2026:DHC:925-DB

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* **IN THE HIGH COURT OF DELHI AT NEW DELHI**

% ***Judgment reserved on: 14.01.2026***

Judgment pronounced on: 05.02.2026

Judgment uploaded on: 05.02.2026

\+ W.P.(C) 8524/2025, CM APPL. 36939/2025, CM APPL. 36941/2025, CM APPL. 52435/2025, CM APPL. 76481/2025 and CM APPL. 76482/2025

DEVYANSHU SURYAVANSHI & ORS. .....Petitioners

versus

STAFF SELECTION COMMISSION & ANR. .....Respondents

\+ W.P.(C) 10070/2025, CM APPL. 41825/2025 and CM APPL. 41828/2025

TUSHAR SHARMA & ORS. .....Petitioners

versus

UNION OF INDIA THROUGH MINISTRY OF PERSONNEL & ORS. .....Respondents

\+ W.P.(C) 12471/2025 and CM APPL. 50923/2025

PAVNI SHARMA .....Petitioner

versus

STAFF SELECTION COMMISSION (SSC) AND ANR .....Respondents

\+ W.P.(C) 14070/2025 and CM APPL. 57706/2025

RAKESH MAHATO .....Petitioner

versus

UNION OF INDIA & ORS. .....Respondents

\+ W.P.(C) 15634/2025

VAIBHAV SINGH .....Petitioner

versus

SHAFF SELECTION COMMISSION HQ & ORS. .....Respondents

\+ W.P.(C) 8525/2025, CM APPL. 36942/2025 and CM APPL. 36944/2025

ABHI NAITAN & ORS. .....Petitioners

versus

STAFF SELECTION COMMISSION & ANR. .....Respondents

Present for Petitioners:
Mr. Gauhar Mirza, Mr. Aditya Bharat Manubarwala, Ms. Abiha Zaidi, Ms. Tanishka Grover, Mr. Pritam and Ms. Priyam Karma, Advs. in W.P.(C) 8524/2025 and W.P.(C) 8525/2025.
Mr. K. K. Sharma and Mr. Harshit Agarwal, Adv. in W.P.(C) 12471/2025.
Mr. Arun Kumar Singh and Mr. Dhanajaya Kumar Tyagi, Advs. in W.P.(C) 15634/2025.

Present for Respondents:
Ms. Arunima Dwivedi, CGSC along with Ms. Himanshi Singh and Ms. Priya Khurana, Advs. in W.P.(C) 8524/2025, W.P.(C) 12471/2025 and W.P.(C) 8525/2025.
Mr. Jagdish Chandra CGSC along with Ms. Maanya Saxena, Mr. Siddharth Bajaj, Advs. in W.P.(C) 10070/2025 and W.P.(C) 15634/2025.

CORAM:
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE ANIL KSHETARPAL
HON'BLE MR. JUSTICE AMIT MAHAJAN

J U D G M E N T

ANIL KSHETARPAL, J.

1. Through the present Writ Petitions under Articles 226 and 227 of the Constitution of India, the Petitioners assail the correctness of the Order dated 30.05.2025 passed the learned Central Administrative Tribunal, Principal Bench, New Delhi [hereinafter referred to as '**the Tribunal**'], in O.A. Nos.1102/2025, 1750/2025, 1405/2025, 1408/2025 and 1814/2025, as well as the Orders dated 17.07.2025 and 11.08.2025 passed by the Tribunal in O.A. Nos.1606/2025 and 1943/2025, respectively [hereinafter collectively referred to as '**Impugned Orders**'].

2. By way of the Impugned Orders, the Tribunal dismissed the Original Applications (OAs) challenging the final results and answer keys of the Combined Graduate Level Examination (CGLE), 2024

conducted by the Staff Selection Commission (SSC), holding that the alleged infirmities in the evaluation of the Tier-II examination, relating to grant of "bonus marks" for 22 questions and alteration of answers in the Final Answer Key released after declaration of results, stemmed from a conscious decision of the Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) committee of the SSC and therefore, did not warrant judicial re-evaluation.

3. With the consent of learned counsel representing the parties, the present Writ Petitions are being disposed of by this common judgment.

FACTUAL MATRIX

4. In order to comprehend the issues involved in the present case, relevant facts, in brief, are required to be noticed.

5. The SSC issued the notification for the CGLE, 2024 on 24.06.2024 for filling approximately 17,727 vacancies. Paragraph 13 of the said advertisement delineates the examination scheme, comprising two stages, Tier-I and Tier-II. It also incorporates a provision for normalization of marks through a specific formula, as detailed in the notice dated 07.02.2019.

