# CURRENT AFFAIRS

## UPSC CSE 2026

**DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS NOTES**

**BY MUDIT JAIN**

**Ex IRS, Ex IPS**

## Courts must protect, not regulate free speech

- Freedom of speech is vital for democracy, and threats usually arise from the executive or legislature, but recent **Supreme Court of India** proceedings in *Ranveer Allahbadia vs Union of India (2025)* have raised concerns about judicial overreach.
- The Court stated that self-styled bodies are insufficient to regulate online content, suggested **neutral autonomous regulators**, and asked the government to publish draft guidelines for public comments.

## Existing legal framework

- **Section 67, Information Technology Act** and **Sections 294, 295, 296, Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS)** penalise obscenity. **Sections 66, 66E, 66F, IT Act** deal with hacking, privacy violations, and cyber-terrorism.
- **IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021** already provide central oversight and impose prior restraint, attracting criticism for overreach.

## Judicial expansion of scope

- The original case concerned FIRs against alleged **obscene content, not online regulation**. In *Common Cause vs Union of India (2008)*, the Court cautioned that many governance problems fall outside judicial competence.

## Regulation vs restraint

- In *Sahara India Real Estate Corp. Ltd. vs SEBI (2012)*, the Court warned against pre-censorship and held that postponement or restraint orders must be a last resort with a high threshold. Over-regulation risks turning into unlawful restraint on speech.

## Constitutional limits

- **Article 19(2)** exhaustively lists grounds for restricting free speech.
  - In *Kaushal Kishor (2023)*, a Constitution Bench held that no additional restrictions beyond Article 19(2) are permissible.
  - The Court has earlier exercised restraint, as seen in *Adarsh Co-operative Housing Society Ltd. vs Union of India (2018)*, leaving content decisions to statutory bodies.

## Role of the Court

- As articulated during the **Constituent Assembly Debates,** the Supreme Court's role is to judge the **reasonableness of restrictions**, not to initiate law-making or suggest new speech-restrictive regimes.

## Comparative perspective

- Democracies such as the **EU (Digital Services Act, 2022)**, **Germany (Network Enforcement Act, 2017)**, **UK (Online Safety Act, 2023)**, and **Australia (Online Safety Act, 2021)** focus on **content removal and penalties for non-compliance**, not prior censorship.
- In contrast, **China and Russia** rely on surveillance and pre-censorship. Scholars warn that courts can be misused in democratic erosion.

## An anomaly

- The **Environment Ministry** told Parliament that **Punjab and Haryana** had collectively reduced **"fire incidences" by 90% in 2025 compared to 2022**, referring to **farm stubble burning** linked to **air pollution** in **Delhi and surrounding cities**.

## Government Claims and Measures

- **Stubble burning** is a traditional shortcut to clear **paddy remnants** and prepare fields for **wheat**.
- The Centre and State governments adopted a carrot-and-stick approach: **fines on farmers**, **subsidised farm equipment, combined harvesters and tractors**, and **incentives to collect stubble and sell it to thermal plants for co-firing**.

## Evidence Gaps and Use of Proxies

- There is **little direct evidence** that these measures reduced the **contribution of stubble burning** to **Delhi's post-monsoon air quality**. This would require **mass-spectrograph analysis** of pollutants to trace the **weightage of stubble burning**, which is **unavailable**.
- The government instead relies on **proxies**, mainly **satellite counts of active fires**, to evaluate trends.

## Fire Counts vs Burnt Area

- Since **2020**, **fire counts** in Punjab and Haryana have declined, leading the government to claim success.
- Using data from a **different satellite**, an independent research outfit found that **'burnt area'** the **actual land burned** declined only **30%**.

## Satellite Limitations and Shift in Burning Time

- Data from **Meteosat (geostationary satellite)** showed **farm fires shifted towards the evening**.
- The Centre mainly uses **polar-orbiting satellites** that pass over India between **10 a.m. and 1.30 p.m.**

- Since **2022**, reports indicated farmers shifted burning to evenings to **avoid detection**.
- Satellites have **different resolution powers**, making the **true count of fires uncertain**.

**Judicial Direction and Transparency**

- The **Supreme Court of India**, when informed in **2024**, directed authorities to ascertain **'burnt area'** to gauge stubble burning trends. The Centre has **not made year-wise burnt-area estimates public**.
- Being **disingenuous with data** risks eroding **public confidence** in claims on tackling **air pollution**.


**The right moment to boost India-Ethiopia ties**

- **Ethiopia**, one of **Africa's fastest-growing economies**, is of growing **strategic and economic interest**, including for **India**, especially after the **meeting between both the PM's at the G-20 summit in Johannesburg**.

