



AXIA IAS ACADEMY



EDITORIAL ANALYSIS



AUGUST 7



**CONSISTENT
COMPREHENSIVE
AND CREDIBLE**



**UNIQUE AND BEST IN
QUALITY**

- 1. Centralised education policy can't deliver true reforms (HINDUSTAN TIMES)**
- 2. For Bollywood's woes, blame the ecosystem, not the industry (THE INDIAN EXPRESS)**
- 3. Upper Assam floods reveal how outdated our financial set-up is (MINT)**
- 4. The new battlefield is the human mind (BUSINESS STANDARD)**



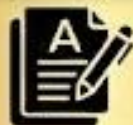
AXIA IAS ACADEMY

UPSC CSE CLASSES

RISE ABOVE THE REST



EXPERT
FACULTY &
GUIDANCE



COMPREHENSIVE
SYLLABUS
COVERAGE



STRATEGIC
TEST SERIES &
MENTORSHIP

ADMISSIONS OPEN

- Prelims + Mains + Interview
- Current Affairs Focus
- Personalized Attention
- Online & Offline Batches



WEBSITE: axiaiasacademy.com



CONTACT: +91 6002-417488



Move from testing memory to testing understanding

Close on the heels of Dharmendra Pradhan resigning as the Union education minister — after student protests over NEET and CBSE irregularities — the Centre constituted a high-power task force chaired by Jeebhay co-founder Nandini Niekani, to overhaul the country's education system. While deploying advanced technology and tightening logistics are essential steps, we risk missing the wood for the trees.

The ongoing crisis is not a sudden failure of administration, but the inevitable outcome of a fundamentally broken architecture. Landed papers, compromised marking systems, and the desperation of millions are symptoms of an education system that has prioritised rote memorisation over cognitive development for decades.

Tactical interventions such as elite committees, harsher punitive provisions, and bureaucratic shuffling only address the perimeter, not the core. To address the latter, the political class must confront deep-seated resistance and overhaul how we assess our children.

From primary school to secondary board exams, our system rewards the accurate retrieval of textbook information rather than the application of concepts. What has changed over the years — at a glacial pace — is the acceptance that this is the problem. But our exams and our classroom pedagogy have not changed in tandem.

A significant percentage of students in our country struggle to acquire foundational literacy and numeracy. Even in our elite private schools, when we assess for deep understanding, our students perform below the international average. There is a belief that challenging course material and exams are unfair to those who are socially or economically challenged; this has led to the system "compensating" by lowering the cognitive demands of exams, setting in motion a cycle that teaches less and expects less.

This pedagogical gap is directly linked to the desperation that fuels exam syndicates and paper leaks. When an assessment system fails to cultivate genuine problem-solving abilities, students are left entirely dependent on a narrow bottleneck of competitive exams. Furthermore, because the exams test memory rather than cognitive agility, possessing the question paper beforehand guarantees success. If our exams were designed to evaluate complex reasoning — utilising Item Response Theory and pedagogical research on what concepts students find more and less difficult — even a leaked paper would be of little use to a student who lacks the underlying conceptual framework.

While moving NEET to a multi-stage, computer-based testing format is an obvious recommendation, to truly resolve this crisis, the newly formed task force and policymakers must look beyond cybersecurity and logistics. We need the following structural reforms.

Transforming board examinations: Our board exams must move away from being memory tests. We need a definitive shift toward assessments where questions are designed to test understanding. Today, a student can achieve exceptionally high scores simply by memorising past papers and textbook answers. Until we



design exams where a student must genuinely understand the material to pass, the incentive to cheat or rely on coaching factories will remain insurmountable. We must also benchmark ourselves for improvement by participating in international assessments such as PISA.

Implementing multi-tiered assessment architecture: The logistical challenge of securely testing millions of students can dilute simultaneously puts the entire system under serious strain. A universally accessible, basic qualifying examination can evaluate foundational competencies. Only those who clear this benchmark should proceed to advanced, high-stakes competitive exams. This would meaningfully reduce the administrative burden on testing agencies and diffuse the anxiety that currently defines our exam season.

Leveraging large-scale learning data: We must deploy large-scale learning data tools to track student comprehension long before they reach Class 12 or university entrances. By rigorously evaluating item response parameters and diagnostic metrics throughout a student's lifecycle, we can identify and remedy learning gaps early.

Rejecting rushed implementations: We have seen major systemic changes, such as the CUEE, implemented with haste. Meaningful assessment reform is a complex scientific endeavour that requires extensive operational strategy, pilot testing, and rigorous evaluation of parameters. Rushing these changes risks failure and could further erode public trust.

The anger of our youth is entirely understandable. They deserve a system that sets them up to succeed.

A secure exam that tests the wrong things is still only a partial fix. True reform will require expending significant political capital to work through the resistance that any deep change inevitably meets.

Sridhar Rajagopalan is co-founder, Educational Initiatives. The views expressed are personal.

Centralised education policy can't deliver true reforms

Dr BR Ambedkar once said, "Examination is something quite different from education, but in the name of raising the standard of education, they are making the examinations so impossible and so severe that the backward communities which have hitherto not had the chance of entering the portals of University are absolutely kept out."

The progressive devolving of states' space in education policy did not begin, yesterday. It began with the National Policy on Education of 1968, adopted by the Union Government in the wake of the Kothari Commission, which formalised the three-language formula. Even before that policy took full shape, CN Annadurai, then Tamil Nadu chief minister, spearheaded a historic resolution in January 1968 in the assembly, rejecting the three-language formula and affirming a two-language policy (Tamil and English). That resolution was the institutional expression of a people's determination to protect linguistic identity and educational opportunity. Tamil Nadu has adhered to this policy, delivering high literacy and strong higher-education outcomes.

However, the constitutional reordering effected by the 42nd Amendment — which transferred education from the State List to the Concurrent List — dented the states' legislative competence. The exclusive domain of the states became a shared field, which the Union increasingly dominated. This set the stage for successive national frameworks that have steadily eroded the autonomy of states to shape education according to their realities.

The National Education Policy 2020 has revived the same pressure under a new guise. In three-language formula, however flexible it claims to be, an paper, is experienced in non-Hindi-speaking states as an instrument of linguistic imposition. When national boards and funding mechanisms push three languages as the default, states that stand by their two-language policy are portrayed as obstructionist. Uniformity is preferred over genuine federal accommodation.

The NEET controversy exposes the same centralising logic. Tamil Nadu's public health system long depended on medical graduates selected through a transparent, state-controlled process that prioritised local needs and social justice, while also fulfilling its constitutional mandate of maintaining public health. Tamil Nadu took the litigation route to keep NEET away since its inception (through regulations promulgated by the Medical Council of India) only in 2010 did the Union government make NEET compulsory nationwide, from 2017.

A single national entrance examination, conducted in a format that privileges coaching-centric culture and urban advantage, has systematically disadvantaged rural and underprivileged students. The Tamil Nadu assembly has twice passed legislation seeking exemption from NEET. The delay in presidential assent and the Union's refusal to attend the National Medical Commission Act demonstrates that while states may legislate, the Union retains an effective veto. The Tamil Nadu government, in fact, had



to file a suit before the Supreme Court challenging the withholding of assent by the President of the state's NEET Exemption Bill. A private member's Bill in the Rajya Sabha to make NEET optional for states, introduced by me, awaits meaningful consideration.

The protests at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi and across the country brought the failures of the national examination system into sharp public focus. The agitation saw young people demand accountability and systemic reform. It underscored not just public anger but also the systemic weakness and crisis of confidence in centralised testing, which is not confined to one region.

These developments form part of a larger pattern. National testing frameworks, model curricula, and conditional funding increasingly determine what is taught, how examinations are conducted, and which languages are privileged. Cooperative federalism is reduced to after-the-fact consultation. When states assert their constitutional space, they are accused of parochialism. When the Union centralises, it is celebrated as national integration. This asymmetry is unsustainable.

Education policy that ignores regional language, local knowledge systems and state-specific equity concerns produces alienation. If the space for policy-making by states continues to shrink, even with so-called reforms, we risk a homogenised system that serves neither excellence nor equity. The Union must respect the legislative and executive competencies of states in the concurrent domain. National frameworks must remain guiding, not binding. Tamil Nadu will continue to defend its two-language policy and its right to determine medical admissions, not out of defiance, but out of fidelity to the constitutional promise of a diverse Union and the prospect of real reforms. The space for states in education policy-making in education must be restored and protected. Anything less diminishes the future of our children.

P Wilson is a senior advocate and member of Rajya Sabha. The views expressed are personal.

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Item Response Theory (IRT):** A psychometric paradigm used in modern test design to evaluate candidate ability based on item difficulty, discrimination, and guessing parameters. Unlike traditional raw-score scoring, IRT measures underlying cognitive traits.
 - *Example:* In an IRT-based exam, two students answering 20 questions correctly may receive different scores if one solved inherently harder, analytical questions while the other solved simpler recall questions.
- **Two-Language vs. Three-Language Formula:** Policy frameworks governing language instruction in Indian schools. The Three-Language Formula (proposed by the Kothari Commission and 1968 NPE) mandates the mother tongue, Hindi, and English (or another modern Indian language in Hindi states). The Two-Language Policy (adopted by Tamil Nadu in 1968) restricts instruction exclusively to the Regional Language and English.
 - *Example:* A school in Tamil Nadu under the Two-Language policy teaches Tamil and English, omitting mandatory Hindi instruction.
- **Concurrent List & The 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act (1976):** Under the Seventh Schedule of the Indian Constitution, subject matters are divided into Union, State, and Concurrent Lists. The 42nd Amendment shifted 'Education' from the State List (Entry 11) to the Concurrent List (Entry 25), allowing Parliament to override state legislation on educational matters.
 - *Example:* Centralized mandates like NEET take precedence over state-level entrance frameworks due to Union supremacy on Concurrent subjects under Article 254.
- **Cooperative vs. Centralised Federalism:** Cooperative federalism implies a negotiated balance of power where Union and State governments consult to formulate policy. Centralised federalism occurs when national agencies enforce uniform, top-down policies, reducing states to administrative arms.
 - *Example:* Uniform national testing mandates without exemptions for state-specific admission preferences reflect centralising federalism.
- **Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA):** A worldwide study conducted by the OECD evaluating 15-year-old students' scholastic performance in mathematics, science, and reading, focusing on applied problem-solving rather than textbook recall.
 - *Example:* Questions ask students to interpret real-world graphs or climate data rather than reproduce definitions from a textbook.
- **Multi-Tiered Assessment Architecture:** A layered examination model where a non-high-stakes, qualifying baseline test filters candidates, and only qualified candidates sit for advanced, specialized entrance exams.
 - *Example:* Civil Services Examination format (Prelims screening followed by Mains analytical assessment) applied to national entrance tests like NEET.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- **Core Thesis**

- National examination crises, paper leaks, and widespread candidate anxiety are structural outcomes of an educational model that prioritises rote memorization over conceptual reasoning, compounded by an over-centralised administrative framework that erodes state-level educational autonomy.

- **Key Substantive Arguments**

- **Pedagogical Vulnerability to Irregularities:** Memory-centric assessment systems make paper leaks lucrative. When an exam tests recall rather than complex problem-solving, advance access to the question paper guarantees high scores. If tests evaluated application and higher-order reasoning, leaked papers alone would offer minimal advantage.
 - **Administrative Strain of Single-Stage Centralisation:** Conducting a single-stage, high-stakes examination for millions of candidates creates logistics vulnerable to compromise. Administrative centralization increases systemic risk, where a single breach invalidates the process nationwide.
 - **Disproportionate Burden on Marginalised Candidates:** Lowering test difficulty to compensate for systemic educational deficits fails to support disadvantaged groups. Instead, it creates high-score crowding, forcing reliance on private coaching factories that rural and economically weaker students cannot afford.
 - **Erosion of Educational Federalism:** The shift of education to the Concurrent List and the imposition of mandatory national tests (NEET, CUET) ignore regional public health, social justice, and linguistic priorities. State assemblies are left with limited legislative capacity when Union policies override state-specific admission mechanisms.
 - **Flaws in Tactical Interventions:** High-powered task forces, stricter penal laws, and administrative restructuring address perimeter logistics without altering the core deficit: an outdated assessment model that neglects foundational learning and higher-order cognition.
-

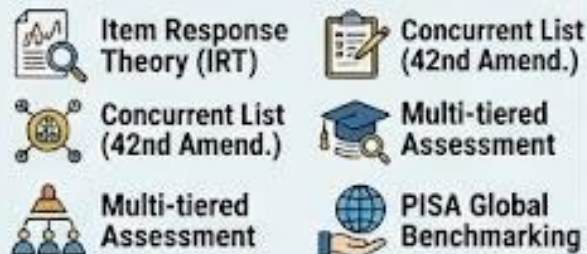
- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- **Pre-Independence Era (Ambedkarite Critique):** Colonial-era education established rigid, examination-centric filters. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar noted that severe exam structures acted as exclusionary barriers for historically marginalized communities, keeping higher education out of reach under the guise of maintaining standards.
- **1964–1968 (Kothari Commission and Language Policy Disputes):** The Kothari Commission (1964–66) proposed the Three-Language Formula, incorporated into the National Policy on Education (1968). Chief Minister C.N. Annadurai led the Tamil Nadu Legislative Assembly in January 1968 to reject this, adopting a Two-Language Policy (Tamil and English) to preserve regional identity and educational access.
- **1976 (The 42nd Constitutional Amendment Act):** During the Emergency, Parliament passed the 42nd Amendment, moving 'Education' from Item 11 of the State List to Item 25 of the Concurrent List. This fundamental shift allowed the Union government to legislate on national education frameworks, board structures, and entrance standards over state preferences.
- **2010–2017 (Introduction and Mandatory Rollout of NEET):** The Medical Council of India (MCI) notified NEET in 2010. Facing state litigation led by Tamil Nadu over public health autonomy and social equity, execution was stalled until the Supreme Court upheld and mandated NEET nationwide in 2016 (operationalized in 2017).
- **2020 (National Education Policy & Centralized Frameworks):** NEP 2020 introduced nationwide assessment standards, common entrance tests (CUET), and reinforced the three-language framework. This reignited debates surrounding regional language preservation, state autonomy, and administrative centralisation.
- **2024–2026 (Assessment Crises and Task Force Interventions):** Systemic paper leaks in national tests prompted public protests, parliamentary debate, and state-level resistance. In response, the Union Government constituted a high-power committee chaired by Nandan Nilekani to propose administrative, technological, and logistical overhauls to testing agencies.



