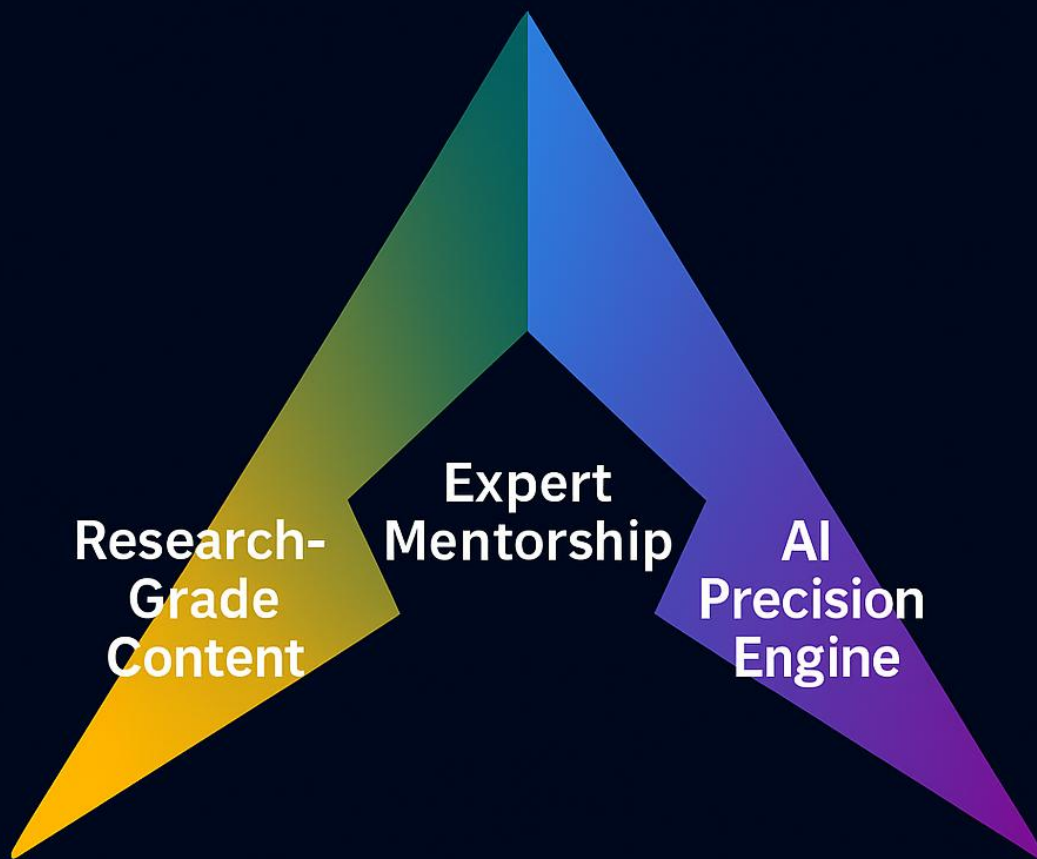


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DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS DATED 22.06.2026

