The Right to Walk – Symbol of Modernity, Democracy, Constitutional Freedom

Mains: *GS I Indian Society| GS II – Polity*

Why in News?

The recent recognition by the Supreme Court (SC) of India of the Right to Walk safely on footpaths as an integral component of the fundamental rights under marks a significant development in India's constitutional jurisprudence.

What is the background?

- **People Vs Vehicles** – At a time when rapid urbanisation, motorisation, and infrastructure development have increasingly marginalised pedestrians, the judgment reaffirms that public spaces exist primarily for people rather than vehicles.
- **Symbolising ideas** – Beyond its legal significance, the right to walk embodies deeper ideas of liberty, equality, dignity, democratic participation, and modernity.
- **Influence of walking** – Walking has shaped India's political movements, spiritual traditions, literary imagination, and cultural identity, making it much more than a mode of transportation.

The Right to Walk is An Essential Dimension of ***Modernity, Democracy, and Constitutional Freedom.***

- **Constitutional Recognition –** The Supreme Court has held that the Right to Walk safely on footpaths forms part of:
  - The freedom of movement under **Article 19(1) (d).**
  - The Right to Life and Personal Liberty under **Article 2**1 of the Constitution.
- **Importance of the SCs judgement** – This recognition is important because it places pedestrian rights within the broader framework of constitutional freedoms.
- Safe and accessible footpaths are no longer merely matters of urban planning but become essential to ensuring citizens' mobility, safety, and dignity.
- The judgment shifts the focus of public infrastructure from being vehicle-centric to people-centric, reaffirming that roads and public pathways belong equally to pedestrians.

Why the right to walk matters?

- **Over priorities to automobiles** – Modern urban spaces often prioritise automobiles

at the expense of pedestrians.
- **Issues with footpaths** – Encroached footpaths, unsafe crossings, poor accessibility for persons with disabilities, and inadequate pedestrian infrastructure have made walking increasingly difficult and dangerous.
- The recognition of walking as a fundamental right acknowledges that mobility is a basic human freedom.
- **Concerns with restrictions** – While the State legitimately regulates several aspects of individual behaviour in public spaces, restrictions on safe pedestrian movement directly affect citizens' ability to access education, employment, healthcare, markets, and public institutions.
- Therefore, ensuring walkable cities becomes essential for guaranteeing substantive freedom and equality.

How walking serves as an expression of human freedom?

- **Individual liberty** – Walking represents one of the most fundamental expressions of individual liberty.
- It allows people to navigate public spaces independently, interact with society, and exercise their freedom of movement.
- **Equality** – Unlike mechanised transport, walking requires no ownership of assets or economic privilege.
- Every individual, irrespective of income or social status, should be able to move safely through public spaces.
- In this sense, the right to walk reflects the democratic principle that public infrastructure should serve all citizens equally rather than privileging those who own private vehicles.
- The judgment therefore reinforces the idea that constitutional rights extend beyond abstract legal principles to include everyday experiences that enable individuals to live with dignity.

How walking is reflected in India’s literary and cultural consciousness?

- Walking occupies a significant place in India's literary, artistic, and cultural traditions.
- Across languages and regions, it has symbolised freedom, introspection, perseverance, and moral conviction.
- Rabindranath Tagore's celebrated songs capture both the freedom of imagination and the courage of independent action.
- *Ekla Chalo Re* ("Walk Alone") celebrates the determination to pursue truth despite opposition, while *Kothao Amar Hariye Jawar Nei Mana* reflects the limitless freedom of the human mind.
- Similarly, Bengali poet **Jibanananda Das** opens his famous poem *Banalata Sen* with the image of a traveller who has wandered across the world for a thousand years.
- Walking here becomes a metaphor for civilisational memory, human experience, and the search for peace.
- These literary traditions demonstrate that walking is not merely physical movement but an important medium for self-discovery, reflection, and creative expression.

How walking influenced India’s freedom movement?

- **Dandi march** – The most iconic example is *Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March (1930),* where walking became a powerful instrument of non-violent resistance against colonial rule.
- Gandhi transformed an ordinary act into an extraordinary political statement, demonstrating that peaceful public mobilisation could challenge imperial authority.
- The image of Gandhi with his walking stick, immortalised in Nandalal Bose's linocut "**Bapuji",** continues to shape India's collective memory.
- Similarly, the sculpture **"Gyarah Murti"** by Devi Prasad Roy Chowdhury, depicting Gandhi leading the Salt March in New Delhi, symbolises the enduring connection between walking and democratic resistance.
- **Delhi chalo movement** – Walking also featured prominently in other nationalist movements, including **Subhas Chandra Bose's "Delhi Chalo"** call and numerous protest marches before and after Independence.
- Public marches have remained one of the most effective democratic methods of expressing dissent and demanding accountability.

