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Index

India Needs to Ensure Women's Participation in Policymaking

Why in the News?

India has slipped two ranks in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2025, now ranking **131st out of 148 countries**. With a gender parity score of just 64.1%, India ranks among the lowest in South Asia.

- While incremental gains were made in economic participation, education, and health, the significant drop in political empowerment of women, particularly the reduction in female representation in Parliament and ministerial roles, has dragged the country's overall performance.
- These figures underscore a deeper malaise - the inadequate role of women in shaping policies and decisions that directly affect their lives and society at large.

Background

The Global Gender Gap Index, introduced by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in 2006, evaluates gender-based disparities across four key dimensions:

1. Economic participation and opportunity
2. Educational attainment
3. Health
4. Political empowerment

India's overall performance in the index has historically been poor, with the political empowerment and economic participation subindices being the weakest links. The latest report (2025) indicates that despite marginal improvements in income parity and labour force participation, India's political gender gap has widened:

- Female representation in Parliament decreased from **14.7% (2024) to 13.8% (2025).**
- Women in **ministerial positions dropped from 6.5% to 5.6%.**

This comes at a time when India has already passed the Women's Reservation Bill (2023), which promises to reserve 33% seats for women in Parliament and State Assemblies, but its implementation is deferred until 2029, post delimitation and census.

Feature: Understanding the Gender Gap in Policymaking

Economic Participation and Opportunity

- India has seen a modest improvement (+0.9%) in this area.
- Estimated earned income parity improved from 28.6% to 29.9%.
- Labour force participation remained stagnant at 45.9%, India's best yet.
- Structural gender biases continue in employment, wages, and leadership roles.

Educational Attainment

- India has achieved near-parity in primary and secondary education enrollment.
- However, education is not translating into proportional workforce representation or leadership roles.
- The pipeline from school to leadership remains fractured for women.

Health and Survival

- Improved slightly due to better access to maternal health and basic health services.
- However, skewed sex ratio at birth (SRB) and female foeticide remain issues in certain states.

Political Empowerment

- The biggest driver of India's poor performance.
- Decline in women's share in Parliament and ministerial roles.
- Despite landmark bills, execution remains distant and delayed.

Challenges in Women's Political Participation

Delayed Implementation of the Women's Reservation Act

- Though passed in 2023, implementation is tied to the next delimitation post the 2026 census, with real impact expected only after 2029.
- Political parties are not bound to implement quotas before that, leading to continued underrepresentation.

Tokenism and Lack of Leadership Roles

- Women who do make it to political office often do so as proxy candidates, especially in local governance.
- Few women hold cabinet-level ministries or have decision-making powers.
- Patriarchal party structures limit women from rising through the ranks.

Lack of Party-Level Quotas

- Unlike countries like Sweden or Rwanda, where political parties follow voluntary gender quotas, Indian parties are not obligated to field women candidates beyond token gestures.
- In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, only 8% of the total candidates fielded by major parties were women.

Gender Stereotypes and Societal Barriers

- Deep-rooted cultural and social beliefs often discourage women from joining politics.
- Safety concerns, lack of support networks, and gendered responsibilities further marginalise women's role in public life.

Disproportionate Media Coverage and Public Scrutiny

- Women in politics often face harsh media treatment, focusing more on their appearance, family roles, or relationships than on their political acumen.
- Online trolling and gendered abuse on social media platforms further deters participation.

Economic Dependence and Lack of Funding

- Women often lack the financial backing required to contest elections.
- Male-dominated donor networks and business lobbies rarely support women candidates.

Comparative Global Experiences

Rwanda

- The global leader in women's political representation, with over 60% of women in Parliament.
- Constitutionally mandated quotas and strong post-conflict institutional reforms.

Nordic Countries

- Nations like Norway, Sweden, and Finland have voluntary party quotas, robust gender equality laws, and family-friendly public policies.