GS Paper II: Polity

1. Right to Walk and Protection of Footpaths

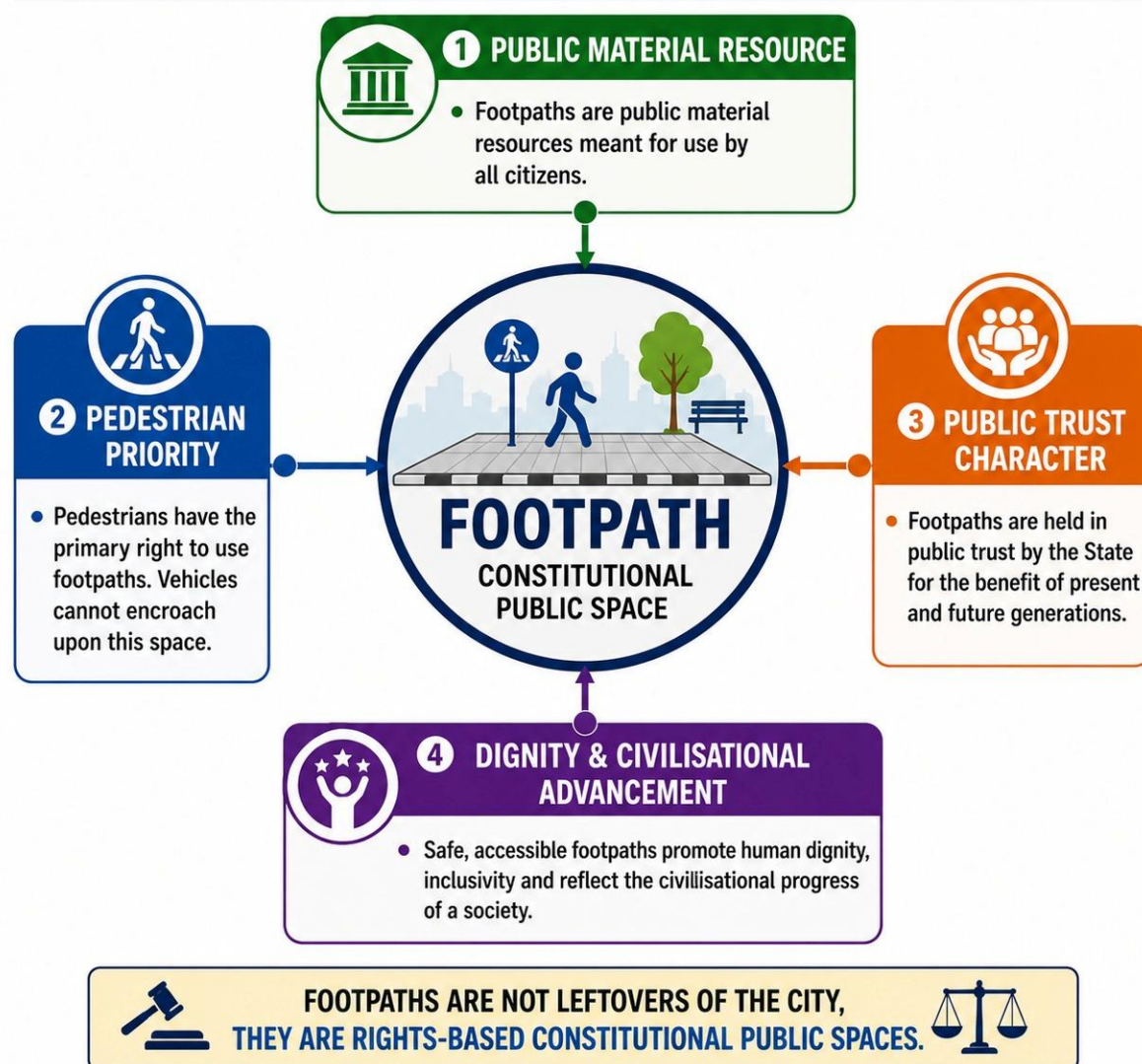
a. Introduction

The Supreme Court's judgment in *Maniyar Iliyaz @ Shaik Riyaz versus P. Ayyappan* marks an important moment in India's constitutional understanding of urban spaces. The Court held that the right to walk safely on a wide and clearly demarcated footpath is a fundamental right. It also urged the government to enact a dedicated law and create a regulator to protect pedestrian rights.

The judgment is significant because it does not treat footpaths merely as extensions of roads. It views them as constitutional public spaces that enable dignity, equality, mobility and freedom. In doing so, the Court shifts the focus of urban governance from a vehicle-centred model to a citizen-centred model.

This makes the issue relevant not only for road safety, but also for constitutional morality, inclusive urban planning and the democratic use of public spaces.

CONSTITUTIONAL CHARACTER OF FOOTPATHS



b. Key Observations of the Supreme Court

Footpaths as Public Material Resources

The Court expanded the meaning of footpaths beyond road safety. It held that footpaths are public material resources held in trust by local authorities for the benefit of the community.

- Urban local bodies and public agencies do not control footpaths for private or administrative convenience.
- They hold them for public use.
- This gives pedestrian infrastructure a constitutional and public-trust character.

Priority to Pedestrians

- The Court recognised that the right to walk safely must receive priority wherever pedestrian infrastructure is concerned. The movement of motor vehicles cannot override the basic right of pedestrians to use a safe, continuous and unobstructed footpath.

Footpaths as Markers of Civilisation

- The judgment observed that broad and uninterrupted footpaths reflect civilisational advancement. A city that protects walking space shows respect for human dignity, accessibility and equitable use of public land.

Thus, pedestrian infrastructure is not merely a traffic-management issue. It is an essential part of constitutional governance.

c. Why Footpaths Are Important

Democratic Mobility

- Footpaths enable safe access to public spaces and make mobility possible for those who do not own vehicles. This includes children, the elderly, persons with disabilities, informal workers, students and low-income citizens.

Link with Constitutional Freedoms

Walking is closely connected with constitutional freedoms.

- Public movement allows citizens to assemble peacefully.
- It enables people to express views and participate in protests.
- It allows access to civic institutions, public offices and essential services.

