

The Hindu Important News Articles For UPSC CSE
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Page 01: GS III : Disaster Management/ Preliminary Examination

On June 21, 2026, a massive ammonia gas leak accident occurred at a private shrimp processing unit near Periyapalayam in the Tiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu. Two migrant workers from Odisha lost their lives in this accident, and more than 60 people were admitted to the hospital. This incident highlights serious deficiencies in the implementation of Industrial Safety Norms, the safety of migrant workers, and Regulatory Oversight in India, which is highly significant for the UPSC GS Paper-III (Disaster Management and Industrial Safety).

Ammonia leak kills two at T.N. seafood unit

More than 60 people, mostly migrant workers, hospitalised; Chief Minister forms inquiry panel | ₹2 lakh *ex-gratia* to be paid to kin of the deceased, both from Odisha; T.N. to arrange return of bodies | Proprietor and manager held; both have pending cases for violations of industrial safety guidelines

R. Srikanth
Deepta H. Ramakrishnan
 CHENNAI

Two migrant workers from Odisha were killed and more than 60 hospitalised after an ammonia gas leak at a shrimp processing unit in Tiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu on Sunday. Of those in hospital, 23 have been admitted to the Intensive Care Unit.

The Tiruvallur district police said the private company, Peter & Paul Seafood Exports Pvt. Ltd., at Kannagipalayam near Periyapalayam was engaged in processing shrimps and exporting them.

At the time of the accident, there were 67 people at the site, mostly migrant women, who worked in the factory and lived in the accommodation provided

within the premises. The deceased have been identified as Jumani Juang and B. Malothi.

The police arrested the proprietor of the company and the factory manager, who both have a case pending against them for previous violations of industrial safety norms.

During inspection, it was found the company did not have a suitable alarm system, a fire hydrant, or a Form 12 register for the Employee State Insurance scheme.

Safety violations

The company had also not obtained a revised plan approval when new equipment was installed, including an ice flaking machine.

Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay set up a three-member panel to probe into the incident and ordered ₹2



National Disaster Response Force personnel at the seafood unit in Tiruvallur district of Tamil Nadu after the gas leak on Sunday. PTI

lakh each to be paid to the families of the two dead workers. An official statement said the panel had been tasked to submit an interim report in 24 hours and final report in three days. To prevent the recurrence of such accidents, the government has mandated immediate joint inspections of all hazardous

industries, it added.

Mr. Vijay also directed that their bodies be transported to their native places for final rites at the Tamil Nadu government's expense.

The rescue team, comprising 30 personnel, rushed to the location equipped with necessary personal protective equip-

ment, gas detection devices, and CBRN rescue gear.

The team rushed 46 workers to Vels Hospital in Manjalaranai and 21 workers to the Venkateswara Hospital in Red Hills, sources in the district administration said. From there, those in serious condition were rushed to the Rajiv Gandhi Government Hospital, while seven others were sent to the Government Stanley Hospital in Chennai.

The police had earlier indicated that seven workers were feared killed, but the government later clarified that the death toll was actually two.

The Periyapalayam police arrested Mohan, the owner of the factory, and factory manager Daniel, under Section 105 of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (punishable culpable hom-

icide not amounting to murder).

Sources in the Department of Industrial Safety and Health said a case had been filed against the company's owner and manager for various violations following inspections.

Even after giving due notice and conducting a second inspection, these violations were not rectified. A chargesheet was then filed against the company's owners and manager, and a case is already pending against them in the Chief Judicial Magistrate's Court in Tiruvallur, officials said.

Monitoring lacking

Environment expert K. Karthikeyan recalled a similar ammonia leak that had happened at a seafood unit in Thoothukudi several years ago. As such factories are often located in re-

mote locations, without access to a good emergency response centre, they must have an on-site emergency plan approved by the District Collector, he said.

As in the case of the Manali industrial area, where stacks are monitored by the Tamil Nadu Pollution Control Board, all units using hazardous chemicals should also have a monitoring system whereby the police, fire department, and the respective district administration are alerted in case of a leak for immediate action, he said.

As shrimp spoils quickly, it must be frozen immediately after peeling, and ammonia is the most commonly used refrigerant gas in the industry.

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Key Highlights of the Incident

- **Location of the Incident:** St. Peter & Paul Seafoods Exports Private Limited, Kannagipalayam village, Tiruvallur, Tamil Nadu.
- **Affected People:** Most of the victims were migrant workers (especially women) who were staying in the accommodation built within the factory premises.
- **Administrative and Legal Action:**
 - The owner and manager of the factory were arrested under Section 105 (Culpable homicide not amounting to murder) of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS).
 - Tamil Nadu Chief Minister C. Joseph Vijay formed a 3-member inquiry committee and announced an *ex-gratia* amount of ₹2 lakh for the families of the victims.
 - A special CBRN (Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear) team of the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) conducted a swift rescue operation.

3. Use of Ammonia & Associated Hazards

- **Use in Seafood Industry:** Shrimp and other seafood items spoil quickly. Therefore, ammonia gas is widely used as a refrigerant to freeze them immediately after peeling.
- **Health Impact:** Ammonia is a highly corrosive and pungent gas. When its level in the air exceeds 300 ppm, it can cause inflammation of the respiratory tract, lung damage, eye irritation, and, in severe conditions, death.

Safety and Regulatory Violations

During the investigation, the following serious flaws were found in the factory:

- **Prior Violations:** Cases of earlier safety regulation violations against the owners were pending in the Chief Judicial Magistrate Court.
- **Lack of Engineering and Infrastructure:** There was an absence of proper alarm systems and fire hydrants (fire-fighting systems) in the factory.
- **Planning Violation:** New equipment like ice flaking machines were installed without a Revised Plan Approval.
- **Lack of Labour Welfare:** The 'Form 12 Register' of the Employees' State Insurance (ESI) scheme was not available for the employees.

Key Concerns for UPSC Mains

- **Lack of Enforcement:** The factory's failure to rectify safety standards despite notices being issued and re-inspections being conducted reflects the weak enforcement mechanism of regulatory bodies.
- **Vulnerability of Migrant Workers:** Providing accommodation to migrant workers right next to or inside the premises of hazardous industries makes them the most vulnerable to such disasters.
- **Remote Location and Response Time:** Such industries are often located in remote areas where emergency medical assistance and disaster response mechanisms (Emergency Response Center) are not immediately available.
- **Lack of Real-time Monitoring:** Industries lack automated systems to monitor leaks in real-time that can directly send alerts to the police, fire brigade, and district administration.

Way Forward

- **Joint Inspection of High-Risk Industries:** The government must immediately mandate strict and joint inspections of all hazardous industries.
- **On-site Emergency Plan:** All hazardous chemical units must have an active on-site emergency plan approved by the District Collector.
- **Automated Environmental Monitoring:** Pollution Control Boards (such as TNPCB) should mandate 'Stack and Ambient Air Monitoring Systems' in industries handling hazardous chemicals, so that local administration can get an auto-alert as soon as a leak occurs.