**Strategic Importance of Ethiopia**

- Ethiopia has a **substantial manufacturing base**, a **large domestic market**, and a **geographic position in the Horn of Africa**, making it a **pivotal African state**.
- It is viewed as a **regional anchor of stability**, with an **effective military**, and plays a **central role** in a subregion marked by **conflict**.
- Ethiopia is the **headquarters of the African Union** and a potential **renewable-energy powerhouse**, especially in **hydropower**, positioning it as a future **regional energy exporter**.
- Although **landlocked**, it has traditionally relied on **Djibouti** for Red Sea access, while recent efforts involving **Somaliland and Eritrea** highlight its push for **strategic autonomy** in trade and logistics.
- The country is **emerging from civil conflict** and attempting to build a **new national consensus**, opening a window for **enhanced India–Ethiopia engagement**.

**Education and People-to-People Ties**

- India–Ethiopia ties are **deep and long-standing**, with **Indian teachers and professors** forming the backbone of Ethiopia's education system for over a **century**.
- Ethiopia was the **pilot country** for the **Pan-African e-Network project (2007)** and has long-term cooperation with **IIT Delhi** for **tele-education**.
- Ethiopia sends one of the **highest numbers of African students to India**, including the **largest number of PhD students from Africa**.
- Graduates from the **Pan-African e-Network Master's programmes** helped staff **new universities and academic departments**.
- Expanding collaboration through **digital learning, vocational training, university linkages and scholarships** remains a key opportunity.

**Investment and Economic Cooperation**

- **Indian investment** surged after **lines of credit from 2006**, catalysing private investment exceeding **$4 billion**.
- Ethiopian leaders acknowledge the **developmental impact** of Indian investors, particularly amid **IMF conditionalities**. Earlier focus on **agriculture** faced setbacks due to **taxation and operational issues**.
- Current opportunities lie in **mining**, especially **gold, critical minerals and rare earth elements**, with Ethiopia having **vast underexplored potential**. Mining cooperation could secure supplies for India's **renewable energy, battery and semiconductor sectors**.

**Defence Cooperation**

- Ethiopia was among the **first foreign recipients of Indian military assistance**, beginning with the **Harar Military Academy (1956)**. Since **2009**, Indian defence teams have supported **training of Ethiopian forces**.
- The Ethiopian military requires **fresh training and modern equipment** to replace **aging Soviet-era systems**. A **new MoU on defence cooperation** and the **first Joint Defence Cooperation Committee meeting** provide an institutional framework.
- Ethiopia has **responsibly repaid earlier Indian lines of credit** under the **IDEAS programme**, enabling consideration of **new defence-related credit**.

**Future Prospects**

- Ethiopia's **BRICS membership** and interest in **Indian investment** in **pharmaceuticals, agro-processing, light manufacturing and mining** signal a new phase.
- Updating the **DTAA** and **Bilateral Investment Treaty** could boost private-sector engagement.
- Investor concerns persist over **foreign exchange availability, taxation, approvals and regulatory consistency**, highlighted by the **Indian diaspora**.
- Platforms such as **BRICS, G-20 and South-South cooperation**, along with **AfCFTA**, enhance Ethiopia's role as a **hub for Indian enterprises**.
- India's **duty-free tariff preference scheme** remains important amid global trade uncertainties.

- With **renewed political will, targeted reforms and strategic alignment**, **India–Ethiopia relations** can evolve into a **dynamic and mutually beneficial partnership**.

## A people-led climate intelligence movement

- **Monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) systems** have become central to climate transparency. COP30 reinforced this through the Global Implementation Tracker, the Belém Mission to 1.5°C, and voluntary indicators for the Global Goal on Adaptation.
- Under the **Paris Agreement**, countries must **track emissions, adaptation progress, and climate finance** to show movement towards their **Nationally Determined Contributions**.

### India and Climate Finance

- **India aligns with this direction**, emphasising that **stronger domestic MRV is essential** both for **transparency** and for **unlocking climate finance**.
- Developing countries **need substantial financial and technical support** to build such systems.
- **Climate finance must not only increase in scale but also shift power downwards** to frontline communities like the Indigenous Peoples, and local communities.

### Limitations of Existing MRV Systems

- MRV systems still rely heavily on remote sensing, administrative datasets, and external expertise, leaving **little room for community-generated insights**.

### Tamil Nadu's Community-based MRV (CbMRV)

- Tamil Nadu's community-based environmental MRV (CbMRV) initiative makes **community-generated environmental intelligence a formal part of climate governance**.
  - It enables **villages to generate systematic, science-ready environmental data**. It weaves traditional ecological knowledge with field-based monitoring of rainfall, temperature, soil and water health, biodiversity, fish catch, cropping patterns, livelihoods, and even carbon stocks and emissions.
  - **CbMRV reframes governance as a partnership between communities and institutions**, rather than a **top-down exercise**. The initiative **began in 2023 under the UK PACT programme**.

