the grounds for the medical board's recommendation was that the minor had no psychiatric disorder. However, the fact that her "psychological and emotional well-being" was compromised that she was driven to multiple attempts at self-harm was disregarded. The SC rightly paid heed to this important aspect in its ruling, namely, women's agency need not be scrutinised in such a manner in every case that reaches the courts. It is imperative that the law expand its provisions to sensitively acknowledge the psychological burden of an unintended pregnancy and facilitate access to safe abortions.

The case led to a curative petition by AIIMS. The SC remained steadfast in its position that women cannot be compelled to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term. Their reproductive autonomy cannot be pitted against that of an unborn foetus who gets "too much focus...and not the mother". Establishing norms for "terminative-of-pregnancy" by "medical or surgical methods", the law in India recognises the necessity of healthcare supervision. However, it is noteworthy that the

SC remained adamant that it should "just...render medical services" and cannot "choose for the citizens" who must be given an opportunity to "take an informed decision".

In late-term abortion cases, a contention arises that emerges to be mode of termination, which involves gestational limits. This leads to moral concerns around the "viability" of that foetus and apprehensions of possible "fetocide". The constitutional argument is that the pregnancy should be carried to term instead, and the child be relinquished by the mother, and given up for adoption. The SC has held that "that cannot be the correct approach" whereby the pregnant woman is rendered "subordinate to the child yet to be born". In most such cases of protracted "viability", there is a need for active intervention to ensure a safe birth. The medical board noted this in the most recent case as well.

It is important to question the constitutional grounds on which withholding emancipation in case of an unwanted pregnancy is equated to "fetocide" by medical boards. Asking a woman who is dealing with an unwanted pregnancy to give birth and give the child away for adoption amounts to compounding her trauma. First, adoption rates in India are very low, with an abysmally low number of children getting adopted outside the jurisdiction of the state's institutionalised care. To expect someone to decide to give away their child in this context is extremely unfair. Second, even if adoption can be facilitated smoothly, a woman may not choose to live with the knowledge that she relinquished a child born out of an unwanted pregnancy. It must be recognised that those who request a late-term abortion do so in distress caused by an unwanted pregnancy they could not terminate within the permissible duration for reasons beyond their control. In the two recent cases, the women were not aware that they were pregnant in the first place.

The MTP Act seeks to recognise "anguish" and "grave injury to the mental health of the pregnant woman" in cases of contraceptive failure and rape. The length of pregnancy is not an obstacle for termination at any stage in case of the detection of fetal abnormalities. Moreover, in view of the SC rulings upholding reproductive autonomy as a fundamental right, it is imperative that legislative guarantees be embedded to this effect. If necessary, therefore, to follow a legislative approach where women's anguish caused by unwanted pregnancies can be adequate ground to set aside gestational limits.

The author is assistant professor, Department of Political Science, University of Hyderabad. Views are personal.



CHARU PRAGNA

## Not law, problem lies elsewhere

**A** 40-YEAR-OLD rape survivor. A pregnancy past 20 weeks. A mother approaching the Supreme Court in desperation. When the Court permitted the termination, the case became, almost instantly, a referendum on abortion law. Activists celebrated the judiciary. Parliament, by implication, stood accused of silence, of abandoning women to the courts. I understand that reaction. I do not agree with it.

In the ongoing pro-life versus choice debate, India over the Government of India has, on balance, got this right. The legislation as it stands is not the obstacle. The problem lies elsewhere, in implementation. In action, and in our collective unwillingness to engage honestly with what late-stage termination actually involves, medically and ethically. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act of 1971 was enacted at a time when both legal abortion was not available to women in most of the democratic world and abortion remained criminalised in most developed countries. The United States was still two years away from *Roe v. Wade*. The United Kingdom had only just begun implementing its own liberalisation. India moved early, driven by a stark reality: Criminalising abortion was killing women.

An estimated 5,00,000 abortions occur annually among adolescents in India, with around 70 per cent being unsafe. Approximately 8-11 per cent of maternal deaths are attributed to unsafe abortions.

The legislature acted again in 2021. The amendment extended the gestational limit to 24 weeks for specific categories of women — rape survivors, minors, those facing fatal abnormalities, women confronting changed circumstances and pregnancy. Twenty-four weeks is nearly six months into a pregnancy. In most situations, it is enough time for medical examinations, counselling, second opinions, and reflection. But pregnancies are not always emotionally linear experiences. Parliament recognised this complexity. It also explicitly included unmarried women, correcting a gap in the original law, and strengthened confidentiality protections, ensuring that seeking an abortion did not expose a woman to further harm. The intent was stated plainly: All women, irrespective of marital status, should have access to safe abortions within the legally allowed timeframe, with dignity, autonomy, confidentiality, and justice. This is not the burden of

a legislature that has abandoned women.

The expense, procedure of a late-term comes significantly more difficult once the losses are formed, posing serious and documented risk to the mother. These are not bureaucratic hurdles invented to obstruct women. They are medical realities, and any honest conversation about late-stage abortion must reckon with them. Fetal viability is the other reality that cannot be overlooked easily. Medical science has advanced dramatically. Premature babies born at seven months today are mostly capable of going on to live healthy lives with proper neonatal care. This complicates the moral and legal debate around very late-stage termination.

This does not take away from a woman's right to decide, but it does make the choice more layered, more consequential. Medical-board approval for pregnancies past 24 weeks is not gatekeeping for its own sake. It is a recognition that at this stage, two lives are at the stake. In the Indian context, a foetus even in the womb is referred to as a "jiv" (life). That spiritual dimension of this debate cannot be dismissed as progressive. The law consistently affirms the weight we place on every life. The 24-week framework is, in that sense, the most balanced balance act available between being pro-life and pro-choice.

Every right comes with a tag. The right to terminate a pregnancy is no different. It must be tempered with medical caution, particularly as gestational age advances and the risks to the mother herself become gravely serious. This is precisely what the amended law sought to reduce by bringing women out of illegal clinics and into regulated medical care.

The cases that reach the Supreme Court are exceptional by definition. But such cases are not evidence that the legislature has failed. They are evidence that the framework is working, with the courts stepping in at the margins where human tragedy outpaces the written law.

In fact, the very reason the Supreme Court could intervene at all was because Parliament had already created a legal and medical framework capable of accommodating complexity. The judiciary was not operating outside the law. It was interpreting the law in an extraordinary factual situation. That distinction matters.

What we need today is not a new law but medical research that functions without delay, trained practitioners in every district, not only in cities, the existing law implemented as Parliament intended, and flawed through institutional inertia or social stigma at the grassroots level.

The legislation is not the problem.

The writer is a lawyer, architectural modelmaker, EP.

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Reproductive Autonomy** refers to an individual's right to make independent decisions about their own reproductive health, including whether to continue or terminate a pregnancy. For example, a woman deciding to undergo abortion based on her personal circumstances without needing spousal or parental consent exercises reproductive autonomy.
- **Gestational Limit** is the time duration of pregnancy up to which abortion is legally permitted. Under Indian law, this is typically 20 weeks for general cases and 24 weeks for special categories like rape survivors or minors.
- **Late-term Abortion** refers to termination of pregnancy beyond 24 weeks of gestation. These cases are medically complex and legally require judicial intervention in India due to the absence of clear legislative provisions.
- **Medical Termination of Pregnancy (MTP) Act, 1971** is the primary legislation governing abortion in India. It was amended in 2021 to expand access and increase gestational limits for specific categories of women.
- **Foetal Viability** describes the stage of pregnancy when a foetus can potentially survive outside the womb with medical assistance. Modern medicine has pushed this threshold earlier, creating ethical complications for late-term abortion debates.
- **Foeticide** refers to the deliberate termination of a viable foetus. Medical boards sometimes express concern that late-term abortion procedures could amount to foeticide, especially when the foetus demonstrates signs of viability.
- **Medical Board** under the MTP Act is a committee of doctors constituted to evaluate requests for abortions beyond 24 weeks. These boards assess medical necessity, potential risks, and provide recommendations to courts.
- **Preterm Birth** in the context of late-term abortion refers to the medical procedure that induces labour prematurely, potentially resulting in a live birth that requires resuscitation or intensive care.
- **Contraceptive Failure** occurs when birth control methods fail to prevent pregnancy despite proper use. The MTP Act recognizes this as a ground for abortion, acknowledging that even responsible family planning can result in unwanted pregnancies.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- **Core Thesis**

- The central debate is whether India's abortion framework should remain a **conditional medical-permission model** or move more clearly towards a **rights-based reproductive autonomy model**. The tension lies between two positions.
- One position argues that courts have expanded reproductive autonomy and therefore the law must now follow. The other position argues that the law is already broadly balanced, and the real weakness lies in poor implementation, lack of access, delayed medical boards, inadequate counselling, and social stigma.
  - **Argument 1: Courts Have Advanced Reproductive Rights**
- Indian courts have increasingly recognised that reproductive choice is part of personal liberty, privacy, dignity, and bodily autonomy. In many cases, courts have permitted termination beyond statutory limits where continuing pregnancy would cause severe trauma.
- This reflects a compassionate constitutional approach. The court is not merely reading the statute mechanically; it is also considering the lived reality of the woman.
  - **Argument 2: Law Still Carries a Permission-Based Logic**
- Although the MTP Act is progressive compared to complete criminalisation, it does not fully recognise abortion as an independent right. The woman often needs approval from doctors, boards, or courts.
- This becomes especially harsh in late-term pregnancy, minor rape survivor cases, foetal abnormality cases, and situations where the woman discovers pregnancy late due to ignorance, fear, family pressure, or lack of medical access.
  - **Argument 3: Mental Health Must Not Be Marginalised**
- A major issue is the tendency to treat mental trauma as less serious than physical injury. But unwanted pregnancy, especially after rape or coercion, can be deeply damaging.
- A rights-sensitive system must recognise that psychological harm is not imaginary or secondary. It is central to human dignity.
  - **Argument 4: The Counterargument — Law Is Not the Main Problem**
- The opposing view argues that the MTP Act already provides a reasonable legal framework. It allows termination up to 24 weeks for specified categories and beyond 24 weeks for substantial foetal abnormalities.
- According to this view, the real problems are late reporting, unsafe abortions, poor district-level medical infrastructure, lack of trained providers, stigma, and confusion among hospitals. Therefore, the answer is not necessarily a new law, but better implementation.
  - **Argument 5: Late-Term Pregnancy Creates Genuine Ethical Complexity**
- Late-stage termination is morally and medically complex because the foetus may have developed significantly. The State has a legitimate interest in protecting potential life.
- However, this concern cannot erase the woman's rights. The real challenge is to balance foetal interest, maternal health, medical feasibility, and constitutional dignity.
  - **Conceptual Flow**
- **Unwanted pregnancy → medical/legal permission → delay → mental trauma → court intervention → constitutional expansion → demand for legislative clarity**

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Pre-Independence: Criminalisation Under Colonial Law**

- Before independence, abortion was largely governed by colonial criminal law. The Indian Penal Code treated causing miscarriage as an offence, except where it was done in good faith to save the woman's life.
- This reflected Victorian morality, patriarchal control, and a limited understanding of women's autonomy. The woman was not seen primarily as a rights-bearing person; pregnancy was treated as a matter of morality, family honour, and criminal control.