Latin America

- Countries such as Mexico and Argentina have enacted parity laws ensuring 50% representation of women in elected offices.

Lessons for India:

- Quotas must be matched with political will, legal backing, and grassroots social support.
- Capacity-building and leadership development programs for women are critical.
-

Way Forward: Bridging the Gap

Advance the Timeline for Women's Reservation

- The 33% quota in Parliament and Assemblies should not be delayed till 2029.
- Interim targets and voluntary implementation by parties can fast-track representation.

Mandatory Political Party Quotas

- Enforce compulsory candidate quotas (e.g., 33% tickets for women) for recognised parties through Election Commission guidelines.
- Tie party funding incentives or de-recognition to gender representation compliance.

Capacity-Building and Political Training

- Create specialised academies or training programs for aspiring women politicians, similar to civil services coaching.
- Fund mentorship networks, workshops, and exposure trips for women in grassroots politics.

Women's Political Finance and Support Networks

- Establish public funds or subsidised loans for women candidates to contest elections.
- Encourage women's business lobbies and civil society groups to fundraise for women-led campaigns.

Combat Gender Bias in Media and Public Discourse

- Introduce media codes of conduct to curb gendered reporting.
- Promote public awareness campaigns to normalise and celebrate female leadership.

Strengthen Local Governance Pipelines

- Leverage the 33% reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) to build a bottom-up political culture.
- Invest in education, digital literacy, and legal awareness for women elected at the local level.

Judicial and Legal Interventions

- The Supreme Court and High Courts can play a proactive role in upholding the spirit of gender equality under Articles 14, 15, and 16 of the Constitution.
- Fast-track cases of discrimination and violence against women in public life.

Conclusion

India's democratic legitimacy and developmental progress are incomplete without equal participation of women in policymaking. The Global Gender Gap Index 2025 acts as a mirror, reflecting systemic barriers that continue to keep half of the population from political power. The passage of the Women's Reservation Act was historic, but its delayed implementation threatens to reduce it to symbolism.

Ensuring true gender parity in politics is no longer a question of feasibility - it is a moral and constitutional imperative.

Main question

India's democratic framework remains incomplete without gender-balanced political representation." Critically examine in light of the Global Gender Gap Report 2025.

Regarding the Global Gender Gap Index 2025, consider the following assertions:
Assertion (A): India's political empowerment score has declined despite passing the Women's Reservation Act.
Reason (R): The Act's implementation is subject to future delimitation and census exercises.
a) Both A and R are true, and R is the correct explanation of A
b) Both A and R are true, but R is not the correct explanation of A
c) A is true, but R is false
d) A is false, but R is true

Answer: a) Both A and R are true, and R is the correct explanation of A

India Needs a Sincere Aircraft Accident Investigation

Why in the News?

The tragic aircraft accident in Ahmedabad on June 12, 2025, has brought India's civil aviation safety architecture back under the spotlight.

- This was not an isolated incident. In recent months, a string of helicopter crashes, near-misses involving commercial airlines, and ground handling lapses have raised questions about the competence, transparency, and integrity of India's aviation regulatory and investigative frameworks.
- Despite having a statutory Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) in place, India continues to face serious shortcomings in ensuring independent, timely, and honest investigations.
- The World Bank and ICAO consistently highlight India's rapid aviation growth but stress that safety oversight mechanisms are not evolving in tandem.
- In this context, the Ahmedabad crash must serve as a wake-up call not just for technical reforms but for deep institutional cleansing.

Background: The Anatomy of India's Aviation Oversight

India's civil aviation sector has experienced rapid expansion. As per the Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), domestic air traffic in 2024–25 crossed 160 million passengers, making India the third-largest domestic aviation market globally.

With growing volume comes greater complexity and risk.

Key Regulatory Institutions:

- **Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA):** Central policymaking authority.
- **Directorate General of Civil Aviation (DGCA):** Aviation regulatory body responsible for safety and licensing.
- **Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB):** Supposedly autonomous body under MoCA tasked with investigating accidents.