AXIA IAS ACADEMY
RISE ABOVE THE REST

KEY CONCEPTS GLOSSARY



MULTIDIMENSIONAL IMPACTS

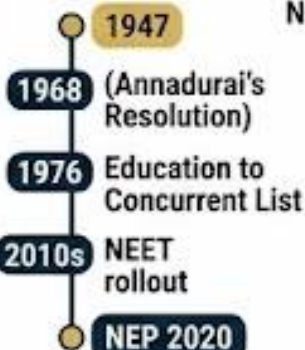


OVERHAULING INDIA'S EDUCATION SYSTEM: BEYOND THE PERIMETER, FIXING THE CORE

A Comprehensive Analysis for UPSC CSE & APSC Aspirants



HISTORICAL EVOLUTION



Rote Memory vs. Cognitive Development

Rote-Based Test

Memory Recall,
Narrow Bottleneck



Susceptible
to Leaks

HOTS/IRT Assessment

Conceptual Application,
Problem-Solving,
PISA Benchmarked



Genuine
Problem-Solving

Deep
Understanding



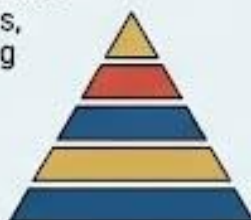
WAY FORWARD: STRUCTURAL REFORMS



Transforming Boards
-End memory tests,
test understanding



**Multi-tiered
Architecture**
-Qualifying then
Advanced exams



Large-scale Learning Data
-Diagnose early gaps



**Reject Rushed
Implementation**

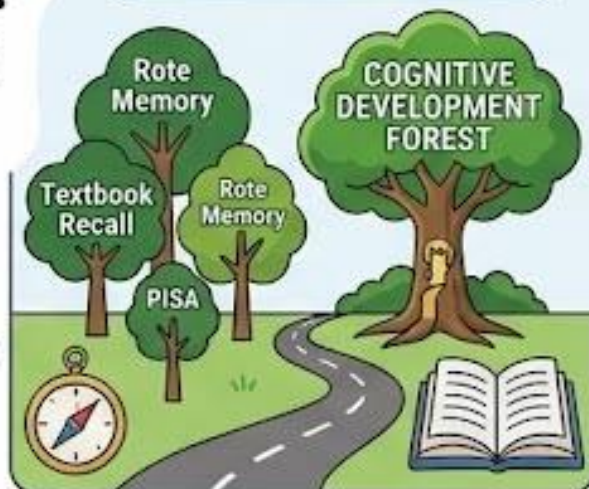


**Respect Federal
Accommodation**

-Guidelines not binding



WOOD FOR THE TREES



UPSC SYLLABUS LINKAGES

GS Paper	
GS1	Diversity, Social Empowerment → NCERT Classes 1 Chapter 2
GS2	Federalism, Education Governance → NCERT Classes 2 Chapter 3
GS3	Human Capital → NCERT Classes 1
GS4	Probity, Exam Integrity → NCERT Classes 2 Chapter 2

“Examination is something quite different from education...”
- Dr. BR Ambedkar

Logical and Philosophical Base

- **Epistemological Foundations (Behaviorism vs. Constructivism):** Current test design reflects a behaviorist model that treats learning as memorization and retrieval. In contrast, constructivist learning theories prioritize cognitive application, synthesis, and problem-solving. When assessments privilege recall, education degrades into mechanical drill-work.
- **Social Justice and Democratic Inclusion:** An Ambedkarite framework views state exams as instruments for democratic inclusion or socio-economic exclusion. When exams require private coaching rather than critical thinking, they create structural barriers for marginalized candidates, contradicting constitutional principles of substantive equality (Article 16).
- **Federalism as a Constitutional Safeguard:** Federalism treats educational delivery as a local public good best managed by regional authorities who understand contextual realities. Centralizing testing under a uniform model assumes a homogeneity that does not exist across India's diverse socio-economic landscape.
- **The Fallacy of Administrative Solutions for Pedagogical Deficits:** Bureaucratic measures (tech overhauls, stricter penal laws) operate on the assumption that cheating is merely a security failure. The core issue is that recall-based tests make advance access to content highly rewarding; changing the testing format alters this incentive structure.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social Dimension**
 - **Coaching Culture and Stratification:** High-stakes recall exams encourage commercial coaching factories. This creates a parallel education system accessible primarily to urban and affluent families, widening the equity gap for rural and marginalized students.
 - **Student Wellbeing:** Severe competition, high score inflation, and repeated paper leaks contribute to student anxiety and burnout, pointing to systemic vulnerabilities in national youth policy.
- **Political Dimension**
 - **Union-State Friction:** The Union's veto power over state legislation (such as withholding presidential assent under Article 201 for state exemption bills) creates political friction, leading states to challenge central mandates in court.
 - **Sub-National Identity and Language Politics:** Enforcing uniform language policies can be perceived as centralizing imposition in non-Hindi speaking states, elevating linguistic identity as a focus of regional political mobilisation.
- **Legal and Constitutional Dimension**
 - **Article 254 and Concurrent List Dynamics:** Union legislation takes precedence over state laws on Concurrent List items, limiting state-level modifications to central entrance tests.
 - **Gubernatorial and Presidential Delays:** Delays in granting assent to state bills seeking exam exemptions highlight constitutional friction between state legislative intent and central executive authority.
- **Ethical Dimension**
 - **Institutional Integrity:** Repeated paper leaks breach the public trust between students and the state, threatening the perceived fairness of meritocratic selection.
 - **Commercialisation of Education:** Converting entry to higher education into a market commodity undermines equal opportunity principles, favoring financial capacity over raw potential.
- **International Dimension**
 - **Global Benchmarking Deficits:** India's historical reluctance to participate consistently in international frameworks like PISA masks systemic learning gaps, leaving students underprepared for global research and innovation.
 - **Decentralized Testing Models:** Many foreign education systems use multi-tiered, decentralized, or aptitude-based assessments (such as the US SAT/ACT or European university frameworks) rather than relying on a single national high-stakes exam.
- **Economic Dimension**
 - **Skill Mismatch and Capital Loss:** Rote-based testing produces graduates with high marks but low problem-solving capacity, aggravating skill deficits across industry sectors.
 - **Unproductive Capital Allocation:** Families redirect significant household savings toward commercial exam coaching rather than productive economic investments or comprehensive skill development.

Linkages with NCERTs

Book / Class	Chapter / Unit	Relevance & Analytical Connection
Class 11 Political Science: <i>Indian Constitution at Work</i>	Chapter 7: Federalism	Explores the division of powers under the Seventh Schedule, the impact of the 42nd Amendment, and Union-State friction regarding Concurrent List subjects.
Class 11 Political Theory	Chapter 6: Social Justice	Discusses substantive vs. formal equality, equal opportunity, and how artificial barriers in educational selection impact social mobility.
Class 11 Economics: <i>Indian Economic Development</i>	Chapter 5: Human Capital Formation in India	Analyzes the distinction between quantitative literacy gains and qualitative human capital formation, emphasizing education's role in economic output.
Class 12 Sociology: <i>Social Change and Development in India</i>	Chapter 5: Change and Development in Industrial Society / Cultural Diversity Units	Examines regionalism, linguistic identity, sub-national aspirations, and structural inequities within education systems.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **General Studies Paper 1 (GS-1)**
 - *Salient features of Indian Society, Diversity of India; Social Empowerment.*
 - **Linkage:** Impact of centralized uniform testing on regional diversity, social stratification, and the urban-rural digital and socio-economic divide.
- **General Studies Paper 2 (GS-2)**
 - *Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Education, Human Resources.*
 - **Linkage:** Assessment reform, governance failures in national testing bodies, pedagogical shifts, and human capital parameters.
 - *Functions and responsibilities of the Union and the States, issues and challenges pertaining to the federal structure, devolution of powers.*
 - **Linkage:** Seventh Schedule disputes, the impact of the 42nd Amendment, Article 200/201 presidential assent friction, and cooperative federalism in education policy.
- **General Studies Paper 3 (GS-3)**
 - *Indian Economy and issues relating to planning, mobilization of resources, growth, development and employment.*
 - **Linkage:** Structural unemployment, workforce skill mismatches resulting from rote-learning systems, and the economic burden of coaching industries.
- **General Studies Paper 4 (GS-4)**
 - *Ethics and Human Interface; Probity in Governance, Public Service Values.*
 - **Linkage:** Institutional ethics, systemic integrity in testing agencies, preventing corruption in public examinations, and protecting public trust.
- **Optional Subjects Linkages**
 - **Public Administration:** Centralised vs. Decentralised administrative models, central agencies, and policy execution dynamics in concurrent sectors.
 - **Political Science & International Relations (PSIR):** Indian Federalism, sub-national identity politics, Centre-State friction, and Ambedkarite political thought.
 - **Sociology:** Educational institutions as mechanisms of social reproduction, elite closure, and structural inequity.

- **Way Forward**

- **Pedagogical and Exam Redesign (Item Response Theory & HOTS):**

- Transition national and state-level exams toward High-Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) and Item Response Theory (IRT).
- Design assessments that test conceptual application, analytical reasoning, and data interpretation rather than textual recall. This reduces the utility of leaked content and curbs reliance on memorization-focused coaching.

- **Multi-Tiered Assessment Framework:**

- Implement a two-stage examination model for high-stakes entrances. A decentralized, computer-based qualifying exam can evaluate baseline competencies, filtering candidates to a manageable number for an advanced, application-focused secondary assessment.

- **Restoring Federal Flexibility in Education:**

- Shift from rigid central uniformity toward a framework of cooperative federalism.
- Allow states operational flexibility to adapt admission mechanisms to regional public health needs, socio-economic contexts, and state curriculum boards, positioning central frameworks as guidelines rather than strict mandates.

- **Early Diagnostic Learning Data:**

- Establish continuous, diagnostic learning evaluations from primary through secondary education to identify and address learning deficits early, reducing reliance on single, high-stakes final exams.

- **Phased Implementation and Global Benchmarking:**

- Avoid rushed nationwide rollouts of new testing systems; use small-scale pilot studies and diagnostic reviews prior to implementation.
- Participate consistently in international assessments such as PISA to benchmark domestic learning standards against global reference points.