- **Safe Housing Norms:** The living spaces of workers within factories must be compulsorily kept at a safe distance (Buffer Zone) from chemical plants and storage tanks.
- **Strict Adherence to Industrial Safety Code:** The provisions of the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 (OSH Code) must be implemented at the ground level without any compromise.

Conclusion

The Tiruvallur ammonia gas leak incident is a clear example of administrative and regulatory failure, where safety standards were ignored despite repeated warnings. Along with economic growth and industrial expansion, the 'safety of human life' must be paramount. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – especially SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) – India urgently needs to shift its industrial safety policies from being 'Reactive' to 'Preventive'.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: Consider the following statements regarding ammonia (NH₃) gas:

1. It is a colorless gas with a pungent odor.
2. It is widely used as a refrigerant.
3. At high concentrations, it can cause severe damage to the respiratory system.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2, and 3

Ans: (d)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: Discuss the need for and importance of "real-time monitoring systems" in hazardous chemical industries. (10Marks, 150Words)

India's agricultural sector is currently facing a severe agricultural paradox. On one hand, in states like Punjab and Haryana, more than 20 million (2 crore) tonnes of paddy straw are burned openly in fields every year. On the other hand, India's agricultural land (ranging from the black soil of Maharashtra to the red soil of Kerala) is struggling with severely depleting carbon levels, low water-holding capacity, and nutrient deficiencies. Burning agricultural residue releases massive amounts of greenhouse gases and fine particulate matter (PM 2.5) into the air, causing severe air pollution in North India. As a solution to this dual crisis (air pollution and declining soil fertility), Biochar is emerging as a 'carbon-negative' and sustainable alternative, which is also being hailed as 'black gold'.

Biochar offers a way to turn India's farm smoke into 'black gold'

When added to poor, degraded soils, biochar can increase their ability to store water and stimulate the growth of beneficial microbes; studies have indicated that it can improve crop productivity by 10% to 30% and water-holding capacity by 10% to 25%, particularly in soils low in nutrients

Vinaya Kumar H.M., Vikram Patil

India's agriculture faces a serious paradox: a large amount of biomass that could improve soil health is instead being burned. This threatens soil health and food security. Punjab and Haryana burn more than 20 million tonnes of paddy straw in their open fields every year. This is due to the short post-harvest periods and a lack of practical alternatives.

Burning these residues releases large quantities of greenhouse gases and fine particles into the air and soil, causing serious air pollution in the region as well as a major loss of organic matter that could otherwise be returned to the increasingly depleted soils.

At the same time, large tracts of agricultural land, from the black soils of Maharashtra to the red soils of Kerala, suffer from very low soil organic carbon, poor water holding capacity, and rapid loss of nutrients, reducing crop productivity even with better seeds and irrigation.

Both these problems are symptoms of the same larger failure to recycle natural resources efficiently.

Value to agriculture
This is where biochar emerges as a carbon negative solution. Biochar is made by heating agricultural waste in low-oxygen conditions. What remains is a carbon rich material that breaks down very slowly in the soil, helping to keep carbon locked away for long periods of time. The benefits extend well beyond carbon capture. Biochar is highly porous and contributes to aggregating soil particles, holding water, and creating a suitable environment for microorganisms.

Given these properties, the value of biochar to agriculture should be obvious. When added to poor, degraded soils, it can increase their ability to store water and stimulate the growth of beneficial microbes.

Studies have indicated that it can improve crop productivity by 10% to 30% and water-holding capacity by 10% to 25%, particularly in soils low in nutrients.

Biochar derived from maize stalks and applied to black soils in Akola district of Maharashtra has improved soil organic carbon content and overall soil fertility in field trials. Research from Kerala has shown that biochar made from coconut leaf stalks increased soil quality in different cropping systems, emphasising the need to use local resources effectively. Perhaps most significantly, long-term studies have shown that biochar has the benefit of enhancing soil health and maintaining higher crop output over time.

Wider vision
This approach also supports India's wider vision of sustainable agriculture and climate resilience. As droughts,

heatwaves, and erratic rainfall become more frequent and more intense, improving soil health will be crucial to sustaining agricultural productivity. By increasing the water-holding capacity and the ability to use nutrients efficiently, thus, biochar can help crops withstand moisture stress while reducing dependency on external inputs. This is particularly important for small and marginal farmers who are often the most exposed to the climate's vagaries.

Integrating biochar into the existing initiatives on natural farming, soil health management, and carbon farming can deliver environmental and economic benefits at scale. Yet in India, biochar remains largely confined to research trials and pilot projects, and is very much alien to many farmers.

In fact, agricultural residues are generally seen only as a problem of disposal. But they are an important resource that can generate additional income, create jobs, can deliver environmental benefits, and could even support payments for ecosystem services.

Carbon credits
As one way forward, the government could package the activities of turning agricultural waste into biochar and putting it on soil into carbon credit markets, creating a strong economic incentive for mass adoption.

Biochar carbon already passes rigorous stability criteria for long-term sequestration, and it can be classified as a persistent carbon dioxide removal technology under internationally accepted accounting standards. For

heavies, and erratic rainfall become more frequent and more intense, improving soil health will be crucial to sustaining agricultural productivity. By increasing the water-holding capacity and the ability to use nutrients efficiently, thus, biochar can help crops withstand moisture stress while reducing dependency on external inputs. This is particularly important for small and marginal farmers who are often the most exposed to the climate's vagaries.

Integrating biochar into the existing initiatives on natural farming, soil health management, and carbon farming can deliver environmental and economic benefits at scale. Yet in India, biochar remains largely confined to research trials and pilot projects, and is very much alien to many farmers.

depends on integrated strategies that combine decentralised, appropriately scaled pyrolysis technology with strong measurement, reporting, and verification systems.

Urban organic waste
The feedstock for biochar is also not limited to agricultural waste and can encompass urban organic waste as well. India generates around 62 million tonnes of municipal solid garbage per year and more than 50% of that is biodegradable. Sewage sludge and crop residues can also be converted into biochar.

This is in keeping with the precepts of the circular economy, as organic waste is diverted from landfills that produce methane and is converted to a useful product for agriculture. By systematically implementing these measures, India can turn its large waste streams into 'black gold', thus ensuring a more resilient agricultural future while making a meaningful contribution to global climate mitigation efforts.

Overall, the value of biomass can only be realised through an integrated ecosystem that catalyses innovation, entrepreneurship, market linkages, investment, and cost-effective access to biochar for farmers.

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THE GIST
Biochar is made by heating agricultural waste in low-oxygen conditions.

Integrating biochar into the existing initiatives on natural farming, soil health management, and carbon farming can deliver environmental and economic benefits at scale.

As droughts, heatwaves, and erratic rainfall become more frequent and more intense, improving soil health will be crucial to sustaining agricultural productivity.

In India, however, biochar remains largely confined to research trials and pilot projects, and is very much alien to many farmers.