- **Early Post-Independence Phase: Public Health Concern**

- After independence, India gradually recognised that criminalisation did not stop abortions. It only pushed women towards unsafe procedures.
- Unsafe abortions led to maternal deaths, infections, infertility, and exploitation by unqualified practitioners. The issue therefore moved from morality to public health.

- **1960s: Shantilal Shah Committee**

- The Government appointed the Shantilal Shah Committee to examine abortion law reform. The committee recognised that strict criminalisation was harming women, especially poor and vulnerable women.
- This was a turning point. The debate shifted from punishment to regulated medical access.

- **1971: Enactment of MTP Act**

- The MTP Act, 1971 permitted abortion under certain conditions. It was progressive for its time because it reduced unsafe abortions and recognised limited reproductive choice.
- However, it remained doctor-centric. The medical practitioner's opinion became the legal gateway.

- **1990s: Sex Selection Concerns**

- With the spread of ultrasound technology, India faced a serious problem of sex-selective abortion. This led to the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques framework.
- This created a separate but connected debate. The State had to prevent sex selection without restricting legitimate abortion access.

- **2000s: Amendments and Access Expansion**

- Amendments and rules sought to improve provider availability and institutional access. Yet, rural women, unmarried women, adolescents, and poor women continued to face barriers.
- The problem was no longer only what the law said, but whether women could actually access safe services.

- **2010s: Constitutional Rights Jurisprudence**

- The Supreme Court began linking reproductive choice with dignity, privacy, decisional autonomy, and bodily integrity. The right to privacy judgment strengthened the idea that intimate personal choices deserve constitutional protection.
- This period constitutionalised reproductive rights.

- **2021: MTP Amendment**

- The 2021 amendment extended the upper gestational limit to 24 weeks for specified categories and recognised unmarried women more clearly in some contexts. It also introduced provisions relating to medical boards for foetal abnormalities.
- This was an important reform, but it did not completely move to a full rights-based model.

- **Present Phase: Court-Led Expansion and Implementation Gap**

- The current phase is marked by court interventions in hard cases: rape survivors, minors, late discovery of pregnancy, foetal abnormalities, and mental health trauma.
- The deeper question now is: Should women have to approach courts at all for deeply personal reproductive decisions? A mature legal system should reduce the need for litigation by creating clear, compassionate, time-bound administrative pathways.



## NAVIGATING REPRODUCTIVE AUTONOMY IN INDIA: A COMPREHENSIVE IAS STUDY GUIDE

### CURRENT LEGAL CONFLICT (MTP ACT 2021)



- AUTONOMY (ART. 21)
- PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING
- FETAL VIABILITY
- MEDICAL BOARD SCRUTINY

#### MTP 2021 BASICS

- 24 weeks limit
  - Re ensure per conduction
- Exceptions
  - For heprocortical mavevement



### KEY DEBATES



#### COURTS SET THE BAR

(Expanding Rights)

- MTP is too rigid
- Focus on anguish
- Renource



#### IMPLEMENTATION IS FLAWED

(Implementation Gap)

- Stigma, rural access,
- Institutional hesitation



### MULTIDIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS

#### SOCIAL

- stigma, taboos, losnsses



#### POLITICAL

Judiciary vs. Legislature



#### ETHICAL

Right to Life vs. Autonomy



#### ECONOMIC

- Unsafe abortion burden



### WAY FORWARD & UPSC RELEVANCE



#### WAY FORWARD

- Decriminalize from IPC,
- streamline boards, sex ed



#### UPSC RELEVANCE

- GS2: Health & Justice
- GS4: Bioethics, compassion



- **Logical and Philosophical Base**

- **4.1 Liberal Autonomy**

- The liberal argument begins with the individual's right to self-determination. A woman's body cannot be treated as an instrument of family, society, religion, or the State.
- Pregnancy is not merely a biological condition. It affects physical health, mental well-being, education, employment, social identity, family relations, and future life chances. Therefore, reproductive choice is central to liberty.

- **4.2 Constitutional Morality**

- Constitutional morality requires institutions to protect individual rights even when social morality is conservative. It prevents majoritarian or patriarchal values from overriding dignity.
- In this issue, constitutional morality asks courts, doctors, and administrators to treat women as autonomous citizens, not as moral suspects.

- **4.3 Feminist Ethics**

- Feminist ethics highlights that laws often look neutral but operate unequally. A wealthy urban woman may access safe private medical care quickly, while a poor rural woman may face delay, stigma, police pressure, and lack of doctors.
- Therefore, equality must be substantive, not merely formal.

- **4.4 Ethics of Care**

- The ethics of care asks institutions to respond with empathy, context, and sensitivity. It recognises that a minor rape survivor or a woman carrying a foetus with severe abnormality needs support, not procedural humiliation.
- A caring State does not merely ask whether a form is complete. It asks whether the person is safe, informed, heard, and protected.

- **4.5 Sanctity of Life Argument**

- The opposing philosophical position is based on the sanctity of life. It argues that the foetus has moral significance, especially as pregnancy advances.
- This view cannot be dismissed casually. A democratic legal system must consider potential life. But the key question is whether potential life can override the actual life, dignity, and autonomy of the woman in all circumstances. A balanced system says no.

- **4.6 Proportionality**

- The doctrine of proportionality helps balance competing interests. Restrictions on abortion may be legitimate only if they pursue a valid aim, are suitable, necessary, and do not impose excessive burden.
- For example, preventing unsafe procedures is valid. But making a rape survivor run from hospital to court may be disproportionate.

- **4.7 Epistemic Justice**

- Epistemic justice means taking seriously the knowledge and lived experience of the person affected. In reproductive matters, the woman knows her trauma, fear, social condition, and future consequences.
- When institutions dismiss her voice and rely only on technical reports, they create epistemic injustice.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**

- **A. Social Dimension**

- Reproductive autonomy is deeply connected with patriarchy, marriage norms, family honour, sexuality, and stigma. In many families, pregnancy is not treated as the woman's personal condition but as a collective social issue.
- Unmarried pregnancy, adolescent pregnancy, and pregnancy after rape are especially stigmatised. This social pressure delays disclosure and medical consultation.
- A socially sensitive approach must therefore include counselling, sex education, family support, and protection from violence.

- **B. Political Dimension**

- The issue tests the political willingness of the State to protect women's rights beyond symbolic empowerment. Many governments speak about women-led development, but reproductive autonomy remains politically sensitive.
- Legislatures often avoid abortion reform because it involves morality, religion, family values, and electoral risk. As a result, courts become the primary site of rights expansion.
- This creates a democratic question: Should courts repeatedly decide individual cases, or should Parliament create a clearer rights-based framework?

- **C. Legal Dimension**

- The legal dimension involves the MTP Act, penal law, child protection law, privacy jurisprudence, equality principles, and constitutional morality.
- The core legal challenge is balancing three interests:
  - the woman's autonomy and health,
  - the State's interest in regulating medical procedures,
  - the moral and legal concern around foetal development.
- Good law must reduce uncertainty and prevent unnecessary litigation.

- **D. Ethical Dimension**

- The ethical issue is not simply "pro-life versus pro-choice." The real ethical challenge is more complex.
- A woman may be carrying an unwanted pregnancy due to rape, failed contraception, foetal abnormality, poverty, domestic violence, or social abandonment. Ethics must consider her lived reality.
- Bioethics provides four principles: autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice. A humane system must respect all four.

- **E. International Dimension**

- Globally, abortion laws vary widely. Some countries recognise broader reproductive autonomy, while others impose severe restrictions.
- International experience shows that criminalisation does not eliminate abortion. It mainly increases unsafe abortions, especially among poor women.
- India's challenge is to create a model rooted in its constitutional values, public health realities, and social context.

- **F. Economic Dimension**

- Unsafe abortion has economic costs. It increases emergency healthcare burden, maternal morbidity, loss of work, and long-term health complications.
- For women, forced pregnancy may interrupt education, employment, mobility, and financial independence.
- Thus, reproductive autonomy is also an economic empowerment issue. A woman's ability to plan her reproductive life affects her life chances.

- **Linkages with NCERTs**

- **Class 12 Sociology - Indian Society, Chapter 5: Patterns of Social Inequality and Exclusion** directly connects to how caste, class, and gender intersect to shape reproductive health outcomes. The chapter's discussion of multiple marginalizations helps explain why disadvantaged women face compounded barriers to abortion access. Students can analyze how social stratification produces differential health outcomes.
- **Class 11 Political Science - Constitution at Work, Chapter 2: Rights in the Indian Constitution** provides the framework for understanding fundamental rights claims to reproductive autonomy. The chapter's treatment of Article 21's right to life as including dignity, privacy, and bodily integrity supports judicial expansion arguments. The scope and limits of fundamental rights directly apply.
- **Class 12 Political Science - Politics in India Since Independence, Chapter 5: Challenges to and Restoration of Congress System** discusses the political context when the MTP Act was passed in 1971. Understanding the era's political dynamics helps explain why progressive legislation emerged when it did. The chapter on the emergency also helps contextualize population control policies.
- **Class 10 Economics - Understanding Economic Development, Chapter 1: Development** links reproductive autonomy to broader development indicators. The chapter's treatment of quality of life beyond income measures includes health outcomes and women's empowerment. Abortion access correlates with multiple development dimensions.
- **Class 9 Economics - Chapter 3: Poverty as a Challenge** connects reproductive health to poverty dynamics. Poor women face higher rates of unwanted pregnancy and lower access to safe abortion. The poverty chapter helps students understand economic barriers as structural constraints rather than individual failings.
- **Class 12 Biology - Reproduction, Chapter 4: Reproductive Health** provides the biological foundations for understanding pregnancy, gestation, and abortion procedures. The chapter's treatment of contraceptive methods, reproductive tract infections, and maternal health creates necessary background knowledge for evaluating medical aspects of the debate.
- **Class 11 Psychology - Chapter 3: The Bases of Human Behaviour** contributes to understanding psychological distress from unwanted pregnancy. The chapter's treatment of stress, trauma, and mental health helps students appreciate why pregnancy continuation imposes psychological costs even without diagnosed psychiatric disorders.
- **Class 12 Geography - India People and Economy, Chapter 5: Health Indicators** provides spatial perspective on regional disparities in healthcare infrastructure. Mapping abortion service availability against population distribution reveals the geographic inequalities that judicial expansion alone cannot remedy.

## GS Paper 1 (Society)

- Topics: Role of women and women's organisations, population and associated issues, poverty and developmental issues, social empowerment.
- Abortion policy directly impacts gender relations, fertility behaviour, and empowerment.

## GS Paper 2 (Polity and Governance)

- Topics: Functions and responsibilities of the Union and States in health, issues relating to development and management of social sector services, role of judiciary, mechanisms for protection of vulnerable sections.
- The interplay between MTP Act, judicial interventions, and administrative implementation fits squarely here.

## GS Paper 3 (Economy, Health, Demography)

- Topics: Inclusive growth, health, human resources, demographic trends, and social sector initiatives.
- Safe abortion services are part of reproductive health strategies and impact demographic and economic outcomes.

## GS Paper 4 (Ethics)

- Topics: Values in public administration, ethical issues in medical practice, moral reasoning, and case-studies on conflicting values.
- Doctors' dilemmas, judicial balancing, and bureaucratic discretion provide rich ethical case material.