While the 2012 establishment of the AAIB was meant to ensure independent and impartial investigations, its placement under the MoCA, which also regulates airlines and DGCA, creates an inherent conflict of interest.

- This stands in contrast to railway safety mechanisms, where the Commissioner of Railway Safety (CRS) operates with greater autonomy from operators and regulators.
- In addition, India follows the Aircraft (Investigation of Accidents and Incidents) Rules, 2017, which clearly state that the purpose of accident investigations is "not to apportion blame or liability but to prevent recurrence". Yet, the ground reality tells a different story.

Features: Systemic Flaws in Aircraft Accident Investigations

Illusion of Autonomy

Despite being labelled "autonomous", the AAIB is staffed, resourced, and led by officials appointed and monitored by the MoCA. This undermines credibility and independence. The DGCA, which licenses airlines and pilots, also reports to the MoCA, creating a closed-loop system where regulators, operators, and investigators share the same administrative umbrella.

Recurring Operational Failures

Recent incidents-including a weather-affected IndiGo Delhi–Srinagar flight (May 2025), multiple flying school and helicopter crashes, and Çelebi Aviation's permit cancellation due to safety concerns, highlight the depth of structural fatigue. These are not isolated failures but indicators of systemic rot.

AAIB Reports as Legal Weapons

AAIB's technical reports, meant for safety improvement, are often misused in criminal investigations:

- Police and courts, lacking aviation expertise, treat these reports as final legal verdicts.
- The "probable cause" clause is interpreted judicially, even though it is speculative and intended for internal learning.
- The result? Pilots are often scapegoated, insurance claims are hastily settled, and larger institutional failures remain unaddressed.

Suppression of Inconvenient Truths
Captain Amit Singh recounts multiple incidents where facts were buried

- In the 2001 crash involving a Union Minister, "entry into a cloud" was cited as the cause, despite meteorological data showing clear skies.
- The 1993 Aurangabad Indian Airlines crash involved overloading, but the final report downplayed this.
- Requests for black box data from the 2018 Air India Express IX611 flight were consistently denied, raising questions of data suppression.

Kozhikode Air Crash: A Case Study in Accountability Failure

In the Kozhikode crash (August 2020), 21 lives were lost. While the final report acknowledged pilot error, recommendations regarding runway safety, communication failures, and air traffic management remain largely unimplemented. No systemic overhaul followed. Worse, India continues to report "zero fatal accidents" in ICAO's State Safety Briefing, despite this well-documented tragedy.

Challenges: The Architecture of Obstruction

Regulatory Capture

- The proximity between regulators, operators, and investigators has led to regulatory capture. Airlines and government officials often escape scrutiny in investigations, while individual errors-especially those of pilots, are magnified.

Weak Legal Safeguards

Rule 19(3) of the Aircraft Rules, 1937, empowers the government to punish pilots for any mistake, creating a blame-oriented culture instead of fostering safety learning. Moreover, India has no legal bar on the usage of AAIB reports in civil or criminal courts.

Parallel Committees and Political Interference

- Ad hoc committees often bypass AAIB in high-profile cases. These politically formed panels dilute technical objectivity and erode public trust in official reports.

Institutional Cowardice

- India's problem is not a lack of talent or tools. It is institutional timidity - a reluctance to confront the uncomfortable truth.
- Reports are delayed, diluted, or dismissed when they threaten reputations or implicate state-run entities.

Way Forward: A Blueprint for Reform

Statutory Independence of AAIB and DGCA

- Establish these as autonomous bodies reporting to Parliament, not MoCA.
- Model them on independent constitutional institutions such as the Election Commission or the CAG.

Legal Reforms for Investigative Integrity

- Amend Rule 19(3) of the Aircraft Rules to protect pilots unless gross negligence is proven.
- Legislate to bar AAIB reports from being used in legal proceedings unless independently validated.