A biochar mixture ready to be applied to soil. Biochar is made by heating agricultural waste in low-oxygen conditions. What remains is a carbon-rich material that breaks down very slowly in the soil. [sawtooth.co.uk](#)

Biochar is highly porous and contributes to aggregating soil particles, holding water, and creating a suitable environment for microorganisms

instance, VM0042 agricultural land management methodology quantifies both avoided emissions from residue burning and long term carbon sequestration in soils. In this protocol, each tonne of certified biochar can generate 2.28 t carbon dioxide equivalent in carbon credits. Depending on carbon market prices, certified biochar can thus provide an additional source of income for project developers, farmers, and cooperatives.

This approach is already being tested in projects such as those using the KISAN kiln from IITKharagpur, which allows smallholders to monetise farm waste.

Several international examples also illustrate the scalability of biochar systems. In Kenya, turning rice husks into biochar has produced thousands of certified carbon credits and improved soil pH and phosphorus content. Thailand has pushed biochar use through national initiatives on soil rehabilitation and carbon management, and tied certification to access to the national carbon registry system, providing a policy-to-market pipeline. High carbon retention and large yield gains have also been reported from Brazil's Embrapa Institute after using on-farm biochar generated from sugarcane bagasse.

These examples also show that success

What is Biochar?

- Production Process:** Biochar is a highly carbon-rich substance produced by heating agricultural waste (such as crop residue, coconut stalks, and corn stalks) at high temperatures in the presence of low oxygen (through the process of pyrolysis).
- Durability:** It decomposes very slowly in the soil, thereby locking (sequestering) carbon within the soil for hundreds to thousands of years.

- **Structure:** It is highly porous, which enables it to bind soil particles together and provide a favorable environment for microorganisms.

Value to Agriculture & Soil Health

- **Improvement in Water-Holding Capacity:** According to studies, mixing biochar into degraded and barren soil improves its water-holding capacity by 10% to 25%.
- **Increase in Crop Productivity:** It can increase crop productivity by 10% to 30% in nutrient-deficient, low-yielding soils.
- **Increase in Soil Organic Carbon (SOC):** Massive improvements in soil quality and organic carbon have been observed through the use of biochar made from corn stalks in Akola district of Maharashtra and from coconut leaf stalks in Kerala.
- **Climate Resilience:** In this era of droughts, heatwaves, and irregular monsoons, it gives crops the strength to tolerate moisture stress, thereby reducing the climate vulnerability of small and marginal farmers.

Carbon Credits & Economic Incentives

- **Long-term Carbon Sequestration:** Biochar is recognized under international accounting standards as a permanent carbon dioxide removal (CDR) technology.
- **VM0042 Protocol:** Under this agricultural land management methodology, every 1 tonne of certified biochar can generate carbon credits equivalent to 2 to 2.8 tonnes of \$CO_2\$ (\$CO_2\$-equivalent).
- **Additional Income for Farmers:** By selling these carbon credits in global markets, farmers, cooperatives, and project developers can earn additional income.
- **Efforts of IIT-Kharagpur:** Currently, projects like IIT-Kharagpur's 'KISAN Kiln' are training small farmers to earn income from agricultural waste.

Global Scale and Success Stories

- **Kenya:** Thousands of certified carbon credits were earned by converting rice husks into biochar, which also improved soil pH values and phosphorus content.
- **Thailand:** A national initiative for soil rehabilitation and carbon management has been launched, and biochar certification has been directly linked to the national carbon registry system.
- **Brazil:** Massive yields and high carbon retention were achieved by the 'Embrapa Institute' through the production of on-farm biochar from sugarcane bagasse.

Role in Urban Waste Management

- **Waste Diversion:** India generates approximately 62 million tonnes of municipal solid waste annually, of which more than 50% is biodegradable.
- **Circular Economy:** Instead of letting sewage sludge and organic waste rot in landfills (which releases methane gas), they can be diverted and converted into biochar, aligning with the principles of a circular economy.

Challenges in India

- **Limited Reach:** Currently, biochar in India is limited only to research trials and pilot projects. Common farmers are completely unaware of its benefits.
- **Perceptual Barrier:** In Indian agriculture, agricultural residue is viewed merely as a 'problem of disposal' rather than a valuable resource.
- **Lack of Ecosystem:** There is a lack of decentralized pyrolysis technology, robust Measurement, Reporting, and Verification (MRV) systems, and market linkages.

Conclusion

Biochar technology holds immense potential to solve India's agro-environmental problems. It can not only prevent the air pollution caused by stubble burning in North India but can also rejuvenate the country's declining fertile soil. However, to transition this from a mere scientific experiment to large-scale adoption, an integrated ecosystem is required. The government should integrate it with existing national schemes such as Natural Farming, Soil Health Management, and Carbon Farming. Until innovation, entrepreneurship, private investment, and farmers' access to cost-effective pyrolysis kilns are ensured, turning this 'waste' into 'black gold' will not be possible. Learning from global examples, India urgently needs to build a solid policy-to-market pipeline.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: Which of the following is not a major raw material for biochar production?

- (a) Paddy straw
- (b) Maize stalks
- (c) Coconut leaf stalks
- (d) Bauxite ore

Ans: d)

UPSC Mains Exam Study Questions

Question: Why is biochar called "black gold"? Discuss its significance from agricultural and environmental perspectives. **(10 Marks, 150 Words)**

Page 08 : GS II : International Relations/ Preliminary Examination

In global politics, historically only those nations have become superpowers that have linked their economic prosperity with maritime dominance, such as Britain, the United States, and China. The recent Iran-US/Israel conflict has proven that controlling strategic waterways can be a weapon as effective as economic sanctions. Iran has targeted the most vulnerable nerve of the global economy (energy supply) by utilizing the Strait of Hormuz. Under the new post-war agreement, the formation of the 'Persian Gulf Strait Authority' (PGSA) by Iran has brought a "changed geopolitical reality" for major importing nations like India, directly impacting India's energy and strategic security.

The Altered Scenario: New Structure of the Strait of Hormuz

- **Iran's Strategic Advantage:** Despite suffering heavy losses from Israeli and American attacks, Iran successfully secured a strategic edge by establishing its control over the Strait of Hormuz.
- **Persian Gulf Strait Authority (PGSA):** Iran has declared this new authority as the sole entity to handle the transit of all vessels passing through the Strait of Hormuz.
- **Islamabad MoU:** Under this new agreement, sanctions on Iran and vessels involved in Iranian trade will be lifted. Alongside this, Iran will engage in talks with Oman and other Gulf nations regarding maritime administration.
- **Change in Transit Rules:** Previously, ships passing through this waterway neither had to pay any transit fee (toll) nor were they required to report to Iran or Oman. Now, global shipping companies will have to consider Iran as a 'decisive stakeholder' in this region.

