

P2. NATIONAL



Delhi Cabinet approves Bill to fine officials for delay in services - Examines how time-bound public service delivery laws strengthen citizen-centric governance, administrative accountability, and good governance.

P3. NATIONAL



Roads Ministry issues public consultation guidelines for highway projects - Explains the role of participatory governance, stakeholder consultation, and transparency in infrastructure planning and implementation.

P4. ECOLOGY



China's 'Great Green Wall' tames desert growth, but scientists say fight is not over - Illustrates how large-scale ecological restoration, scientific planning, and sustained public policy can combat desertification and build climate resilience.

P7. ECONOMICS



RBI issues data governance guidance framework for banks - Discusses the institutional framework for ensuring secure, accountable, and risk-based governance of data in India's digital financial system

Editor's Note

In this edition of the Pala Civil Times, we explore how contemporary public policy is increasingly shaped by the principles of accountability, participatory governance, sustainability, and digital transformation. Our national pages examine Delhi's proposed legislation on time-bound public service delivery and the Centre's decision to institutionalise public consultation in national highway projects, highlighting the growing emphasis on citizen-centric governance. The Environment section analyses China's Green Great Wall Programme, offering insights into large-scale ecological restoration and strategies to combat desertification. In Decoded Editorials, we unpack the constitutional debate surrounding the restoration of Jammu & Kashmir's Statehood and examine the broader questions of freedom of expression, censorship, and democratic values. Our Economics page explains the RBI's new Data Governance Framework for banks, reflecting the increasing importance of secure and accountable data management in a rapidly digitising financial system. Together, these topics offer a multidimensional perspective on governance, public policy, and development—equipping every UPSC aspirant with the analytical lens needed to navigate contemporary issues.

Editorials Decoded



Welcome back, Taslima Nasrin



Analyses the balance between freedom of speech, reasonable restrictions, artistic expression, and constitutional democracy.



Fulfil the promise



Explores the constitutional issues surrounding Statehood, Union Territories, federalism, democratic representation, and Centre-State relations.

Delhi Cabinet approves Bill to fine officials for delay in services

The Delhi Cabinet has approved the Delhi (Right of Citizen to Time Bound and Ease of Delivery of Service) Bill, 2026, replacing the 2011 legislation governing time-bound public service delivery. The proposed law significantly enhances accountability by increasing penalties for unjustified delays by government officials and aims to make public services more transparent, efficient, and technology-driven. The Bill reflects the broader **shift towards citizen-centric governance**, where timely delivery of public services is increasingly recognised as an essential component of good governance, administrative accountability, and responsive public administration.

Understanding the Right to Time-Bound Public Services

Right to Time-Bound Public Services refers to a governance mechanism that legally obligates public authorities to deliver notified government services within a prescribed timeframe.

Key features include:

- Citizens are legally entitled to receive specified public services within notified timelines.
- Designated officers are made personally accountable for delays.
- A grievance redressal and appellate mechanism enables citizens to seek remedies.
- Monetary penalties may be imposed on officials for unreasonable delays, subject to principles of natural justice.
- Governments periodically notify eligible services, timelines, and responsible authorities.
- The objective is to transform governance from discretionary administration to rights-based, accountable, and service-oriented public administration.

Key Features

The proposed Bill strengthens the existing framework by increasing the penalty for delayed service delivery from ₹10 per day (maximum ₹200) under the 2011 Act to ₹250 per day (maximum ₹5,000). Before imposing penalties, officials must be given an opportunity to explain the delay, upholding the principles of natural justice, particularly the rule of audi alteram partem (hear the other side). The legislation also introduces the concept of ease of service delivery, emphasising simplification, digital governance, and administrative efficiency. With more than 500 notified services, the law institutionalises measurable standards of public service delivery.

Why is it needed?

Time-bound service delivery laws strengthen good governance by improving transparency, accountability, and administrative responsiveness. They operationalise constitutional values under Article 14 (equality before law) by ensuring non-arbitrary access to public services and support the Directive Principles promoting an efficient and welfare-oriented administration. Such legislation complements national initiatives like Digital India, Minimum Government, Maximum Governance, and the National e-Governance Plan. By reducing bureaucratic delays, improving ease of living, and enhancing citizen trust, these reforms contribute to better public administration, improved investment climate, and stronger institutional credibility.