## Way forward

### Clarify and update legal framework

- Amend statutory provisions to clearly recognise women's reproductive autonomy as a central value, while maintaining reasonable safeguards for late-term viability.
- Simplify categories and grounds so that both doctors and women understand their rights and obligations.
- Ensure coherence across related laws—MTP, POCSO, PCPNDT, and criminal provisions.

### Strengthen administrative mechanisms

- Establish functional, time-bound medical boards at district or regional levels, with clear standard operating procedures.
- Train health officials and hospital administrators to treat abortion as a core health service, not an exceptional risk.
- Introduce accountability measures for unjustified delays or refusals.

### Focus on minors and vulnerable women

- Develop special protocols for minors, rape survivors, and women with mental health conditions, prioritising their best interests and confidentiality.
- Provide counselling, legal aid, and social support to help them navigate complex decisions.
- Engage families and communities to reduce stigma and violence around pregnancy decisions.

### Build capacity and trust among medical professionals

- Integrate legal and ethical training on reproductive rights into medical education and in-service programmes.
- Offer institutional support and clear guidelines so doctors feel secure when acting in good faith within the law.
- Encourage ethical reflection and peer discussion on hard cases.

### Improve public awareness and social attitudes

- Conduct awareness campaigns about legal rights, safe services, and the dangers of unsafe abortions.
- Use school curricula, media, and community engagement to promote respectful attitudes towards women's autonomy.
- Work with civil society groups and women's organisations to bridge gaps between policy and practice.

### Promote evidence-based policy

- Collect and analyse data on abortion services, especially late-term cases, to identify patterns of exclusion or delay.
- Use this evidence to refine laws, guidelines, and resource allocation.
- Encourage independent research and public debate to keep policy responsive and grounded.

## UPSC GS 1 – Society

- 2015: “Women empowerment in India needs gender budgeting. Discuss.”
- 2013: “Discuss the changes in the status of women in India in the past two decades.”

## UPSC GS 2 – Polity and Governance

- 2021: “Judicial legislation is antithetical to the doctrine of separation of powers as envisaged in the Indian Constitution. Comment.”
- 2017: “Examine the scope of Article 21 in the light of the recent judgment of the Supreme Court on the Right to Privacy.”
- 2016: “Discuss the role of the judiciary in upholding citizen’s rights and promoting justice in India.”
- 2014: “Critically examine the role of the Parliament in ensuring accountability of the executive.”

## UPSC GS 3 – Health and Social Sector

- 2018: “Examine the role of public health system in India in addressing the challenges of maternal and child health.”
- 2013: “What do you understand by social sector? Explain its components.”

## UPSC GS 4 – Ethics

- 2015: Case-study questions on medical ethics and conflicting values in public administration.
- 2019: “What do you understand by the terms ‘public service values’ and ‘professional values’?” (Can be linked to doctors’ duties.)

## Essay Paper

- Various years: Questions on “Women’s empowerment”, “Health, education and human development”, “Judiciary and democracy”, etc., where reproductive rights cases can be used as illustrations.

# Coal gasification emerges as a priority

Picture a lump of coal. For decades, coal in India had a singular role — to be burned for power. Today, that same lump can be transformed into fertiliser, steel inputs, transport fuels, and hydrogen, redefining it from a combustion fuel into a strategic industrial feedstock. This transformation, enabled by coal gasification, is no longer experimental. It is fast becoming a national priority.

At its core, gasification is a chemical, not thermal, process. Coal is heated at 700–1,300°C in a low-oxygen environment, producing synthetic gas (syngas), a mixture of hydrogen and carbon monoxide. This immediate unlocks an entire value chain — ammonia, urea, methanol, synthetic natural gas, and petrochemical feedstocks. In a resource-constrained economy, this is not merely technological diversification, it is value recombination.

India's recent moves signal a shift from hesitation to intent. Underground Coal Gasification (UCG), where coal is converted in situ without mining, is being piloted in Jharkhand. Eastern Heavy Electricals Ltd (EHEL) has developed indigenous gasification technology suited to India's high-ash coal, to produce high-value methanol. Simultaneously, the private sector is emerging as a serious participant.

The transition is underpinned by India's unique resource position. India produced over 1.047 million tonnes of coal in FY25, crossing the one-billion-tonne mark alongside China. It holds nearly 199 billion tonnes of proven reserves and 404 billion tonnes total geological reserves, one of the largest coal endowments globally. Yet nearly 80 per cent of the mined coal is still burnt for power. This is serious underutilisation of an advantageous natural endowment.

The urgency is amplified by import dependence. India imports 88 per cent of crude oil, over 90 per cent of methanol, and 13–15 per cent of ammonia, with ammonia imports alone costing \$982 million (2024). Each geopolitical disruption, from the Strait of Hormuz to tariff regimes, translates directly into inflation. Coal gasification offers a strategic domestic hedge.

Estimates suggest a scaled gasification programme could reduce imports by \$3 billion annually and generate savings of ₹60,000 crore–90,000 crore through domestic fertiliser and chemical production. This is not just energy transition but a macroeconomic stabilisation lever.

Policy and investment momentum reflect this shift. The ₹3,300 crore viability gap funding scheme (2014) targets 100 mt of gasification capacity by 2030: ₹4,050 crore for public sector units and ₹4,450 crore for private players. The Cabinet on Wednesday approved a ₹2,500 crore unified incentive scheme, with a maximum support of ₹1,000 crore per project (up from ₹1,000 crore for private projects and ₹1,200 crore for public projects), targeting self-reliance in liquefied natural gas (LNG), urea, ammonia, methanol, and direct reduced iron. Complementing this framework is a proposed ₹50,000 crore plan to revive 20,000 Mw of idle gas-based capacity. Seven major gasification projects worth ₹64,000 crore across Maharashtra, Odisha, and West Bengal are already underway. Experts estimate 13–20 large complexes will be needed between 2026 and 2030 to meet the 100 mt target.

The project pipeline reflects an ecosystem that looks credible. Policy, technology, capital, and execution are converging. Key developments include the Coal India Ltd-BJGL joint venture at Lakhaspur, Odisha (₹11,782 crore); Coal India-GAIL Authority of India Ltd (GAIL) joint venture at Sonepur Bazar, West Bengal (₹13,052 crore); and IIL-Steel Authority of India Ltd joint venture at Durgapur Steel Plant commissioning by FY29. The ₹1,000-crore Talcher Fertiliser Plant in Odisha, India's first coal gasification-based urea project producing 1.27 million tonnes annually, has been developed as a joint venture between GAIL, Coal India, Rashtriya Chemicals & Fertilizers Ltd and Fertilizer Corporation of India Ltd, was inaugurated by the Prime Minister in September 2026.

Private sector initiatives are equally significant. Jindal Steel's Aardr facility, among the world's largest syngas-based steel plants, is operational, with new

projects in Raigarh in Maharashtra. New Era Cleantech's \$2.5-billion coal-to-ethanol investment and NLC India's lignite-to-methanol project further expand the ecosystem. Recent developments indicate deepening engineering and execution capability: LAT Energy Hydrocarbon Ombone has secured a large order from Bharat Coal Gasification and Chemicals Ltd in Odisha. The total pipeline now exceeds ₹85,000 crore. More large Indian companies are preparing to enter.

What distinguishes the current moment is the alignment of five enabling conditions: Abundant domestic coal supply, India-adapted technology, strong policy backing, rising private participation, and a geopolitical environment enabling import dependence.

The economic logic is compelling. Syngas from domestic coal can substitute for imported LNG, supply farmers with home-grown urea, reduce coking coal imports in steel, and bridge the hydrogen economy transition. But this is also where caution is warranted. Gasification projects are capital-intensive, technologically complex, and highly sensitive to global price cycles. India has faced this before. When oil prices declined in the past, interest in gasification waned. China, by contrast, persisted. Both countries began exploring gasification simultaneously, but China treated it as a strategic priority, deploying patient capital across price cycles. Today, China gasifies over 80 plants annually and dominates global methanol and ammonia production through coal-derived syngas. India's output is a mere 3–4 per cent of that scale.

India now stands at an inflection point. The debate on coal is often framed as one between continuation and transition. Gasification reframes it entirely. From combustion to conversion, from fuel to feedstock, from constraint to opportunity, from black to green. If executed strategically, it can redefine energy security, industrial policy, and economic and environmental resilience.

One wonders why this transformation was delayed for decades.

The author is an infrastructure expert. He is also the founder & managing trustee of The Infra-Vison Foundation. With inputs from Mihir Chatterjee



**INFRATALK**  
VINAYAK CHATTERJEE

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Coal Gasification**

- Coal gasification is a chemical process in which coal is converted into synthesis gas, commonly called **syngas**, under high temperature and controlled oxygen conditions. Unlike ordinary coal burning, where coal is fully combusted to produce heat, gasification partially converts coal into useful gaseous intermediates.

- In simple terms, instead of burning coal directly in a thermal power plant, coal is processed to produce a gas that can later be used to make fertilisers, methanol, hydrogen, steel inputs or synthetic natural gas. This changes coal from a low-value fuel into a higher-value industrial raw material.

- **Syngas**

- Syngas is mainly a mixture of **hydrogen and carbon monoxide**. It is called “synthesis gas” because it can be used to synthesise several industrial products. For example, syngas can be converted into methanol, ammonia, urea, synthetic fuels and chemicals.

- For UPSC, syngas is important because it links energy security, fertiliser security, industrial policy and climate transition in one concept.

- **Underground Coal Gasification**

- Underground Coal Gasification, or UCG, refers to converting coal into gas while it is still underground. The coal need not be mined physically. Oxygen, air or steam is injected underground, and the resulting gas is brought to the surface.

- This can be useful for coal seams that are deep, difficult to mine or economically unattractive. However, it also raises concerns about groundwater contamination, subsidence and monitoring challenges.

- **Coal-to-Chemicals**

- Coal-to-chemicals means using coal-derived syngas to produce chemicals such as methanol, ammonia, urea, olefins and other petrochemical feedstocks. This is significant for India because many such inputs are currently imported or produced using imported natural gas.

- **Methanol Economy**

- Methanol can be used as a fuel, fuel-blending component, chemical feedstock and industrial solvent. A methanol economy means building an industrial system where methanol becomes a major energy and chemical carrier.

- Coal gasification can support this by producing methanol from domestic coal, though environmental safeguards are necessary.

- **Direct Reduced Iron**

- Direct Reduced Iron, or DRI, is iron produced from iron ore without melting it fully in a blast furnace. Syngas can be used as a reducing agent in this process. This is important because India’s steel sector depends heavily on coking coal imports.

- **Viability Gap Funding**

- Viability Gap Funding is government financial support given to make large infrastructure or industrial projects commercially viable. Coal gasification projects are capital-intensive, so such support reduces investor risk and encourages private participation.

- **Strategic Feedstock**

- A strategic feedstock is a raw material that supports national economic security. Coal gasification treats domestic coal as a strategic input for chemicals, fertilisers, steel and energy rather than merely as a polluting fuel.



- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Colonial Period: Coal as the Fuel of Empire**

- Coal mining in India began during the colonial period, especially around the Raniganj coalfields. Coal became important for railways, steam engines, industries and colonial extraction. At this stage, coal was viewed mainly as a fuel for transport and industrial production.
- The logic was simple: coal powered the machinery of colonial commerce.

