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**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# The Right to Walk and the City

 **THE HINDU**7 July 2026 · **SOCIAL ISSUES** · **GS1** · **GS2**

CURATED &amp; WRITTEN BY

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# The Right to Walk and the City

 **The Hindu**    7 July 2026    **GS1**    **GS2**

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## THE LIFT LINE

Every Indian city has planned lovingly for the car and forgotten the person on foot. When the Supreme Court held that walking safely on a footpath is a fundamental right, it did more than settle a legal point; it named the most basic user of the road, the pedestrian, as the one our planning has ignored.

## WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

The judgment connects fundamental rights, urbanisation, road safety and sustainable-city design, spanning Society and Governance. The 2026 ruling elevating safe footpaths to a constitutional right makes it a current, citable case.

**GS Paper 1:** Urbanisation, their problems and remedies; salient features of Indian society.

**GS Paper 2:** Fundamental rights; issues relating to development and management of social sector or services; government policies and interventions.

**Prelims angle:** Article 21 (right to life and personal liberty); Article 19(1)(d) (freedom of movement); the S. Rajasekaran line of road-safety litigation; the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019; non-motorised transport.

**Mains angle:** How pedestrian-first design advances dignity, safety and sustainability, and why Indian urban planning has neglected it.

## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

In 2026, the Supreme Court held that the right to walk safely and conveniently on footpaths is protected as part of Article 21 read with the freedom of movement under Article 19(1)(d). The Court observed that unobstructed, safe and accessible footpaths are essential to human dignity, personal safety and meaningful mobility, and that when footpaths are absent or encroached upon, people are forced onto carriageways and

exposed to grave risk. Crucially, it placed a correlative and enforceable duty on urban development authorities, municipal corporations, municipalities and even panchayats, and pushed for a national pedestrian-safety framework.

The ruling responds to a stark reality. Pedestrians and cyclists, the most vulnerable road users, account for a large share of India’s road-crash deaths, yet Indian street design overwhelmingly prioritises motor vehicles. Footpaths, where they exist, are often narrow, broken, encroached by vendors and parking, or interrupted by utility boxes and open drains. Non-motorised transport (walking and cycling), which carries a substantial share of urban trips, has been treated as an afterthought rather than as core infrastructure. The judgment reframes this neglect as a rights violation, not merely a civic inconvenience.

## THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

The central argument is that walkability is not a lifestyle luxury but a constitutional entitlement (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/entitlement/>) and a public-health, safety and sustainability imperative, and that Indian cities must redesign streets to put pedestrians first.

### Dignity and Safety

A footpath is where the poorest citizen, the child, the elderly person and the person with a disability exercise the most basic form of mobility. Denying safe walking space is denying dignified, safe access to the city.

### The Design Bias

Indian street standards, budgets and enforcement have been built around vehicular **throughput** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/throughput/>). Pedestrian infrastructure is squeezed to whatever space is left, producing discontinuous, unsafe walkways.

### Sustainability and Health

Walkable cities cut vehicular emissions, congestion and **sedentary** (<https://ujjyari.com/vocab/sedentary/>)-lifestyle disease. Non-motorised transport is the cleanest, cheapest and most equitable mode, and central to climate-resilient urban planning.

DIMENSION	CAR-FIRST CITY	PEDESTRIAN-FIRST CITY
Priority user	Motor vehicle	Person on foot
Footpath	Residual space	Continuous, accessible core infrastructure
Safety outcome	High pedestrian fatality	Lower crash risk for vulnerable users
Sustainability	Higher emissions, congestion	Lower emissions, better public health

## HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

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Apply the vulnerable-user principle: street design should protect the least protected road user first, then work outward to cyclists, public transport and finally private vehicles. Contrast this with the prevailing capacity principle, which optimises for vehicle flow. The judgment shifts the design paradigm (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/paradigm/>) from movement of vehicles to movement of people. A second frame is the rights-to-infrastructure ladder: recognising a right (safe walking) is only the first rung; enforceable standards, budgeted footpath networks, and accountability of civic bodies are the rungs that turn a declaration into a lived reality. The gap between declaration and delivery is where most Indian rights jurisprudence gets stuck.

## THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

Indian streets are designed for the car -> footpaths are residual, broken and encroached -> pedestrians spill onto carriageways -> vulnerable road users bear a large share of crash deaths -> Supreme Court reads safe walking into Articles 21 and 19(1)(d) -> enforceable duty on municipal and development bodies -> a shift from car-first to pedestrian-first, dignified, sustainable cities.

## WAY FORWARD

- ① **Legislate a pedestrian-safety framework.** Enact a national pedestrian law and mandatory street-design standards for continuous, obstruction-free, accessible footpaths.
- ② **Budget for walking and cycling.** Ring-fence a share of urban transport budgets for non-motorised transport, not just roads and flyovers.
- ③ **Fix accountability.** Hold municipal bodies and development authorities answerable, with grievance-redress (<https://ujjiyari.com/vocab/redress/>) and audit of footpath quality, as the Court directed.
- ④ **Design for the vulnerable.** Adopt universal-design norms so footpaths serve children, the elderly and persons with disabilities, integrating walking with public transport for last-mile access.

## PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has asked about urbanisation and its problems (2022: “Discuss the various social problems which originated out of the speedy process of urbanisation in India.”) and the right to life under Article 21. This editorial connects those to street design and road safety.

**Practice question:** “The right to walk is a test of how seriously a city takes the dignity of its poorest citizens.” In light of the 2026 Supreme Court ruling, examine the neglect of pedestrians in Indian urban planning and suggest reforms. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: *The Hindu* (<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion>)

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