Way Forward

The proposed legislation represents an important step towards institutionalising citizen-centric governance by combining legal accountability with administrative reforms. However, effective implementation will depend on robust digital infrastructure, adequate staffing, continuous monitoring, transparent grievance redressal mechanisms, and periodic revision of notified services. Penalties alone cannot guarantee better governance unless accompanied by process simplification, capacity building, and performance management.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. The Citizens' Charter has been a landmark initiative in ensuring citizen-centric administration. But it is yet to reach its full potential. Identify the factors hindering the realisation of its promise and suggest measures to overcome them. (GS II – Governance – 2024)

RELEVANCE

GS II : Governance

Roads Ministry issues public consultation guidelines for highway projects

The Union Ministry of Road Transport and Highways (MoRTH) has **introduced mandatory public consultation** during the preparation of **Detailed Project Reports (DPRs)** for all future national highway projects, following recommendations of the Parliament's Public Accounts Committee (PAC). The reforms also strengthen oversight of highway contractors and introduce technological measures to improve toll management. The initiative reflects the growing emphasis on participatory governance, transparency, and accountability in public infrastructure development, ensuring that highway projects are not only technically sound but also socially acceptable and efficiently managed.



Understanding Public Consultation

Public consultation is a structured process through which governments seek the views of stakeholders before implementing development projects.

It aims to:

- Identify local concerns and minimise social conflicts.
- Improve project design through stakeholder feedback.
- Enhance transparency and democratic decision-making.
- Facilitate smoother land acquisition and rehabilitation.
- Reduce delays arising from litigation and public opposition.

For highway projects, consultations are conducted during the Detailed Project Report (DPR) stage, allowing technical planning to incorporate local realities before project execution.

Key Features

The revised framework mandates consultations with local bodies, district authorities, and elected representatives depending on the nature of the project. The Ministry has also required registration of major sub-contractors with the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI), improving regulatory oversight and quality control. In toll management, concerns regarding inadequate commuter facilities, emergency response, staff conduct, and underreporting of traffic volumes have prompted the adoption of **Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) technology alongside FASTag.**

RELEVANCE

GS III : Infrastructure

Significance for India

Infrastructure projects increasingly require balancing developmental needs with public participation and accountability. Institutionalising consultations can reduce project delays, improve social acceptance, and minimise disputes relating to land acquisition and environmental concerns. Enhanced contractor oversight improves construction quality and safety, while digital tolling technologies increase revenue transparency and operational efficiency. These reforms align with India's broader objectives of Ease of Living, Digital Governance, and evidence-based infrastructure planning, while supporting faster and more sustainable infrastructure expansion under initiatives such as the PM Gati Shakti National Master Plan.

Way Forward

Mandatory public consultation represents a shift from a purely engineering-driven approach to a people-centric model of infrastructure governance. However, consultations must remain meaningful rather than procedural, with adequate representation of affected communities and timely disclosure of project information. Strengthening digital monitoring, independent audits, contractor accountability, and citizen grievance mechanisms will enhance public confidence and improve project outcomes. Integrating technology with participatory governance can make India's highway infrastructure more efficient, transparent, and socially sustainable.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. The Gati-Shakti Yojana needs meticulous co-ordination between the government and the private sector to achieve the goal of connectivity. Discuss. (GS II – Governance – 2022)

ECOLOGY

China's 'Great Green Wall' tames desert growth, but scientists say fight is not over

China's **Three-North Protective Forest Program (TNPFP)**, popularly known as the Green Great Wall, has emerged as one of the world's largest ecological restoration initiatives. Launched in 1978, the programme seeks to curb the expansion of deserts across northern China through afforestation, sand dune stabilisation, and ecosystem restoration. Recent assessments indicate a significant decline in desertified land, highlighting the programme's long-term success. Beyond ecological restoration, the initiative demonstrates how sustained political commitment, scientific innovation, and community participation can collectively address land degradation and enhance climate resilience.

Understanding the Science of Desertification

- **Desertification:** As defined by the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), *it is the degradation of land in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid regions due to climatic variations and human activities such as deforestation, overgrazing and unsustainable farming.*
- **Straw Checkerboards:** A low-cost ecological engineering technique in which straw is arranged in grid patterns to stabilise sand dunes, reduce wind erosion, conserve soil moisture, and facilitate vegetation growth.