6. The Tier-I Computer-Based Examination was conducted in September 2024, and the results thereof were declared on 05.12.2024. The Tier-II Examination, comprising Paper-I (Session-I with three sections and Session-II) and Paper-II, was conducted on 18.01.2025 and 20.01.2025. It is stated that one component thereof, namely the

Data Entry Speed Test Module (Session-II), could not be conducted as scheduled due to a technical glitch and was subsequently held on 31.01.2025.

7. On 21.01.2025, the SSC published the tentative Answer Key for Paper-I of the Tier-II Examination, pursuant whereto representations were invited and submitted by candidates in respect of the disputed issues/answers.

8. The SSC declared the final result and published the list of candidates shortlisted for posts other than Junior Statistical Officer/Statistical Investigator on 12.03.2025. Thereafter, on 18.03.2025, after obtaining post preferences and declaring the final result, the SSC released the Final Answer Key as well as the final scores of candidates in the Tier-II Examination.

9. It is further recorded in the pleadings that, under the Revised/Final Answer Key, nine (09) questions from the examination conducted on 18.01.2025 and ten (10) questions from the examination conducted on 20.01.2025 were declared invalid. Attention was also drawn to a tabulated list of twenty-two (22) questions in respect of which grace marks were awarded uniformly to all candidates, including those who had not attempted the questions or had furnished incorrect answers to the disputed questions.

10. Aggrieved thereby, the candidates instituted the aforementioned OAs before the Tribunal, which came to be dismissed on, *inter alia*, the following grounds:

i. The courts do not possess expertise in all academic disciplines and, in matters relating to the evaluation of examination answer keys, the views of SMEs merit due deference, particularly where divergent opinions are possible.

ii. While the scope of judicial review extends to areas within judicial expertise (such as Law), the Tribunal held that it could not sit in appeal over decisions involving subjects such as Mathematics, English, or General Knowledge, and therefore refrained from substituting its own assessment for the considered view of the SMEs of the SSC.

CONTENTIONS OF THE PARTIES

11. Heard learned Counsel for the parties at length and, with their able assistance, perused the paper book.

12. Learned Counsel representing the Petitioners has submitted as follows:

i. Judicial review is available even in academic matters when the examination question setting has been riddled with lacunae and the evaluation of the answers has been faulty. Reliance is placed upon the judgments rendered in ***Staff Selection Commission & Anr. v. Shubham Pal & Ors.***[1]***; Shivraj Sharma v. Consortium of National Law Universities & Ors.***[2]***; Siddhi Sandeep Ladda v. Consortium of***

[1] 2025 SCC OnLine Del 7145
[2] 2025:DHC:2838-DB

National Law Universities & Ors.[3]***;*** and ***Salil Maheshwari v. High Court of Delhi***[4]***.***

ii. The Respondents arbitrarily applied normalisation to twenty-two (22) questions without justification or adherence to the methodology prescribed under the SSC notice dated 07.02.2019, resulting in an undue dilution of merit.

iii. The grant of equal marks to all candidates for invalid questions is also assailed as unfair, as it benefits those who answered incorrectly or did not attempt the questions. Reliance is placed on ***Guru Nanak Dev University v. Saumil Garg & Ors.***[5] to submit that marks ought to be awarded only to candidates who attempted the disputed questions.

iv. The Petitioners furnished specific instances, including Question ID 630680674736 (Mathematics) and Question ID 630680522658 (English), where the most appropriate option could reasonably be deduced despite minor typographical errors.

13. *Per contra*, learned Counsel for the Respondents submits that Courts and Tribunals ought to defer to the opinion of experts in academic matters, as they do not possess the requisite expertise in all disciplines to re-evaluate such decisions. Reliance is placed on ***Mahesh Kumar v. SSC & Anr.***[6]***; Ran Vijay Singh & Ors. v. State of Uttar Pradesh & Ors.***[7]***; Ashish Singh & Ors. v. UOI & Ors.***[8]***;*** and

[3] 2025 INSC 714
[4] 2014 SCC OnLine Del 4563
[5] (2005) 13 SCC 749
[6] 2021:DHC:861-DB
[7] (2018) 2 SCC 357
[8] 2023:DHC:000778

Freya Kothari v. Union of India[9] to contend that a presumption of correctness attaches to the evaluation process. It is further submitted that full marks were awarded only in cases where the SMEs found the questions to be ambiguous.

