

A case of people versus population

July 11 has been observed as World Population Day since 1989 after the global population crossed the five billion mark. The population is now estimated to be 8.1 billion, with India as the most populous nation (1.44 billion), which is slightly more than China's.

This writer wrote the article, "Myths about Population Growth", which was published in this daily on World Population Day ('World Population Day' page, July 11, 1997) – when India crossed the 100 crore mark. The article showed how the doomsday predictions of Malthus, 200 years ago, or that of his present-day followers in the West, that population growth would overtake food production, never came true and never will in the future. The aim of this article is to analyse what has changed in 27 years.

Changes in India

Let us look at some of the major socio-economic changes in India over 27 years.

First, the population has grown 44% from 100 crore to 144 crore, but the annual growth rate of the population has fallen sharply – from nearly 2% to below 1%. This is because the number of births per woman (total fertility rate or TFR) has fallen from 3.4 to 2, just below the "replacement level" of 2.1.

Second, the per capita GDP of Indians grew six times, from \$400 to \$2,400. The average life span of an Indian has increased from 61 years to 70 years.

Third, Indians living below the multi-dimensional poverty line decreased from 43% to 11%. However, 11% of 144 crore is still a very large number of 16 crore people.

The 16 crore people below the poverty line are not distributed evenly across the country. Just four States, namely, Uttar Pradesh: (5.4 crore out of 23.6 crore), Bihar (4.2 crore out of 12.7 crore), Madhya Pradesh (2.52 crore out of 8.7 crore) and Jharkhand (1.1 crore out of 4 crore) account for 83% of the national total of people below the poverty line, while accounting for only 34 % of India's total population. How to address this persisting disparity in socio-economic growth



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and poverty reduction among Indian States is among the top priorities of the central and State governments and beyond the scope of this article.

Impact of climate change

But a far more serious issue facing the people of India is the adverse effects of climate change which do not recognise national boundaries. This is where the population versus people dichotomy becomes apparent. The debate on historical emissions (advanced by developing countries) versus current emissions (advanced by the developed world) is closely linked to the population versus people divergence. This is because the per capita consumption of both natural resources and manufactured products directly correlates with the per capita income of the people.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries with a per capita income of \$40,000 and a total population of 1.39 billion, together produce and consume \$55.6 trillion worth of natural resources and manufactured goods. In comparison, India, with a per capita GDP of \$2,400 and a population of 1.44 billion, produces and consumes just \$3.5 trillion worth of natural resources and manufactured goods. In other words, the OECD countries with a population slightly less than that of India consume nearly 16 times of what the whole of India consumes. This has been the major cause of global warming over the past few decades, resulting in unpredictable weather changes. In turn this has adversely affected the poor in developing nations more severely than people in developed nations with much better housing and civic infrastructure.

With 11% of its people still below the poverty line, India will continue to accord priority to economic growth over climate change mitigation measures, and rightly so. That responsibility lies majorly with the OECD countries, and now increasingly with China. Successive Indian governments have negotiated hard at global

forums on India's right to grow economically to alleviate poverty as early as possible.

Global South and growth

The Narendra Modi government has articulated this even more forcefully by expanding the definition of the Circular Economy framework in the G-20 New Delhi Declaration of September 2023: "In order to endeavour to decouple our economic growth from environmental degradation and enhance sustainable consumption and production, including primary resource consumption while supporting economic growth, we acknowledge the critical role played by circular economy, extended producer responsibility and resource efficiency in achieving sustainable development".

This is an explicit statement of intent to maintain the economic growth of the Global South nations, a term used for all developing nations as a group. India is looked upon by the nations of the Global South in their efforts to maintain economic growth in their respective nations as the first priority, followed by measures to achieve net zero. India has fixed the year 2070 to achieve this, compared to the European Union's target of reaching net zero by 2050. But India would strive for zero poverty within the next decade.

The next few decades will see developing nations focusing on eradicating persistent poverty among their people rather than responding to population growth doomsday "experts" who have so far not been proved right. As Tamil poet C. Subramania Bharati said nearly 100 years ago, "Thani oruvanukku unavillai enil, inda jagathinai azhithiduvom (even if one person does not have food to eat, we will destroy the world)". So, it is the welfare of average citizen which matters and not population numbers at the macro level.