Vulnerabilities and Strategic Concerns for India

- **Weak Shipping Sector:** Indian seafarers earn billions of dollars in foreign exchange by working abroad, but India's own shipping sector remains weak. This leaves Indian seafarers vulnerable amidst piracy and geopolitical tensions.
- **Failure of LPG and Fuel Strategy:** India's Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG) strategy is entirely dependent on imports transiting through the Strait of Hormuz.
- **Absence of a Contingency Plan:** India has a limited fleet of Indian-flagged carriers to maintain the supply chain during times of crisis.
- **Lack of Storage Capacity:** India faces a severe shortage of long-term 'cavern storage' (underground strategic reserves), causing the supply chain to be immediately disrupted during a crisis.
- **Neglect of the Chabahar Project:** India had an excellent strategic opportunity to bypass the Strait of Hormuz through the Chabahar Port (Iran), but India failed to focus on it in time or abandoned it.

Changed reality

India must reduce its dependence on the Strait of Hormuz

Nations rise to power on the strength of their economies and, by extension, trade. Historically, countries such as the United Kingdom, Japan, the United States and China have combined economic prosperity with maritime dominance. India's weak shipping sector reflects its geopolitical position. Yet, its seafarers generate billions of dollars in foreign exchange while facing risks from piracy and geopolitical tensions. The recent conflict with Iran showed that control of strategic waterways can be as consequential as economic sanctions. By leveraging the Strait of Hormuz, Iran exposed a critical vulnerability in the global economy. Disruptions to energy flows imposed costs far beyond the battlefield and the economic consequences appear to have played a significant role in shaping the U.S. response. From a shipping perspective and its Hormuz stakes, Iran may have secured strategic gains despite the heavy damage inflicted on it by Israeli and U.S. Even as the attacks on Lebanon cast a shadow over the peace deal, Iran has announced that the Persian Gulf Strait Authority it set up during the war will be the sole authority that will handle Strait of Hormuz transits.

The memorandum of understanding envisages lifting sanctions on Iran and on ships serving Iranian trade. It also mandates Iranian talks with Oman and other Gulf states on maritime administration in the Strait of Hormuz. Previously, vessels transiting the Strait neither paid tolls nor reported to Iran or Oman. Whether or not the new framework results in transit fees is less important than the reality: that shipping companies must now account for Iran as a decisive stakeholder in the Strait of Hormuz. For India, the conflict has exposed a major strategic weakness. Despite the Strait of Hormuz being vital to its energy security, the disruption exposed the absence of a credible contingency plan for such eventualities. India's LPG strategy relies heavily on imports moving through the Strait of Hormuz, supported by a limited fleet of Indian-flagged carriers and a tightly scheduled supply chain with little long-term cavern storage. Similar vulnerabilities affected other fuel supplies too. Many countries are now reassessing their dependence on the Strait of Hormuz. The United Arab Emirates is pursuing a "zero Hormuz dependency" strategy by strengthening alternative infrastructure and routes. India must draw lessons from the crisis. Diversifying supply chains, investing in alternative maritime and land corridors, and strengthening strategic partnerships should become priorities. Projects such as Chabahar offered precisely such an opportunity but India gave up on it. For India, reducing dependence on the Strait of Hormuz is no longer just an economic goal; it is a strategic necessity.

Global Response and Lessons

- **UAE's Strategy:** Learning from this crisis, the UAE is working on a "Zero Hormuz Dependency" strategy, strengthening alternative infrastructure and trade routes to achieve this goal.
- **Lessons for India:** Reducing dependency on the Strait of Hormuz is no longer just an economic goal for India, but an imperative strategic necessity.

Way Forward

- **Diversifying Supply Chains:** Instead of relying solely on Gulf nations for its energy requirements (especially crude oil and LPG), India must increase imports from Africa, South America, and other regions.
- **Investment in Alternative Corridors:** India must actively develop alternative maritime and land corridors, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) or trade agreements with Oman.
- **Strengthening Strategic Partnerships:** Diplomatic efforts must be intensified in cooperation with other nations in the Gulf region (such as Oman and the UAE) to ensure maritime security and uninterrupted trade.
- **Development of Domestic Infrastructure:** The expansion of Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) and underground cavern storage capacity must be accelerated so that the country does not face fuel shortages in the event of any emergency blockade.

Conclusion

The crisis at the Strait of Hormuz has made it clear that India must redefine its maritime and energy diplomacy to safeguard its ambitions of becoming an economic superpower. Iran's formal control over this waterway is a wake-up call for India's policymakers. Overcoming its past mistakes (such as the hesitant approach on Chabahar), India must display strategic foresight similar to the UAE. Expanding its shipping fleet, strengthening storage, and exploring new trade routes are the only ways to establish India as a secure and self-reliant nation in this 'changed reality'.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: What is the primary objective of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR)?

- (a) To increase petroleum exports
- (b) To permanently control oil prices
- (c) To ensure energy security in the event of a supply crisis
- (d) To store fuel solely for military use

Ans: c)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: Discuss the significance of Strategic Petroleum Reserves (SPR) for India. (10 Marks, 150 Words)

Recently, a Supreme Court bench comprising Justice P.S. Narasimha and Justice Atul S. Chandurkar presented a historic perspective regarding pavements (footpaths) and the rights of pedestrians. The Court clarified that a footpath is not merely a narrow strip of land to avoid road accidents, but is a symbol of civilizational development, public liberty, and social equality. The Court has prioritized the right to walk on a safe footpath over the movement of motor vehicles and highlighted it as a fundamental right under the Constitution.

Are footpaths more than safe spaces?

Are footpaths, as a material resource, facing a situation akin to the 'tragedy of commons'? Have laws favoured vehicles over pedestrians? Does footpath promote equality in urban spaces? Does walking still hold significance in India? Who are responsible for protecting footpaths? Why does the court want a regulator?

EXPLAINER

Krishnadas Rajagopal

The story so far:

A Bench of Justices P.S. Narasimha and Atul S. Chandurkar has, in its judgment (Maniyar Iliyaz@Shaik Riyaz versus P. Ayyappan), said a footpath's relevance is more than that of a narrow strip of land where the 'less-fortunate' ones take cover from being knocked down by vehicles speeding on multi-lane motorways.

Does the ruling deconnect the footpath from the theme of accidents?

Justice Narasimha's judgment divorces the footpath from the theme of motor accidents. The sole aim of a footpath is not to avoid accidents. The pathways have an identity and a purpose of their own.

The footpath caters to the most essential, the most fundamental of rights – the pleasure of walking. The court said the presence of a broad footpath is a reflection of civilisational advancement and respect for the freedom to walk. The tracks offer the public access to urban spaces through movement by walking.

The judgment declared that the right to walk on a comfortable and safe footpath held "priority over movement by motor vehicles". In a way, reasoning of the judgment suggests that footpaths suffer from a situation described in environmental law as the 'tragedy of the commons' or the degradation of a precious resource when many individuals use it. Safe and broad footpaths have become a scarce resource, riddled by encroachments, garbage and pavement trade. Secondly, the court has reasoned that broad footpaths, besides amplifying the beauty of cities, must also enable equitable access to all. Nothing should be done to thwart the public's free access to common spaces.