How walking is reflected in India’s spiritual traditions?

- **Spiritual teachers** – Many of India's great spiritual teachers including *Gautama Buddha (Siddhartha), Guru Nanak, and Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu*—travelled extensively on foot while spreading their philosophical and religious teachings.
- Their journeys helped shape India's cultural and civilisational unity across regions and communities.
- **Hindu religious traditions** – They too reflect the symbolic importance of walking.
- The footprints of **Goddess Lakshmi**, drawn during household rituals and festivals, signify prosperity entering the home.
- Such practices reveal that walking has long been associated with sacred presence, blessings, and movement towards spiritual fulfilment.
- **Classical Indian knowledge systems** – The word **"pada" (foot)** also refers to a metrical unit in poetry and a foundational unit of knowledge classification, illustrating the deep cultural association between walking, language, and intellectual traditions.

How walking serve as a symbol of modernity and democratic thoughts?

- **Walking as a Symbol of Modernity –** Walking has been closely associated with the emergence of modern thought.
- The French poet **Charles Baudelaire**, who popularised the concept of **modernity** in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life (1863),* highlighted the experience of observing urban life through walking.
- His idea of the *flâneur* the individual who strolls through city streets observing society, symbolises intellectual curiosity and engagement with modern urban culture.
- Walking without a predetermined destination allows individuals to observe, reflect, and connect with their surroundings.
- Such experiences encourage creativity, critical thinking, and emotional well-being, making walking an important component of modern civic life.
- **Walking, Public Space, and Democratic Citizenship –** Public spaces acquire

meaning only when citizens can freely access and use them.

- Footpaths, parks, streets, and public squares are essential spaces for social interaction, civic participation, and democratic engagement.
- Pedestrians often represent society's most vulnerable groups, including children, senior citizens, persons with disabilities, women, and economically weaker sections.
- Protecting their right to safe mobility promotes inclusivity and social justice.
- A pedestrian-friendly city also supports environmental sustainability by reducing dependence on motorised transport, lowering carbon emissions, improving air quality, and encouraging healthier lifestyles. Consequently, the right to walk contributes simultaneously to constitutional values, public health, and sustainable urban development.
- **Philosophical Perspective on Walking –** French philosopher **Michel de Certeau**, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, argues that walking transforms urban spaces into lived experiences.
- According to him, pedestrians do not merely follow the physical design of cities; they create new meanings through their everyday movements and interactions.
- Walking allows individuals to reinterpret public spaces beyond official planning, creating opportunities for spontaneous encounters, cultural exchange, and personal reflection.
- It becomes a subtle yet powerful expression of individual agency within organised urban systems.
- Similarly, English Romantic poet **William Wordsworth's** famous expression, "*I wandered lonely as a cloud,*" reflects walking as a means of contemplation and emotional renewal.
- Such perspectives underline the universal importance of walking in shaping both personal consciousness and collective culture.

What are the challenges in realising the right to walk?

- Encroachment of footpaths by vendors, parking, and illegal constructions.
- Poor quality or absence of pedestrian infrastructure.
- Inadequate facilities for persons with disabilities and senior citizens.
- Urban planning that prioritises automobiles over pedestrians.
- Weak enforcement of road safety and traffic regulations.
- Limited public awareness regarding pedestrian rights.
- Addressing these issues requires coordinated action involving urban planners, municipal authorities, transport departments, and law enforcement agencies.

What could be done?

- Realising the constitutional right to walk requires a comprehensive approach that integrates legal protections with urban planning reforms.
- Cities should adopt pedestrian-first planning, ensuring continuous, obstruction-free footpaths, safe crossings, universal accessibility, and adequate lighting.
- Smart city initiatives should incorporate walkability as a key performance indicator.
- Greater investment in public transport, traffic calming measures, and non-motorised transport infrastructure can further encourage walking.
- Public awareness campaigns should promote respect for pedestrian rights, while strict

enforcement against illegal encroachments and unsafe driving practices is essential.
- Ultimately, urban development should recognise that cities exist for people, not merely for vehicles.

What lies ahead?

- The Supreme Court's recognition of the Right to walk as part of the fundamental rights guaranteed under Articles 19(1) (d) and 21 is more than a legal affirmation—it is a reaffirmation of democratic citizenship, human dignity, and inclusive development.
- Walking has shaped India's literary traditions, spiritual journeys, freedom struggle, and constitutional values.
- It represents freedom, equality, reflection, and participation in public life.
- As India continues to urbanise, safeguarding pedestrian rights will be essential for creating cities that are not only efficient but also humane, sustainable, and truly democratic.
- The judgment therefore restores walking to its rightful place as a defining feature of both constitutional liberty and modern civilisation.

Reference

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