The views expressed are personal



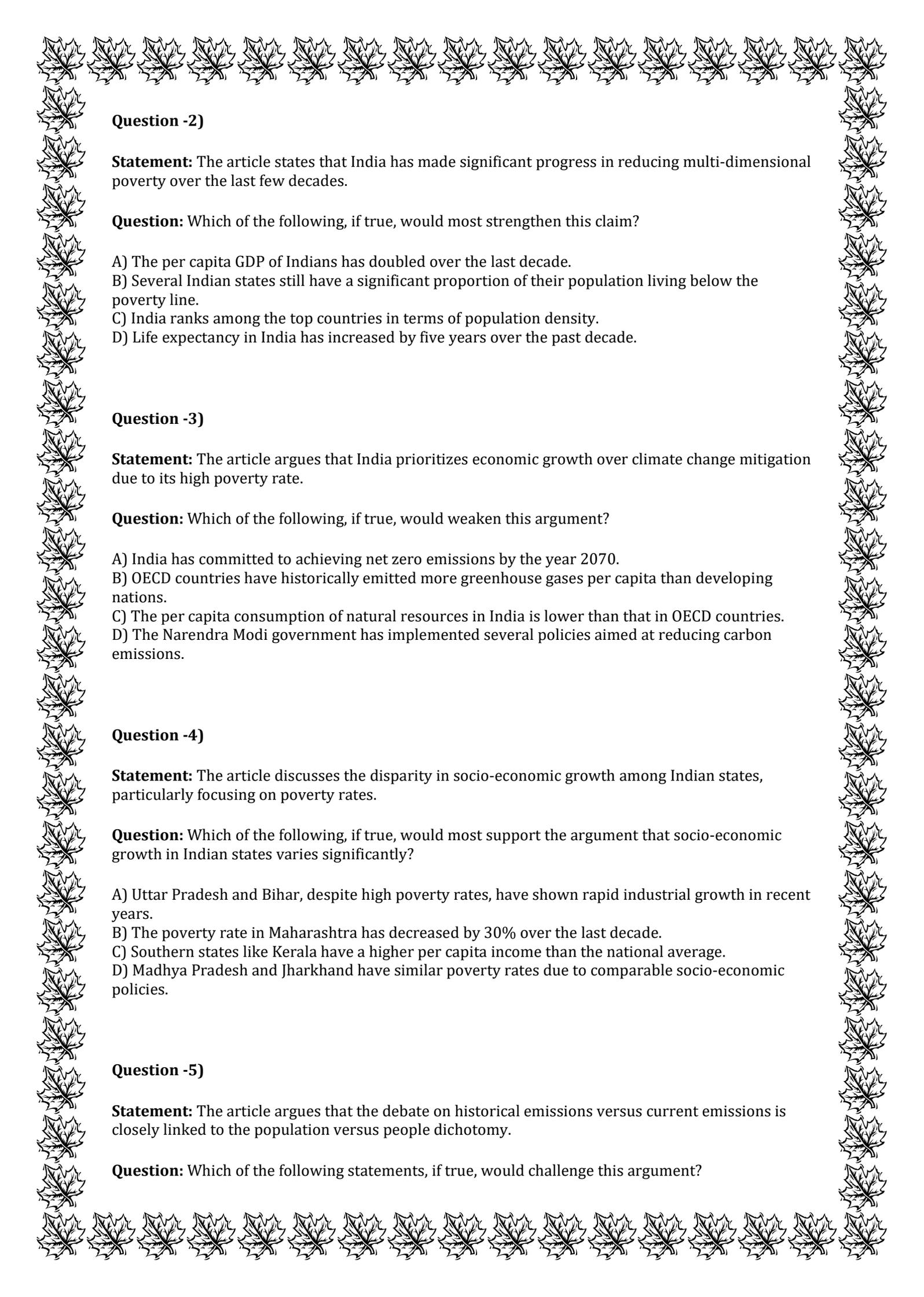
It is the welfare of the average citizen which matters and not macro-level population numbers

Question -1)

Statement: The article argues that the predictions of Malthus and his modern followers about population growth outstripping food production have not materialized.

Question: Which of the following would weaken the argument presented in the article?

- A recent study showing that global food production has decreased despite advancements in agricultural technology.
- Statistical data indicating a steady increase in global population growth rates over the past decade.
- Expert opinion suggesting that climate change exacerbates food insecurity in densely populated regions.
- Historical evidence demonstrating instances where population growth led to food shortages in specific countries.



Question -2)

Statement: The article states that India has made significant progress in reducing multi-dimensional poverty over the last few decades.

Question: Which of the following, if true, would most strengthen this claim?

- A) The per capita GDP of Indians has doubled over the last decade.
- B) Several Indian states still have a significant proportion of their population living below the poverty line.
- C) India ranks among the top countries in terms of population density.
- D) Life expectancy in India has increased by five years over the past decade.

Question -3)

Statement: The article argues that India prioritizes economic growth over climate change mitigation due to its high poverty rate.

Question: Which of the following, if true, would weaken this argument?

- A) India has committed to achieving net zero emissions by the year 2070.
- B) OECD countries have historically emitted more greenhouse gases per capita than developing nations.
- C) The per capita consumption of natural resources in India is lower than that in OECD countries.
- D) The Narendra Modi government has implemented several policies aimed at reducing carbon emissions.

Question -4)

Statement: The article discusses the disparity in socio-economic growth among Indian states, particularly focusing on poverty rates.