Sidelining safety: A row of police vehicles parked on the footpath in Cubbon Park forced the pedestrians to walk on the road during IPL match in Bengaluru in April. NAGESH PRABHU

Justice Narasimha has observed that access to common spaces, in both urban areas and rural areas, should be distributed in such a way that it was "not a monopoly of the motorised class alone". Article 39(b) of the Constitution mandates that material resources of a community must be distributed so as to sub-serve the common good. Authorities must consider the "common good" of both pedestrians and motor vehicle owner while designing a material resource like land to build roadways. A wide, well-demarcated and uninterrupted footpath could "change the beauty of and equitable access to our cities and towns".

Does walking still hold significance in the Indian imagination?

The court said that the act of walking have had diverse roles in the Indian imagination. Walking was a struggle for the not-so-unfortunate, a meditation in motion for many, resistance for a cohesive, discovery for the inquisitive, a cohesive strategy for sharp socio-political minds.

From the first sparks which ignited the national struggle for freedom to the complexities of modern politics, the idea of walking as a means of expressing an opinion or drawing public attention remains a constant. Walking was not just motion, but embodied the fundamental freedoms of speech and expression, of peaceful protest and the right to form associations and unions for gaining the just rights of workers.

Have the 'duty-bearers' neglected their duty to protect footpaths?

However, laws like the Motor Vehicles Act of 1988 paid homage to movement by wheels. They even "undermined the precious rights of walkers". Justice Narasimha said the tendency to subjugate safe and comfortable footpaths to motor transport was a civilisational problem.

The primary "duty-bearers" responsible for effectively managing footpaths are urban development authorities, municipal corporations, municipalities, and panchayats. Footpaths

are held in trust by these bodies for the public's benefit. They are the material resources of the community.

Is there a need for statutory law and regulator?

The judgment is not satisfied by merely declaring the right to walk safely on a wide and clearly demarcated footpath as a basic right, but recommends to the government to implement the fundamental right through a statutory law, and moreover, establish a regulator to hear aggrieved pedestrians.

The court recalled the positive role played by Parliament and State legislatures in the past in enabling the effective exercise and enjoyment of fundamental rights on the ground.

It also noted that modern statutes have shaped a new framework of institutional governance by creating regulatory bodies. These bodies institutionalise continuity through perpetual succession and seal, embed expertise through specialisation, promote diversity through their composition, and ensure integrity through mechanisms of accountability.

One of the examples the court drew in this context was the Right to Education Act, which had declared the fundamental right to free and compulsory elementary education under Article 21A in Sections 3 to Section 5. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights was recognised as the regulator.

Justice Narasimha said a similar Act and a regulatory body must be devised by the legislature to protect the fundamental right to walk on demarcated footpaths. The statutory framework would not only ensure the working of the fundamental right on the ground but also identify the duty-bearers. The court said such an Act must also establish a full-time regulator to plan, enforce, and implement this precious right. The apex court has directed its Registry to send a copy of the judgment to the Central Ministries and the Law Commission of India to "reflect on the compelling necessity for initiating the necessary legal framework".

THE GIST

The court said the presence of a broad footpath is a reflection of civilisational advancement and respect for the freedom to walk.

The court has reasoned that broad footpaths, besides amplifying the beauty of cities, must also enable equitable access to all.

The judgment is not satisfied by merely declaring the right to walk safely on a wide and clearly demarcated footpath as a basic right, but recommends to the government to implement the fundamental right through a statutory law.

1. Are Footpaths More than 'Safe Spaces'?

- **Freedom from the Accident Discourse:** The Court liberated footpaths from the narrow mindset of viewing them merely as instruments to "prevent motor accidents."
- **The Pleasure of Walking:** A footpath fulfills one of the most fundamental dimensions of human life—the 'pleasure of walking.' The presence of wide and safe footpaths reflects the civilizational advancement of any society.

- **Access to Urban Spaces:** It grants the general public the right to access urban public spaces and move freely therein without any hindrance.

2. Are Footpaths Becoming a 'Tragedy of the Commons'?

- **Degradation of Resources:** Similar to the environmental law principle of the 'Tragedy of the Commons,' footpaths are a shared public resource that everyone is overexploiting, leading to the destruction of their quality.
- **A Scarce Resource:** In contemporary times, safe and wide footpaths have become a scarce resource.
- **Major Hurdles:** Footpaths are currently choked with encroachments, garbage dumping, unauthorized parking (such as the parking of police vehicles during an IPL match at Cubbon Park, Bengaluru, as cited in the article), and pavement trade, forcing pedestrians to walk on the main road.

3. Is the Law Biased Towards Vehicles?

- **Priority to Wheels:** Existing laws, such as the Motor Vehicles Act, 1988, and our urban planning models place greater emphasis on the 'movement of wheels.'
- **A Civilizational Problem:** According to Justice Narasimha, subordinating safe and comfortable footpaths to motorized transport (i.e., prioritizing vehicles and treating pedestrians as second-class citizens) is a serious "civilizational problem."
- **Violation of the Constitution:** This policy goes against Article 39(b) of the Constitution, which directs that the material resources of the community must be distributed in such a manner that they serve the "common good," rather than establishing a monopoly of the motorized class.

4. Do Footpaths Promote Equality in Urban Areas?

- **Equitable Access:** Wide and uninterrupted footpaths, besides enhancing the aesthetics of cities, provide all citizens with equitable access to public spaces without any economic discrimination.
- **End of Monopoly:** The design of a community resource like land must be structured in a way that the road serves the shared interest of both car owners and pedestrians, rather than becoming the exclusive domain of the wealthy or the motorized class.

5. Significance of 'Walking' in Indian Ethos/History

The Court observed that the concept and history of 'walking' in India have possessed multifaceted dimensions:

- **Meditation in Motion:** For many, it serves as a medium for mental peace and conceptual clarity.
- **Discovery:** For the inquisitive, it is a method to observe society and the world from close quarters.
- **Strategy and Solidarity:** For sharp socio-political minds, it has been a strategy to mobilize and unite society.

- **Resistance and Freedom Protest:** From the initial sparks of India's freedom struggle to modern-day politics, 'walking' (such as the Dandi March or various Padyatras) has been a potent medium to voice dissent or draw public attention. It manifests the fundamental rights to freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and forming associations.

6. Who are the 'Duty-Bearers' for Protecting Footpaths?

The Court explicitly identified the primary institutions accountable for the management of footpaths:

- Urban Development Authorities
- Municipal Corporations
- Municipalities
- Gram Panchayats
- **Public Trust Doctrine:** All these local bodies hold footpaths "in trust" for the benefit of the general public. These are material resources of the community, and protecting them is a statutory duty of these bodies.