14. No other submissions were advanced by learned counsel for the parties.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

15. The issue that arises for consideration is whether the Tribunal was justified in declining to interfere with the final answer key and evaluation process of the CGLE, 2024, in view of the settled principles governing the scope of judicial review in academic matters.

16. At the outset, it is necessary to elucidate the scope of judicial review in matters of academic evaluation. It is well settled that Courts and Tribunals, in exercise of writ jurisdiction under Articles 226 and 227 of the Constitution, do not function as appellate bodies to re-assess answer keys or the merits of academic judgments made by SMEs unless the decision-making process is shown to be vitiated by patent illegality or arbitrariness.

17. The Supreme Court in ***Ran Vijay Singh*** *(supra)* has underscored that where the governing rules do not provide for re-evaluation or scrutiny of answer sheets, judicial interference is permissible only in rare and exceptional cases demonstrably involving a material error.

[9] W.P.(C) 13668/2022

18. The judgment of this Court in ***Mahesh Kumar*** *(supra)* is further instructive. The Court observed that academic matters are best left to the academics. Courts should not re-evaluate or scrutinize answer sheets, as they lack the expertise to do so. The correctness of evaluation must be presumed. In the event of doubt, the benefit should ordinarily go to the examining authority rather than the candidate. Sympathy or compassion cannot guide judicial intervention. It is further observed that an error by the examining authority affects the entire body of candidates, and the examination process cannot be derailed merely because some candidates feel aggrieved.

19. The above-mentioned decision was subsequently upheld by the Supreme Court in SLP*(C) No. 1951/2022*. The Apex Court observed that where Courts have no expertise, academic matters are best left to the academic authorities. These authorities clearly underscore that, in normal circumstances involving technical or multi-disciplinary examinations, judicial review is strictly circumscribed.

20. Furthermore, this Court in ***Freya Kothari*** *(supra)*, ***Salil Maheshwari*** *(supra)*, and ***Ashish Singh*** *(supra)* has consistently held that judges are not, and cannot be, experts in all fields. Where conflicting views arise in the evaluation of answer keys, the Courts must defer to the opinion of the experts and cannot assume the role of academic authorities themselves. These decisions underscore that judicial review in academic matters is necessarily circumscribed, and intervention is warranted only in cases of patent illegality, arbitrariness, or manifest procedural infirmity.

21. The reliance placed by the Petitioners on the judgments in ***Shivraj Sharma*** *(supra)* and ***Siddhi Sandeep Ladda*** *(supra)* is misplaced. In those cases, the Courts exercised judicial review over the question-setting and evaluation process of the Common Law Admission Test (CLAT). The subject matter in those cases was law, a field in which the Courts possess specialized expertise. The Courts were thus competent to assess the correctness of questions and answers and, where necessary, override the views of the experts.

22. The present case is clearly distinguishable. The CGLE, 2024 comprises questions across multiple disciplines, including Mathematics, English, History, Logical Reasoning, Chemistry, and General Science. These are areas in which this Court does not possess the requisite technical or academic competence. In such circumstances, the scope of judicial review is necessarily limited. The Court cannot act as an appellate body to re-evaluate the considered opinions of SMEs. Intervention is warranted only where there is a clear error of law, patent arbitrariness, or manifest procedural impropriety. None of these conditions is established in the present proceedings.

23. Additionally, the rationale articulated by the SSC for awarding marks uniformly in respect of incorrect/ambiguous/multiple correct answers' questions cannot be rejected in its entirety. In an examination scheme involving negative marking, a discerning candidate may consciously refrain from attempting a doubtful or ambiguous question to avoid penal consequences, notwithstanding the time and effort invested. In such circumstances, distinguishing

candidates who attempted the question and those who did not may itself result in inequity. The policy of extending benefit to all candidates, when a question is declared invalid for want of a unique correct answer, therefore rests on a discernible logic aimed at mitigating unintended prejudice. At the same time, while different examining bodies may legitimately adopt different corrective mechanisms, such a policy must remain an exception rather than the norm and cannot be invoked to mask systemic deficiencies in question-setting or evaluation.