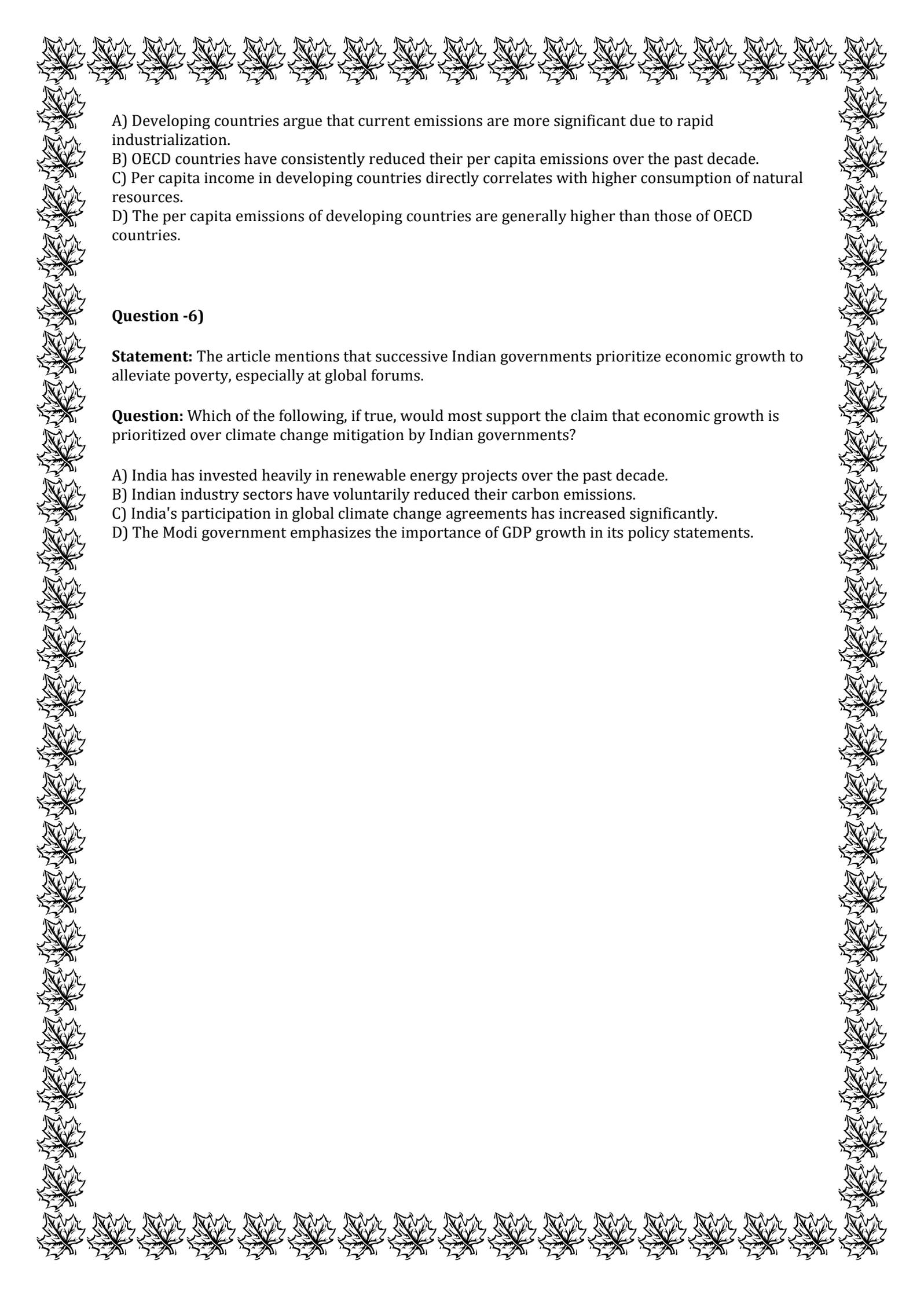
Question: Which of the following, if true, would most support the argument that socio-economic growth in Indian states varies significantly?

- A) Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, despite high poverty rates, have shown rapid industrial growth in recent years.
- B) The poverty rate in Maharashtra has decreased by 30% over the last decade.
- C) Southern states like Kerala have a higher per capita income than the national average.
- D) Madhya Pradesh and Jharkhand have similar poverty rates due to comparable socio-economic policies.

Question -5)

Statement: The article argues that the debate on historical emissions versus current emissions is closely linked to the population versus people dichotomy.

Question: Which of the following statements, if true, would challenge this argument?

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- A) Developing countries argue that current emissions are more significant due to rapid industrialization.
- B) OECD countries have consistently reduced their per capita emissions over the past decade.
- C) Per capita income in developing countries directly correlates with higher consumption of natural resources.
- D) The per capita emissions of developing countries are generally higher than those of OECD countries.

Question -6)

Statement: The article mentions that successive Indian governments prioritize economic growth to alleviate poverty, especially at global forums.

Question: Which of the following, if true, would most support the claim that economic growth is prioritized over climate change mitigation by Indian governments?

- A) India has invested heavily in renewable energy projects over the past decade.
- B) Indian industry sectors have voluntarily reduced their carbon emissions.
- C) India's participation in global climate change agreements has increased significantly.
- D) The Modi government emphasizes the importance of GDP growth in its policy statements.