7. Why Does the Court Seek a Statutory Law and a 'Regulator'?

The Supreme Court does not wish to stop at merely declaring a right; it wants to see its actual enforcement on the ground. For this, the Court has recommended that the government enact a statutory law and establish an independent regulator. The key reasons behind this include:

- **Real Implementation of Rights:** Just as the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) was made the regulator to implement the Right to Education (RTE Act) on the ground, a dedicated mechanism is required for the right to walk.
- **Institutional Continuity and Expertise:** A regulatory body possesses its own expert framework, continuity, and tools to fix accountability.
- **Identification of Duty-Bearers:** Through legislation, it will become clear which officer or body will be held accountable in case of negligence in maintaining footpaths.
- **Grievance Redressal:** The regulator will function as a full-time body to hear the grievances of aggrieved pedestrians, formulate plans, and stringently enforce rules.

Conclusion

This judgment of the Supreme Court has the potential to trigger a paradigm shift in Indian urban planning. The Court has forwarded copies of this judgment to the central ministries and the Law Commission of India to develop the necessary legal framework. To make Indian cities 'smart' and 'sustainable,' it is absolutely vital that our policies are designed keeping humans, rather than cars, at the center. Granting statutory recognition to the 'Right to Walk' will be a revolutionary step toward social justice, environmental protection, and improving the quality of life for citizens.

UPSC Prelims Practice Questions

Question: What does Article 39(b) of the Constitution relate to?

- (a) Equal pay for equal work
- (b) Development of children
- (c) Distribution of community resources for the common good
- (d) Environmental protection

Ans: c)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: "Footpaths are not merely transport infrastructure but symbols of social justice and civil liberties." Comment. **(10 Marks, 150 Words)**



India's microfinance sector, which plays a massive role in financial inclusion by providing collateral-free loans to low-income households, marginalized groups, and small entrepreneurs, was struggling with a severe liquidity deficit and credit risk for the past two years. At such a critical juncture, the government announced the Credit Guarantee Fund Scheme for Micro Finance Institutions 2.0 (CGSMFI 2.0). Boasting an allocation of ₹20,000 crore, this scheme is proving to be a "boon" for the liquidity-starved sector, restoring the confidence of lenders and accelerating the revival of the industry.

Credit guarantee fund of microfinance units

OPINION

Jiji Mammen

The credit guarantee fund of microfinance institutions (CGSMFI 2.0) has come as a boon to a sector reeling under liquidity deficit for more than a year. Many lenders kept away from MFIs or enhanced underwriting norms in the past two years. Some institutions that supported the microfinance sector even during worst times in the past have stepped back at the moment, mirroring the sector in uncertainty. At this juncture, the announcement of the CGSMFI 2.0 scheme for guaranteeing funders' money has come as a great relief.

Similar to a fund created during the Covid-19 pan-



Looking up: The funding under the guarantee scheme would speed up the revival. GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

demic, the CGSMFI 2.0 has almost three times the allocation at ₹20,000 crore. It has been designed to ensure every institution can benefit equitably. Additionally, 15% has been earmarked for small and mid-segment MFIs.

The scheme also prescribed a cap of 20% of as-

sets under management (AUM) for individual borrowers to ensure the money was better distributed. The maximum amount eligible for each institution was also capped at ₹100 crore, ₹200 crore or ₹1,000 crore, depending on institution's size.

The limit for the larger

MFIs was increased subsequently. Similarly, the scheme has been extended up to August 31.

Signs of revival

Thankfully, the scheme comes at a time when the sector is showing signs of revival. The past few months have seen a positive trajectory of disbursements and outstanding. There are indications that disbursements in May may have been much higher. The funding under the guarantee scheme would speed up the revival.

Self-regulation

The microfinance sector – which enables easy access to credit without collateral for low-income individuals, marginalised groups, and small entrepreneurs – was hit badly

by the Covid-19 pandemic. The borrowers are among the most vulnerable in such calamities. The sector catered to the post-pandemic surge in demand for credit. But the higher credit flow without commensurate revival of the economy saw some households ending up in an over-leveraged position, leading to higher indebtedness and sector-wide stress.

As a corrective measure, self-regulatory organisations came up with a set of guardrails, first in July 2024 and again in April 2025. They were finalised jointly with the CEOs of MFIs and their diligent implementation has put the sector back in order.

There has been an improvement in several parameters in the last few quarters. The portfolio size

declined from ₹4.4 lakh crore in March 2024 to ₹3.71 lakh crore in March 2025 and ₹3.34 lakh crore in March 2026. It had dipped below ₹3.2 lakh crore during the year, but showed growth in the last two months of the financial year to close at ₹3.34 trillion, below the previous year's close. However, the numbers for May would be more encouraging, given the higher lending. When it comes to the portfolio at risk (PAR) value, the PAR 30-179 days has improved from 6.65% in March 2025 to 2.31% in March 2026. Similar, the PAR 90-plus improved from 3.93% to 1.49%. The PAR 179-plus, has stabilised in last six months.

(The writer is ED and CEO of Sa-Dhan. The views expressed are personal)

1. Key Features of the CGSMFI 2.0 Scheme

- **Large Financial Allocation:** Compared to the previous fund created during the COVID-19 pandemic, the allocation of CGSMFI 2.0 has been increased nearly threefold to ₹20,000 crore.
- **Equitable Distribution:** To ensure that institutions of all sizes benefit equally, 15% of the total allocation under the scheme has been specifically earmarked for small and medium-sized MFIs.
- **Capping of Maximum Loan Limits:** The maximum eligible amount for large institutions has been capped at ₹100 crore, ₹200 crore, or ₹1,000 crore based on their asset size (which was later enhanced further for mega MFIs).
- **Risk Management:** To prevent excessive concentration of funds in any single institution or individual borrower, exposure has been capped at a maximum of 20% of the total Assets Under Management (AUM).
- **Extension of Timeline:** The duration of the scheme has been extended until August 31st to allow a maximum number of institutions to avail themselves of its benefits.

2. Reasons for Recent Stress in the Microfinance Sector

- **Impact of the Pandemic:** This vulnerable and low-income segment of society was the hardest hit by COVID-19, which severely impacted their repayment capacity.
- **Over-leveraging:** A sudden surge in credit demand occurred post-pandemic. Without a robust economic recovery, financial institutions disbursed loans on a large scale, trapping many households in a web of higher indebtedness beyond their capacity.
- **Reluctance of Lenders:** Due to rising risks over the past two years, several large banks and financial institutions stopped funding MFIs or tightened their lending norms, creating widespread uncertainty in the sector.

3. Self-Regulation and Corrective Measures

To pull the sector out of the crisis, Self-Regulatory Organisations (SROs) of the microfinance sector and Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of MFIs collectively implemented strict corrective measures:

- **Implementation of Guardrails:** The first protective framework was implemented in July 2024, followed by a second one in April 2025.
- **Strict Enforcement:** The rigorous on-ground enforcement of these guidelines is the primary reason why the financial health of this sector has shown remarkable improvement over the past few quarters.