- **Early Post-Independence Phase: Coal for Nation-Building**

- After independence, coal became central to India's development model. Heavy industries, railways, thermal power plants, steel plants and public-sector undertakings depended on coal. The Nehruvian model of industrialisation treated coal as a foundation of self-reliance.
- Coal was not yet seen as a chemical feedstock on a large scale. It was mainly seen as a source of power and heat.

- **Nationalisation Phase**

- In the 1970s, coal mines were nationalised to ensure planned development, worker protection and energy security. Coal India emerged as the dominant institutional actor. The objective was to secure coal supply for power, steel and heavy industry.
- This phase strengthened state control but did not deeply diversify coal use.

- **Liberalisation and Import Dependence**

- After 1991, India's economy expanded rapidly. Demand for power, fertilisers, steel, petrochemicals and transport fuels increased. Domestic coal production rose, but India also became more dependent on imported crude oil, natural gas, coking coal and chemical feedstocks.
- The contradiction became sharper: India had coal, but still imported many coal-substitutable industrial inputs.

- **Climate Era and Clean Coal Debate**

- From the 2000s onward, climate change, air pollution and energy transition entered policy debates. Coal became environmentally controversial. At the same time, India could not abandon coal abruptly because of power demand, employment and industrial dependence.
- This created space for "clean coal" technologies, including washing, supercritical thermal plants, carbon capture and gasification.

- **Recent Phase: Gasification as Strategic Policy**

- In recent years, coal gasification has gained policy momentum through targets, incentive schemes, public-sector projects and private-sector interest. The emphasis has shifted from experimental pilots to national-scale industrial deployment.
- The current phase marks a transition from coal as a fuel of necessity to coal as a feedstock of strategy.



# INDIA'S COAL GASIFICATION PRIORITY: A COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGIC ANALYSIS FOR UPSC PREPARATION

ON BEHALF OF AXIA IAS ACADEMY

## The Shift: From Black to Green



## Understanding the Process: High-Temperature Gasification



## Unlocking the Entire Value Chain



## Strategic Importance & Policy



**Strategic Domestic Hedge**  
(against geopolitics, against geopolitics, e.g., Strait of Hormuz)

- Policy**
- VGF ₹8,500 Cr
  - Unified Incentive Scheme ₹37,500 Cr
  - Target 100 mt by 2030
  - Key milestones (Talcher, Gall-CIL-RCF-FCIL)
  - Comparison with China's 80mmpta

## UPSC Relevant Concepts

- Energy Security (GS Paper 3)**
- Indigenization of Technology**
- Environmental Management (CS Paper 3 & Ethics)**
- Essay Themes**

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"Rise above the Rest"

- **Logical and Philosophical Base**
- **Logic of Strategic Autonomy**
  - Coal gasification rests on the philosophy of strategic autonomy. A country that depends heavily on imported oil, gas, ammonia, methanol and coking coal remains vulnerable to geopolitical shocks. Domestic coal-based syngas offers an alternative route.
  - This does not mean isolation from global markets. It means reducing excessive dependence where domestic capacity can be built.
- **Developmental State Logic**
  - The idea also reflects the developmental state model. The state identifies a strategic sector, provides incentives, reduces risk, mobilises public-sector enterprises and invites private investment.
  - Here, the market alone may not invest because projects are capital-heavy and technologically complex. Therefore, state support becomes necessary.
- **Utilitarian Argument**
  - From a utilitarian viewpoint, coal gasification is defended on the ground that it may produce wider social and economic benefits: lower import bills, fertiliser security, industrial jobs, steel-sector support and better use of domestic resources.
  - The ethical question is whether these benefits outweigh environmental and social costs.
- **Pragmatic Environmentalism**
  - A purely idealistic approach may demand rapid coal exit. A purely industrial approach may ignore climate costs. Coal gasification sits between these two extremes. It accepts that India still needs coal in the medium term but argues that coal should be used more productively and with better safeguards.
  - This is a form of pragmatic environmentalism.
- **Philosophical Tension**
  - The deeper tension is between **developmental justice** and **ecological justice**. India needs growth, jobs and industrial capacity. But future generations need a stable climate, clean air and water security.
  - Coal gasification is acceptable only if it respects both sides of this moral balance.
- **Epistemological Angle**
  - The issue also reflects a shift in knowledge: coal is no longer viewed only as a black rock to be burnt. It is being understood as part of an integrated carbon, chemical and industrial system.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**

- **Social Dimension**

- Coal gasification can create jobs in mining, engineering, plant operation, transport, chemicals and manufacturing. It can support industrial towns and backward regions if projects are located near coal belts.

- However, the social cost can be high if land acquisition, pollution, labour safety and local livelihoods are ignored. Coal-bearing regions often have tribal, forest-dependent and economically vulnerable communities. Therefore, social consent is as important as technical feasibility.

- **Political Dimension**

- The issue connects with energy security, national self-reliance, industrial policy and regional development. Governments may support gasification because it offers a domestic alternative to imports and creates visible infrastructure.

- At the same time, it can become politically sensitive because coal is linked with climate commitments, pollution and local protests.

- **Legal Dimension**

- Coal gasification projects require compliance with mining laws, environmental laws, forest laws, pollution-control norms, land acquisition rules and labour regulations. Underground coal gasification also needs clear liability rules in case of groundwater damage or subsidence.

- Legal clarity is essential because investors need certainty and citizens need protection.

- **Ethical Dimension**

- The ethical issue is not whether coal is good or bad in absolute terms. The real question is whether its use is responsible, transparent and fair.

- Ethically, projects must protect local communities, reduce emissions, avoid ecological damage and ensure that benefits are not captured only by industry.

- **International Dimension**

- India imports large quantities of energy and industrial feedstocks. Coal gasification can reduce exposure to geopolitical disruptions in West Asia, maritime chokepoints and global price shocks.

- Internationally, however, India must also manage climate diplomacy. A large coal-based industrial push may face criticism unless accompanied by credible emission-reduction technologies.

- **Economic Dimension**

- The economic case is strong in terms of import substitution, domestic value addition, fertiliser security, steel-sector support and industrial diversification.

- But the economic risk is also real. Capital cost, technology risk, global price volatility and carbon-pricing pressures may affect long-term viability. Hence, careful prioritisation is necessary.

- **Linkages with NCERTs**
- **Class 8 Science — Coal and Petroleum**
  - This chapter directly explains coal, petroleum, natural gas and fossil fuels. It helps students understand why coal is called a non-renewable resource and why overdependence on fossil fuels creates environmental concerns.
  - Coal gasification can be linked here as an advanced use of coal beyond simple burning.
- **Class 8 Geography — Resources**
  - This chapter explains natural resources, their classification and sustainable use. Coal gasification fits well because it shows how the value of a resource depends not only on its availability but also on technology, governance and usage pattern.
- **Class 10 Geography — Minerals and Energy Resources**
  - This is one of the strongest NCERT linkages. The chapter discusses coal, petroleum, natural gas, conventional energy sources and energy conservation.
  - Coal gasification can be used as an example of moving from conventional coal use to diversified industrial use.
- **Class 10 Geography — Manufacturing Industries**
  - Gasification supports fertiliser, steel, chemical and fuel industries. This chapter helps students connect raw materials, industrial location, energy supply and value addition.
- **Class 11 Economics — Indian Economic Development**
  - The themes of infrastructure, industrialisation, energy, sustainable development and import dependence are directly connected. Coal gasification can be used to discuss how economic planning tries to balance growth and sustainability.
- **Class 11 Geography — India: Physical Environment**
  - This helps in understanding the distribution of coal resources, geological formations, river systems and environmental constraints. Water availability and land use are important for gasification projects.
- **Class 12 Geography — India: People and Economy**
  - This is highly relevant for mineral resources, energy planning, industrial regions, transport networks and regional development. Coal gasification can be placed within the broader geography of resource-based industrialisation.
- **Class 12 Economics — Macroeconomics and Development**
  - The issue connects with import bills, current account balance, subsidies, industrial investment and public finance. It is useful for understanding how energy choices influence macroeconomic stability.

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- **GS Paper 1**

- Coal gasification connects with the distribution of key natural resources, industrial location, mineral belts and regional development. It can be used in questions on coalfields, steel industries, fertiliser plants and energy-resource geography.

- **GS Paper 2**

- The governance angle includes policy design, centre-state coordination, environmental regulation, public-sector enterprises, private participation and strategic autonomy. It also links to international relations through energy security and import dependence.

- **GS Paper 3**

- This is the strongest paper for the issue. It directly connects with energy security, infrastructure, industrial policy, inclusive growth, environmental pollution, climate change, science and technology, innovation and resource mobilisation.

- Coal gasification can be used in answers on Atmanirbhar Bharat, Make in India, energy transition, fertiliser security and clean coal technologies.

- **GS Paper 4**

- Ethics linkages include intergenerational justice, environmental ethics, public accountability, distributive justice and responsible governance. The issue asks whether present economic gains can be balanced with future ecological obligations.

- **Way Forward**

- **Adopt a Phased Strategy**

- India should not rush into indiscriminate expansion. The first phase should focus on commercially viable, strategically important and environmentally manageable projects.

- Priority should be given to sectors where import dependence is high, such as ammonia, methanol, fertilisers and coking coal substitutes.

- **Build India-Specific Technology**

- Indian coal has unique characteristics, especially high ash content. Therefore, technology must be adapted to Indian geological and chemical realities.

- Public research institutions, PSUs, private firms and academic institutions should jointly develop indigenous gasifiers, catalysts, waste-treatment systems and monitoring tools.

- **Link Incentives with Performance**

- Financial support should not be unconditional. Incentives must be linked to emission standards, water efficiency, carbon capture readiness, local employment, waste management and project completion milestones.

- This will prevent subsidy misuse.

- **Ensure Environmental Safeguards**

- Every major project must undergo rigorous environmental assessment. Carbon capture, water recycling, ash utilisation, zero-liquid discharge and continuous emission monitoring should be built into project design.

- Underground coal gasification should proceed only after strict geological and groundwater-risk assessment.

- **Create Assured Market Demand**

- Long-term offtake agreements are necessary for methanol, ammonia, urea, synthetic gas and steel inputs. Without market certainty, projects may become stranded assets.

- Government procurement and industrial clustering can help.

- **Protect Communities**

- Local communities must receive fair compensation, health safeguards, jobs, skill training and environmental transparency. Social impact assessment should be as serious as financial appraisal.

- **Integrate with Energy Transition**

- Coal gasification should not weaken renewable energy expansion. It should be treated as a transitional industrial strategy for hard-to-abate sectors, not as an excuse to delay clean energy.