When footpaths disappear or become unsafe, these freedoms become harder to exercise in everyday life.

Urban Liveability

- Footpaths improve urban liveability by encouraging physical activity, reducing dependence on motor vehicles, lowering congestion and supporting cleaner urban mobility.

Equality in Urban Spaces

- Most importantly, footpaths promote equality in urban spaces. A city designed only for vehicles privileges those who can afford private transport. A city with safe and accessible footpaths recognises that public space belongs equally to all citizens.

Therefore, footpaths are not minor roadside facilities. They are instruments of dignity, equality, health and democratic participation.

d. Governance Concerns

Poor Condition of Footpaths

The judgment highlights deep structural weaknesses in urban governance. In many Indian cities, footpaths are either absent, too narrow, poorly maintained or interrupted by encroachments.

Common problems include:

- illegal parking,
- garbage dumping,
- uneven surfaces,
- construction debris,
- commercial occupation,
- broken or discontinuous pathways.

Vehicle-Centric Urban Planning

- Urban planning has historically prioritised motor vehicles over pedestrians. Roads are widened, flyovers are built and parking spaces are protected, while walking infrastructure is treated as secondary.
- This reflects a larger policy imbalance in which mobility is often equated with vehicular movement rather than human movement.

Inadequate Legal Framework

- Existing legal frameworks remain inadequate. The Motor Vehicles Act, 1988 primarily deals with vehicular regulation, licensing, traffic offences and road safety. It does not create a comprehensive rights-based framework for pedestrians.

As a result, pedestrian safety and footpath protection remain dependent on fragmented municipal rules, planning guidelines and weak enforcement.

Fragmented Institutional Responsibility

- Institutional responsibility is divided among municipal bodies, development authorities, traffic police, public works departments and utility agencies. This fragmentation weakens accountability.
- When a footpath is encroached upon, damaged or blocked, citizens often do not know which authority is responsible for correction.

These concerns show why a constitutional declaration must be supported by a clear statutory and institutional framework.

e. Need for a Statutory Framework

Dedicated Pedestrian Rights Law

- The Supreme Court recommended that the right to walk safely should be operationalised through a dedicated law. A constitutional declaration alone may not be sufficient unless it is supported by enforceable duties, standards and remedies.

Clear Duties and Standards

Such a law should clearly identify duty-bearers responsible for planning, constructing, maintaining and protecting footpaths.

It should define minimum standards for:

- width,
- continuity,
- accessibility,
- lighting,
- drainage,

- surface quality,
- barrier-free movement.

Remedies for Pedestrians

- The law should provide remedies for pedestrians when these standards are violated. Without remedies, the right to walk may remain symbolic rather than enforceable.

Independent Regulator

The Court also recommended the establishment of an independent regulator.

The regulator may:

- receive complaints from pedestrians,
- monitor compliance,
- enforce standards,
- coordinate among agencies,
- ensure continuity of accountability.

Comparison with Right to Education

- The Court referred to the Right to Education Act as a useful example. Just as the constitutional right to education was translated into a statutory framework with clear obligations and institutional mechanisms, the right to walk safely also requires a legal structure that makes the right meaningful in practice.

Thus, the statutory framework must convert a judicially recognised right into a practically enforceable urban entitlement.

f. Analysis/ Observations

Constitutional Significance

- The judgment strengthens the interpretation of Article 21 by recognising that life and liberty include safe movement in public spaces. It also reinforces Article 19 freedoms because walking is often the first condition for public participation, assembly and expression.

Shift in Urban Planning

- The ruling encourages a shift from vehicle-centric urban planning to people-centric planning. It reminds cities that roads are not only corridors for cars and two-wheelers. They are shared public spaces where pedestrians must receive priority.

Inclusive Urban Development

- The judgment advances inclusive urban development. Children, senior citizens, persons with disabilities, women, street-dependent workers and economically weaker citizens benefit directly from safe pedestrian infrastructure.

In this sense, footpaths become instruments of equality and dignity.

Implementation Challenges

Implementation will be difficult due to:

- rapid urbanisation,
- rising motorisation,
- pressure on road space,
- weak municipal finances,
- limited technical capacity,
- poor enforcement strength.

Livelihood Concerns

- Encroachments may also involve livelihood concerns, especially where street vendors are involved. Therefore, footpath protection must be balanced with planned vending zones and inclusive livelihood regulation.

Coordination Challenge

- Coordination among agencies will remain a major challenge. A regulator can help, but success will depend on clear legal powers, adequate staffing, transparent standards and regular public audits.