Institutionalise 'Just Culture'

- Introduce protocols to decriminalise honest reporting of errors and encourage transparency.
- Train stakeholders in human factors and systemic safety management, not just operational competence.

Create a Permanent Aviation Ombudsman

- A statutory ombudsman must be empowered to:
  - Review all past and present accident investigations.
  - Hear grievances of families, whistleblowers, and others.w
  - Recommend legal and disciplinary action where suppression is evident.

End Parallel Committees

- Empower AAIB exclusively for all investigations, regardless of the profile of those involved.
- Prohibit MoCA from forming parallel panels that undermine due process.

Reform the National Civil Aviation Policy (NCAP)

- Revise NCAP to make safety the central pillar.
- Include:
- Mandatory safety audits for all carriers
  - Public disclosure of incident data
  - Clear timelines for the implementation of investigative recommendations

Transparent and Timely Disclosure

- Make all accident reports, black box summaries, and safety advisories public within a fixed timeline.
- Create a centralised aviation safety dashboard accessible to passengers, researchers, and media.

Capacity Building and International Alignment

- Invest in India's investigative workforce by setting up a dedicated Aviation Safety Training Academy.

- Collaborate with ICAO, NTSB (USA), and EASA (Europe) for capacity-building and benchmarking.

Conclusion: Skies demand humility, precision, and most of all, accountability. Every aircraft accident is not just a mechanical failure; it is often a mirror held up to institutional dysfunction. India, with its global aviation ambitions, cannot afford to navigate blindfolded.

Mains Practice Questions
India's aviation safety oversight lacks institutional independence and cultural accountability." Critically evaluate this statement in the context of recent aircraft accidents.

About aircraft accident investigations in India, consider the following statements:
1. The Aircraft Accident Investigation Bureau (AAIB) is an autonomous body under the Ministry of Home Affairs.
2 . The primary objective of an AAIB investigation is to determine legal culpability and assign criminal responsibility.
3 . The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) mandates separation between aviation regulatory functions and accident investigations.
4 . In India, findings of the AAIB can be used as admissible evidence in criminal courts by default.

Which of the statements above is/are correct?
a) 3 only
b) 1 and 4 only
c) 2 and 3 only
d) 1, 2 and 4 only

Answer: a) 3 only

Statement 1 is incorrect. AAIB is under the Ministry of Civil Aviation, not Home Affairs.
Statement 2 is incorrect. Investigations are for safety improvement, not assigning blame.
Statement 4 is incorrect. AAIB reports should not be used as legal evidence, yet they are often misused.

Mind the Sulphur: India's Debate on Flue Gas Desulphurisation (FGD) Units

Why in the News?

On June 4, 2025, a significant recommendation emerged from a committee led by Principal Scientific Adviser (PSA) Ajay Sood: the rollback of India's decade-old policy mandating Flue Gas Desulphurisation (FGD) units in all coal-fired thermal power plants (TPPs).

- This recommendation came just months after India extended the deadline for installing FGDs in non-compliant plants.
- At the heart of the debate lies a complex balance between public health, climate commitments, financial feasibility, and energy affordability.

Background

Coal-based thermal power plants remain the backbone of India's electricity sector. As of April 2025, they constitute more than 46% of India's installed electricity capacity, with an aggregate capacity of 2,19,338 MW. However, this dominance comes at a severe environmental and public health cost, most notably, emissions of sulphur dioxide (SO_2), a hazardous gas linked to acid rain, respiratory diseases, and secondary particulate matter (PM2.5).

- In 2015, India's Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) responded by making it mandatory for all TPPs to install FGD units to reduce SO_2 emissions.
- The initial deadline was set for 2018, but widespread non-compliance resulted in multiple deadline extensions. As of April 2025, only 39 of the 537 coal-based TPPs had installed FGDs.
- Most others cited high costs, logistical challenges, and ambiguous regulatory support.
- Against this backdrop, the recommendation by the PSA-chaired committee to reconsider FGD mandates reflects a growing rift between environmental objectives and developmental pragmatism.