Key Features of the TNPFP

- **Largest Afforestation Programme:** Initiated in 1978, the Green Great Wall aims to create protective forest belts across northern China.
- **Integrated Restoration Approach:** Combines afforestation, straw checkerboards, irrigation, grassland restoration, and sustainable land management rather than relying solely on tree planting.
- **Long-Term Outcomes:** Since 2000, China's desertified land has reportedly declined by around 10%, while severely desertified areas have reduced by over 40%. Forest cover in the programme region has increased from 5% (1978) to 14% (2022).
- **Institutional Commitment:** The programme illustrates the importance of long-term policy continuity, sustained public investment, and scientific monitoring in ecological restoration.
- **Community Participation:** More than 300 million rural workers have contributed to restoration efforts, highlighting the role of local communities in achieving environmental goals.



The Way Forward

China's experience illustrates that reversing desertification is a long-term developmental process rather than a short-term environmental project. While favourable climatic conditions may support restoration, durable outcomes depend on sustained political commitment, adaptive scientific management, regular monitoring, and active community participation. Future restoration programmes should prioritise native species, landscape-specific interventions, and ecosystem resilience over mere increases in forest cover. As climate change intensifies land degradation globally, integrated and science-based restoration strategies will be crucial for achieving ecological sustainability and strengthening the resilience of vulnerable communities.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



- What is/are the importance/importances of the 'United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification'? (2016)
1. It aims to promote effective action through innovative national programmes and supportive international partnerships.
 2. It has a special/particular focus on South Asia and North Africa regions, and its secretariat facilitates the allocation of major portions of financial resources to these regions.
 3. It is committed to a bottom-up approach, encouraging the participation of local people in combating the desertification. Select the correct answer using the code given below.
- a) 1 only
 - b) 2 and 3 only
 - c) 1 and 3 only
 - d) 1, 2 and 3

RELEVANCE

GS III : Environmental Conservation

Welcome back, Taslima Nasrin (Indian Express : 16-07-2026)

The invitation extended to Bangladeshi author Taslima Nasrin to participate in a public event in Kolkata after nearly two decades has revived the debate on freedom of expression and censorship in India. Her earlier departure from Kolkata in 2007 following protests over her memoir *Dwikhondito* highlighted the tension between artistic freedom and public sentiment. The issue underscores a larger constitutional question: how should a democracy balance free speech, public order, and cultural or religious sensitivities while safeguarding the fundamental right to express dissenting or controversial ideas?

Underlying concepts

- **Freedom of Speech and Expression:** Guaranteed under **Article 19(1)(a)** of the Constitution, it includes the freedom to express opinions through speech, writing, literature, art, films, and other media.
- **Reasonable Restrictions:** Under **Article 19(2)**, this right may be restricted on grounds such as sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the State, public order, decency, morality, contempt of court, defamation, incitement to an offence, and friendly relations with foreign States.
- **Prior Restraint (Pre-censorship):** Governmental restrictions imposed before publication or exhibition, permissible only within constitutional limits.
- **The 'Heckler's Veto':** A situation where threats of protest or violence effectively suppress lawful speech, leading authorities to restrict expression instead of maintaining public order.
- **Taslima Nasrin:** Her novel **Lajja (1993)** criticised religious intolerance in Bangladesh, while her memoir *Dwikhondito* triggered protests in Kolkata, resulting in her departure from the city.
- **Recurring Instances:** Similar controversies have surrounded **Perumal Murugan's Madhorubhagan** and **Honey Trehan's Satluj**, reflecting continuing debates over artistic freedom.
- **Constitutional Principle:** The Supreme Court has consistently held that the State's duty is to protect lawful expression from unlawful intimidation, rather than suppress speech because of anticipated protests.
- **Democratic Value:** Freedom of expression protects not only popular opinions but also ideas that challenge prevailing social, political, or religious beliefs.

Significance for India

Freedom of expression is a cornerstone of constitutional democracy, enabling intellectual inquiry, artistic creativity, scientific temper, and informed public debate. Protecting diverse viewpoints strengthens pluralism and reinforces India's commitment to secularism and democratic values. At the same time, constitutional restrictions seek to balance individual liberty with public order and social harmony. The manner in which governments respond to controversial works reflects the health of democratic institutions and the rule of law. Ensuring that disagreements are resolved through dialogue rather than coercion is essential for preserving an open and inclusive public sphere.