The judgment is therefore transformative in principle, but its real value will depend on whether urban governance systems can convert it into daily pedestrian safety.

g. Way Forward

Comprehensive Pedestrian Rights Law

- India needs a comprehensive pedestrian rights and footpath protection law. Such a law should define walking as a protected mode of mobility and create enforceable standards for safe, continuous and accessible footpaths.

Accountability of Urban Local Bodies

- Urban local bodies must be made directly accountable for pedestrian infrastructure. Their performance should be monitored through public audits, complaint portals, accessibility inspections and periodic reporting.

Integration at Planning Stage

- Development authorities and public works agencies should integrate footpath design into road construction from the planning stage itself.

Universal Design Principles

Cities should adopt universal design principles so that footpaths are usable by children, elderly persons and persons with disabilities.

Standard features should include:

- pedestrian crossings,
- ramps,
- tactile paving,
- adequate lighting,
- obstruction-free pathways.

Integration with Urban Mobility

- Walking and other forms of non-motorised transport should be integrated into smart city planning, metro station planning, bus systems and urban mobility policies.

Balance with Livelihood Rights

- Encroachment removal should be accompanied by lawful vending regulation, so that pedestrian rights and livelihood rights are addressed together.

These measures can ensure that the right to walk becomes a lived reality rather than only a judicial declaration.

Conclusion

The Supreme Court judgment redefines footpaths as constitutional public spaces rather than mere roadside infrastructure. Safe walking is closely linked with dignity, equality, public health, freedom of movement and democratic participation.

Protecting footpaths is therefore not only an urban planning requirement. It is a constitutional obligation essential for building inclusive, accessible and sustainable cities. In a democratic city, the pedestrian is not an afterthought. The pedestrian is central to the meaning of public space itself.

GS Paper II: Current Affairs

2. Biochar and Sustainable Agriculture

a. Introduction

Biochar is increasingly being discussed as a promising tool for sustainable agriculture and climate action. India generates large quantities of agricultural residue every year, especially paddy straw in northwestern India. Much of this residue is burnt in the open, causing severe air pollution, loss of organic matter and deterioration of soil health.

Biochar offers a constructive alternative. It can convert agricultural waste into a stable, carbon-rich material that improves soil quality, supports crop resilience and stores carbon for long periods. In this sense, biochar represents a waste-to-wealth approach that links farm productivity with environmental sustainability.

This makes biochar important not only as a soil amendment, but also as a bridge between residue management, climate mitigation and rural livelihood generation.

b. Key Issue

India faces a dual agricultural challenge.

Crop Residue Burning

- Crop residue burning remains a serious environmental concern. Punjab and Haryana alone burn over 20 million tonnes of paddy straw annually, contributing to air pollution and the loss of valuable biomass.

Declining Soil Quality

Many agricultural regions suffer from declining soil quality. Common problems include:

- low soil organic carbon,
- poor water retention,
- nutrient loss,
- excessive dependence on external inputs,
- reduced resilience of farming systems.

These problems become more serious under conditions of drought, heat stress and erratic rainfall.

Role of Biochar

- Biochar can address both challenges together. It transforms agricultural residue into a useful soil-enhancing resource instead of allowing it to become a source of pollution.

Thus, biochar converts an environmental liability into an agricultural asset.

c. What is Biochar?

Biochar is produced by heating biomass under low-oxygen conditions through a process known as pyrolysis.

Feedstock Used

The biomass may include:

- crop residue,
- maize stalks,
- rice husk,
- coconut waste,
- other organic farm waste,
- carefully treated sewage sludge.