- **UPSC CSE Mains**
- **GS Paper 2 (2018)**
 - *Question:* "The centralisation of higher education entrance systems in India attempts to balance merit with uniformity, but often at the cost of federal equity and state-specific needs." Critically examine. (250 words, 15 marks)
- **GS Paper 2 (2020)**
 - *Question:* "Which steps are required for reforming the examination system in Indian schools and universities to shift the focus from rote learning to critical thinking?" Discuss with reference to national education frameworks. (150 words, 10 marks)
- **GS Paper 2 (2022)**
 - *Question:* "The transfer of 'Education' from the State List to the Concurrent List by the 42nd Amendment Act, 1976 has altered Centre-State dynamics significantly." Analyze this statement in the context of recent controversies over uniform national entrance examinations. (250 words, 15 marks)
- **GS Paper 4 Ethics (2021)**
 - *Question:* "Frequent paper leaks and administrative failures in public examination bodies erode public trust in the state's meritocratic promises." What ethical and governance measures should be implemented to restore integrity in public testing agencies? (250 words, 15 marks)
- **APSC (Assam Public Service Commission) Mains**
- **CCE Mains - GS Paper 2 (2020)**
 - *Question:* "Discuss the constitutional implications of placing education on the Concurrent List. How can cooperative federalism be strengthened while addressing state-specific priorities in education?" (250 words, 15 marks)
- **CCE Mains - GS Paper 2 (2023)**
 - *Question:* "In light of persistent issues in national competitive examinations, evaluate the need for structural assessment reforms versus purely logistical security measures in India." (150 words, 10 marks)

It's just a Bollywood problem



RAKESH RAJAMANI

THE IS ENORMOUS success of Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* and the latest film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Spider-Man: Beyond New Day*, across Indian theatres, could easily leave one wondering whether Indian cinema is slowly losing its ability to produce films that capture the public imagination on a similar scale. That concern may be valid, but only if we continue to see Bollywood as representing the entirety of Indian cinema.

In fact, at its emotional core, *The Odyssey* line if unfolds very much like a Tamil masala film. A hero's long journey home, emotional dilemmas and larger-than-life adventures are themes Tamil star vehicles have comfortably embraced for decades. The language and scale may be different, but the emotional grammar is surprisingly familiar. When Odysseus finally returns home, he might as well be Rajinikanth walking into *Kabali* (2016) to declare, "Tell them I'm back."

Hindi cinema's biggest successes this year have largely stayed within familiar comfort zones. Whether it is yet another leader conflict spectacle in *Dhruvan* or *The Revenge*, or *Border 2*, or the dependable cocktail of horror and comedy in *Black Jungle* and *Shamshad 4*, Bollywood seems increasingly reluctant to venture beyond formulas that have already been tested, approved and monetised.

Of course, popular cinema has always relied on familiar genres and crowd-pleasing tropes. The problem begins when an industry becomes so risk-averse that it edges towards insensibility. The films may become bigger, louder and technically slicker, but the emotional and thematic territory they explore continues to shrink.

But if we look beyond the Hindi film industry, regional cinema continues to be wonderfully alive. Tamil cinema's biggest hit this year, *Kannappa*, was the hit for its unassuming village deity Kannappa; to examine the apathy of the Indian judicial system, it could easily have settled for being a conventional courtroom drama. Instead, it upends the idea of justice against God himself, making the film even more compelling as a momentous entry story.

Malayalam cinema, meanwhile, remains fascinated by ordinary lives. *Vaathi* (2019) of *q's* *Billon* director Manoj Kumaran coming of age story into an emotionally resonant exploration of modern

youth, friendship and the often uncomfortable transition into adulthood.

Telugu cinema, often unduly noted for being more than life commercial entertainers, also offers pleasant surprises. *Pudu* packages a reflection on systemic oppression within an awfully popular sports drama. *Miss* *but* *Shangha* on the other hand, follows a woman struggling to reconcile a violent past with the ordinary life she desperately wants to protect. Both films work as mainstream entertainers while refusing to become emotionally soporific.

None of these films are masterpieces. Neither are they flawless. But they all make an earnest effort to explore newer themes and discover fresh ways of telling stories. That willingness to take creative risks is perhaps their greatest strength.

Regional cinema today seems far more comfortable asking uncomfortable questions. It draws more freely from local folklore, literature, politics and lived experience. It treats audiences to embrace stories deeply rooted in specific cultures without endlessly chasing a mythical "pan-Indian" template. Ironically, it is this very specificity that often makes these films feel more universal.

Bollywood, meanwhile, seems trapped in an ideological purgatory of the worst sub-blockbuster. Somewhere along the way, "pan-Indian" has become shorthand for sending away every regional taste and local feel as though it could belong anywhere, and therefore nowhere in particular. The result is scale without distinction.

This is not to suggest that Bollywood has stopped making good films altogether. Every industry produces both mediocre films and occasional gems. Bollywood still possesses unmatched resources, visual polish and marketing muscle.

But cinema has never been remembered for technical excellence alone. Audiences return to films because they recognise themselves in them, because they are surprised by them, or because they leave the theatre carrying an idea that wasn't there two hours earlier. That willingness to surprise feels far more abundant outside Mumbai today.

Perhaps, this is a healthy development for Indian cinema. For decades, the cinema conversation largely flowed in one direction, from Bollywood to everyone else. Increasingly, it is regional cinema that is setting the agenda, discovering fresh storytelling voices and proving that commercial success and creative ambition need not be mutually exclusive.

The question isn't whether Indian cinema can still dominate big. It is obvious that it can. The real strength of Indian cinema lies in the many different languages that it speaks in.

The writer is a Chennai-based filmmaker

Blame the ecosystem, not the industry



SHUBHRA GUPTA

THE LATEST shenanigans of a teenage superhero morphing into a spider in order to save the good girl from bullying moments is currently running in packed theatres. Not just around the world, but also in India, where *Spider-Man: Beyond New Day* has chalked up the biggest Bollywood opening weekend, while *spidee* is roaring. The classic line "With great power comes great responsibility" can be heard not just in the original English, but in Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam.

And it's not just Tom Holland swinging from day heights in NYC which has got Indian audiences back to the big screen. Several Hollywood films have done such good business at the box office that many Indian films are having to postpone their releases for a safer date, and we're only halfway through 2020.

Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*, a paean to Homer's epic, and to the director's ability to parse ancient mythology for our cynical age, is still in theatres. Amazon MGM Studios' sci-fi adventure *Project Hail Mary*, involving the very wholesome Ryan Reynolds and his cutesy relationship with a friendly alien, tickled up impressive numbers. Curry Barker's *Obsession*, a non-starry horror film front-loaded with the aesthetics of a low-budget home movie and terrible performance became a surprise hit. And the very adult-themed chamber drama *The Ditch*, inspired by Seth Rogen in an award-winning turn, drew major crowds.

What's going on? Hollywood has traditionally done well in urban Indian pockets, within familiar franchise flake and pacy actioners grabbing eyeballs. But it's never been such a done and proven formula if you go by the enthusiastic reception for scrappy horror films, or small-canvas talky dramas, not just the expected big-budget creature features and superhero sagas.

In Bollywood's spidee-sense tugging? Has it forgotten how to tell engaging stories? Aren't the filmmakers in Mumbai, home to the biggest industry in the world, wondering where their local audience has gone? *Dhruvan* 2 tops the list of successes this year, no surprises there, because of the unprecedented buzz it came riding on, and the doubling down on its content and intent. Then

came, in no particular order, *Border 2*, *Black Jungle*, *Shamshad 4*, *Welcome To The Jungle*. The first was a solid film, layered with a strong anti-war sentiment; all the others are loud comedies coasting on low-hanging humour.

What's becoming abundantly clear is that only two kinds of films are being made, and supported, on scale in Bollywood these days: Propaganda and slapstick, both competing for the lowest common denominator. But this is not just me having a snarky moment. For the last decade, with the immense after-effects of globalising, globalised cinema, every other kind of filmmaking has been having a difficult time of it. Even if it does get made, the chances of it surviving, let alone thriving, have become narrower and narrower.

So does this signal the death of creativity in Bollywood? Not in the least. The industry is filled with filmmakers who are capable of telling stories with heart and craft, layered with technical polish, but in an ecosystem so hastily inclined to liberalism and plurality, these voices are going unheard. Not into the void — we're not quite there yet — but the risk is imminent.

Two recent films which gave us the chance to question and interrogate the past, have broken through the shield. Imtiaz Ali's *Maat* *Vaapasi*, *Aadav*, which deals with the twin longing for a lost land and love, may not be all the way perfect, but it brings back a sense of springing hope. Nissaruddin Shah's brilliant performance as a man who has never been able to forget, makes us remember. It makes us hope, and I can't think of anything better.

Honey Tripathi's *Satish*, originally named *Parash 90*, tells the story of an individual who fought for his people at a time when the state was riven by militancy. The film's modest appearance on streaming platform Zee5 and its equally sudden disappearance is an abiding mystery, but never more than the reason why the Indian cinema kept demanding out for over three years. You could argue persuasively, and many have, that the thrust of the story was one-sided, that it didn't touch upon all aspects besetting the troubled state. But that doesn't take away from the fact of it being an important film which speaks to its time, and our time. Agreeing to disagree is the civilised way to go, but somehow letting the producer and director, and leaving them with no income, is beyond the pale.

If pushback and intimidation is the response, the result will only be silence and submission. What price creativity?

The writer is a film critic. The Indian Express shubhra.gupta@theindianexpress.com

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Cultural Homogenization:** The process by which unique local traditions, dialects, and cultural expressions are erased or flattened into a single, standardized global or national template.
 - *Example:* Replacing distinct regional folk motifs with a generic, polished "pan-Indian" soundtrack designed strictly for algorithm-driven viral marketing.
- **Masala Cinema & Emotional Grammar:** An archetype of popular Indian cinema that blends disparate genres—melodrama, action, comedy, romance, and tragedy—into a unified, larger-than-life narrative anchored by heightened emotional beats.
 - *Example:* Classic Tamil or Hindi mainstream cinema where the protagonist's journey mirrors mythical archetypes of justice, familial duty, and redemption.
- **Pan-Indian Template:** A commercial production strategy aimed at creating films with broad, non-specific geographic and cultural appeal to maximize revenue across multiple linguistic markets simultaneously.
 - *Example:* Setting a narrative in an unidentified, stylized landscape with simplified moral tropes to ensure easy dubbing and reception across diverse state audiences.
- **Creative Risk-Aversion:** An economic behavior in media industries where risk is minimized by relying exclusively on pre-tested intellectual property, formulas, sequels, or politically safe genres rather than original or provocative themes.
 - *Example:* A studio greenlighting only multi-starrer action franchises or low-brow comedy sequels to guarantee baseline theatrical returns.
- **Chilling Effect:** The legal and social deterrence of legitimate artistic expression caused by implicit state pressure, stringent censor demands, extra-constitutional harassment, or fear of commercial retaliation.
 - *Example:* Filmmakers self-censoring politically sensitive or socially critical themes during the script stage to avoid prolonged legal hurdles or distribution blockades.
- **Soft Power:** The capacity of a nation to influence international outcomes and shape global preferences through cultural attraction, values, and ideas rather than military or economic coercion (Coined by Joseph Nye).
 - *Example:* The global outreach of Indian cinema through international dubbed releases, shaping cultural perceptions across Africa, the Middle East, and the West.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- **Shift in the Creative Center of Gravity**

- Mainstream Hindi cinema (Bollywood) has historically been regarded as the primary cultural voice of Indian film. However, a structural pivot is occurring. While mainstream Hindi cinema increasingly defaults to formulaic risk-aversion, regional industries—particularly Tamil, Malayalam, and Telugu cinema—are emerging as the primary engines of creative ambition, cultural rootedness, and narrative innovation.

- **The Myth of the Pan-Indian Monoculture**

- The pursuit of a generic "pan-Indian" movie template often results in the stripping away of authentic regional textures, producing films that possess visual scale without narrative distinctiveness. Conversely, regional film industries demonstrate that true narrative universality arises from deep cultural specificity. Films grounded in localized folklore, regional socio-political realities, and authentic human dilemmas resonate far more profoundly with diverse audiences than sanitized, location-neutral spectacles.

- **Dual Pressures on Mainstream Storytelling**

- Mainstream Hindi cinema is caught in a pincer movement between economic conservatism and socio-political intolerance:

- **Economic Determinism:** Soaring production costs incentivize studios to fund only low-risk, pre-sold formulas, such as slapstick comedies, high-decibel action, or nostalgic sequels.
- **Political Environment:** A restrictive environment toward plurality and institutional pushback makes critical or socially interrogative cinema financially and operationally hazardous, squeezing out nuanced, humanistic storytelling.

- **Hollywood's Deepening Market Penetration**

- Foreign cinema, particularly from Hollywood, has expanded beyond its traditional urban, English-speaking demographic in India. By leveraging wide multi-language dubbing (across Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam) and offering diverse narratives—ranging from high-concept auteur projects to low-budget experimental horror—foreign films are emerging as direct box-office disrupters across Tier-2 and Tier-3 markets.