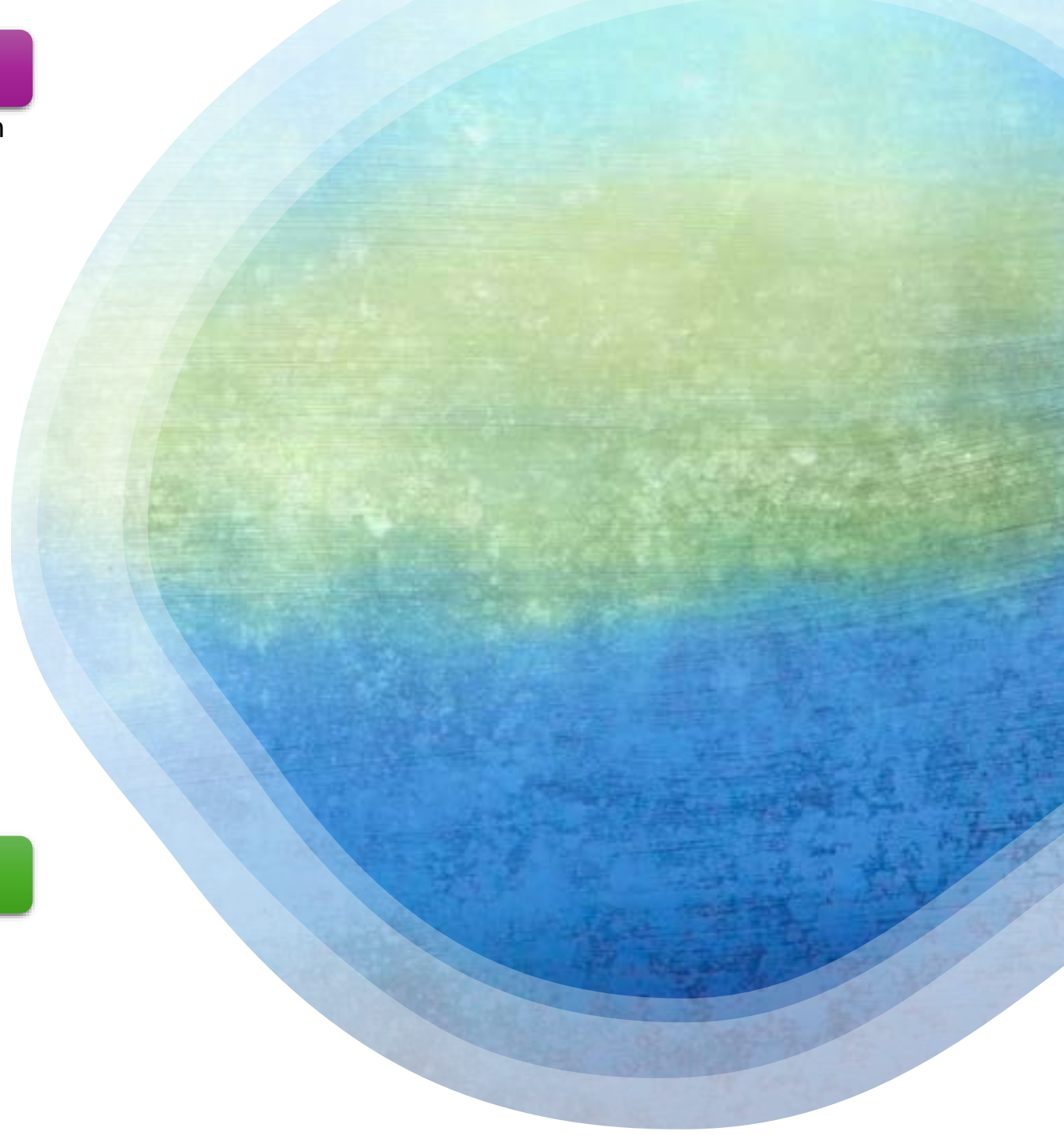
- The final goal must remain a cleaner, resilient and diversified energy system.

## UPSC CSE Mains – GS-3

- 2013: “What do you understand by ‘carbon credit’? How does it help in reducing emissions?”
- 2016: “Examine the role of coal in India’s energy mix and the challenges of its continued use in the context of environmental concerns.”
- 2017: “India’s energy strategy is a mix of different options. Discuss the role of coal and renewable energy in this mix.”
- 2018: “How is the growth of energy sector critical for India’s economic development? Discuss in the context of energy security and environmental sustainability.”
- 2019: “Discuss India’s commitments under the Paris Agreement and the challenges of balancing development needs with climate change mitigation.”
- 2020: “Clean energy is the order of the day. Examine the role of clean coal technologies in India’s energy transition.”
- 2022: “Highlight the importance of energy security in India. Suggest measures to reduce import dependence of energy.”
- 2023/24 (theme-wise): questions on net-zero targets, industrial policy, and decarbonisation of hard-to-abate sectors.

## UPSC CSE Prelims – Environment/Economy

- Questions on “clean coal technology”, “coal-bed methane”, “gas hydrates”, and “carbon capture and storage” appearing across years.
- Questions on energy mix, share of different fuels, and government schemes related to energy and environment.



# Is India becoming one big exam centre



**DINESH SINGH**  
FORMER VICE-CHANCELLOR,  
UNIVERSITY OF DELHI

**T**HIS article is being penned as much in anguish as in hope. The anguish is nationwide and stems from the enormous distress and demoralisation that has affected a large segment of our youth whose hopes and expectations of success were dashed just a couple of days back when a “guess paper” linked to the NEET examination was leaked, and the exam subsequently cancelled.

The torment that prospective examinees face is easy to understand but very hard to alleviate. After all, when someone decides to enrol for an exam, she invests an important part of the formative years of her life to the tortuous process of preparing for it. In addition, she incurs significant expenses for coaching as she knows that that is a key element to success. And what are the odds of her succeeding?

Given that there were 22,750,11 candidates who were scheduled to take the NEET examination this year and only 1,29,800 MBBS seats, it follows that

her chances of success were a mere 6 per cent. In other words, for every one hundred candidates, less than six would be selected. Imagine what goes on in the mind of a youngster who gambles so much of her intellectual and economic capital for so little?

By all accounts, a large number of the candidates were from the not so well-off segments of society. The anguish is exacerbated when you know that this is not the first time such a leak has happened — nor are they confined to the NEET examination alone. A cursory examination of the data related to the history of question paper leaks in India will disabuse the reader of any such notion.

This brings us to a larger issue, which is that we are examining our students right out of their minds. A child is subjected to exams since she starts school — tests for kindergarten are not unheard of in the big metros. But the genuine torment must be reserved for the time the child begins to approach high school and coaching classes because the norm.

Coaching centres thrive on the fears of middle-class parents driven by the belief that the path to success lies through the portals of institutions like IIT or an AIIMS. Coaching centres are perceived as necessary gateways for enabling schoolchildren to succeed at the various entrance



**FOOLPROOF:** The NTA should invest massively in building a meticulously curated question repository. **AN**

examinations that are being conducted by our worthy institutions of knowledge. The list of such examinations is countless: there's NEET, of course, but also CUET and JEE, plus GATE and CAT. The day is not far off when viewed from outer space India shall appear as one big exam centre.

This business of inflicting one exam after another on young and impressionable minds flies in the face of the 2020 National Education Policy (NEP). The policy advocates a much more enlightened approach that advocates testing as means of enabling a student to gain knowledge and not for disabling the mind of the student.

To imbue a bit of fresh air

into the discussion at hand, I would like to draw attention to an interesting experiment underway for about three years in Jammu and Kashmir.

In keeping with the spirit of the NEP 2020, several prominent universities in J&K have launched an innovative undergraduate degree programme formally known as the Design Your Degree Programme. The main features of this include, exposure to communication and analytical skills, alongside training in the use of data and IT. Learning happens largely through group-based project work. The blackboard plays a substantially diminished role.

Extra-curricular and co-

curricular activities carry academic credit, as does entrepreneurial activity. Students take part in activities such as riding on a train that gets converted to a College On Wheels, where they work on projects related to any aspect of the journey onboard and where the train halts.

As students progress year by year, they begin to realise their yearnings and interests and specialise accordingly. They have the option of exiting after one year with a certificate that records the credit earned, after two years with a diploma, after three years with an undergraduate degree with specialisation of their choice, or after four years with an Honours degree which has a research component. Testing happens in enlightened ways where project outcomes are presented and discussed in depth before credit is accorded.

But to return to the NEET crisis, let me say here that all is not lost, simple, but powerful ways of re-imagining the NEET exam exist, especially if meticulous planning is paired with shrewd technology. What is puzzling isn't primarily the issue of leaks, but rather our apparent powerlessness in halting the decay. Here is a foolproof way to fix the testing crisis.

First, the National Testing Agency (NTA) should invest massively in building a meticulously curated question repository. Fool-

proof Internet connectivity at every test venue needs dependable power backups and high-speed, sturdy laser printers too.

The NTA must develop a sophisticated algorithm capable of instantly generating a flawless question set via unpredictable randomisation. This set would be transmitted securely, in encrypted digital format, to all centres mere hours ahead of exam start time.

Centres would then print copies just two hours prior. Every exam room must have clear-recording video surveillance of all proceedings. Papers can thus circulate securely without risk.

Ideally, equipping candidates with solid desktops or laptops would allow emailing the paper directly at exam time, with typed responses submitted via secure software to a central grading hub. Alternatively, handwritten answers on paper remain viable. This serves as an initial blueprint to spark a brainstorming drive toward a tamper-proof system that restores candidate confidence.

What I have proposed here is not NEET-specific. It is a simple model for conducting any exam without the fear of leakages. Testing is only supposed to be a medium for learning, it cannot be a substitute for it. Educating a child has to be India's goal, not testing whether she is capable of being educated.

Educating a child  
has to be India's goal,  
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being educated.

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **NTA (National Testing Agency):** An autonomous body under India's Ministry of Education responsible for conducting entrance exams like NEET, JEE (Engineering), and CUET (University admissions). It was created to offload exam conduction from the CBSE and ensure efficiency.

- **NEP 2020 (National Education Policy 2020):** India's latest education policy framework emphasizing holistic, flexible, multidisciplinary education over rote learning. It advocates for formative, low-stakes assessments rather than high-stakes, memorization-based exams.

- **High-Stakes Exam:** An examination where the result has a massive, life-altering consequence for the candidate (e.g., admission to a limited, prestigious course), creating immense psychological pressure. NEET is a quintessential example.

- **Design Your Degree Programme (J&K):** An innovative, flexible undergraduate model aligned with NEP 2020. Students choose courses based on their interests, earn credits for co-curricular activities, and can exit with certificates, diplomas, or degrees at multiple stages. *Example: A student passionate about film-making can combine courses in literature, history, and digital media while earning credits for making a documentary.*

- **Meritocracy**

- Meritocracy means selection based on ability, effort and performance rather than birth, wealth, caste, family influence or political patronage.