Features of Flue Gas Desulphurisation (FGD) Units

Purpose and Function

- FGD units are designed to remove sulphur dioxide from flue gas, the gaseous byproduct emitted during the combustion of fossil fuels like coal. SO_2 is acidic and corrosive and can cause environmental and health problems when released untreated.

Major Technologies

- There are three main types of FGD technologies used globally and in India:
- Dry Sorbent Injection (DSI):
- Involves injecting a powdered sorbent (typically limestone) directly into the flue gas.
- The sorbent reacts with SO_2 to form a stable compound that can be filtered out.
- Lower capital cost but less efficient (30–50% removal efficiency).

Wet Limestone Scrubbing:

- Uses a slurry of limestone and water in a scrubber to absorb SO_2.
- Produces gypsum ($CaSO_4 \cdot 2H_2O$), a byproduct used in cement and drywall.
- High efficiency (90–98%), but expensive to install and operate

Seawater Scrubbing:

- Limited to coastal TPPs.

- SO_2 is absorbed in seawater and later neutralised before discharge.
- Environmentally sustainable but geographically limited.

Cost Implications

- According to the Central Electricity Authority, installing FGDs costs around ₹1.2 crore per MW.
- For India's coal fleet, implementing FGDs across 97,000 MW of proposed additional capacity would cost about ₹97,000 crore.
- Operationally, FGDs increase electricity tariffs by ₹0.72 per kWh, a cost reflecting cleaner air but raising affordability concerns.

Challenges

Financial Burden on Discoms and Consumers

- India's power distribution companies (discoms) are already financially stressed.
- The additional fixed costs and operational expenses of FGDs could burden utilities and raise tariffs, affecting affordability for millions of consumers.
- The Union Power Minister recently expressed concerns about striking a balance between cost, health, and emissions.

Delay in Implementation

- Despite policy mandates dating back to 2015, only a fraction of plants have complied.
- Successive deadline extensions (now pushed to 2029 for many plants) suggest a weak enforcement mechanism.
- Delays are further exacerbated by supply chain issues, equipment procurement bottlenecks, and a lack of skilled labour.

Weak Monitoring and Enforcement

- Lack of real-time emissions data from most TPPs.
- State Pollution Control Boards (SPCBs) are understaffed and under-resourced.
- Monitoring compliance and issuing penalties remain ineffective.

Policy Flip-Flop and Institutional Ambiguity

- The December 2024 notification postponing deadlines again was issued without justification, indicating policy unpredictability.
- The recent PSA committee recommendation contradicts earlier environmental commitments, creating confusion among plant operators and investors.

Health and Environmental Consequences

- As per studies by CEEW, 15% of PM2.5 in India is linked to coal-based emissions, with 80% of that linked to SO_2.
- Skipping FGDs will exacerbate India's air pollution crisis, especially in regions near TPPs like Singrauli, Korba, and Angul.
- Vulnerable groups (children, the elderly, those with respiratory issues) are at high risk.

No Proven Alternatives

- Currently, no credible alternatives exist for removing SO_2 at scale from flue gases.
- Technological substitutes like carbon capture or low-sulphur coal either do not address SO_2 directly, are prohibitively expensive, or are not widely available in India.

Way Forward

Create a Phased and Prioritised Compliance Roadmap

- Focus on priority areas: Plants located in or near critically polluted zones should be the first to comply.
- Set graded timelines based on plant size, pollution impact, and geographic vulnerability.
- Allow for flexible financing structures for smaller or loss-making plants.

Use the 'Polluter Pays Principle' to Fund FGDs

- Impose a green cess on non-compliant TPPs and direct this revenue to fund FGD installations.
- Cross-subsidise cleaner power by reducing taxes on renewable energy while making SO_2-heavy electricity slightly costlier.