Key Properties

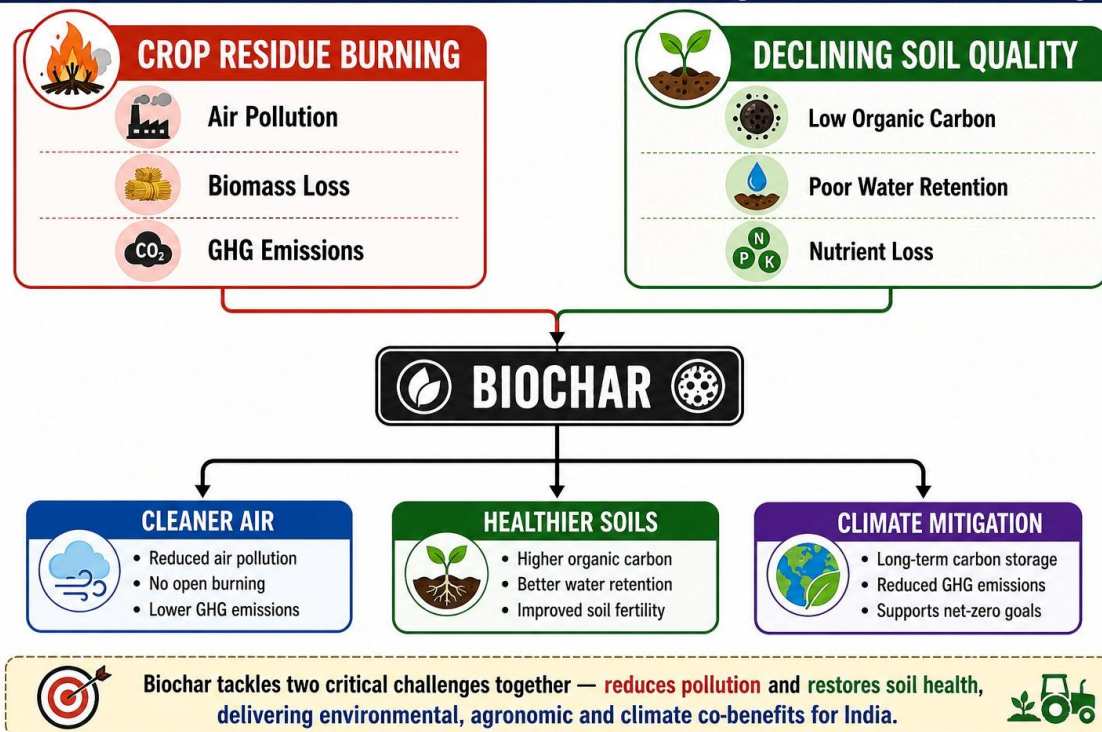
The resulting material is:

- rich in carbon,
- porous in structure,
- slow to decompose,
- capable of improving soil structure,
- useful for long-term carbon storage.

Because of these properties, biochar can improve soil structure, retain moisture, support microbial activity and store carbon in the soil for long periods.

After understanding its nature, its agricultural value becomes clearer because its physical and chemical properties directly influence soil productivity.

Biochar as a Solution to India's Dual Agricultural Challenge



d. Agricultural Benefits

- **Soil Health Improvement:** Biochar improves soil organic carbon and helps restore degraded soils. It supports better aggregation, improves soil structure and enhances the biological quality of soil.

- **Water-Holding Capacity:** Its porous structure increases the soil's ability to hold water, with studies indicating an improvement of about 10 to 25 per cent in water-holding capacity. This is particularly useful in rainfed and drought-prone regions.
- **Crop Productivity:** Biochar can improve crop productivity by about 10 to 30 per cent, especially in nutrient-poor soils.
- **Nutrient Retention and Microbial Support:** Biochar supports beneficial soil microbes and helps retain nutrients. This can reduce excessive dependence on external inputs and improve nutrient-use efficiency.
- **Climate Resilience for Farmers:** By improving moisture retention and soil structure, biochar helps crops withstand drought and moisture stress more effectively. For small and marginal farmers, these benefits are significant because their livelihoods are more vulnerable to climate variability, input cost increases and declining soil fertility.

Therefore, biochar strengthens both productivity and resilience, making it relevant for climate-stressed agriculture.

e. Environmental Benefits

- **Reduction in Crop Residue Burning:** Biochar can reduce open burning of crop residue and the air pollution associated with it. Instead of releasing carbon and pollutants into the atmosphere, biomass can be converted into a stable soil amendment.
- **Carbon Sequestration:** Biochar contributes to climate mitigation by locking carbon in the soil for long periods. Since it decomposes slowly, it can function as a form of long-term carbon storage.
- **Methane Reduction:** By diverting organic waste from landfills, biochar can help reduce methane emissions from decomposing biomass.
- **Circular Economy:** Biochar supports a circular economy model. Agricultural waste, urban organic waste and other biomass streams can be converted into a useful input for farming.

In this way, biochar links local pollution control with global climate mitigation.

f. Economic Benefits

- **Rural Employment:** Biochar can create new income opportunities in rural areas. Its production, processing, transport and application can generate local employment.
- **Decentralised Value Chains:** Farmer producer organisations, cooperatives, start-ups and local entrepreneurs can play an important role in building decentralised biochar value chains.
- **Carbon-Credit Potential:** Biochar also has potential in carbon-credit markets. If its carbon sequestration benefits are properly measured and verified, farmers and project developers may be able to earn carbon-credit-based incentives.

This can make climate-friendly agriculture economically attractive and create an additional income stream for rural communities.

g. Analysis/ Observations

Significance

Biochar can convert farm waste from a pollution source into what is often described as “black gold” for agriculture.