4. Signs of Revival in the Sector

According to the latest financial data (up to March 2026), the sector is witnessing a turnaround on both liquidity and credit quality fronts:

- **Consolidation of the Portfolio:** Due to conscious efforts to mitigate over-leveraging risks, the total loan portfolio size has rationalized from ₹4.4 lakh crore in March 2024, to ₹3.71 lakh crore in March 2025, and down to ₹3.34 lakh crore in March 2026. However, new disbursements have seen a massive resurgence in the final two months of the financial year, particularly in May 2026.
- **Sharp Decline in Portfolio at Risk (PAR):** The risk of loan defaults has dropped drastically, as evidenced by the following metrics:
 - **PAR 30–179 Days (Loans overdue by 30 to 179 days):** Sharply improved from 6.65% in March 2025 to just 2.31% in March 2026.
 - **PAR 90+ Days (Loans overdue by more than 90 days):** Dropped from 3.93% in March 2025 to a mere 1.49% in March 2026.
 - **PAR 179+ Days:** This metric has completely stabilized over the last six months, indicating steady recovery of bad loans.

Conclusion

The CGSMFI 2.0 scheme has provided a vital safety net to the Indian microfinance sector at a time when it was grappling with a severe liquidity crunch. This ₹20,000 crore credit guarantee is encouraging banks and major financial institutions to fearlessly resume funding to MFIs. Concurrently, the self-regulation guardrails established by SROs in 2024 and 2025 have reinforced credit discipline on the ground, leading to a historic decline in default risks (PAR) by March 2026. To sustain economic inclusion

at the grassroots level, it is imperative that the benefits of this credit guarantee effectively reach small and rural MFIs, providing renewed momentum to self-employment and women's empowerment across the remotest corners of the country.

UPSC Prelims Exam Study Questions

Question: What is the primary objective of microfinance?

- (a) To provide loans to large industries
- (b) To provide financial services to the low-income group without collateral
- (c) To provide loans only to the agricultural sector
- (d) To promote foreign investment

Ans: b)

UPSC Mains Practice Questions

Question: "The microfinance sector is a vital instrument for women's empowerment and inclusive development; however, over-indebtedness has emerged as its greatest challenge." Discuss. **(15 Marks, 250 Words)**



End the free rein of junk food advertising in India

Despite the Government of India's plans to amend advertising laws to curb the promotion of HFSS (high in fat, sugar and sodium) foods, such products continue to be advertised rampantly. As evidence of the health harms associated with industrially processed foods engineered to be highly palatable and potentially addictive continues to grow, restricting their advertising – particularly exposure to children and young people – may no longer be avoidable.

Try opening a YouTube video on politics, scrolling through Instagram reels, or scanning a newspaper, and you are likely to encounter advertisements for noodles, chips, biscuits, breakfast cereals, chocolates, sweetened beverages, or other ultra-processed food (UPF) products. Recently, there was a YouTube advertisement for a newly launched baked chips brand in India. The advertisement emphasised the product's cheese and tomato flavours and the "crunchiness" to appeal to consumers. What it did not disclose was that the product is a UPF with ingredients such as maltodextrin, nature-identical flavourings, flavouring substances, salt substitute (KCl/potassium chloride), acidity regulators (627, 631) and emulsifier (322). While prominently promoting selective attributes such as "baked", the advertisement omitted material health information, including the product's high salt and fat content and the presence of refined carbohydrates. Such marketing practices can create a misleading impression of healthfulness while obscuring the nutritional risks associated with these products.

While readers can recall their own experiences, there are a few other examples in the media. A female film celebrity is seen recommending a multigrain, "no maida choco cereal" for her son, despite it being a high sugar product. An entire family of actors promotes a "12-grain" breakfast cereal, while a popular film actor endorses a biscuit as a "good choice". Most of these products, however, are high in sugar, fat and/or salt, raising questions about the messages conveyed through such endorsements. Such selective disclosures create a false perception of healthfulness and deprives consumers, particularly children and adolescents, of the right to make an informed choice.

Review frameworks

The focus of this article is also to draw the attention of policymakers to the need for reviewing whether existing legal frameworks sufficiently serve the public interest. Clearer legal provisions may be required to effectively regulate the advertising of unhealthy food products.

Advertising is directly linked to increased consumption of UPFs, which is strongly associated with rising rates of obesity and diabetes. These advertisements often feature



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child actors and use emotionally appealing messages aimed at both children and parents, creating a desire for such products. The fact that in 2024, three major transnational corporations spent \$13.2 billion on advertising underscores the volumes and the power of food product advertisements. Advertising does not merely reflect demand; it helps create it. In India alone, more than two lakh junk food advertisements in a month were backed by advertising expenditure of about ₹170 crore.

Evidence suggests that UPFs can encourage overconsumption through mechanisms that resemble those identified in addiction science. The health harms associated with UPFs appear closely linked to their industrial design and marketing strategies. But the food industry fails to disclose this fact to people. Recently, the City of San Francisco filed a lawsuit against 10 major UPF manufacturers, alleging child-targeted marketing, the development of highly compelling product formulations, and inadequate disclosure of health risks such as obesity and diabetes. Among other remedies, the lawsuit sought to prevent further deceptive marketing practices and pushed for corrective measures to address the effects of past false advertising.

A policy gap

The Government of India's National Multisectoral Action Plan (NMAP) for Prevention and Control of Common Non-Communicable Diseases (2017-2022) envisaged the prohibition/restrictions on the advertising of HFSS foods. Many pre-packaged foods are highly processed, containing additives such as colours, flavours, emulsifiers and sweeteners, and are often HFSS. The issue has gained policy attention. In February 2025, the Supreme Court of India, in response to a PIL on warning labels for packaged foods, observed that front-of-pack labelling is necessary to protect the right to health. The Economic Survey 2025-26 also highlighted concerns around unhealthy diets. Several Members of Parliament have called for stronger measures, including front-of-pack warning labels, advertising restrictions and taxation of UPFs. In 2024, the Court had noted that misleading advertisements can encourage the consumption of unhealthy foods by children, pregnant women and the elderly, with potentially serious health consequences. These developments point to a growing recognition that existing safeguards may be inadequate.

The Lancet Series on UPFs and Human Health, published three papers in November 2025 which presented scientific evidence linking UPF consumption to poorer diet quality, displacement of real foods, and a higher risk of obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes and other non-communicable diseases. Global and Indian data show that rising UPF consumption has coincided with increasing

obesity rates. The Lancet made a strong case for policies in the food environments to reduce UPF consumption, with many experts arguing that policymaking should not wait for further evidence.

The food environment needs a fix

Children and adolescents in India are exposed daily to advertisements for UPFs and HFSS foods on television, digital platforms, social media, sports broadcasts and through influencers. This sustained and sophisticated marketing is designed to build brand loyalty and shape lifelong consumption patterns. The aim of the UPF industry is clear: to encourage the displacement of real culinary or cultural foods for profits. What children or youth eat cannot be separated from what they are persuaded to desire at schools, work places, cinema halls, other public places or even at home.