### Institutionalisation

- The aim is **long-term institutionalisation** and a **permanent green workforce**.
- Training tools are proposed for **community colleges**, **Industrial Training Institutes**, **forestry and agricultural institutions**, **Panchayat Raj training centres**, and **State skill development programmes**.
- With sustained support, community monitors can maintain **long-term environmental baselines** and replicate the system across **wider geographies**.

## Are methane emissions in India being missed?

- **Methane**, which is **84 times more potent than $CO_2$ over 20 years**, fuels **landfill fires** and accounts for **~15% of India's methane emissions**, making the **waste sector a high-impact, short-term climate action area**.
- Traditional **model-based estimates** of landfill methane rely on poor, outdated data, while **ground-level monitoring** is costly and difficult to scale, limiting hotspot identification.
- **Satellite-based monitoring** offers a breakthrough, with studies by **Indian Space Research Organisation** identifying major methane emitters like **Ghazipur, Pirana, Deonar and Kanjurmarg**, prompting action by the **National Green Tribunal**.
- **Satellite observations show emissions far higher than official models**, with some single landfills emitting **nearly as much methane as entire city or State waste-sector estimates**, exposing major data gaps.
- The solution lies in a **satellite–ground feedback loop**, where space-based detection guides **targeted local interventions**(fixing leaks, improving gas capture), and ground data improves satellite accuracy.
- An **integrated governance approach** linking urban local bodies, pollution control boards, **Swachh Bharat Mission**, and bodies like **Commission for Air Quality Management** can turn landfill methane into a **climate mitigation and energy opportunity** (e.g., Bio-CNG under Gobardhan).

## Why are OBC lists in Bengal being scrutinised?

- **National Commission for Backward Classes (NCBC)** has recommended **excluding 35 of 37 communities (mostly Muslim)** added in **2014** from **West Bengal's Central OBC list**, as disclosed by the **Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment**.
- These communities were earlier included based on findings of the **State Commission for Backward Classes**, citing **social, educational, and economic backwardness**, low representation in services, and historical caste-based discrimination, including parallels with SC/OBC groups in other States.

- The original inclusion aligned with broader assessments like the **Sachar Committee Report (2006)** and **Ranganath Mishra Committee Report (2007)**, which highlighted **persistent marginalisation of Dalit-origin Muslim communities** even after religious conversion.
- Since **2022**, the NCBC reviewed West Bengal's OBC lists, arguing that **religion appeared to be the dominant criterion**, a view echoed by the **Calcutta High Court** in **2024** (order later stayed by the **Supreme Court of India**).
- The **Supreme Court** has sought **quantifiable data** on backwardness and representation in public employment, questioning the adequacy of earlier evidence used for inclusion.
- Any change now requires **Parliamentary approval and Presidential notification** under the **Constitution (102nd) Amendment Act, 2018**, unlike 2014 when the executive could notify OBC lists directly.

## Bill for overhaul of higher education regulatory framework likely soon

- In its **Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan Bill, 2025**, set to be introduced in **Parliament** this **Winter Session**, the **Union government** proposed an **overhaul of the regulatory framework** of **higher education**.
- Bill proposes a **12-member Viksit Bharat Shiksha Adhishthan (VBSA)** as an **umbrella commission**. Under **VBSA**, separate councils for **regulatory (viniyaman)**, **accreditation (gunvatta)**, and **standards (manak)** will operate.
- The Bill seeks to **subsume the functions** of the **University Grants Commission (UGC)**, **AICTE**, and **NCTE**.
- It proposes that the **UGC's grants-disbursal function** be carried out through **mechanisms devised by the Ministry of Education**.
- Citing the **National Education Policy, 2020**, the government said the Bill would **enable and empower universities** to achieve **excellence in teaching, learning, research and innovation**.
- The **VBSA** will consist of **12 members**, with each council having **up to 14 members**.
- The law will apply to **Central and State universities**, **colleges**, and **higher education institutions**, including **technical**, **teacher**, and **architectural education** institutions. It includes **institutions of national importance** and **institutes of eminence**.
- The Bill **exempts professional programmes** such as **medicine**, **dentistry**, **law**, **pharmacology**, **nursing**, and **veterinary sciences**.
- The **Accreditation Council** is mandated to develop an **outcome-based institutional accreditation framework**.
- The **Regulatory Council** will set **standards for foreign universities** approved by the **Centre** to operate in **India**.
- It will also facilitate **high-performing universities** to set up **campuses abroad**.
- The Bill mandates developing a **policy to prevent commercialisation of higher education**.