Introduce Emission Trading Schemes (ETS)

- Similar to the Perform, Achieve, and Trade (PAT) scheme, introduce SO_2 emissions trading to incentivise reductions.
- Plants that perform better can sell credits to laggards.

Strengthen Regulatory Oversight and Real-Time Monitoring

- Invest in Continuous Emissions Monitoring Systems (CEMS).
- Strengthen the capacity of SPCBs and MoEFCC to enforce SO_2 compliance norms rigorously.
- Involve independent watchdogs and citizens' groups in tracking pollution from coal plants.

Address Affordability through Tariff Restructuring

- Allow for a pass-through mechanism in tariffs to recover fixed FGD costs over a longer horizon (10–15 years).
- Support discoms with soft loans or green bonds to absorb the cost burden temporarily.

Invest in Cleaner Energy and Just Transitions

- While FGD is necessary for existing TPPs, India must accelerate its coal-to-renewables transition.
- Prioritise the closure of older, inefficient coal plants that are major SO_2 emitters and are economically unviable.
- Train workers in renewable sectors and initiate just transition frameworks for coal-dependent regions.

Maintain Policy Continuity and Institutional Clarity

- Avoid contradictory messaging from different government bodies.
- Establish an inter-ministerial coordination group (including MoEFCC, MoP, PSA, and CEA) for a coherent emissions strategy.
- Develop a national emissions inventory and publish it annually to assess progress.

Conclusion

India stands at a critical juncture: its energy ambitions must align with its environmental responsibilities. The rollback of Flue Gas Desulphurisation mandates may yield short-term economic relief, but at the potential cost of public health, climate commitments, and India's global environmental credibility.

Instead of abandoning the FGD roadmap, the government must rethink implementation, not the goal itself. A phased, data-driven, and regionally sensitive strategy, supported by appropriate financing and technology, strikes the right balance between development and sustainability. Clean air is not a luxury. It is a right, and India must act decisively to protect it.

MAIN QUESTION
To what extent has the evolving nature of Indian federalism, judicial activism, and electoral reforms shaped the democratic accountability and constitutional governance in India?"

Which of the following best explains why the rollback of FGD mandates could undermine India's climate and air quality goals, despite not directly targeting carbon dioxide?
a) FGDs increase fuel efficiency, thus reducing CO_2 emissions indirectly.
b) SO_2 reacts with water vapour and ammonia to form secondary particulate matter, increasing PM2.5 levels.
c) India's Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) under the Paris Agreement include SO_2 reduction.
d) FGD systems are required to capture methane and nitrous oxide, both potent GHGs.

Answer: b) SO_2 reacts with water vapour and ammonia to form secondary particulate matter, increasing PM2.5 levels.

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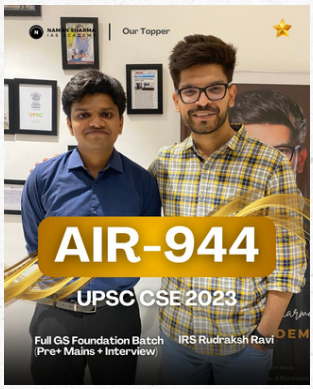