It supports multiple policy goals at once:

- reducing stubble burning,
- improving soil health,
- promoting natural farming,
- strengthening climate-resilient agriculture,

- advancing carbon neutrality,
- supporting rural livelihoods.

Its relevance is especially high in India because agricultural sustainability is no longer only a productivity question. It is also a question of soil restoration, climate adaptation, air quality and rural livelihoods.

Policy Relevance

- Biochar offers a practical bridge between agriculture, environment and climate policy. It can fit into residue management, natural farming, carbon farming, waste-to-wealth and rural entrepreneurship programmes.

Challenges

However, several challenges remain.

- Biochar adoption is still largely limited to research trials and pilot projects.
- Many farmers lack awareness about its benefits.
- Affordable pyrolysis technology is not widely available.
- Biochar quality varies depending on feedstock and production method.
- Carbon-credit systems require credible measurement, reporting and verification.
- Farmers may not receive fair incentives without reliable carbon-market mechanisms.

Ecosystem Requirement

- Biochar cannot succeed as a standalone technology. Large-scale adoption will require market linkages, decentralised infrastructure, farmer collectives, quality standards, finance and policy support.

Thus, the real challenge is not only producing biochar, but creating a reliable ecosystem around its production, certification, application and monetisation.

h. Way Forward

Integration with Existing Schemes

- India should integrate biochar with natural farming, the Soil Health Card scheme, PM-KUSUM and emerging carbon farming initiatives. This would help connect soil restoration, renewable energy, farm income and climate mitigation.

Decentralised Pyrolysis Units

- Decentralised pyrolysis units should be promoted at the village level and through farmer producer organisations. This would reduce transport costs and make residue management more practical.

Safe Feedstock Use

- Crop residue, urban organic waste and sewage sludge may be used as feedstock, but safety standards must be strictly followed, especially where contaminated waste is involved.

Quality Standards

India needs clear standards for biochar quality, production and field application. These standards should specify:

- suitable feedstock,
- permissible contaminants,
- recommended application rates,
- soil-specific usage guidelines.

Carbon Market Linkages

- Biochar projects should be linked with carbon markets through credible measurement, reporting and verification systems.

Support to Local Institutions

- Farmer cooperatives, start-ups and local entrepreneurs should be supported through finance, training and market access.

These measures can help move biochar from scattered pilot projects to a scalable and farmer-friendly agricultural solution.

Conclusion

Biochar can help India address stubble burning, soil degradation and climate vulnerability through a single integrated solution. Its promise lies in converting agricultural waste into a resource for soil health, climate resilience and rural income.

However, its success will depend on moving beyond pilot projects towards a robust ecosystem of technology, farmer awareness, carbon finance, quality standards and local entrepreneurship. If implemented well, biochar can become an important pillar of sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture in India.

GS Paper II: Current Affairs

3. Global AI Regulation and Developing Countries

a. Introduction

Artificial Intelligence has emerged as one of the most transformative technologies of the twenty-first century. Its impact may be comparable to earlier industrial technologies that reshaped economies, labour markets, governance systems and global power relations.

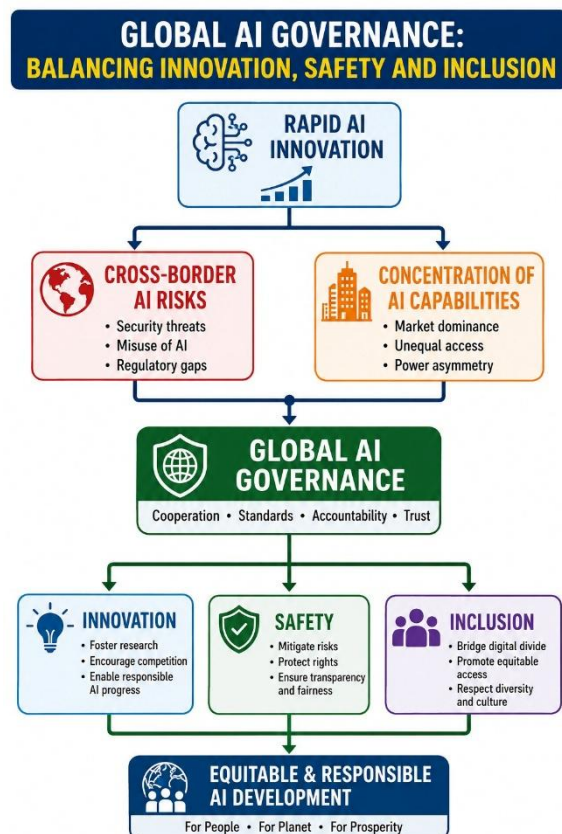
However, unlike many earlier technologies, advanced Artificial Intelligence is presently concentrated in the hands of a few countries and large technology companies that possess vast data resources, computing infrastructure, specialised talent and financial capacity.