Way Forward

A mature democracy is distinguished not by the absence of disagreement but by its ability to accommodate competing ideas within constitutional limits. While freedom of expression is not absolute, restrictions must remain narrowly tailored and consistent with Article 19(2). Governments should protect writers, artists, and filmmakers from intimidation while encouraging peaceful debate over contentious works. Strengthening constitutional values of tolerance, reasoned discourse, and respect for diverse opinions will help sustain both individual liberties and social cohesion.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. Who of the following is the author of the books "The India Way" and "Why Bharat Matters"?

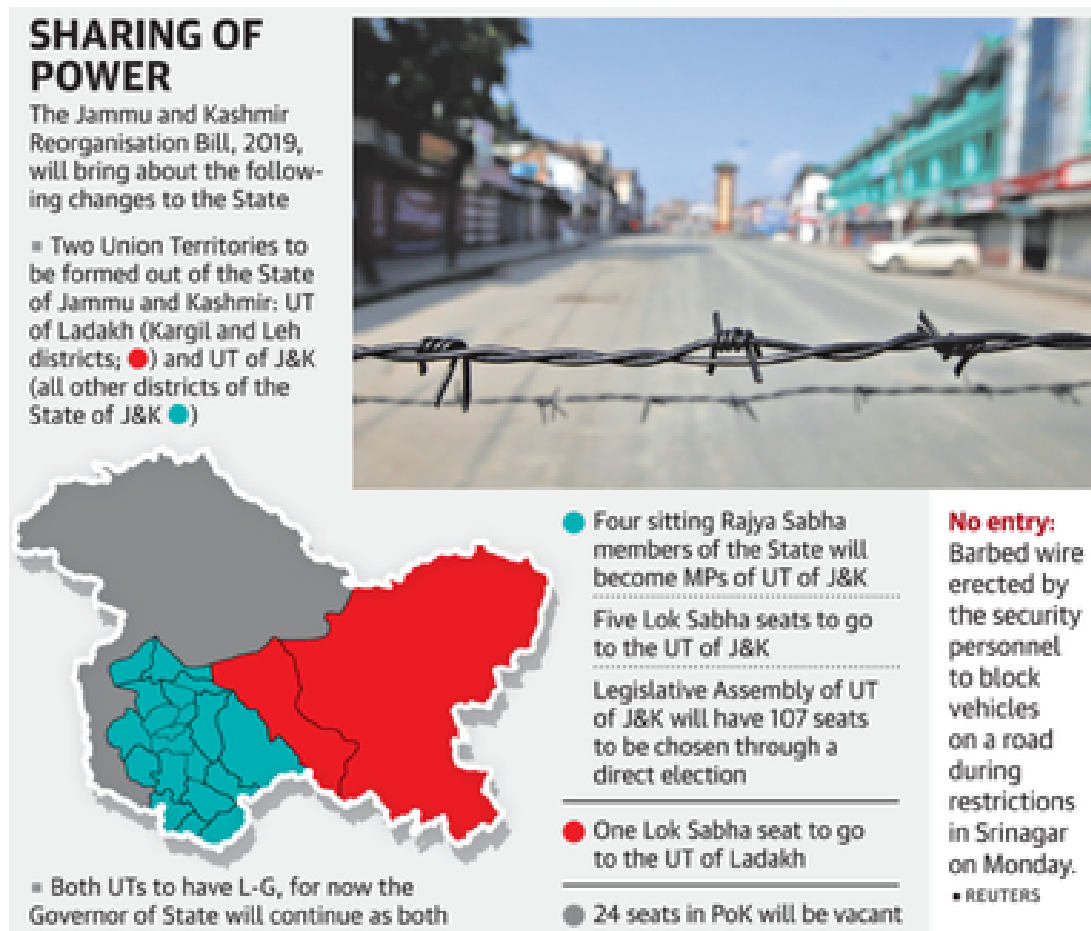
- (a) Bhupendra Yadav
- (b) Nalin Mehta
- (c) Shashi Tharoor
- (d) Subrahmanyam Jaishankar

RELEVANCE

GS I : Events of national and international Importance

Fulfil the promise (The Hindu : 16-07-2026)

The demand for the restoration of Statehood to Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) has regained prominence following continued delay by the Union Government despite repeated assurances before the Supreme Court, Parliament, and the public. Although Assembly elections have been held, J&K continues to function as a Union Territory, where significant executive powers remain vested in the Lieutenant Governor. The issue extends beyond a political promise and raises broader constitutional questions relating to federalism, democratic representation, constitutional morality, and the balance of powers between the Union and the States.