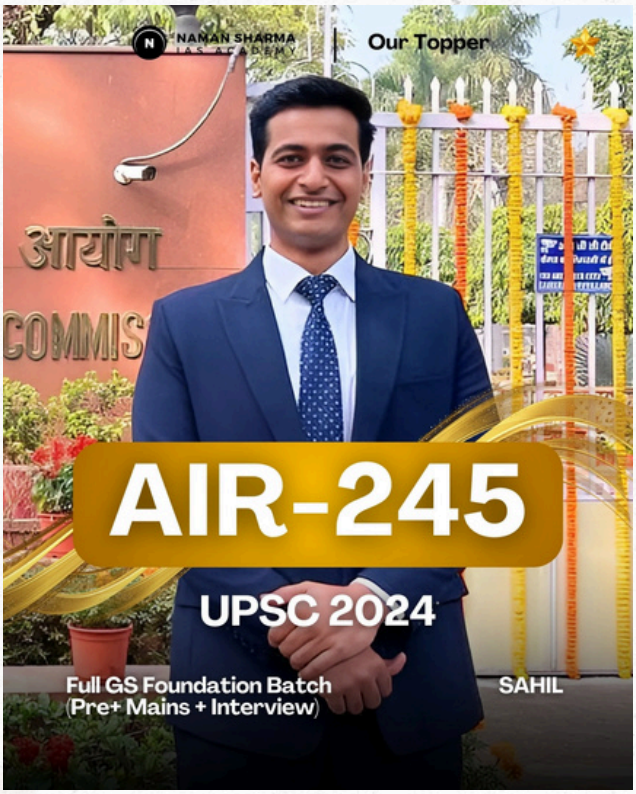

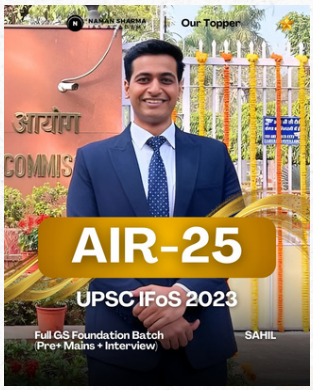

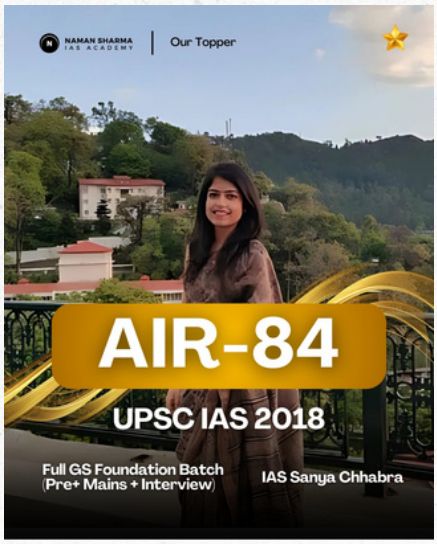

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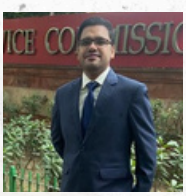

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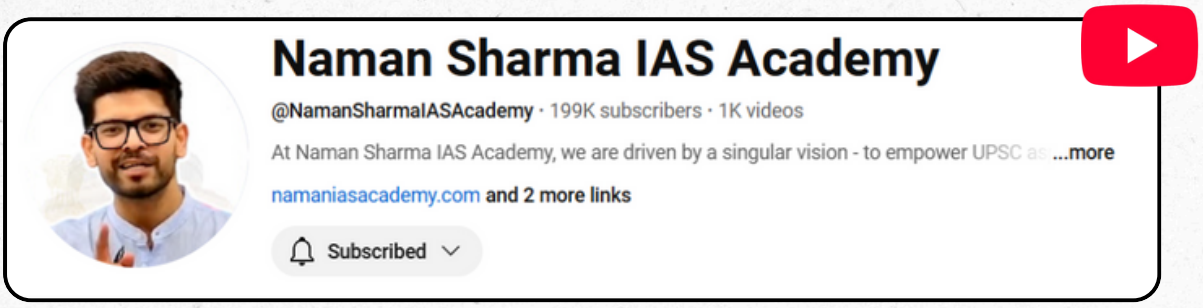