Experts in The Lancet Series contend that nutrition education and behaviour-change programmes alone cannot succeed in an environment that is saturated with aggressive marketing of unhealthy food products.

This situation underscores an important constitutional principle: when harm is foreseeable and populations are vulnerable, the state has a duty to protect public health and regulate the marketing of unhealthy food products. India committed in 2017 to restrict such advertising, but that objective remains unfulfilled. Given the scale of the problem, neither market forces nor self-regulation are likely to be sufficient. Therefore, there is a strong case for the Government of India to introduce stricter controls on the advertising and promotion of UPFs and HFSS foods such as planned in 2017 by amending advertisement laws.

If schools are to be protected spaces free from UPFs, HFSS foods and misleading nutrition messages, it is inconsistent to ignore the commercial environment that shapes children's choices outside school. The school environment itself requires clear policy direction, not merely advisories (as Brazil did recently). The Economic Survey has called for stronger regulation of UPF advertising and marketing. International experience, from Chile to Mexico, suggests that voluntary self-regulation is often ineffective, whereas enforceable legal measures can be more effective. Given its influence on children's food choices, advertising warrants stronger regulation as part of the broader right to health.

Restricting the advertising of unhealthy food products need not be viewed as anti-industry or anti-profit. In fact it could reduce company expenditure on advertising and encourage companies to redirect resources towards minimally processed foods and healthier local markets. Such a shift could help shape more sustainable and health-oriented food systems in the future.

Restricting the advertising of ultra-processed food (UPF) products and foods high in fat, sugar and sodium (HFSS) is a public health imperative

GS Paper II: Social Justice

UPSC Mains Exam Practice Questions: "In the 21st century, non-tariff barriers have emerged as the most significant impediments to global trade." Examine. (15 Marks, 250 Words)

Context : In India, the advertising of ultra-processed foods (UPFs) and food products high in fat, sugar, and sodium (HFSS) currently runs unchecked across social media, television, and newspapers. Scientific evidence has conclusively established that these industrially manufactured food products are not only detrimental to health but are also highly addictive. Despite the Government of India's 2017 commitment to ban these advertisements, the market continues to operate without restraint due to the complete failure of industry self-regulation. To safeguard the health rights of children and youth, introducing stringent amendments to advertising laws has now become an imperative strategic step.

1. Misleading Marketing & Selective Disclosures

- **Concealing the Truth:** Companies aggressively highlight only appealing attributes in their advertisements, such as "baked," "cheese flavored," or "crunchiness." However, they systematically conceal harmful ingredients like maltodextrin, artificial flavoring substances, excessive salt, refined carbohydrates, and acidity regulators (such as Acidity Regulators 627 and 631).
- **Misuse of Celebrity Endorsements:** Prominent cinematic icons are frequently seen endorsing products like "no-maida choco cereal" or "12-grain breakfast cereal" for their children, which in reality are loaded with high sugar and fat contents. This practice effectively deprives consumers, particularly children, of their right to make an informed choice.
- **Manufacturing Demand:** Advertisements do not merely satisfy existing market demands; rather, by deploying emotional messaging and utilizing child actors, they engineer an artificial desire for these unhealthy products among both children and parents.

2. Public Health Crisis and Economic Costs

- **Surge in Obesity and Diabetes:** The rising consumption of UPFs and the onslaught of advertisements are directly linked to India's skyrocketing rates of obesity, hypertension, cardiovascular diseases, and type-2 diabetes.
- **Addiction Science:** According to 'The Lancet' reports, the formulation of UPFs combined with aggressive advertising strategies manipulates the human brain to such an extent that individuals indulge in overconsumption even in the absence of actual hunger.
- **Global Corporate Power:** In 2024 alone, three mega multinational food corporations spent a staggering \$13.2 billion (approximately ₹1.1 lakh crore) on advertising. In India, over 2 lakh junk food advertisements are broadcasted in a single month at an estimated cost of ₹170 crore.

3. Policy Gap & Judiciary Role

- **National Multi-Sectoral Action Plan (NMAP 2017-2022):** Under this plan, the Government of India had set a target to regulate and ban advertisements for HFSS foods—a goal that remains unfulfilled to this day.
- **Observations of the Supreme Court (February 2026):** While hearing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL), the Apex Court explicitly stated that implementing 'Front-of-Package Labeling' (FOPL—warning labels) on packaged foods is absolutely essential to protect the right to health. The Court had previously cautioned that misleading advertisements are causing severe, long-term harm to the health of children and pregnant women.

- **Economic Survey 2025-26:** The country's latest Economic Survey also expressed profound concern over unhealthy diets, strongly advocating for strict controls on UPF advertisements along with the introduction of targeted taxation.

4. Global Precedents and Lessons

- **The San Francisco (USA) Lawsuit:** Recently, the city of San Francisco filed a lawsuit against 10 major UPF manufacturing corporations for targeting children with deceptive marketing tactics and intentionally concealing critical health risks.
- **Chile and Mexico:** The experiences of these nations demonstrate that the 'voluntary self-regulation' claimed by industries consistently fails; only strict, enforceable legal measures yield real public health outcomes.
- **Brazil:** Instead of merely issuing passive advisories to regulate commercial environments inside schools, Brazil has implemented clear, mandatory policy directives.

Way Forward

- **Enactment of Strict Statutory Laws:** Fulfilling its 2017 resolution, the government must immediately amend existing advertising laws to enforce a comprehensive ban on HFSS/UPF commercials during children's programming, sports broadcasts, and across social media platforms.
- **Mandating Warning Labels (FOPL):** The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) must mandate clear, conspicuous front-of-pack warning labels (such as 'High in Sugar' or 'High in Sodium') on all packaged products.
- **Fiscal Measures (Taxation):** Unhealthy, ultra-processed food items should be subjected to higher tax brackets (often referred to as a 'Fat Tax' or 'Sin Tax') to actively discourage their consumption.
- **Industry Redirection:** Restricting junk food commercials should not be viewed as an anti-industry move. It will significantly reduce the marketing expenses of these corporations, freeing up capital that can be redirected toward the processing and production of minimally processed, healthier, and locally sourced foods.
- **Securing Schools as Safe Zones:** The sale of junk food and the propagation of misleading nutritional messaging within school campuses and their immediate vicinity must be entirely prohibited.

Conclusion

When the public health toll is glaringly evident and a massive cross-section of the population (especially children) is highly vulnerable, it becomes the constitutional obligation of the State (under Article 21—Right to Health) to step in with decisive intervention. Relying solely on nutrition education or behavior change communication is insufficient to counter the predatory framework of the advertising industry. India must strike a vital balance between corporate profitability and consumer welfare by institutionalizing a rigorous, globally aligned regulatory framework, thereby securing a healthy and sustainable food system for future generations.