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Regulating the Way Down: India Issues Its First Space-Object Re-Entry Rules

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

**Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

[in linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

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Regulating the Way Down: India Issues Its First Space-Object Re-Entry Rules

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The Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre (IN-SPACe) published India's first authorisation framework for the planned atmospheric re-entry of space objects in late July 2026, requiring prior permission, liability insurance and a demonstrated casualty-risk threshold.

WHAT THE GUIDELINES REQUIRE

REQUIREMENT	DETAIL
Authorisation	Any planned re-entry by an Indian entity needs IN-SPACe permission, whether the re-entry occurs inside or outside Indian territory
Foreign entities	Must route applications through an Indian-incorporated company
Technical submissions	Trajectory predictions plus survival and fragmentation assessments
Casualty risk threshold	Must demonstrate risk below 1 in 10,000
Insurance	Adequate insurance, including third-party liability insurance where prescribed by IN-SPACe at the time of authorisation
Liability standard	Operators accept absolute, no-fault liability
Scope	Applies to objects designed to survive re-entry or planned for re-entry

WHY INDIA IS REGULATING AHEAD OF THE ACTIVITY

India does not currently conduct significant planned re-entry operations. That makes this a notable case of **anticipatory regulation**, building the framework before the activity it governs arrives at scale.

The timing is not arbitrary. It follows Skyroot's Vikram-1 making India the third country in which a private firm placed payloads in orbit, and precedes Agnikul's planned booster-recovery attempts. Reusable launch vehicles, which require controlled booster return, are the specific technology that turns re-entry from a rare event into a routine operational step, and India's private launch sector is moving toward exactly that capability.

APPROACH	TRADE-OFF
Regulate before the activity scales	Provides legal certainty to operators planning multi-year reusable-vehicle programmes; avoids a scramble to write rules after an incident
Regulate after the activity develops	Rules can be calibrated to observed real-world practice, but risks a regulatory vacuum during the highest-uncertainty period

The competitive argument for the anticipatory route is that legal certainty is itself an asset for a commercial launch sector: a company planning a reusable vehicle needs to know, before committing capital, what the return-leg compliance obligations will be. The counter-argument is that compliance costs, particularly mandatory third-party insurance, fall hardest on early-stage startups with the least capacity to absorb them.

THE INTERNATIONAL LAW BACKDROP

India's framework does not exist in isolation; it operationalises obligations India already carries under international space law.

INSTRUMENT	RELEVANCE
Outer Space Treaty, 1967	States bear international responsibility for national space activities , including those of non-governmental entities, which must be authorised and continuously supervised by the state
Liability Convention, 1972	A launching state bears absolute liability for damage caused by its space object on the surface of the Earth or to aircraft in flight
IN-SPACE re-entry guidelines, 2026	Domesticate that absolute-liability exposure by passing it through to the operator and requiring insurance against it

The absolute-liability standard in the 1972 Convention is the key link: because India as a launching state is liable regardless of fault for surface damage, it has a direct sovereign interest in ensuring that any private operator whose object might land on someone is both technically competent and financially able to cover the resulting claim.

INDIA'S SPACE REGULATORY ARCHITECTURE

BODY	ROLE
Department of Space (DoS)	The parent department under which India's civil space programme sits
ISRO	The national space agency, focused increasingly on research and strategic missions
IN-SPACe	Single-window autonomous body for authorising, promoting and regulating private space activity
NSIL (NewSpace India Limited)	The commercial arm, handling technology transfer and commercial launch services
Indian Space Policy, 2023	The framework document formalising private-sector participation and IN-SPACe's authorisation mandate

UPSC RELEVANCE

GS Paper 3: Science and technology, space; awareness in the fields of IT, space; **indigenisation** of technology.

GS Paper 2: **Statutory**, regulatory and quasi-judicial bodies; important international treaties and their implications for India.

Prelims pointers:

- **IN-SPACe:** Indian National Space Promotion and Authorisation Centre, under the **Department of Space**; single-window authorisation body for private space activity.
- Casualty-risk threshold: **below 1 in 10,000**; **third-party liability insurance where prescribed by IN-SPACe** at authorisation; **absolute no-fault liability** accepted by operators.
- **Outer Space Treaty, 1967:** states are internationally responsible for national space activities, including private ones.
- **Liability Convention, 1972:** **absolute liability** for damage on the Earth's surface or to aircraft in flight.
- **Indian Space Policy, 2023** formalised private participation; **NSIL** is the commercial arm.

★ FACTS CORNER, KNOWLEDGE PEDIA

THE GUIDELINES:

IN-SPACE authorisation required for planned re-entry by Indian entities, inside or outside Indian territory.

Foreign entities must apply through an Indian-incorporated company.

Casualty risk must be below 1 in 10,000; third-party liability insurance where prescribed by IN-SPACE at authorisation; absolute no-fault liability.

Requires trajectory predictions and survival/fragmentation assessments.

INTERNATIONAL LAW BASIS:

Outer Space Treaty, 1967: state responsibility for national space activities, including private ones.

Liability Convention, 1972: absolute liability for damage on Earth's surface or to aircraft in flight.

INDIAN ARCHITECTURE: DEPARTMENT OF SPACE, ISRO, IN-SPACE (AUTHORISATION), NSIL (COMMERCIAL ARM), INDIAN SPACE POLICY 2023.

Sources: IN-SPACE, Department of Space, United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs

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