This concentration has created an urgent need for global governance. Artificial Intelligence can support innovation, public service delivery, health care, education, agriculture and climate action. At the same time, it can also create risks relating to surveillance, misinformation, cyber threats, discrimination, labour displacement and even biological or chemical security.

The challenge before the world is to regulate Artificial Intelligence without allowing regulation to become a tool of technological exclusion.

b. Key Issue

Artificial Intelligence has immense developmental potential, but its ecosystem is deeply unequal.



- **Concentration of AI Capabilities:** Countries and companies with access to high-quality data, advanced chips, large computing capacity and skilled researchers are able to shape the direction of Artificial Intelligence development. Developing countries, in contrast, may become dependent users of systems designed elsewhere.
- **Regulatory Fragmentation:** One major concern is regulatory fragmentation. If different countries create widely divergent rules, innovators may face complex compliance burdens and global cooperation may weaken.
- **Digital Dependency:** The second concern is digital dependency, sometimes described as digital colonialism. In such a situation, developing countries may supply data and become consumers of Artificial Intelligence systems without having meaningful control over design, standards, safety or economic gains.

Thus, the central issue is not only how to regulate Artificial Intelligence, but also who controls its development and who benefits from it.

c. Present Global AI Regulation

- **European Union Artificial Intelligence Act:** Several global efforts are underway to regulate Artificial Intelligence. The European Union's Artificial Intelligence Act, adopted in 2024, is the most comprehensive legal framework so far. It focuses on safe, transparent, non-discriminatory and environmentally responsible Artificial Intelligence.
- **United Nations Initiatives:** At the multilateral level, the United Nations has created a Global Dialogue on Artificial Intelligence to enable participation by all countries. It has also established an Independent International Scientific Panel on Artificial Intelligence to provide scientific assessments and inform global discussions.
- **International AI Summits:** International Artificial Intelligence summits are helping build norms, standards and governance mechanisms. These platforms are important because Artificial Intelligence governance requires cooperation among governments, companies, researchers and civil society.
- **India's Role:** India has also sought to shape the debate. The AI Impact Summit in New Delhi advanced the idea of a Trusted AI Commons, which aims to make responsible Artificial Intelligence tools accessible more widely. However, most current frameworks still remain voluntary, limited in enforceability or shaped by the priorities of technologically advanced countries.

The present regulatory landscape shows growing global awareness, but it also reveals the need for a more inclusive and enforceable governance framework.

d. Why Global AI Governance is Needed

Cross-Border Risks

Global governance is necessary because Artificial Intelligence risks do not remain confined within national borders.

These risks include:

- misinformation,
- cyberattacks,
- algorithmic discrimination,
- autonomous systems,
- biosecurity threats,
- surveillance misuse.

A minimum global framework can help ensure safety, accountability and ethical use.

Protection for Countries with Weak Regulatory Capacity

- Such a framework can also protect countries with weaker regulatory capacity. Many developing countries may not yet have the institutional strength to evaluate complex Artificial Intelligence systems or negotiate effectively with large technology companies.

Global standards can therefore provide a basic layer of protection.

Reduction of AI Power Concentration

- Global governance can also reduce the concentration of Artificial Intelligence power. If access to data, computing power and safety tools remains restricted to a few actors, the economic and geopolitical benefits of Artificial Intelligence will be unequally distributed.

Importance for India

- For countries like India, global rules are important not only for safety, but also for ensuring that developing countries are not excluded from innovation.

Therefore, global AI governance must combine safety with technological inclusion.

e. The Risk of AI Non-Proliferation

- **Meaning of AI Non-Proliferation:** A major concern is that Artificial Intelligence regulation may gradually take the form of a non-proliferation regime, similar to nuclear governance. Under such a model, a few powerful countries or companies may claim exclusive authority to develop advanced Artificial Intelligence in the name of safety.
- **Concern for the Global South:** This would be problematic for the Global South. Safety is important, but it should not become a justification for technological gatekeeping. If developing countries are denied access to advanced Artificial Intelligence infrastructure, models and knowledge systems, global inequality will deepen. They may remain dependent on imported technologies without developing domestic capability.
- **Need for Open Participation:** Artificial Intelligence governance must avoid a closed-club approach. It should regulate risks while preserving the right of developing countries to participate in innovation, research and deployment.