- **The Democratizing Power of Creative Risk**

- The vitality of an art form is directly tied to its willingness to risk commercial failure in pursuit of thematic novelty. While mainstream Hindi cinema remains focused on safe blockbusters, regional industries are using commercial frameworks to address complex themes—such as judicial apathy, caste and systemic oppression, youth disillusionment, and gendered agency—proving that critical engagement and box-office viability can coexist.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**
 - **Genesis and Nation-Building Era (1913–1940s)**
 - **Foundational Roots:** Cinema in India began as a medium deeply intertwined with mythology (*Raja Harishchandra*, 1913) and social reform.
 - **Anti-Colonial Subtext:** Regional centers like Mumbai, Kolkata, and Chennai developed distinct cinematic styles, often embedding anti-colonial sentiment, swadeshi ideals, and critiques of social hierarchies within acceptable allegorical forms.
 - **Post-Independence Realism and the Golden Age (1950s–1960s)**
 - **Nehruvian Idealism:** Early post-independence cinema reflected nation-building efforts, rural-urban migration, and agrarian struggles (*Mother India*, *Do Bigha Zamin*).
 - **Bifurcation of Streams:** The period saw a clear distinction between popular song-and-dance narratives and the emergence of the "Parallel Cinema" movement (spearheaded by Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen, and Ritwik Ghatak), which emphasized socio-economic realism and won international acclaim.
 - **Rise of the Commercial Masala and Regional Assertiveness (1970s–1980s)**
 - **The Angry Young Man Archetype:** Economic stagnation, unemployment, and institutional decay in the 1970s birthed the archetype of the disillusioned hero fighting a corrupt system.
 - **Regional Political Integration:** In South India, particularly Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh, cinema became directly intertwined with regional identity politics and Dravidian socio-political movements, establishing regional cinema as an independent powerhouse rather than a satellite of Mumbai.
 - **Liberalization, Multiplexes, and Diaspora Focus (1990s–2000s)**
 - **Post-1991 Economic Reforms:** Economic liberalization led to the corporatization of the film industry, the rise of multiplexes, and an increased reliance on foreign box-office revenue from the Indian diaspora.
 - **Demographic Segmentation:** Mainstream Hindi cinema pivoted toward affluent, aspirational, NRI-centric romances, creating a growing cultural disconnect with rural and lower-middle-class Indian realities.
 - **The OTT Era, Pan-Indian Wave, and Contemporary Crisis (2010s–Present)**
 - **Technological Democratization:** Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms and dubbed television broadcasts introduced North Indian audiences to South Indian mainstream cinema, challenging Bollywood's market dominance.
 - **Structural Monoculture vs. Regional Dynamism:** Recent years have seen the rise of mega-budget "pan-Indian" franchises alongside an increasing polarization: mainstream Hindi cinema gravitates toward safe, formulaic spectacles, while regional directors leverage local narratives to drive critical and commercial discourse.
-



UPSC CSE PREPARATION: A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF CURRENT CINEMATIC TRENDS IN INDIA

FOREIGN FILM DISRUPTION: MULTI-LANGUAGE DUBBING & GENRE DIVERSITY

Braking Hollywood Opening Weekend

Tamil
Kannada

Hindi
Tamil
Telugu
Malayalam

From Sci-Fi to Scrappy Horror, Foreign Films penetrate Tier-2 & Tier-3 markets.

HINDI CINEMA (BOLLYWOOD): THE COST OF RISK AVERSION

Cormule Content

- Propaganda
- Slapstick
- Tested sequels

Formulaic Content

Shrinking Emotional & Thematic Territory

Risk of Irrelevance

Tested, Approved, Monetized

Safe Slot

Stagnation, reliance on formulas, and loss of distinct regional texture for a generic Pan-Indian appeal.

REGIONAL CINEMA (TAMIL, MALAYALAM, TELUGU): THE CREATIVE HEART & AGENDA SETTER.

Uncomfortable Questions

Social Critique

Rooted in Specific Culture

Creative Risks

Deep Local Folklore, Literature, Politics, Lived Experience

Setting the creative agenda, discovering fresh storytelling voices, and proving commercial success can coexist with ambition.

EDUCATIONAL TAKEAWAYS & ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Impact on Indian Federal Culture
- Role of Cinema in Soft Power projection
- Economic Shifts in Distribution
- Artistic Freedom vs. Censorship (Ref: Punjab 95)
- Ethics of Storytelling vs. Propaganda

Liberty & Plurality

Pushback & Intimidation



- **Logical and Philosophical Base**
- **The Frankfurt School: Mass Culture vs. Authentic Art**
 - The philosophical tension between homogenized blockbuster cinema and critical, rooted storytelling directly mirrors Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of the **"Culture Industry."**
 - They argued that under advanced capitalism, popular culture becomes a factory system producing standardized, formulaic goods designed to pacify audiences and enforce conformity.
 - When cinema abandons thematic risk to chase lowest-common-denominator commercial safety, it ceases to function as art and becomes an instrument of cultural standardization.
- **Geertzian "Thick Description" and Cultural Specificity**
 - Anthropologist Clifford Geertz emphasized the concept of **"Thick Description"**—the idea that human behavior and cultural expressions can only be understood through their specific, dense contextual meaning.
 - Applied to narrative arts, universal human emotions are not accessed through abstract, placeless generalizations (the sanitized "pan-Indian" formula).
 - Instead, they are unlocked through deep, uncompromising specificity—using local folklore, regional idioms, and particular socio-political contexts to reveal broader truths about the human condition.
- **Millian Freedom of Expression and the Marketplace of Ideas**
 - John Stuart Mill's defense of free expression in *On Liberty* rests on the premise that truth emerges from the open collision of diverse, conflicting opinions.
 - A healthy cinematic landscape acts as a democratic "marketplace of ideas."
 - When systemic pushback, censorship, or commercial intimidation silences critical, uncomfortable, or non-conformist films, it impoverishes the public sphere, replacing vibrant democratic debate with enforced ideological uniformity.



- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social Dimension**
 - **Representation of Plurality:** Cinema acts as a mirror to society. When mainstream cinema limits its thematic scope, marginal social groups, rural realities, and complex regional identities are erased from the popular narrative.
 - **Community Engagement:** Regional films grounded in local deities, vernacular traditions, and subaltern histories validate regional pride and foster intercultural understanding across linguistic boundaries.
 - **Impact of Stereotyping:** Formulaic, risk-averse cinema often relies on regressive tropes, hyper-masculinity, and simplified "us versus them" binaries, whereas narrative-driven films challenge societal prejudices regarding caste, gender, and economic inequality.
- **Political Dimension**
 - **Cinema as Ideological Apparatus:** Film has long served as a tool for shaping public consciousness. A shift toward uniform, state-sanctioned, or hyper-nationalistic themes risks transforming cinema from an instrument of democratic critique into a vehicle for political hegemony.
 - **Suppression of Dissent:** Institutional delays, arbitrary censorship cuts, and extra-legal intimidation directed at socio-politically critical films weaken Article 19(1)(a) protections and signal an intolerance toward alternative narratives.
- **Legal Dimension**
 - **Regulatory Challenges and the Cinematograph Act:** The statutory framework governing film certification (Cinematograph Act, 1952) has frequently been criticized for acting as a censor board rather than a certification body, exceeding the reasonable restrictions mandated under Article 19(2) of the Indian Constitution.
 - **Digital Arbitrary Oversight:** The ambiguous regulatory environment surrounding OTT streaming platforms (such as the IT Rules, 2021) creates legal uncertainty, leading platforms to preemptively pull or delay controversial films to avoid litigation or public backlash.
- **Ethical Dimension**
 - **Moral Responsibility of the Creator:** Filmmakers and studios face an ethical tension between financial profit and artistic integrity. Resorting to low-brow, sensationalist, or polarising content for immediate financial gain can erode public discourse and ethical sensibilities.
 - **Ethics of Historicism and Truth:** Films dealing with historical trauma or socio-political conflict carry an ethical imperative to present nuanced, multi-faceted realities rather than one-sided or revisionist propaganda that deepens social fault lines.
- **International Dimension**
 - **Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy:** India's global influence relies heavily on its vibrant, pluralistic cultural output. A vibrant film industry that showcases diversity, intellectual depth, and artistic freedom enhances India's global image as a mature democracy.
 - **Globalization and Foreign Competition:** The expanding footprint of dubbed Hollywood cinema in non-urban Indian markets demonstrates that Indian audiences are increasingly global consumers. To remain competitive on its home turf, domestic cinema must elevate its production standards, narrative depth, and visual innovation.
- **Economic Dimension**
 - **Capital Concentration and Monopoly:** High production budgets and centralized distribution networks concentrate market power among a few major studios, making independent, small-budget films economically vulnerable and dependent on theatrical margins.
 - **Disruption of Traditional Business Models:** The rise of streaming platforms alongside international film distribution has disrupted traditional theatrical windows. While this offers global reach, it leaves mid-budget cinema struggling for theatrical visibility against massive event blockbusters.

Linkages with NCERTs

Class 11 Sociology: *Introducing Sociology*

- **Chapter 3: "Understanding Social Institutions"**

- *Context:* This chapter discusses mass media as a pervasive social institution that constructs social realities, reinforces norms, and acts as an agent of socialization.
- *Linkage:* The contrast between formulaic mainstream cinema and culturally rooted regional cinema demonstrates how media institutions can either enforce dominant social hierarchies or act as sites of socio-cultural resistance and reform.

Class 12 Political Science: *Politics in India Since Independence*

- **Chapter 8: "Regional Aspirations"**

- *Context:* Examines the delicate balance between national integration and the assertion of regional, linguistic, and cultural identities in Indian democracy.
- *Linkage:* The resistance of regional film industries to a homogenized "pan-Indian" template directly parallels India's broader federal dynamic: true national strength lies in celebrating linguistic diversity rather than enforcing centralized uniformity.

Class 11 Political Theory: *Political Theory*

- **Chapter 2: "Freedom"**

- *Context:* Explores negative versus positive liberty, John Stuart Mill's "harm principle," and the necessity of safeguarding freedom of expression from state and social tyranny.
- *Linkage:* The issue of official censorship, stonewalling of controversial films, and extra-constitutional pushback directly illustrates the systemic threats to negative liberty and artistic expression in a constitutional democracy.

Class 12 Sociology: *Social Change and Development in India*

- **Chapter 7: "Mass Media and Communications"**

- *Context:* Traces the transformation of mass communications from state-controlled developmental media to globalized, commercialized media markets.
- *Linkage:* Maps directly onto the evolution of Indian cinema—from early post-independence socialist realism to the contemporary pressures of global capitalism, corporatization, and digital disruption.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper 1: Indian Culture and Society**
 - **Art Forms and Literature:** Cinema as a contemporary performing art form that reflects regional heritage, oral storytelling traditions, and local folklore.
 - **Salient Features of Indian Society & Diversity:** The clash between regional linguistic specificity and homogenized mass culture as a study in unity versus uniformity.
- **GS Paper 2: Governance, Constitution, and Polity**
 - **Fundamental Rights (Article 19(1)(a)):** Liberty of speech and expression, artistic freedom, and the constitutional boundaries of "reasonable restrictions" under Article 19(2).
 - **Statutory and Regulatory Bodies:** The structural role, efficiency, and judicial reform of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC).
- **GS Paper 3: Economic Development and Media Growth**
 - **Service Sector Dynamics & Creative Economy:** The economics of the film industry, corporate consolidation, OTT market trends, and the market impact of foreign (Hollywood) direct competition.
- **GS Paper 4: Ethics and Human Interface**
 - **Ethics in Media and Public Discourse:** Moral responsibilities of creators, political instrumentalization of art, freedom of expression versus social harmony, and the cultivation of pluralistic tolerance.
- **Essay Subject Areas**
 - *"Unity in Diversity vs. Enforced Uniformity in Modern India."*
 - *"Soft Power: The Global Currency of Cultural Authenticity."*
 - *"Freedom of Expression: The Bedrock of Democratic Innovation."*



- 
- **Way Forward**
 - **Institutional Reform of Certification Mechanisms**
 - **Transition from Censor to Certification Board:** Implement the recommendations of the **Shyam Benegal Committee (2016)**, which advised that the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) should function strictly as a age-rating certification body rather than an authority empowered to demand arbitrary edits, cuts, or bans.
 - **Clear Statutory Parameters:** Amend the Cinematograph Act to restrict executive interference and define clear, unambiguous guidelines aligned with constitutional jurisprudence on free speech.
 - **Protection of Creative Autonomy and Legal Safeguards**
 - **Anti-Mob Veto Mechanism:** State governments must uphold the law and enforce public order during theatrical screenings, preventing non-state actors, fringe groups, or mobs from exercising an extra-judicial veto over certified films.
 - **Transparent Platform Governance:** Formulate clear, objective regulatory frameworks for streaming platforms that protect creators from arbitrary takedown demands while preserving artistic autonomy.
 - **Financial and Distribution Infrastructure for Diverse Cinema**
 - **Public Support for Independent Cinema:** Establish state-backed public grants and regional film development funds—similar to the British Film Institute (BFI) or France's CNC—to subsidize small-canvas, socially relevant, and artistic cinema.
 - **Equitable Screen Allocation:** Introduce market guidelines or public theater networks (e.g., state-owned art-house screens) to ensure mid-budget, non-franchise, and independent films get adequate showtimes alongside massive blockbusters.
 - **Decoupling Pan-Indian Ambition from Cultural Flattening**
 - **Incentivizing Vernacular Screenwriting:** Film institutes, industry bodies, and state governments should establish screenwriting incubators that focus on adapting regional literature, oral history, and local folklore.
 - **Focus on Subdued Realism and Technical Polish:** Mainstream industries must invest in narrative development, screenwriting, and thematic depth rather than relying solely on high-decibel visual effects and pre-existing formulaic tropes.