- Examinations are defended as meritocratic tools. However, if access to good schools, coaching, internet, language skills and emotional support is unequal, then exam results may reflect social privilege as much as individual merit.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- **Core Thesis:** India's obsession with high-stakes, low-success-probability entrance exams is causing widespread youth distress, demoralization, and a distortion of the true purpose of education—which is learning, not relentless testing.
- **Argument 1 - The Cruel Arithmetic of Success:** The author uses stark data (2.27 crore candidates for 1.29 lakh MBBS seats, a mere 6% success rate) to argue that the system is designed for mass failure. The emotional and economic investment for such a low probability of success is argued to be inherently cruel.
- **Argument 2 - Systemic and Repetitive Failure:** The anguish is compounded because question paper leaks are not a one-off anomaly but a recurring pattern across multiple exams (NEET, etc.). This points to a deep, systemic decay in examination management, not just isolated lapses.
- **Argument 3 - The "Exam Centre Nation" Phenomenon:** The article argues that from kindergarten to postgraduate entrance tests (GATE, CAT, etc.), Indian children are "examined out of their minds." Coaching centres have normalized a culture where natural curiosity is replaced by the singular goal of cracking a specific test.
- **Argument 4 - The NEP 2020 Contradiction:** This endless testing directly violates the spirit of NEP 2020, which champions a holistic, enabling, and flexible education system. Current practices "disable the mind" rather than enabling knowledge gain.
- **The J&K Counter-Example (Positive Argument):** The article presents J&K's "Design Your Degree" programme as a successful, viable alternative. Its features—group projects, reduced blackboard teaching, academic credit for extracurriculars, and multiple exit options—demonstrate that NEP 2020's vision is practically achievable.
- **Proposed Solution :** The author proposes a technology-driven, foolproof system to fix the *conduct* of exams: a curated question repository, a sophisticated randomization algorithm, encrypted transmission to centres just hours before the exam, on-site printing, and video surveillance. The ultimate goal is to make testing a medium for learning, not its substitute.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Pre-Independence Era (Colonial Period):** The Macaulayite education system introduced examination-based filters to create a class of clerks and administrators for the British Raj. The Civil Services Exam became the archetype of a high-stakes, paper-based merit test.

- **Post-Independence (1950s-1980s):** Establishment of IITs (1951), IIMs (1961), and AIIMS (1956) as islands of excellence. Entrance exams to these elite institutions became the gold standard for merit, gradually creating a national obsession. The focus was on scarcity and selection.

- **1990s - Rise of Coaching Culture:** Economic liberalization increased middle-class aspirations. Simultaneously, seats in professional colleges did not expand proportionally. Private coaching centres emerged as powerful intermediaries, perfecting rote-learning and test-taking strategies. The first major question paper leaks began grabbing national headlines.

- **2000s - Commercialization and Proliferation:** The number of entrance exams exploded for engineering (AIEEE, BITSAT, VITEEE), medical (AIPMT, later NEET), management (CAT, XAT), and law (CLAT). The coaching industry became a multi-crore enterprise. Leaks and malpractices became more frequent and organized, involving "solver gangs" and interstate networks.

- **2010s - Legal and Institutional Response:** The government formed the NTA in 2017 to bring professionalism. The Right to Education Act (2009) focused on school access but not exam reform. NEET was made compulsory for all medical admissions by Supreme Court order (2016-17) to unify the system, inadvertently centralizing risk. High-profile leaks (e.g., NEET 2024, as implied) continued, eroding public trust.

- **2020 Onwards - The NEP Era & Ongoing Crisis:** NEP 2020 formally rejects high-stakes exams. However, implementation lags. The article's anguish reflects the gap between policy intent (NEP 2020) and ground reality (leaky, stressful, success-starved exams). The current moment is a crisis of both *conduct* (leaks) and *design* (low success rates).

## REFORMING INDIA'S EXAM CULTURE: FROM A 'BIG EXAM CENTRE' TO A CENTER OF EXCELLENCE.

### CURRENT MCQ-BASED ELIMINATION MODEL (The Funnel)



1. Massive Candidate Numbers (24L Candidates)
2. Low Success Rate (5-6%)
3. Hyper-Centralization & Risk (e.g., Leaks)
4. Coaching Industry Complex (Mental Toll)



### ASPIRATIONAL HOLISTIC CREDIT MODEL (The Growth Tree)



CERTIFICATE  
DIPLOMA  
DEGREE  
HONORS WITH RESEARCH

1. Formative Assessment & Skill-Based
2. Holistic Credit Portfolio (Extra-curricular, Projects)
3. Decentralized with Standards



LOCAL SECURE PRINTING



CREDIT-BASED SYLLABUS



MULTI-EXIT OPTIONS



RESTORING INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

"SHIFTING THE GOAL FROM TESTING FOR ELIMINATION TO LEARNING FOR EMPOWERMENT."

- **Logical and Philosophical Base**

- **Underlying Logic of Current System:** The prevailing logic is one of **scarcity-driven filtration**. With limited seats in elite institutions, the exam is viewed as a necessary "sorting machine." The assumption is that a single, high-pressure, time-bound test is the most objective and efficient method to identify "merit." The philosophical foundation is a narrow, economistic version of **meritocracy**—success equals test score.

- **Assumptions being Challenged:** The article challenges the assumption that this intense competition is inevitable or healthy. It questions whether a 6% success rate can ever be considered a fair or humane system. It also challenges the assumption that coaching-centre training equals genuine education or aptitude.

- **Philosophical Foundation of the Alternative (NEP & J&K Model):** This is rooted in **progressive, humanist, and constructivist** educational philosophy (inspired by thinkers like John Dewey, Rabindranath Tagore, and Jiddu Krishnamurthi). Key tenets include:

- **Education as Enablement:** The goal is to develop a capable, thinking, and adaptable human being, not just a test-passing machine.
- **Holistic Development:** Cognitive, emotional, ethical, and physical growth are all valued equally.
- **Learning by Doing:** Knowledge is constructed through projects, experiences, and group work (e.g., "College on Wheels"), not passively received via lectures.
- **Pluralism and Flexibility:** Acknowledge that students have diverse interests and intelligences; the system should allow for different pathways (multiple exit options) rather than a single "winner-take-all" race.
- **Low-Stakes Formative Assessment:** Tests should provide feedback for improvement (formative) rather than solely for final judgment (summative). The "presentation and discussion" of projects embodies this.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**

- **8.1 Social Dimension**

- Exam-centric education affects family life, childhood, social mobility and inequality.
- For poor families, a competitive exam can be a ladder of mobility. For the same reason, failure becomes emotionally devastating. Social pressure is intense because success is seen not merely as personal achievement but as family redemption. The burden falls heavily on first-generation learners.

- **8.2 Political Dimension**

- Examinations are politically sensitive because they involve youth aspirations.
- Any irregularity can trigger protests, opposition criticism and public anger. A government's credibility is affected when recruitment or entrance exams fail. Therefore, examination integrity is not only an administrative issue but also a governance issue.

- **8.3 Legal Dimension**

- Fair examination is linked with equality before law, non-arbitrariness and legitimate expectation.
- Candidates expect that rules will be followed, papers will remain confidential, evaluation will be fair and results will be declared transparently. Legal frameworks must punish organised malpractice while protecting innocent candidates.

- **8.4 Ethical Dimension**

- The ethical question is simple but profound: can a society ask students to work honestly if institutions cannot guarantee fairness?
- Paper leaks, bribery, impersonation and manipulation attack the moral foundation of merit. Ethical examination governance requires integrity, accountability, transparency and compassion towards candidates.

- **8.5 International Dimension**

- Globally, countries are rethinking high-stakes testing.
- Many systems use a combination of school records, standardised tests, interviews, portfolios, project work and continuous assessment. India can learn from these models, but must adapt them to its scale, diversity and equity challenges.

- **8.6 Economic Dimension**

- The exam economy creates employment and services, but it also imposes huge costs on families.
- Coaching fees, hostel expenses, travel, online subscriptions and repeated exam attempts create financial stress. At the national level, poor assessment design can misallocate talent and weaken human capital formation.

- **8.7 Administrative Dimension**

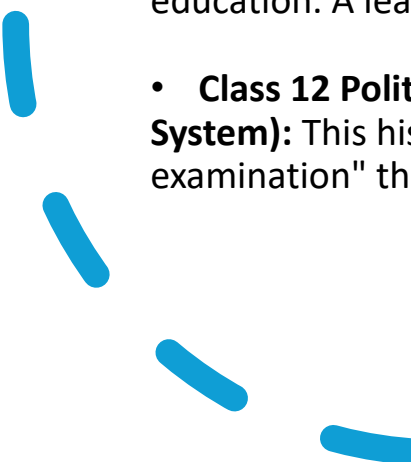
- Conducting national exams requires coordination among agencies, police, district administration, cyber experts, centre superintendents and evaluators.
- A single weak link can compromise the system. Administrative reform must therefore focus on chain-of-custody, vendor regulation, accountability mapping and crisis response.

- **8.8 Psychological Dimension**

- The exam system shapes student identity.
- Many students begin to believe that their worth equals their rank. This is dangerous. A humane system must teach students that exams are important but not absolute judgments of life, intelligence or dignity.



- **Linkages with NCERTs**

- **Class 11 Psychology (Chapter 8 - Motivation & Emotion):** Directly relevant for understanding the psychological impact of high-stakes exams: stress, anxiety, achievement motivation (McClelland), and the Yerkes-Dodson law (optimal performance requires moderate, not extreme, arousal).
  - **Class 12 Sociology (Chapter 6 - The Challenges of Cultural Diversity):** Connects to how education acts as a mechanism for social reproduction. Coaching centres and exams often perpetuate elite dominance rather than creating true equality of opportunity for marginalized communities.
  - **Class 11 Economics (Chapter 7 - Human Capital Formation):** Crucial for understanding education as investment. The article questions if this "exam race" is efficient human capital formation or a wasteful, destructive process that doesn't build real skills.
  - **Class 9 Political Science (Chapter 5 - Democratic Rights):** Links the right to education (Article 21A) with the quality of that education. A leaky, stressful exam system arguably violates the spirit of the right to a fair chance.
  - **Class 12 Political Science (Politics in India Since Independence, Chapter 5 - Challenges to and Restoration of Congress System):** This historical context shows how the initial focus on elite institutions like IITs set a template for "merit through examination" that eventually overwhelmed the system.
- 

## GS Paper 1 (Society)

- Topics: “Salient features of Indian society”, “Role of women and women’s organisations”, “Social empowerment” and “Effects of globalisation on Indian society”.
- Exam-centric education can be discussed under social change, youth issues, family pressures and urbanisation of aspirations.

## GS Paper 2 (Polity, Governance, Social Justice)

- Directly linked to “Issues relating to development and management of social sector services relating to education and human resources”, and “Government policies and interventions”.
- Also relevant to “Role of NGOs, SHGs, pressure groups” (coaching / parent associations) and “Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States” (centre–state tussles over NEET-type exams).

## GS Paper 3 (Economy, S&T)

- Connect with “Inclusive growth”, “Employment”, “Investment models”, and “Role of technology in everyday life”.
- Technology-enabled exams, ed-tech platforms, and the coaching economy can be analysed through an economic and technological lens.

## GS Paper 4 (Ethics, Integrity, Aptitude)

- Useful under “Ethics in public administration”, “Work culture”, “Values and ethics in education”, and case-studies on exam leaks, corruption and whistle-blowing.
- Questions on conflict of interest, responsibility of officials, and fairness to students can be framed easily.

## Essay Paper

- Excellent fodder for themes like “Education and human development”, “Youth and aspirations”, “Technology and society”, or “Justice and equality in opportunities”.
- The conceptual tension between testing and learning can produce rich, multidimensional essays.

- Way forward

- **Re-centring the purpose of education**

- Public discourse must consistently emphasise that the ultimate goal is to develop capable, compassionate citizens, not just exam-cracking specialists.
- Policies, institutional mandates and media narratives should be aligned to celebrate innovation, research, service and creativity alongside exam performance.

- **Multi-dimensional assessment architecture**

- Combine entrance scores with board performance, school-level internal assessment and standardised aptitude tests, using transparent weightages.
- Encourage universities to experiment with interviews, portfolios, and bridge courses, especially for disadvantaged candidates, within well-defined regulatory boundaries.