The challenge is to prevent harm without freezing the existing hierarchy of technological power.

f. Trusted AI Commons

Meaning

The Trusted AI Commons is proposed as an open repository of tools and resources for safe and responsible Artificial Intelligence development.

It may include:

- datasets,
- benchmarks,
- testing tools,
- safety protocols,
- deployment guidelines.

India's Role

- India is expected to initially host and manage this initiative. Its value lies in its open and liberal licensing model.

Developmental Significance

- Such a model can help governments, researchers, start-ups, universities and smaller organisations access responsible Artificial Intelligence tools without depending entirely on large technology companies.

Relevance for Developing Countries

- For developing countries, the Trusted AI Commons can become an important instrument of technological inclusion. It can reduce entry barriers, improve safety capacity and create a shared public infrastructure for ethical Artificial Intelligence development.

Thus, the Trusted AI Commons can convert responsible AI from a private advantage into a shared developmental resource.

g. Analysis/ Observations

Significance

Global Artificial Intelligence regulation has major significance for inclusive development.

It can help:

- prevent concentration of Artificial Intelligence power,
- support responsible innovation,
- protect users, workers and citizens,
- reduce algorithmic harm,
- strengthen the voice of developing countries,
- promote equitable technological growth.

Importance for India

- For India, this debate is strategically important. India has a large digital population, a strong technology sector, expanding digital public infrastructure and growing Artificial Intelligence ambitions.
- At the same time, India must protect data sovereignty, prevent algorithmic harm and ensure that Artificial Intelligence supports inclusive growth rather than deepening inequality.

India as a Rule-Shaper

- The Trusted AI Commons can strengthen India's role in global technology governance. It allows India to present itself not merely as a market for Artificial Intelligence, but as a rule-shaper and provider of digital public goods.

Key Challenges

However, the challenges are serious.

- Regulation must not become so restrictive that it slows innovation.
- Weak regulation may enable harms in cybersecurity, misinformation, surveillance, discrimination and biosecurity.
- Open access may remain limited if datasets, testing tools and benchmarks are dominated by powerful actors.
- Voluntary declarations may not be sufficient to prevent misuse.
- Developing countries may remain under-represented in global norm-setting.

Core Dilemma

- The challenge is to create rules that are effective without becoming exclusionary.

Thus, global AI regulation must balance three objectives: innovation, safety and inclusion.

h. Way Forward

Minimum Global Regulatory Framework

The world needs a minimum global regulatory framework for Artificial Intelligence safety, transparency and accountability.

Such a framework should define basic obligations relating to:

- risk assessment,
- bias testing,
- data protection,
- human oversight,
- grievance redress,
- accountability for harm.

Avoidance of Non-Proliferation Approach

- Global governance must avoid non-proliferation-style restrictions that permanently divide the world into technology producers and technology consumers.

Representation of Developing Countries

- Developing countries must have meaningful representation in norm-setting bodies, scientific panels and regulatory discussions.

Strengthening India's Domestic Capacity

India should strengthen its domestic Artificial Intelligence regulatory capacity through:

- skilled institutions,
- technical auditing mechanisms,
- data governance frameworks,
- public-sector expertise,
- sector-specific AI safety standards.

Promotion of Trusted AI Commons

- India should promote open datasets, benchmarks, testing tools and safety protocols through the Trusted AI Commons.

Balance Between Data Sovereignty and Innovation

- Data sovereignty should be balanced with cross-border innovation. Countries must protect citizens' rights and public interest, but they should also allow responsible collaboration in research, development and deployment.
- Artificial Intelligence governance should therefore combine safety, openness, fairness and innovation.

These steps can ensure that global AI governance becomes an instrument of equitable development rather than technological exclusion.

Conclusion

Global Artificial Intelligence governance must not become a tool for technological gatekeeping. It should ensure safety, accountability, transparency and equitable access.

For India and other developing countries, the central challenge is to participate in Artificial Intelligence innovation while avoiding digital dependency. A fair global framework, supported by initiatives such as the Trusted AI Commons, can help ensure that Artificial Intelligence becomes a shared developmental resource rather than a source of new global inequality.

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While every effort has been made to balance depth with brevity, please keep the following in mind:

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This compilation is curated primarily from the UPSC Mains perspective — with emphasis on conceptual clarity, analytical depth, and interlinkages across GS papers.

However, the PrepAlpine team is simultaneously developing a dedicated Prelims-focused Current Affairs Series, designed for:

- factual coverage
- data recall
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This Prelims Edition will be released separately as a standalone publication.

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