- 
- **Mains PYQs (UPSC CSE & APSC)**
 - **GS Paper 1: Culture & Society**
 - *"Indian society is a tapestry of pluralism where local cultural expressions feed into a larger national ethos."* In light of this, discuss how modern cinema reflects the tension between regional specificity and national cultural homogenization. (15 Marks, 250 Words - UPSC 2021 Modified)
 - How does the global reach of Indian media and entertainment contribute to India's soft power projection abroad? What structural challenges limit its full potential? (10 Marks, 150 Words)
 - **GS Paper 2: Polity & Governance**
 - *"Freedom of expression on artistic platforms cannot be suppressed on the apprehension of a threat to public order created by non-state actors."* Discuss in the context of judicial pronouncements regarding film certification and artistic liberty in India. (15 Marks, 250 Words - UPSC 2019 Theme)
 - Evaluate the structural functioning of statutory regulatory bodies like the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). Do the existing guidelines strike a fair balance between Article 19(1)(a) and Article 19(2)? (15 Marks, 250 Words)
 - **GS Paper 4: Ethics**
 - *"A risk-averse culture in media and arts leads to ideological conformity, eroding the democratic spirit of plural tolerance."* Analyze this statement from an ethical perspective. What are the moral duties of media creators toward a diverse public sphere? (10 Marks, 150 Words)

Upper Assam floods reveal how outdated our financial set-up is

Flood patterns are changing but disaster response and mitigation funding follows yesterday's data. It should be proactive



AMIT KAPOOR & SHREEN ZUTSHI
are, respectively, chair and research manager,
Institute for Competitiveness, & @shreenzutshi

Assam is the latest victim of a system that is becoming normalised in India as a danger zone. Another year, the floodline may mean Pibit, a Hindu festival in a coastal city where a festival has and has acquired an unfamiliar intensity. Assam's floods this season have killed 147 lives and left 140 villages and thousands of thousands of people at risk across districts, with the chief minister describing water levels as never in half a century. Upper Assam is not accustomed to see this situation. The suffering reveals a story of policy mismanagement.

This tragedy needs to be understood against Assam's wider climate risk landscape. The Climate Risk and Vulnerability Assessment of 2021 places the state 88th among India's 28 states overall, with the second highest exposure score nationally. The report estimates that 17% of Assam is highly vulnerable to floods. Exposure indicates the scale of risk, but adaptive capacity determines if warning channels reach communities, making it necessary, drinking water and health care are lost, and electricity and communications recoverability.

As per a report prepared by the Institute for Competitiveness, Assam has an adaptive capacity score of 76.6, making it the third most constrained among the states assessed. This reflects structural weaknesses in water, sanitation, surface roads and telecom facilities. The latest floods left nearly 13,000 households without electricity 10 days after the deluge, while millions continued to share a toilet in some areas after the water had receded.

Keeping its risk landscape in mind, over the years Assam has won a fine in the disaster finance provision from 12,540 crore under the 11th Finance Commission (FC) to 61,712 crore under the 15th FC. The 15th FC has recommended an allocation of 12,825 crore for 2026-31. Lack of fund provision does not seem to be the main problem.

Climate-related finance should be judged by the speed it has evolved, not merely by the funds allocated. The relevant metrics for tracking whether embankments, roads, shelter, water systems and communication may have changed during a flood. In July 2020, the state government reported that 5,000 km of the state's 11,360 km embankment network required repair or reconstruction because its flood resistance capacity had declined. Around 1,800 km had been strengthened, including 800 km over the last five years. But the story doesn't end here. There are also other issues that cause damage in Upper Assam that need to be highlighted for effective risk mitigation and prevention.

One question is whether centrally recognised risk can prompt comprehensive preventive action. Another concerns the challenge of managing a tributary basin with much of its catchment area lying across the state's boundaries.

In 2019, concerns about mining, erosion and



possible changes in the Dihm's course worried the Gauhati high court. The state had then prepared a multidisciplinary study and master plan, and the court called for an endorsement mechanism. While the case yielded nothing about the role of mining in this year's flood, it raises the question of whether a recognised risk was met with proper preventive action in the last six years. An institutional gap is only part of the problem; another is geographical. A 2011 Geographic Information System study under the Dihm's drainage system of North East India estimated that floodable area here is roughly 1,800 sq km. Although estimates differ across studies, it is clear that much of the basin lies upstream in Nagaland, with water and sediment flowing into the Assam plains before joining the Brahmaputra.

Nagaland's soil and water conservation department has been a pioneer in erosion control, road testing and watershed regeneration. But hills and open cast mines in Wokha, Mon, Molokhang, Longleng and Tinsukia. Its 2014-21 administrative report reveals several examples of damage from acid mine drainage and other programmes intended to restore mine spoil areas.

This does not mean that the identified mines fall within the Dihm's catchment or that mining of iron ore has materially worsened this year's floods, but it establishes a causal link between Dihm as a connected basin. Water, silt and sediment increased state borders. Yet, mining regulation, forest administration, catchment restoration and disaster expenditure are state functions. So climate risk enters by river basins, but governance and finance are shielded by administrative boundaries. This is one

misnomer. But there is a bigger one in the design of India's FCs.

Although the 15th FC recognises disaster risk, its weighting remains low. For state disaster response and mitigation in local allocations, the 15th FC gives a 20% weight to adjusted average disaster expenditure between 2011-12 and 2013-14, excluding the two previous years, and 30% to a disaster risk index that has separate hazard exposure and vulnerability. Although the risk component is recognised better than in earlier approaches, the difficulty lies in the relative weights. Disaster response is a justified parameter for assessing state recovery finance needs, but

overall, the deviation formula is slow to take emerging geographies of risk into account. It is designed so that risk is fully recognised only after a record of damage has accumulated. In this regard, India lacks the institutional ability to anticipate vulnerability before disaster strikes. While floods would have to change patterns, our fiscal and administrative set-up largely remains the same. Waiting for the next cycle to reconsider climate risk within India's private and public sector of flood devastation

could mean several more tragedies. The Union and state budgets must therefore begin applying forward-looking climate risk criteria, while a stronger framework is developed for the next FC.

Climate mitigation must begin before recovery efforts commence a cycle later in the development. Recovery is not simply a matter of rebuilding what was lost at the same location. There is a different, agricultural field, school or village is reconstructed in a fringe, rebuilding happens elsewhere.

QUICK READ

Climate risk enters by river basins, but governance and finance are shielded by administrative boundaries. The mismatch is greater than the one in how funds are divided to states.

India requires anticipatory funding. Budgets must start using forward-looking climate risk criteria while a better development framework is developed for the next Finance Commission.

Climate mitigation must begin before recovery efforts commence a cycle later in the development. Recovery is not simply a matter of rebuilding what was lost at the same location. There is a different, agricultural field, school or village is reconstructed in a fringe, rebuilding happens elsewhere.

- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Hazard vs. Disaster:** A *hazard* is a dangerous physical event or human activity (e.g., heavy monsoon rain or river overflow). A *disaster* occurs when a hazard interacts with vulnerable human settlements, causing severe disruption, loss of life, and economic damage.
 - *Example:* Heavy precipitation in an uninhabited forest is a hazard; that same precipitation inundating thousands of villages with poor infrastructure becomes a disaster.
- **Exposure:** The presence of people, livelihoods, environmental services, infrastructure, or economic assets in places that could be adversely affected by a hazard.
 - *Example:* Building houses or roads directly on a river floodplain increases physical exposure to flooding.
- **Adaptive Capacity:** The ability of systems, institutions, humans, and organisms to adjust to potential damage, take advantage of opportunities, or respond to consequences.
 - *Example:* A state with flood-resilient roads, decentralized emergency drinking water supplies, and robust solar back-ups for telecom networks has high adaptive capacity.
- **Acid Mine Drainage (AMD):** The outflow of acidic water from metal or coal mines, caused by the exposure of sulfide minerals to air and water. AMD degrades water bodies, destroys aquatic ecosystems, increases river sediment load, and destabilizes riverbanks.
 - *Example:* Runoff from unregulated rat-hole coal mining in upstream mountain ranges polluting downstream rivers with sulfur and toxic heavy metals.
- **Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM):** A process that promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land, and related resources within a river basin boundary, maximizing socio-economic welfare without compromising vital ecosystems.
 - *Example:* Managing the Dikhow River by coordinating upstream land-use and mining policies in Nagaland with downstream flood-control measures in Assam.
- **Historical Expenditure Bias in Devolution:** A fiscal formula flaw where central financial grants for disaster mitigation are calculated primarily on how much money a state spent on past disasters, rather than its future risk or vulnerability.
 - *Example:* Allocating 70% of disaster funds based on a state's past emergency spending rather than its future risk profile.
- **Anticipatory Governance:** A system of governance that uses predictive climate modeling, risk mapping, and forward-looking data to invest in preventive infrastructure before disasters occur, rather than relying on post-event relief.

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**
- The recurring devastation across river basins in Northeast India stems from a misalignment between political borders, fiscal mechanisms, and natural river geography.
- **The Shift in Hazard Intensity and Geography**
 - **Unprecedented Inundation:** Floods are no longer restricted to traditional floodplains. Historically resilient regions, such as Upper Assam, now face intense, multi-district inundations that paralyze life for weeks.
 - **Frequency and Scale:** Extreme rainfall events linked to global climate shifts have transformed seasonal monsoon flows into sudden, high-magnitude deluges that overwhelm local systems.
- **The Gap Between Exposure and Adaptive Capacity**
 - **High Risk, Low Readiness:** While a state may be recognized for high flood vulnerability and exposure, its capacity to adapt remains structurally constrained.
 - **Core Infrastructure Fragility:** Critical services—such as surface transport, clean drinking water, electricity, and telecommunications—frequently collapse during floods. Long delays in restoring basic utilities exacerbate human suffering well after floodwaters recede.
- **The Illusion of Financial Allocation vs. Real Capacity**
 - **Rising Allocations:** Allocations under successive Finance Commissions (from the 14th to the 16th FC) show substantial increases in disaster management funds.
 - **The Capacity Deficit:** Higher monetary allocations have not translated into durable ground-level protection. Structural measures like embankments suffer from systemic decay; thousands of kilometers of riverbanks require constant repair because their original flood-resistance capacity has degraded.
- **Transboundary Ecological and Upstream Dynamics**
 - **River Basins vs. Political Borders:** River systems like the Dikhow flow across state lines (from Nagaland into Assam). Water, sediment, and environmental degradation pay no heed to state boundaries.
 - **Upstream Land-Use Pressures:** Unregulated open-cast and rat-hole coal mining, coupled with deforestation in upstream states, release massive sediment loads and acidic drainage into river systems, raising riverbeds and heightening downstream flood severity.
- **Flaws in the Finance Commission Architecture**
 - **Reactive Fund Devolution:** The 16th Finance Commission's allocation model heavily favors past disaster spending (70% weight) over a forward-looking risk index (30%).
 - **Compounding Vulnerability:** This historical weighting forces states to suffer repeated, documented damage before unlocking higher levels of preventive disaster funding.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- The vulnerability of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries has been shaped by over a century of ecological shifts, engineering interventions, and policy changes.

- **The Colonial Era (Late 19th Century to 1947)**

- **Focus on Extraction:** British administrative policy prioritized protecting tea gardens, timber routes, and railways near riverbanks.
- **Early Embankments:** Earthen bunds were built without a comprehensive understanding of fluvial geomorphology, restricting natural floodplains and causing riverbeds to gradually rise.

- **The 1950 Great Assam-Tibet Earthquake**

- **Ecological Shock:** Measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale, this massive earthquake altered the region's topography.
- **Sediment Surge:** Massive landslides dumped billions of tons of debris into the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, raising riverbeds, altering natural drainage paths, and permanently increasing flood frequency.

- **The Post-Independence Engineering Phase (1954 National Flood Policy)**

- **Structural Reliance:** In response to devastating floods, India adopted a structural protection strategy focused heavily on earthen embankments.
- **Temporary Fixes:** Designed as short-term measures, these embankments became permanent policy fixtures. Over decades, lack of maintenance left thousands of kilometers of bunds fragile and prone to breaches.

- **Institutional Initiatives (1980s)**

- **Brahmaputra Board Act (1980):** Established an autonomous body to survey, plan, and manage integrated flood control across the Northeast.
- **Implementation Gaps:** The Board faced staff shortages, limited financial autonomy, and resistance from states protective of their land and water rights, leading to delays in regional master plans.