- **Secure and humane exam reform**

- For unavoidable high-stakes exams, invest heavily in curated question banks, encryption, hybrid digital-paper models, CCTV and standardised protocols with independent audits.
- At the same time, limit the number of attempts, schedule exams humanely, provide counselling support, and ensure quick, transparent redress in case of errors.

- **Strengthening school education and teachers**

- Reduce rote-based board exams, integrate competency-based questions, and give teachers autonomy plus training to evaluate projects and continuous work.
- Improve infrastructure, teacher-student ratios and support services so that good schooling, not coaching, becomes the primary preparation for any further study.

- **Addressing inequalities and mental health**

- Provide scholarships, free coaching support, hostel facilities and digital access for students from marginalised backgrounds.
- Integrate mental-health services, peer mentoring and life-skills education into school and college systems to equip students for stress and failure.

- **Institutional accountability and participatory governance**

- Establish independent oversight bodies for testing agencies, with representation from educators, psychologists, technologists and students.
- Regularly publish audit reports, data on malpractice, and impact assessments of exam reforms, while engaging in consultation with states and stakeholders.

### UPSC CSE Mains – GS 2

- Education and human resource development: questions on NEP 2020, challenges in higher education, and schemes for quality and equity in schooling.
- Role of regulatory bodies and issues in professional education (engineering, medicine, law) including quality, access and governance.

### UPSC CSE Mains – GS 1 & Essay

- Social issues: youth stress, suicide in coaching hubs, impact of urbanisation and aspiration on families and communities.
- Essays on themes like “Education without values” or “Knowledge, technology and inequality” where exam-centricity is a strong sub-topic.

### UPSC CSE Mains – GS 3

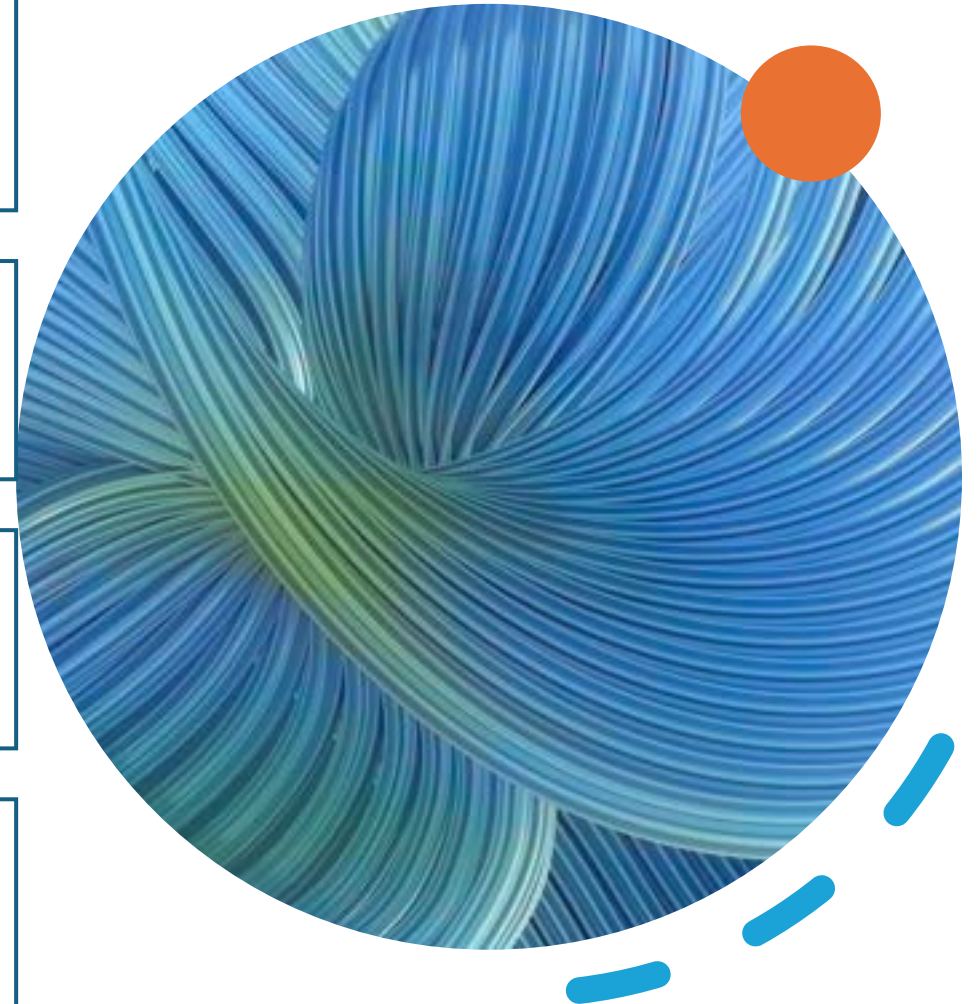
- Human capital, demographic dividend and skilling; how education quality affects growth and innovation.
- ICT in education and digital divide, especially in the context of online learning and computer-based testing.

### UPSC CSE Mains – GS 4

- Case-study style questions on corruption in recruitment, fairness in public examinations, whistle-blowing and responsibility of administrators.
- Thematic questions on professional ethics of teachers, exam authorities and policy-makers.

### UPSC Prelims

- Objective questions on features of NEP 2020, structure of national and state-level education schemes, and basic factual aspects of bodies like NTA (if notified).
- Questions on constitutional provisions related to education, fundamental rights and DPSPs.



# Austerity and symbolism

In moments of crises, Intent isn't enough. Following through announcements with enforcement of measures is key, as a run through recent Indian economic history shows

## ANNOUNCEMENTS

Austerity drives economic growth. At least that's what the Indian government claims. The strategy played out in the 1990s had a profound influence on growth, but it was not a silver bullet. The government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment.

When the 1990s began, the Indian economy was in a state of stagnation. The government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment. The government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment.

Yet, there were some differences between the 1990s and the 2000s. In the 1990s, the government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment. In the 2000s, the government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment.

## RECENT AND THE FUTURE

Let's look at the 1990s and the 2000s. In the 1990s, the government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment. In the 2000s, the government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment.

However, the result of which is economic growth. The government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment. The government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment.

Since 2014, the government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment. The government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment.

As a result, the government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment. The government's strategy was to reduce public expenditure and to increase private investment.



## A look back

	1990-91	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03	2003-04	2004-05
GDP growth (in %)	6.7	5.1	6.6	4.5	10.8	6.7
Public debt (of GDP)	-	28.2	36.2	56.1	64.3	69.4
Public Reserve (in % of GDP)	2.9	1.46	1.25	0.48	0.25	0.24

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## Missing policy steps

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- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Austerity Measures:** Government policies aimed at reducing expenditure, curbing consumption, and managing fiscal discipline during economic crises. These can include spending cuts, tax increases, or moral suasion. *Example: A directive to ministers to travel only by economy class instead of business class.*

- **Foreign Exchange Reserves:** Assets held by a central bank in foreign currencies, used to back liabilities and influence monetary policy. They act as a buffer against external shocks. *Example: Reserves falling from 7.28 billion to 6.9 billion, reducing import cover.*

- **Import Cover:** The number of months of imports that a country's foreign exchange reserves can finance. It is a key measure of external vulnerability. *Example: Reserves sufficient for 10.5 months of merchandise imports.*

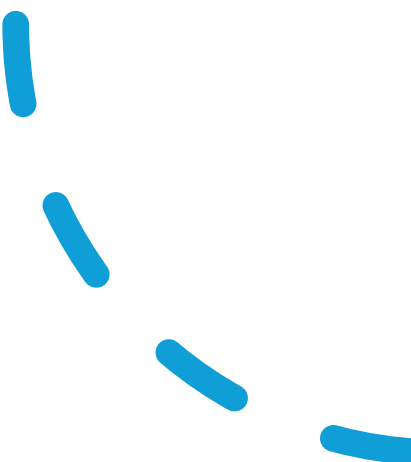
- **Current Account Deficit (CAD):** When a country's total imports of goods, services, and transfers exceed its exports. A high CAD indicates reliance on foreign capital. *Example: CAD doubling from less than 1% to nearly 2% of GDP due to rising oil and gold imports.*

- **Moral Suasion:** A central bank or government's tactic of persuading rather than mandating economic actors to behave in a certain way. It relies on appeals rather than legal enforcement. *Example: Asking citizens to carpool or skip one meal a week.*

- **Exhortation vs. Enforcement:** Exhortation is an appeal or strong encouragement, while enforcement involves binding rules with penalties. The article argues that past governments combined both, whereas recent approaches rely more on exhortation.

- **Fiscal Burden:** The strain on government finances due to subsidies, unpaid bills, or delayed price adjustments. *Example: Not raising petrol prices despite higher crude costs increases the government's subsidy bill.*

- **Parallel Market (Smuggling):** An illegal trading network that emerges when legal channels become expensive or restricted. *Example: Higher import duties on gold can lead to smuggling, as the black-market price undercuts the legal one.*



- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- **Core Thesis:** Intent and symbolic announcements are insufficient during economic crises. Effective crisis management requires a tight coupling of policy announcements with enforceable actions. The historical record shows that successful austerity combines moral appeal with hard administrative and price-signal measures.

- **Key Points and Supporting Evidence:**

- **Historical Precedents:** The article contrasts several crises: 1965 (food crisis, war), 1990 (Gulf war, oil shock), 2009 (global financial crisis), and 2026 (West Asian conflict, forex decline).

- **1965 (Shastri):** Combined rationing enforcement with a symbolic "skip dinner on Monday" appeal. Action + symbolism.

- **1990 (V.P. Singh):** Imposed restrictions and a "Gulf surcharge" but faced political opposition on cooking gas. Incomplete action.

- **2009 (Manmohan Singh):** Issued binding directives: economy-class travel, no new vehicles/positions, restricted conferences. Clear enforcement.

- **2026 (Modi):** Relied heavily on exhortation (carpooling, less gold, work from home) without immediate binding rules, except for import duty hikes on gold/silver.

- **Gap Between Announcement and Implementation:** The article notes that a week after the 2026 appeal, no specific measure was enforced besides symbolic ministerial car-pooling. This contrasts with past governments where administrative orders followed quickly.

- **Missing Policy Steps:** Critically, the article points to a failure to adjust retail prices of petrol/diesel despite higher global crude prices. Delaying these price signals increases fiscal burden (subsidies) and distorts market behavior.

- **Counterarguments Acknowledged:** Experts question the gold import duty hike, arguing it encourages smuggling and creates administrative headaches. This shows that even well-intended steps can have unintended consequences.