24. The further reliance placed on ***Guru Nanak Dev University*** *(supra)* to contend that marks ought to be awarded only to candidates who attempted the disputed questions is misplaced. In the said case, the examination did not involve negative marking, nor did it concern a selection process of the scale involved in the present case. The factual matrix therein, including the limited number of candidates, is materially distinct, rendering the principle inapplicable to the controversy at hand.

25. Notably, the Petitioners were justified in pointing out specific instances, including Question ID 630680674736 (Mathematics) and Question ID 630680522658 (English), where, notwithstanding minor typographical errors, the most appropriate option could reasonably be deduced by a diligent and well-prepared candidate. Such errors, though characterised as minor, ought not to have found place in a competitive examination of this magnitude and do reflect a lack of due care at the stage of framing and vetting of questions. At the same time, once the examining authority, acting on expert opinion, chose to treat

the questions as ambiguous and adopted a uniform method of moderation, the Court cannot substitute its own assessment for that of the SMEs.

26. This Bench in order to satisfy has also examined the questions, opinions of the SME Committee and interacted with the concerned official of the Board. In this case, it is not possible to conclusively hold that the Final/Revised Answer Key is incorrect and the decision taken by the Board was unjustified in given facts and circumstances.

27. At this juncture, we find it necessary to record our considered observations regarding the administrative stewardship of the SSC in the conduct of the CGLE, 2024. The uniform grant of grace marks in as many as twenty-two (22) questions to all candidates, including those who had either not attempted the questions or had furnished incorrect answers, represents a serious deviation from the principles of competitive merit and procedural fairness. The magnitude of these revisions is not merely incidental; it bespeaks a systemic lapse in the framing, vetting, and finalisation of the question papers and answer keys, including issues of translation parity, which should have been unambiguous from the outset.

28. By declaring final results prior to the publication of the final answer key, SSC effectively insulated its decision-making from timely scrutiny, thereby presenting aspirants with a *fait accompli* and shielding systemic errors from challenge. While the sanctity of expert opinion is acknowledged, the performance of the experts in this

instance reflects a degree of casualness and lack of rigour that cannot pass without judicial notice.

29. The requirement to revisit and revise expert opinion on such a scale underscores avoidable deficiencies in both question-setting and evaluation. Recruitment examinations of this nature are not mere administrative exercises; they directly impact the careers of young aspirants and shape the integrity of public service. Consequently, the SSC is obliged to ensure that ambiguities are minimised and that moderation mechanisms do not inadvertently penalise candidates, who have made genuine effort, nor reward non-attempts, thereby safeguarding the level playing field that lies at the heart of competitive merit.

30. Although the issue relating to the release of the final answer key after declaration of results was not pressed before the Tribunal and does not arise for adjudication in these petitions, we cannot ignore the resulting anomaly. A candidate who correctly attempted a question in one language version may suffer disadvantage due to defects in another, while candidates who did not attempt the question stand to benefit. Such an outcome underscores the need for clear, consistent, and transparent policies to govern ambiguous or defective questions.

31. In light of the above, we expect the SSC to adopt a more circumspect and systematic approach in the framing, vetting, and finalisation of question papers and answer keys. Institutionalising a clear and transparent policy for addressing ambiguities and objections will not only enhance the credibility of examinations but also

significantly reduce avoidable litigation. While no directions are warranted in the present case, the SSC must exercise greater academic rigour and administrative diligence in all future examinations, so as to prevent recurrence of the shortcomings evident in the present exercise.

32. Viewed cumulatively, while the conduct of the SSC in the present examination reveals serious lapses in academic rigour and administrative diligence that merit strong judicial disapproval, the corrective measures ultimately adopted were founded on expert opinion and cannot be characterised as vitiated by patent illegality, arbitrariness, or procedural impropriety warranting interference in the exercise of writ jurisdiction. The Tribunal, therefore, acted within the permissible bounds of judicial restraint in declining to interfere with the final answer key and evaluation process. Notwithstanding our expressed concerns, the settled principles governing judicial review in academic matters compel this Court to uphold the impugned decisions.

CONCLUSION

33. In view of the foregoing discussion, we are of the considered opinion that the refusal of the learned Tribunal to interfere with the impugned action represents a reasoned exercise of discretion, consistent with the settled principles governing judicial restraint in matters relating to academic evaluation.

34. Accordingly, the Impugned Orders are upheld.

35. The present Writ Petitions are dismissed. All pending applications also stand disposed of.

ANIL KSHETARPAL, J.

AMIT MAHAJAN, J.

FEBRUARY 05, 2026
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