Significance for India

The restoration of Statehood carries implications reflecting India's commitment to constitutional federalism, democratic governance, and political inclusion. A fully empowered elected government can strengthen local accountability, improve governance, and enhance public participation in policymaking. The issue also influences Centre-State relations and shapes perceptions of democratic institutions in strategically important border regions. Timely restoration, alongside continued security measures, can reinforce constitutional legitimacy and demonstrate that national security and democratic decentralisation are complementary rather than competing objectives.

Conclusion

The restoration of Statehood should be viewed as a constitutional and governance issue rather than merely a political commitment. While security considerations remain important, long-term stability depends equally on representative institutions, public confidence, and cooperative federalism. A calibrated approach that combines effective security management with the timely transfer of constitutional powers to an elected government would strengthen democratic legitimacy and reinforce India's federal framework while addressing the developmental and governance aspirations of the people of Jammu & Kashmir.

Constitutional Significance

- Constitutional Background:** The Jammu and Kashmir Reorganisation Act, 2019 bifurcated the former State into the Union Territories of Jammu & Kashmir (with a legislature) and Ladakh (without a legislature), following the abrogation of Article 370.
- Supreme Court's Position:** In its 2023 judgment upholding the abrogation of Article 370, the Supreme Court recorded the Union Government's assurance that Statehood would be restored, although no specific timeline was prescribed.
- Governance Concerns:** Despite the election of a legislative assembly, key subjects such as public order, police, and significant administrative powers remain with the Lieutenant Governor, limiting the authority of the elected government.
- Federalism and Democratic Accountability:** Prolonged continuation of Union Territory status raises concerns regarding representative governance, cooperative federalism, and the accountability of executive authority to elected representatives.

RELEVANCE

GS II : International Relations

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. Discuss the nature of Jammu and Kashmir Legislative Assembly after the Jammu and Kashmir Reorganization Act, 2019. Briefly describe the powers and functions of the Assembly of the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. (GS II – Indian Polity – 2025)

RBI issues data governance guidance framework for banks

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has issued the Guidance on Regulatory Expectations for Data Governance for banks and other Regulated Entities (REs) to strengthen the governance of data across the financial sector. The framework aims to improve data quality, security, accountability, and risk management while ensuring compliance with the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) Act, 2023. As digital banking and technology-driven financial services expand, data has become a strategic asset, making robust governance essential for maintaining operational resilience, regulatory compliance, and customer trust.

What is Data Governance?

Data governance is a structured framework of policies, processes, roles, and technological controls that ensures data is accurate, secure, consistent, accessible, and used responsibly throughout its lifecycle.

Key features of the framework

- **Data Governance Framework (DGF):** Every Regulated Entity (RE) must establish a DGF aligned with its enterprise risk management framework and proportionate to its size and business model.
- **Institutional Oversight:** The *Board of Directors* will oversee implementation through board-level and executive-level data governance committees.
- **Defined Roles:** The framework clearly distinguishes the responsibilities of *Data Owners (governance and quality)*, *Data Stewards (implementation)*, and *Data Custodians (technical management and security)*.
- **Single Source of Truth (SSOT):** REs must maintain one authoritative source for all critical data elements to ensure consistency across operations.
- **Data Lifecycle Management:** Governance must extend from data collection and processing to storage, sharing, archival, and secure disposal.
- **Traceability:** Metadata and data lineage records must be maintained to track data throughout its lifecycle.
- **Core Principles:** The framework is based on accountability, integrity, transparency, auditability, traceability, proportionality, and standardisation.
- **Risk Controls:** Strong safeguards are mandated for third-party data sharing, encryption, periodic audits, and continuous monitoring.

Significance for India

The framework strengthens India's digital financial ecosystem by enhancing cyber resilience, consumer protection, and regulatory oversight. It complements the DPDP Act, 2023 by promoting responsible handling of personal data and supports India's vision of a secure digital economy. Strong data governance reduces operational, compliance, reputational, and financial risks while improving supervisory effectiveness and evidence-based decision-making. The framework is particularly significant as banks increasingly rely on artificial intelligence, cloud computing, fintech partnerships, and cross-border data processing, making standardised governance essential for maintaining financial stability and public confidence.

Way Forward

The RBI's guidance marks a shift from viewing data as merely an operational resource to recognising it as a core element of financial governance and risk management. Effective implementation will require investment in digital infrastructure, skilled personnel, periodic audits, and a strong culture of data stewardship across financial institutions. As India's financial sector becomes increasingly data-driven, harmonising technological innovation with privacy, accountability, and regulatory compliance will be critical to ensuring a secure, resilient, and trusted digital banking ecosystem.