- **Comparative External Position:** While India's external account in 2026 is far stronger than in 1965 or 1990 (import cover >10 months vs. ~2 months), the rationale for conservation remains valid because the absolute scale of imports is much larger.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Pre-1960s (Early Post-Independence):** Austerity was often linked to planned development, not just crises. The focus was on import substitution and saving foreign exchange for industrialization.
- **1965-66 (Food and War Crisis):** The first major post-independence austerity drive with mass appeal. Shastri's "skip dinner" appeal was combined with rationing enforcement. The underlying assumption was collective sacrifice for national survival.
- **1970s (Oil Shocks):** The 1973 and 1979 oil crises led to price controls, rationing of petroleum products, and appeals for reduced consumption. However, enforcement was often weak, leading to long queues and black markets.
- **1990-91 (BOP Crisis):** The most severe crisis. The government initially delayed action (like V.P. Singh's partial surcharge). The subsequent Narasimha Rao-Manmohan Singh government combined IMF-mandated austerity (devaluation, subsidy cuts) with structural reforms. Enforcement was harsh and unavoidable.
- **2008-09 (Global Financial Crisis):** A demand-side crisis, not a classic BOP crisis. The government used fiscal stimulus (spending, not austerity) initially, then pivoted to expenditure rationalization (economy-class travel, caps on conferences). Austerity here was about signaling fiscal discipline to markets.
- **2010s (Modi Era - Pre-2020s):** Focus shifted to "minimum government, maximum governance." Austerity was often linked to efficiency drives (e.g., reducing government bloat, rationalizing subsidies). The emphasis was on targeting subsidies via DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer) rather than blanket appeals.
- **2026 (West Asian Conflict):** A return to older forms of exhortation (carpool, less gold, work from home) but without parallel enforcement mechanisms. The unique feature is a disconnect between macroeconomic indicators (still comfortable reserves) and political messaging (crisis appeals). This suggests symbolic politics as much as economic necessity.
- **Present Day (extrapolating from the text):** The current phase is characterized by selective enforcement (import duties on gold) and soft persuasion (moral suasion on consumption), with a reluctance to pass through global price signals to domestic retail markets due to political economy concerns.



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# AUSTERITY, SYMBOLISM, AND STRUCTURAL ECONOMICS: INDIAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT (UPSC CSE ANALYSIS)

## THE CORE DIALECTIC: MORAL SUASION vs. ENFORCEMENT



## MANAGING THE 'TWIN DEFICITS'



## HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF LEADERSHIP & RESPONSE



## UPSC CSE FOCUS: ETHICS & LEADERSHIP

### GS 4: ETHICS IN GOVERNANCE

#### THE MORAL CONTRACT

Key points:

- \* Leadership by Example (Visible sacrifices)
- \* Transparency in Policy
- \* Social Solidarity in Hard Times



### GS 3: THE POLICY SHIFT

STRUCTURAL FRICTION vs. BEHAVIORAL NUDGE



Symbolism creates cohesion but little movement

VS



Enforcement moves the data

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- **Logical and Philosophical Base**
- **Underlying Logic:**
  - **Scarcity Mentality:** The core logic is that resources (foreign exchange, food, fuel) are finite. During crises, demand must be suppressed to prevent depletion. This is a classic Malthusian logic applied to state finances.
  - **Price Signal Theory:** Economically rational actors respond to prices. If retail fuel prices are kept artificially low, consumption will not fall. The article argues that avoiding price hikes undermines the entire austerity effort.
  - **Symbolic Leadership:** Leaders must demonstrate personal sacrifice to legitimize asking citizens for sacrifice. This is based on the logic of role modeling and moral authority.
- **Assumptions:**
  - Citizens are responsive to moral appeals (not just economic incentives).
  - The government has accurate real-time information on reserve adequacy and import trends.
  - Enforcement mechanisms (rationing, customs, administrative orders) are functional.
  - Short-term pain (higher prices, reduced consumption) will produce long-term gain (forex stability, lower CAD).
- **Philosophical Foundations:**
  - **Gandhian Economy of Permanence:** Appeals for reduced consumption (less gold, carpooling) resonate with Gandhian ideas of voluntary simplicity and trusteeship. It assumes that enough citizens will internalize the national interest over individual convenience.
  - **Keynesian vs. Classical:** The article leans classical: austerity is the correct response to a supply shock. A Keynesian might argue for managed demand but not consumption suppression during a slowdown. The article implicitly rejects stimulus in favor of conservation.
  - **Political Realism:** The delay in raising fuel prices reflects a philosophical choice: political survival (avoiding public backlash) over economic optimality. The article critiques this as short-termism.
  - **Legal Positivism vs. Moral Suasion:** The article values binding rules (legal positivist approach) over moral appeals. It assumes that without coercive enforcement, exhortation is largely ineffective.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **8.1 Social Dimension**
  - Austerity affects social behaviour. It encourages citizens to think beyond individual consumption and consider national interest. However, social acceptance depends on fairness. If the middle class is asked to reduce fuel and foreign travel while elite consumption continues, the moral message weakens. Social trust is therefore central.
- **8.2 Political Dimension**
  - Austerity is politically sensitive because it asks people to give up comfort. Political leaders prefer symbolic appeals because they create patriotic sentiment without immediate coercion. But democratic politics also demands accountability. Citizens may support austerity if leaders visibly reduce public extravagance first.
- **8.3 Legal Dimension**
  - Voluntary austerity needs no coercive law. But compulsory restrictions on imports, travel, prices or consumption require legal authority. Laws must be reasonable, non-discriminatory and proportionate. Arbitrary bans can invite litigation and distort markets.
- **8.4 Ethical Dimension**
  - The ethical question is not whether sacrifice is needed, but who sacrifices and for what purpose. Ethical austerity must protect the poor, prevent elite privilege and ensure that savings are used for public welfare. Leadership by example is not decorative; it is morally necessary.
- **8.5 International Dimension**
  - External shocks such as wars, oil price spikes, supply chain disruptions, currency volatility and global recession can force countries to conserve foreign exchange. India's strategic autonomy depends partly on external sector strength. A country with weak reserves has less diplomatic flexibility.
- **8.6 Economic Dimension**
  - Austerity can reduce CAD, protect forex reserves and control inflation. But excessive austerity can reduce consumption, investment and growth. Therefore, the correct policy mix is important: reduce waste, improve productivity, strengthen exports, conserve energy and maintain growth-supporting expenditure.
- **8.7 Administrative Dimension**
  - The success of austerity depends on departmental discipline, expenditure monitoring, procurement reforms and real-time data. Governance capacity matters more than slogans. A strong state can translate moral appeals into measurable savings.

- **Linkages with NCERTs**

- **9.1 Class 9 Economics – Food Security in India**

- This chapter directly connects with rationing, buffer stocks, Public Distribution System and food crisis management. It helps students understand why food stocks and state intervention became important in India's development journey.

- **9.2 Class 10 Economics – Development**

- The chapter explains that development is not just income growth. Economic policy must balance growth, equity, sustainability and public welfare. Austerity debates also involve this balance between macroeconomic stability and citizen well-being.

- **9.3 Class 10 Economics – Money and Credit**

- This chapter helps students understand financial flows, credit, trust and institutional finance. It provides a base for understanding why economic credibility matters during periods of stress.

- **9.4 Class 10 Economics – Globalisation and the Indian Economy**

- This is highly relevant because external sector pressure arises from trade, imports, exports, foreign investment and global shocks. India's exposure to oil prices, currency movements and geopolitical instability is part of globalisation.

- **9.5 Class 11 Indian Economic Development – Indian Economy 1950-1990**

- This chapter explains planning, import substitution, public sector dominance, food constraints and foreign exchange scarcity. It is essential for understanding why austerity was historically embedded in India's developmental model.

- **9.6 Class 11 Indian Economic Development – Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalisation**

- The 1991 crisis and reforms form the most important historical linkage. Students can connect balance of payments crisis, devaluation, IMF support, structural reforms and the shift from controls to market-oriented policy.

- **9.7 Class 12 Macroeconomics – Government Budget**

- This chapter explains fiscal deficit, revenue deficit, capital expenditure and fiscal policy. It is central to understanding fiscal austerity and expenditure rationalisation.

- **9.8 Class 12 Macroeconomics – Balance of Payments**

- This is the strongest NCERT linkage. CAD, forex reserves, imports, exports, exchange rate and external vulnerability are directly related to the theme.

- **9.9 Class 12 Political Science – Politics in India Since Independence**

- This helps connect economic crises with political leadership, planning, food shortages, Green Revolution, coalition politics and liberalisation.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **10.1 GS Paper 3 – Indian Economy**
  - This is the strongest linkage. Topics include Indian economy, growth, development, government budgeting, external sector, resource mobilisation, planning, fiscal policy and effects of liberalisation. Austerity can be used in answers on CAD, fiscal deficit, inflation, currency pressure and macroeconomic stability.
- **10.2 GS Paper 3 – Food Security**
  - The historical connection with food scarcity, buffer stocks, rationing and Green Revolution makes it relevant for food security. Students can use the 1960s experience as an example of crisis-led policy transformation.
- **10.3 GS Paper 3 – Energy Security**
  - Fuel conservation, oil imports, crude price volatility and strategic reserves connect this issue with energy security. India's dependence on imported crude remains a major vulnerability.
- **10.4 GS Paper 2 – Governance**
  - This theme links strongly with policy implementation, accountability, transparency, citizen participation and government communication. It shows the difference between announcement and execution.
- **10.5 GS Paper 2 – Centre-State Relations**
  - Austerity measures often require coordination between Union ministries, state governments and local bodies, especially in transport, public expenditure, welfare and energy use.
- **10.6 GS Paper 1 – Post-Independence Consolidation**
  - The 1960s food crisis, 1991 economic crisis and later reforms are important parts of post-independence history. This issue allows students to connect economy with leadership and state-building.

## Way Forward

**Institutionalize Austerity:** Instead of "ad-hoc circulars," there should be a permanent framework for rationalizing government expenditure (e.g., following recommendations of Expenditure Management Commissions).

**Transparency in Pricing:** Move away from "suppressing" market signals. Let fuel prices reflect global realities but protect the most vulnerable through Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT).

**Focus on the "Big Three":** Real austerity lies in reducing the import bill for **Oil, Gold, and Electronics**. This requires long-term investment in renewable energy and "Make in India."

**Behavioral Change through Incentives:** Instead of just "asking" people to use public transport, the state must provide "world-class" public transport to make the choice logical, not just moral.

- **UPSC CSE Mains:**

- **2021: GS3** - "Explain the meaning of Balance of Payments. Discuss the reasons for the recent deterioration in India's Current Account Balance and suggest corrective measures." (Directly maps to CAD and import compression logic)
- **2019: GS3** - "How is the fiscal policy of India different from the monetary policy? What are the instruments of fiscal policy? Explain the role of fiscal policy in managing inflation." (Austerity is a fiscal policy tool)
- **2017: GS3** - "What is the significance of the 'Balance of Payments' for a country's economy? What are the measures taken by the government to correct the deficit in the Balance of Payments?" (Import duties, export promotion, demand compression – all discussed in the article)
- **2015: GS3** - "The nature of economic crisis in 1991 was different from the crisis in 2008. Comment." (The article implicitly compares 1965, 1990, 2009, and 2026 – excellent fodder for such comparative questions)
- **2014: GS4 (Ethics)** - "Conflict of interest is a common phenomenon in public administration. How does it affect the decision-making process? Illustrate with examples." (Delaying fuel price hikes due to political conflict of interest is a perfect example)
- **2013: GS3** - "What is the Current Account Deficit? What are the implications of a high Current Account Deficit? Suggest measures to reduce it." (Direct match with the article's core concern)

- **UPSC CSE Prelims (Topics, not specific questions):**

- Balance of Payments components
- Foreign Exchange Reserves composition (FCA, gold, SDRs)
- Import cover and its significance
- Fiscal deficit vs. revenue deficit
- Administered prices vs. market-determined prices



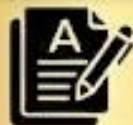
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