- **The Modern Governance Era (2005 to Present)**

- **Disaster Management Act (2005):** Established a institutional structure (NDMA, SDMA, DDMA) to shift focus from reactive post-disaster relief to proactive risk reduction.
 - **Finance Commission Shifts:** The 14th, 15th, and 16th Finance Commissions gradually created dedicated State Disaster Mitigation Funds (SDMF). However, allocation formulas remain tied to historical spending rather than dynamic climate projections.
-



AXIA

IAS ACADEMY

RISE ABOVE THE REST

axiaiasacademy.com | +91 6002-417488

UNPRECEDENTED INUNDATION CRISIS

- 87** Lives Lost
- 349** Villages Affected
- Hundreds of Thousands Displaced
- Water Levels Unseen in Half a Century (Upper Assam)



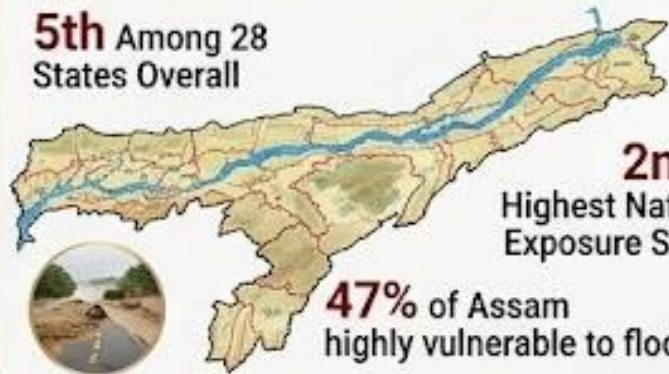
POLICY MISMATCHES & CLIMATE RISK

High Exposure Score vs. Low Adaptive Capacity



CLIMATE RISK ASSESSMENT (2025)

5th Among 28 States Overall



2nd Highest National Exposure Score

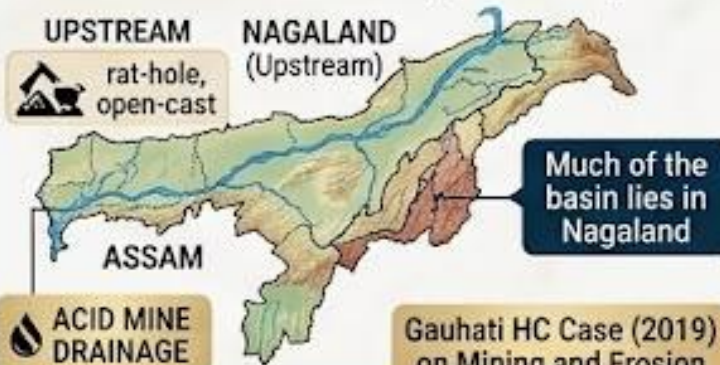
47% of Assam highly vulnerable to floods

EVIDENCE OF STRUCTURAL WEAKNESS

- 13,000** households without electricity 11 days later
- Embankment Status: **3,000 km** of 4,800 km require repair

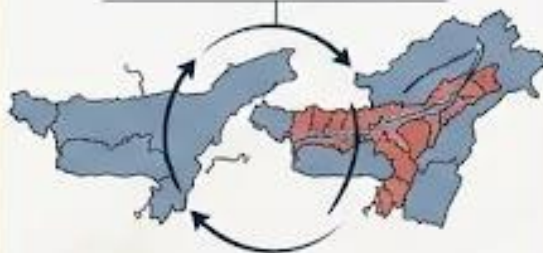
TRANSBOUNDARY & MINING CHALLENGES

DIKHOW RIVER BASIN (3,889 SQ KM)



GOVERNANCE & FISCAL MISMATCH

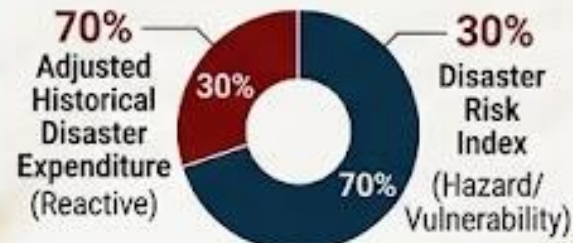
Water, debris, sediment transcend state borders



Risk is recognized only after a record of damage has accumulated.

FISCAL ARCHITECTURE FLAWS

DISASTER FUND DEVOLUTION CRITERIA



16th Finance Commission Recommended Allocation (2026-31): ₹5,825 Cr.

THE WAY FORWARD: ANTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

- Shift to Forward-Looking Climate Risk Criteria.
- Inter-State Basin Governance.
- Funds judged by Capacity Created, not allocated.
- Mitigation before Recurring Relief substitutes development.
- Adaptive recovery (not just simple rebuilding).



- **Logical and Philosophical Base**
 - Examining river management through logical and philosophical lenses reveals deep structural contradictions in India's environmental governance.
- **Ecocentrism vs. Technocratic Anthropocentrism**
 - **The Technocratic Paradigm:** Treat rivers as hydraulic channels that can be controlled using concrete and earthen walls. This view prioritizes human settlement expansion over natural ecological processes.
 - **The Ecocentric Reality:** Rivers are living ecosystems requiring natural seasonal expansion into floodplains. Confining rivers without addressing upstream catchment health destabilizes fluvial mechanics, making flood control efforts counterproductive.
- **Administrative Federalism vs. Ecological Basin Reality**
 - **Cartographic Fragmentation:** State borders are drawn along political lines, whereas ecological systems operate as unified river basins.
 - **The Governance Paradox:** Treating river administration, forest clearance, and mining regulation as isolated state subjects prevents regional cooperation. Upstream states control land use, while downstream states bear the physical and financial costs.
- **Inter-generational and Spatial Justice**
 - **Spatial Injustice:** Downstream agrarian communities suffer the consequences of upstream resource extraction (e.g., rat-hole mining and land clearing) without any mechanism for compensation or shared governance.
 - **Inter-generational Inequity:** Deferring structural repairs and relying on temporary flood fixes passes mounting ecological debts and financial costs onto future generations.
- **Actuarial vs. Anticipatory Justice in Public Finance**
 - **Actuarial (Reactive) Logic:** Post-disaster relief conditions financial assistance on accumulated loss, treating disasters as unforeseen events rather than predictable climate risks.
 - **Anticipatory (Proactive) Logic:** Public finance should prioritize risk reduction by allocating funds where exposure and vulnerability are highest *before* disasters strike.



Multidimensional Analysis		
Dimension	Primary Impact / Mechanism	Policy & Structural Challenge
Social	Loss of life, mass displacement, damage to rural housing, and severe disruption to health and education systems.	Vulnerable populations face prolonged loss of power, clean water, and access to roads, forcing temporary migration and deepening rural poverty.
Political	Tensions over resource extraction, land use, and flood impacts across state boundaries.	Political focus often favors short-term emergency relief over long-term, cross-border watershed management.
Legal	Judicial interventions highlight environmental degradation and river course changes, but enforcement remains weak.	Current statutes lack strong mechanisms to mandate and enforce joint, inter-state basin management plans.
Ethical	Disproportionate harm suffered by vulnerable rural communities who contribute least to environmental degradation.	Prioritizing post-disaster relief over durable, preventive infrastructure raises fundamental questions of climate justice.
International	Domestically uncoordinated river management weakens India's stance in regional hydro-diplomacy.	Transboundary river dynamics with neighboring countries (e.g., China, Bangladesh) mirror internal inter-state governance challenges.
Economic	Destroys crops, damages public assets, and diverts scarce state capital toward recurring emergency relief.	Allocating funds primarily based on past disaster spending creates a cycle that starves preventive infrastructure of needed investment.

- **Linkages with NCERT Textbooks**
- **Class 11 Geography: *India - Physical Environment***
 - **Chapter 7 (Natural Hazards and Disasters):** Directly covers flood mechanisms, spatial distribution in the Brahmaputra valley, structural mitigation measures, and the distinction between natural hazards and man-made disasters.
 - **Chapter 3 (Drainage System):** Details fluvial patterns, sediment loads, and the geomorphology of Himalayan rivers and their tributaries in Northeast India.
- **Class 11 Geography: *Fundamentals of Physical Geography***
 - **Chapter 6 (Geomorphic Processes and Fluvial Landforms):** Explains river erosion, deposition, channel migration, aggradation, and how sediment load changes river course dynamics.
- **Class 12 Political Science: *Politics in India Since Independence***
 - **Chapter 7 (Regional Aspirations & Federal Friction):** Covers inter-state federal disputes, resource sharing, and governance challenges across borders in the Northeast.
- **Class 11 Economics: *Indian Economic Development***
 - **Chapter 9 (Environment and Sustainable Development):** Discusses environmental degradation, opportunity costs of pollution, resource depletion, and sustainable economic planning.



- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **GS Paper 1: Indian Geography & Society**
 - **Salient Features of World's Physical Geography:** Fluvial dynamics, floodplains, channel migration, and sediment transport in Himalayan river basins.
 - **Geophysical Phenomena:** Extreme climate events, changing monsoon patterns, and localized hydrological hazards.
- **GS Paper 2: Governance, Constitution, and Federalism**
 - **Inter-State Governance:** Constitutional mechanisms (Article 263 Inter-State Council, Article 262 Water Disputes) for managing transboundary natural resources.
 - **Institutional Frameworks:** Operational efficiency of state administrative bodies during crises and institutional gaps in risk planning.
- **GS Paper 3: Disaster Management, Environment, and Fiscal Policy**
 - **Disaster and Disaster Management:** Moving from reactive relief to proactive mitigation, addressing embankment vulnerability, and improving community resilience.
 - **Environmental Degradation:** Downstream impacts of unregulated upstream coal mining, acid mine drainage, and deforestation.
 - **Fiscal Federalism:** Criteria used by the Finance Commission (FC) for State Disaster Response/Mitigation Funds (SDRF/SDMF).
- **GS Paper 4: Ethics and Human Values**
 - **Ethics in Governance:** Balancing short-term relief spending against long-term preventive infrastructure investments.
 - **Environmental Ethics:** Ensuring spatial and inter-generational justice for vulnerable communities exposed to climate hazards.

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- **Way Forward**
 - Addressing river basin vulnerability requires structural, fiscal, and governance reforms tailored to ecological realities.
 - **Shift to Integrated River Basin Management (IRBM)**
 - **Establish Transboundary Basin Authorities:** Create statutory River Basin Organizations (RBOs) for major multi-state tributaries (e.g., the Dikhow River). These authorities must include representatives from upstream and downstream states to coordinate land-use, mining regulations, and flood management.
 - **Mandate Cross-Border Environmental Audits:** Require joint Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) for mining and forestry activities in upstream areas that affect downstream water quality and sediment levels.
 - **Reform the Finance Commission Devolution Architecture**
 - **Rebalance the Devolution Formula:** Adjust the 16th Finance Commission framework to give greater weight to forward-looking climate risk, vulnerability indices, and exposure levels, rather than relying heavily on past expenditure.
 - **Incentivize Regional Risk Mitigation:** Allocate a portion of State Disaster Mitigation Funds (SDMF) specifically for collaborative, inter-state environmental projects.
 - **Modernize Infrastructure and Embankment Management**
 - **Transition to Nature-Based Solutions:** Move away from sole reliance on earthen embankments toward "Room for the River" strategies, wetland restoration, and bio-engineering techniques that absorb excess floodwaters naturally.
 - **Real-Time Structural Monitoring:** Deploy GIS, remote sensing, and IoT sensors along critical embankments to detect structural weaknesses before breaches occur.
 - **Strengthen Local Adaptive Capacity**
 - **Build Flood-Resilient Public Assets:** Construct elevated roads, solar-powered communication shelters, and decentralized drinking water plants that remain operational during major floods.
 - **Empower Local Communities:** Involve rural Panchayats in early warning distribution, shelter management, and maintenance of local drainage networks.

- **UPSC CSE Mains**

- **2023 - GS Paper 3**

- **Q.** "The frequency and intensity of floods in various parts of India have increased significantly in recent years." Discuss the major human-induced factors responsible for this trend and suggest suitable mitigation strategies, with special emphasis on river basin management. *(15 Marks, 250 Words)*

- **2021 - GS Paper 3**

- **Q.** Discuss the institutional framework for disaster management in India. How far has the shift from a relief-centric approach to a proactive mitigation-centric approach been achieved in practice? Critically evaluate. *(15 Marks, 250 Words)*

- **2019 - GS Paper 3**

- **Q.** Disaster preparedness is the first step in disaster management. Explain how vulnerability mapping and risk assessment help in reducing the impact of natural hazards, using riverine floods in North-East India as an example. *(10 Marks, 150 Words)*

- **2018 - GS Paper 2**

- **Q.** Inter-state water and environmental disputes are emerging as major challenges to Indian federalism. Discuss the constitutional and administrative mechanisms available to resolve these conflicts and evaluate their effectiveness. *(15 Marks, 250 Words)*

- **APSC CCE Mains (Assam Public Service Commission)**

- **2022 - GS Paper 5 (Assam Specific)**

- **Q.** Floods in Assam are no longer just a natural calamity but a complex socio-economic issue. Analyze the structural and non-structural factors contributing to the recurring flood problem in the Brahmaputra Valley and suggest actionable solutions. *(15 Marks, 250 Words)*

- **2020 - GS Paper 3**

- **Q.** Evaluate the effectiveness of embankments as a flood protection measure in Assam. How can modern bio-engineering and river basin management techniques supplement existing engineering solutions? *(10 Marks, 150 Words)*

The new battlefield is the human mind

Much of the discussion on information warfare focuses on fake news, deepfakes and AI-generated content designed to spread falsehoods. These threats remain real, but increasingly they represent yesterday's battle.