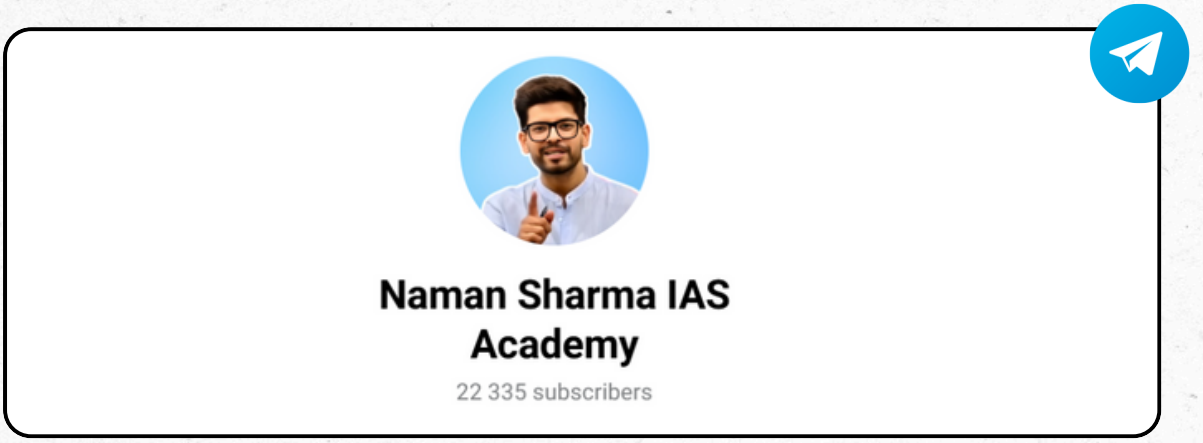

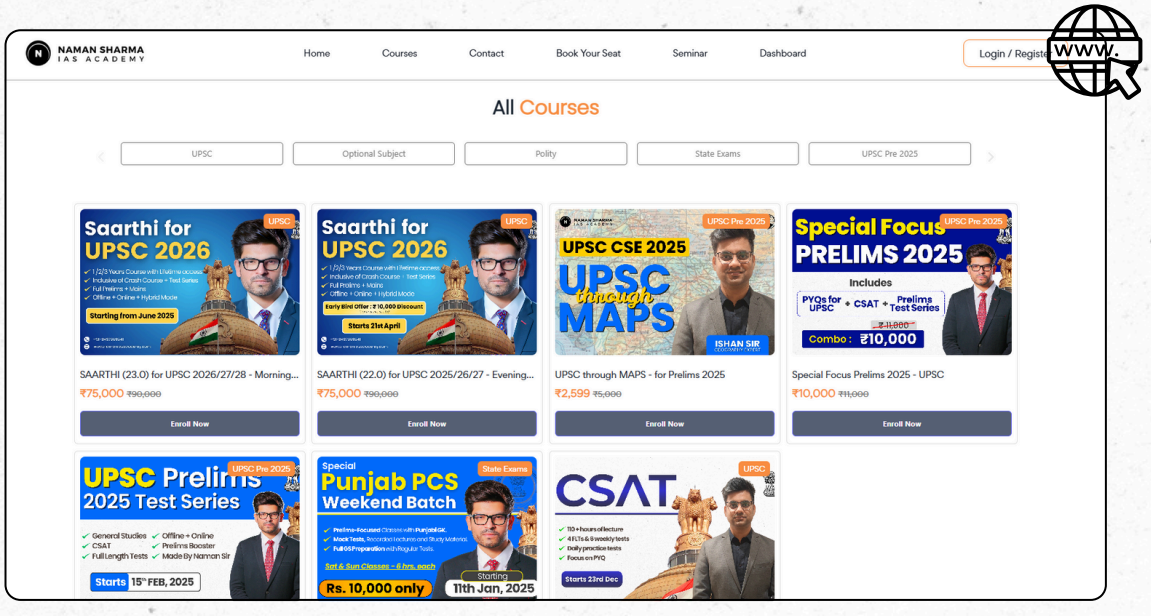

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