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Q. "The emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Digital Revolution) has initiated e-Governance as an integral part of government". Discuss. (GS II – Governance – 2020)

Q. E-governance is not only about utilization of the power of new technology, but also much about critical importance of the 'use value' of information. Explain. (GS II – Governance – 2018)

RELEVANCE

GS III : Indian Economy

PYQ Compass

UPSC questions previously asked from the themes discussed on this page.



Who of the following is the author of the books “The India Way” and “Why Bharat Matters”?

- (a) Bhupendra Yadav
- (b) Nalin Mehta
- (c) Shashi Tharoor
- (d) Subrahmanyam Jaishankar

Ans : D

Why Bharat Matters is a 2024 non-fictional book written by Indian politician and author S. Jaishankar. Jaishankar was the incumbent Minister of External Affairs of the Government of India in the Second Modi ministry at the time of publishing. In this work, Jaishankar discusses India's foreign policy and emphasises the importance of Bharat, i.e. India, with its ever-growing role on the global stage as a potential superpower.

• ‘The India Way: Strategies for an Uncertain World,’ by Dr S Jaishankar, presently the Union Minister of External Affairs, is a book that attracts much attention and curiosity. Firstly, because it is written by a career diplomat with four decades of experience, and hence with a vantage perspective. Secondly, because he has now graduated to a more powerful policy-making, strategy-defining role, and getting an insight into his thinking would be gratifying. Hence option (d) is the correct answer.

Q. What is/are the importance/importances of the 'United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification? (2016)

1. It aims to promote effective action through innovative national programmes and supportive international partnerships.
 2. It has a special/particular focus on South Asia and North Africa regions, and its secretariat facilitates the allocation of major portions of financial resources to these regions.
 3. It is committed to a bottom-up approach, encouraging the participation of local people in combating the desertification. Select the correct answer using the code given below.
- a) 1 only
 - b) 2 and 3 only
 - c) 1 and 3 only
 - d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: c

The United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) focuses on combating desertification, land degradation, and drought (DLDD), with a strong emphasis on sustainable land management and improving the livelihoods of affected populations. **Statement 1: Correct** – The UNCCD aims to promote effective action through national programs and international partnerships, which help implement solutions for land degradation and desertification.

Statement 2: Incorrect – While the UNCCD has a global focus, it does not specifically allocate major portions of financial resources to South Asia and North Africa. It works with various regions but does not prioritize specific regions in terms of financial distribution. 3.

Statement 3: Correct – The UNCCD is indeed committed to a bottom-up approach, encouraging the stakeholders in combating desertification and promoting sustainable land management.

Practice Questions and answers

Q. With reference to public consultation in national highway projects, consider the following statements:

1. Public consultation has been made mandatory during the preparation of the Detailed Project Report (DPR) for future highway projects.
2. Local Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assembly are required to be consulted in both greenfield and brownfield highway projects.
3. Registration with the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) has been made mandatory for sub-contractors undertaking works above a specified project value.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 1 only
- B. 1 and 3 only
- C. 2 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Answer: B

Statements 1 and 3 are correct.

Statement 1 is correct. MoRTH has incorporated mandatory public consultation at the DPR preparation stage.

Statement 2 is incorrect. Consultation with MPs and MLAs is mandatory only for greenfield projects, not brownfield projects.

Statement 3 is correct. Major sub-contractors executing works beyond the prescribed threshold must register with the NHAI.

Q. With reference to the RBI's Guidance on Regulatory Expectations for Data Governance, consider the following statements:

1. Regulated Entities are required to establish a Single Source of Truth (SSOT) for all critical data elements.
2. The framework assigns identical responsibilities to Data Owners, Data Stewards and Data Custodians.
3. Data risks are required to be integrated into the enterprise risk management framework of Regulated Entities.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- A. 1 and 2 only
- B. 2 and 3 only
- C. 1 and 3 only
- D. 1, 2 and 3

Answer: C

Statements 1 and 3 are correct.

Statement 1 is correct. The guidance requires a Single Source of Truth (SSOT) for all critical data.

Statement 2 is incorrect. The three roles have distinct responsibilities relating to governance, implementation and technical management.

Statement 3 is correct. Data risks must be incorporated into the overall enterprise risk management framework.