Today, information warfare is evolving into more sophisticated cognitive warfare, wherein the objective is no longer just to persuade people to believe a false narrative, but to shape how they perceive reality itself by influencing what they pay attention to, whom they trust, how they evaluate evidence and, ultimately, how they make decisions. The battlefield is no longer information alone. It is the human mind, and the cognitive processes through which people form judgements.

Generative artificial intelligence (AI) has made creating convincing fabricated content inexpensive. But the real transformation is strategic rather than technological. Modern influence operations increasingly do not invent falsehoods. They identify existing social fissures such as political disagreements, economic anxieties, or distrust of institutions and amplify them, like a magnifying glass enlarging an existing crack. Amplification makes one part of reality appear to define the whole. The objective is not to create new divisions, but to repeatedly direct public attention towards existing ones and distort the sense of proportion much like an optical illusion.

Amplification is far more difficult to counter than fabrication because it builds on realities that already exist. A fabricated claim can eventually be disproved. In amplification, the facts remain the same, but repeated magnified exposure of a part changes our perception of what is important, representative or urgent. Once that perceptual lens is shaped, every subsequent event is viewed through it.

This shift has been reinforced by the redesign of social media itself. A decade ago, platforms largely connected people with friends and accounts they chose to follow. Today, the platforms themselves increasingly decide what users see. TikTok transformed social media through short videos and its "For

You" feed, where algorithms recommend content based not on who created it but on its ability to capture attention. Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts and X have followed the same model. This matters because the human brain responds more quickly and emotionally to faces, voices and moving images than to text. Combined with infinite scrolling, auto-play, and frictionless sharing, these recommendation systems have transformed social networks into attention networks, making amplification faster, wider and more powerful than ever before.

These innovations were introduced by the social media platforms to maximise user engagement, not to enable information warfare. Yet together they have created an unprecedented infrastructure for cognitive influence. Content now spreads less because of who shares it and more because algorithms predict it will hold attention. Since outrage generates stronger engagement than nuance, emotionally charged narratives travel farther than balanced ones.

Cognitive warfare goes a step further.

While amplification seeks to dominate attention, cognitive warfare seeks to degrade judgement itself. The objective is no longer to persuade people to accept a particular narrative, but to undermine their confidence in judging any narrative. Imagine being exposed every day to an endless stream of videos, expert claims, counterclaims, manipulated images, genuine footage taken out of context, AI-generated content and fabricated fact-checks. Individually, much of it may be unconvincing. Collectively, however, it creates confusion. Over time, people stop asking what is true and begin asking whether anything can be trusted. That shift is the strategic objective. A population that trusts nothing is often more useful to an adversary than one that believes a specific falsehood, because it becomes far harder to mobilise, reassure or unite during a crisis.

This is what distinguishes cognitive warfare from traditional propaganda. Propaganda sought to replace one belief with another. Cognitive warfare seeks to

undermine the ability to judge what is true. Consider a natural disaster. Normally, an evacuation order from the authorities would trigger immediate action. But after prolonged exposure to manipulated videos regarding imminent disaster, people may hesitate. Is the warning genuine? Has the official account been hacked? The delay itself can cost lives. The battlefield is no longer information. It is human judgement.

AI is accelerating this transition. It can produce thousands of tailored messages, identify which narratives generate the strongest engagement, and continuously refine them for different audiences, languages and emotional triggers. Influence operations thus become adaptive learning systems rather than static campaigns. The next step is agentic AI. Instead of human operators coordinating networks of accounts, autonomous AI agents will conduct millions of personalised conversations, adapt to individual responses, build credibility over time and subtly reinforce selected narratives. Cognitive warfare will become continuous, conversational and highly personalised.

The implications are huge. Public trust is a strategic national asset, and the ability of citizens to distinguish genuine public concerns from orchestrated amplification influence a nation's resilience during crises.

Technology, regulation and international cooperation will all be essential. But none can keep pace with the speed and scale of AI-driven influence operations. Just as previous generations built military resilience to defend territory and cyber resilience to protect digital infrastructure, this era demands cognitive resilience to protect democratic judgement.

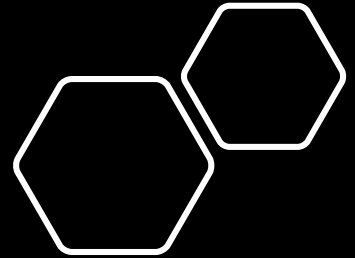
The most durable defence lies in building cognitive resilience: Teaching citizens how amplification works, strengthening trusted channels of communication, and encouraging respectful dialogue across differences. Finland's model of media literacy could be studied. As information warfare evolves into cognitive warfare, the first line of defence is no longer only the border. It is the informed citizen. Pause before you believe. Pause before you share.

The writer is Chairman, UPSC and former Defence Secretary of India. The views are personal



OFF THE GRID

AJAY KUMAR



- **Key Terms and Explanations**

- **Cognitive Warfare:** A strategic approach that targets the human mind as a domain of conflict. Unlike traditional warfare that destroys physical assets or cyber warfare that disables digital networks, cognitive warfare aims to manipulate how people process information, form beliefs, and make decisions.
 - *Example:* Instead of hacking a power grid, an adversary manipulates public perception during a heatwave so citizens blame local governance rather than technical failure, triggering civil unrest.
 - **Information Warfare vs. Cognitive Warfare:** Information warfare focuses on controlling or altering the *content* of information (e.g., spreading a false document). Cognitive warfare focuses on altering the *process of human cognition*—shaping perception, trust, and attention so individuals interpret even genuine information through a distorted lens.
 - **Fabrication vs. Amplification:**
 - **Fabrication:** The creation of completely false information out of thin air (e.g., a synthetic deepfake video of a world leader announcing a surrender). It is vulnerable to factual debunking.
 - **Amplification:** The practice of identifying existing, genuine societal fault lines (ethnic tension, political disagreements, institutional mistrust) and artificially magnifying them.
 - *Example:* Taking a localized police dispute and algorithmically boosting it to millions of feeds to make it appear as an existential, nationwide crisis.
 - **Epistemic Nihilism (The Trust Crisis):** A psychological state where individuals stop believing that objective truth exists or can be known. Cognitive warfare achieves victory not when people believe a specific lie, but when they reach a point of absolute cynicism where they trust no official source, expert, or institution.
 - **Attention Networks vs. Social Networks:**
 - **Social Networks (Old Model):** Platforms designed around explicit social graphs (who you choose to follow or friend).
 - **Attention Networks (Modern Model):** Platforms driven by algorithmic recommendation engines (e.g., TikTok, Instagram Reels, X) that deliver content based on its likelihood to capture and hold emotional attention, regardless of who created it.
 - **Agentic AI:** Advanced artificial intelligence systems capable of autonomous decision-making, long-term planning, and execution without step-by-step human intervention. In cognitive operations, agentic AI can hold personalized, continuous conversations with millions of users simultaneously, adapting its persuasion techniques based on real-time feedback.
- 
- 
- 
- 

- **Main Arguments and Substantive Parts**

- **The Shift from Content Creation to Perception Architecture**

- The fundamental vulnerability of modern societies is no longer just the proliferation of falsehoods, but the manipulation of human perception. While generative AI makes creating false content cheap, the true strategic breakthrough lies in changing *where* public attention is directed. When an actor controls attention, they control what feels urgent, representative, and true to the citizen.

- **The Power of Amplification Over Fabrication**

- Debunking a lie is straightforward once fact-checkers present evidence. However, countering amplification is far more complex because the underlying facts are often real. By repeatedly exposing citizens to a specific, magnified fragment of reality—such as a single instance of corruption or a single localized protest—the perception of the entire system is altered. The magnified part comes to define the whole.

- **Algorithmic Vulnerabilities and the Engagement Economy**

- Modern digital architecture was not designed as a military weapon, yet its incentive structure makes it an ideal deployment mechanism for cognitive influence:

- **Emotional Frictionlessness:** Human cognition responds faster to audiovisual content than to text. Short-form video platforms exploit this evolutionary trait.
- **Outrage Optimization:** Recommendation algorithms prioritize engagement. Because human psychology reacts more strongly to outrage, fear, and division, algorithms naturally accelerate polarizing content.
- **Structural Decoupling:** Content distribution is no longer bounded by social trust (following friends), but by algorithmic prediction (what keeps eyes on the screen).

- **Strategic Paralysis Through Epistemic Degradation**

- The ultimate objective of cognitive warfare is not indoctrination, but paralysis. By flooding the information environment with conflicting narratives, manipulated context, verified claims, and AI-generated noise, citizens experience cognitive exhaustion. During a national security crisis or public health emergency, a populace that cannot discern truth hesitates to follow official directions, neutralizing the state's capacity to respond.

- **The Escalation to Adaptive and Agentic Operations**

- Artificial intelligence transforms influence operations from static, episodic campaigns into dynamic, continuous systems:

- **Micro-Targeting at Scale:** AI analyzes audience sentiment and automatically tailors messages to specific demographic or psychological profiles.
- **Conversational AI:** Autonomous agents act as synthetic citizens, building long-term digital relationships, participating in online forums, and subtly shaping opinions over months or years.

- **Historical Evolution of the Issue**

- Ancient & Classical Statecraft

- 4th Century BCE - 18th Century

- Strategic deception was focused on elite decision-makers and battlefield tactics. Sun Tzu advocated winning without fighting by disrupting enemy strategy. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* detailed *Upajapa* (secret psychological operations) to sow dissent among rival ministers and armies.

- Industrialized Propaganda & State Media

- 1914 - 1945

- The advent of mass printing, radio, and cinema allowed states to mobilize entire populations during WWI and WWII. The focus was top-down persuasion, national morale building, and ideological indoctrination through centralized state information ministries.

- Cold War Active Measures

- 1945 - 1991

- KGB *Disinformatsiya* and CIA covert psychological operations shifted from outright wartime propaganda to long-term subversion. Tactics included planting forged stories in foreign newspapers to erode trust in democratic institutions over decades.

- Digital Revolution & Cyber Warfare

- 1990s - 2000s

- The internet expanded the battleground to digital infrastructure. Cyber operations focused on data theft, network disruption, and web defacements (e.g., the 2007 cyberattacks on Estonia).

- Algorithmic Exploitation & Social Media

- 2010s

- Micro-targeting emerged during events like the 2016 US Elections and Brexit. Trolls, bot networks, and data analytics firms (e.g., Cambridge Analytica) weaponized commercial advertising tools to manipulate voter behavior along psychological profiles.

- Cognitive Warfare & Agentic AI

- Present Day

- The convergence of recommendation algorithms, deepfakes, and generative AI shifts warfare from information content to cognitive processing itself. Influence becomes automated, continuous, personalized, and designed to degrade societal trust.



AXIA
IAS ACADEMY
RISE ABOVE THE REST

FROM INFORMATION TO COGNITIVE WARFARE



Yesterday's Battle:
Spreading Falsehoods



Today's Objective:
Shaping Perception

COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS: THE NEW BATTLEFIELD IS THE HUMAN MIND

THE ENGAGEMENT ECONOMY: ATTENTION NETWORKS

Old Model:
Social Networks
(Chosen Follows)



- PRIORITIZE OUTRAGE & EMOTION
- AUDIOVISUAL content over nuanced text

Today:
Attention Networks



- Frictionless sharing & INFINITE SCROLL

SELECTIVE AMPLIFICATION OVER FABRICATION

Strategic Transformation:
Amplification > Fabrication



OPTICAL
ILLUSION SIZE
DISTORTION

SOCIAL FISSURES

- Political
- Economic
- Trust



WAY FORWARD: BUILDING COGNITIVE RESILIENCE

- Finland's Model example



EDUCATIONAL
INOCULATION

- Media Literacy
- Pre-Bunking



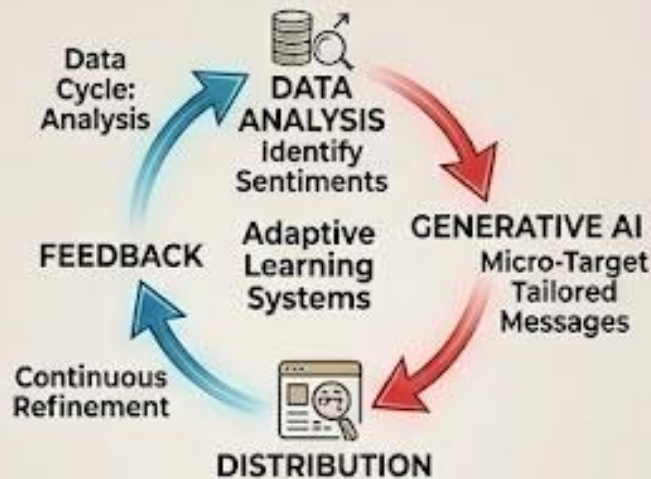
PLATFORM
ACCOUNTABILITY
Regulation of
Amplification

- The Informed Citizen
is the First Line of
Defence



RE-ANCHORING
INSTITUTIONAL
TRUST

AI ACCELERATOR & AGENTIC AI



AUTONOMOUS AI AGENTS
conduct millions of
PERSONALIZED CONVERSATIONS
& BUILD CREDIBILITY

IMPACT: DEGRADATION OF JUDGEMENT & EPISTEMIC NIHILISM



TRUSTED
CHANNELS
Official Sources
Experts
Media

- Goal: UNERMINED CONFIDENCE in judging any narrative
- EPISTEMIC NIHILISM: Trusting Nothing



- STRATEGIC PARALYSIS during crises

- **Logical and Philosophical Base**
- **Epistemology and the Crisis of Truth**
- At its core, cognitive warfare attacks epistemology—the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature and boundaries of knowledge.
 - **Classic View:** Knowledge is "justified true belief." Society relies on shared verification mechanisms (scientific consensus, journalism, judicial process) to establish what is true.
 - **Cognitive Attack:** By systematically undermining these verification mechanisms, cognitive warfare forces a shift toward absolute epistemic relativism. When citizens believe that "all sources are biased" or "everything can be fake," objective truth ceases to function as a unifying force in governance.
- **Bounded Rationality and Cognitive Biases**
- Psychologist Daniel Kahneman's dual-process theory explains why the human brain is susceptible to cognitive influence:
 - **System 1 (Fast, Emotional, Intuitive):** Processes visual, high-arousal information instantly. It relies on heuristics like availability (judging likelihood based on how easily examples come to mind) and confirmation bias.
 - **System 2 (Slow, Logical, Deliberate):** Requires energy and focus to evaluate evidence critically.
 - **Exploitation:** Recommendation algorithms and short-form media target System 1, bypassing System 2 before the brain can apply critical scrutiny.
- **Foucault's Power/Knowledge Paradigm**
- Michel Foucault argued that power and knowledge are fundamentally intertwined; whoever controls the discourse defines what is accepted as "truth." In cognitive warfare, state and non-state actors do not merely control access to information; they construct the perceptual framework through which citizens interpret reality, thereby exercising invisible power over public behavior.
- **Habermas and the Degradation of the Public Sphere**
- Jürgen Habermas posited that modern democracy relies on an "Ideal Speech Situation" where citizens engage in rational-critical debate free from coercion. Cognitive warfare disintegrates this public sphere by replacing rational deliberation with algorithmically generated outrage, tribal echo chambers, and artificial consensus.

- **Multidimensional Analysis**
- **Social Dimension**
 - **Erosion of Social Cohesion:** Amplification exaggerates minor fault lines—caste, community, religion, or economic class—making routine disagreements feel like existential battles.
 - **Loss of Interpersonal Trust:** When citizens perceive that fellow citizens are constantly influenced or brainwashed by opposite narratives, social capital declines, leading to atomization and tribalism.
- **Political Dimension**
 - **Subversion of Democratic Legitimacy:** Elections require a basic consensus on facts. Cognitive manipulation undermines faith in electoral integrity, public institutions, and democratic transitions.
 - **Governance Paralysis:** In times of emergency (pandemics, natural disasters, national defense crises), public hesitation caused by contradictory narratives delays compliance with government directives, directly threatening national security.
- **Legal Dimension**
 - **Regulatory Lag:** Statutory frameworks designed for static broadcasting or traditional print media are ill-equipped to address real-time, algorithmically driven cognitive operations.
 - **Rights Dilemma:** Balancing national security against fundamental rights (such as Article 19(1)(a) of the Indian Constitution—Freedom of Speech and Expression) is difficult. Blanket content removals risk authoritarian overreach, while inaction leaves the public exposed.
 - **Attribution Burden:** Attributing grey-zone cognitive operations to a specific foreign power or state actor under international law is nearly impossible due to proxy networks, deepfakes, and automated accounts.
- **Ethical Dimension**
 - **Violation of Cognitive Liberty:** Cognitive manipulation infringes on individual mental autonomy—the right to form thoughts and beliefs free from subtle, covert technological coercion.
 - **Commodification of Outrage:** Tech platforms profit directly from user engagement driven by anger and division, creating a conflict between corporate revenue and public well-being.
- **International and Strategic Dimension**
 - **Grey-Zone Warfare:** Cognitive operations allow adversaries to achieve strategic objectives without crossing the threshold of kinetic war, bypassing traditional deterrence mechanisms.
 - **Asymmetric Advantage:** Open, democratic societies with free speech and open digital infrastructure are inherently more vulnerable to cognitive attacks than closed, authoritarian regimes that heavily filter domestic internet access.
- **Economic Dimension**
 - **Market Volatility:** AI-generated disinformation or amplified corporate scandals can wipe out billions in market capitalization within minutes (e.g., fake images of explosions near financial centers causing sudden stock drops).
 - **Depreciation of National Human Capital:** A society experiencing high levels of cognitive distraction, distrust, and polarization suffers from reduced productivity and lower institutional efficiency.

Linkages with NCERTs		
NCERT Book & Class	Chapter Title	Conceptual Connection to Cognitive Warfare
Class 11 Political Science: Political Theory	<i>Chapter 2: Freedom</i>	Examines negative vs. positive liberty. Relates to whether citizens are truly free when their choices are covertly directed by algorithms.
Class 11 Political Science: Political Theory	<i>Chapter 10: Development</i>	Discusses democratic decision-making and public interest, contrasting it with algorithmic manipulation of public opinion.
Class 12 Political Science: Contemporary World Politics	<i>Chapter 3: Security in the Contemporary World</i>	Covers non-traditional security threats, human security, and grey-zone operations targeting civilian populations.
Class 12 Sociology: Indian Society	<i>Chapter 6: The Challenges of Cultural Diversity</i>	Illustrates how existing communal, regional, and linguistic fissures can be amplified by external actors to destabilize national integration.
Class 12 Sociology: Social Change and Development in India	<i>Chapter 7: Mass Media and Communications</i>	Traces the evolution of media from public interest broadcasting to commercialized digital networks and political communication.
Class 12 Psychology	<i>Chapter 6: Attitude and Social Cognition</i>	Explains fundamental concepts of impression formation, cognitive consistency, prejudice, and how social influence reshapes human attitudes.

- **Linkages with UPSC CSE Syllabus**
- **General Studies Paper 1 (Indian Society)**
 - **Topics:** Social Empowerment, Communalism, Regionalism, and Secularism.
 - **Relevance:** Direct connection to how cognitive operations identify and magnify internal social fault lines to weaken national unity.
- **General Studies Paper 2 (Governance & Constitution)**
 - **Topics:** Structure, Organization and Functioning of the Executive and Judiciary; Role of Media and Civil Society; Important Aspects of Governance, Transparency, and Accountability.
 - **Relevance:** Focuses on the erosion of public trust in state institutions, challenges in regulating digital platforms, and defending the democratic public sphere.
- **General Studies Paper 3 (Internal Security & Cyber Security)**
 - **Topics:** Challenges to Internal Security through Communication Networks; Role of Media and Social Networking Sites in Internal Security Challenges; Basics of Cyber Security; Hybrid Warfare.
 - **Relevance:** Primary mapping domain. Cognitive warfare represents the convergence of cyber warfare, psychological operations, and internal security disruption by foreign state/non-state actors.
- **General Studies Paper 4 (Ethics, Integrity & Aptitude)**
 - **Topics:** Human Values - Lessons from Lives and Teachings of Great Leaders; Attitude: Content, Structure, Function; Influence on Thought and Behaviour; Persuasion and Social Influence; Probity in Governance.
 - **Relevance:** Evaluates the ethical boundaries between legitimate political persuasion and covert cognitive manipulation; protection of individual mental autonomy.

- 
- **Way Forward**
 - **Educational Inoculation (The Finnish Model)**
 - **Pre-Bunking over De-Bunking:** Instead of reacting to individual fake claims after they go viral, introduce systemic media literacy into primary and secondary school curricula.
 - **Critical Media Hygiene:** Teach citizens to recognize basic psychological triggers—emotional arousal, sensationalist framing, selective context—and encourage a compulsory "pause" before sharing content.
 - **Algorithmic Accountability and Architecture**
 - **Duty of Care Regulations:** Mandate that tech platforms perform risk assessments regarding how their recommendation systems amplify polarizing or illegal content.
 - **Introducing Deliberate Friction:** Restrict auto-play mechanisms, limit infinite scrolling, and add confirmation steps for high-velocity viral content to lower processing speed and engage deliberate critical thinking.
 - **Algorithmic Audits:** Establish independent regulatory oversight bodies to audit recommendation models for artificial amplification biases.
 - **Institutional Trust Re-Anchoring**
 - **Transparent and Rapid Crisis Communication:** Government agencies must maintain clear, verifiable, and authoritative communication channels during emergencies to prevent panic and rumor fills.
 - **Institutional Humility and Accountability:** Restoring trust requires public institutions to proactively acknowledge mistakes, correct errors transparently, and demonstrate political neutrality.
 - **Technical Provenance and Authentication**
 - **Digital Watermarking and Cryptographic Signatures:** Mandate technical standards (such as C2PA) that trace the origin and edit history of visual and audio media from creation to distribution.
 - **AI Detection Frameworks:** Invest in defensive AI systems that identify coordinated bot behavior, automated account networks, and synthetic cognitive attacks in real time.
 - **A Whole-of-Nation Defense Doctrine**
 - **National Cognitive Resilience Taskforce:** Coordinate efforts across the Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Defence, Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology (MeitY), civil society, and educators.
 - **Depolarization Initiatives:** Promote civic programs and community spaces that foster respectful dialogue across political and socio-economic divisions, weakening the fault lines adversaries seek to exploit.

- 
- **UPSC Mains Questions**
 - **General Studies Paper 3 (Internal Security & Cyber Warfare)**
 - **(2023):** "What are the internal security challenges posed by social media platforms? Discuss the role of non-state actors in exploiting these platforms to destabilize social harmony." *(10 Marks, 150 Words)*
 - **(2021):** "What is Cyber Warfare? Discuss the extent to which cyber warfare poses a threat to national security and evaluate the measures taken by India to counter it." *(15 Marks, 250 Words)*
 - **(2020):** "Discuss the strategic implications of emerging technologies like Artificial Intelligence and Big Data Analytics on the nature of modern warfare and national security." *(15 Marks, 250 Words)*
 - **(2017):** "The weaponization of information and media is becoming a major instrument of non-kinetic warfare. Analyze its impact on Indian internal security." *(15 Marks, 250 Words)*
 - **General Studies Paper 2 (Governance & Fundamental Rights)**
 - **(2022):** "Freedom of speech and expression is the cornerstone of democracy, yet unregulated digital platforms threaten social order. Critically examine the legal mechanisms available to regulate online content in India without curtailing fundamental rights." *(15 Marks, 250 Words)*
 - **(2019):** "E-governance is not only about technology-driven governance but also about trust building between citizens and the state. Discuss in the light of increasing public skepticism towards digital institutions." *(10 Marks, 150 Words)*
 - **General Studies Paper 4 (Ethics)**
 - **(2022):** "Persuasion and social influence are critical tools for public servants. Distinguish between ethical persuasion and psychological manipulation. How can public administration guard against algorithmically engineered consent?" *(10 Marks, 150 Words)*
 - **(2020):** "With the rise of artificial intelligence and automated content delivery, the line between information, misinformation, and influence is blurred. Discuss the ethical obligations of technology corporations toward democratic societies." *(10 Marks, 150 Words)*



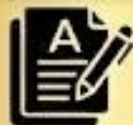
AXIA IAS ACADEMY

UPSC CSE CLASSES

RISE ABOVE THE REST



EXPERT
FACULTY &
GUIDANCE



COMPREHENSIVE
SYLLABUS
COVERAGE



STRATEGIC
TEST SERIES &
MENTORSHIP

ADMISSIONS OPEN

- Prelims + Mains + Interview
- Current Affairs Focus
- Personalized Attention
- Online & Offline Batches



WEBSITE: axiaiasacademy.com



CONTACT: +91 6002-417488

