



“Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall.”

— Oliver Goldsmith

# **Important Issues of the Day**

- **WorldHappinessReport 2026 –Prelims**
- **CEC selection – Page No. 1, GS 2**
- **Mahad Satyagraha – Page No.1 , GS 1**
- **section 377 – Page No.1 , GS 2**
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World Happiness Report 2026



- **Recently, the Oxford Wellbeing Research Centre published the World Happiness Report 2026 in partnership with Gallup and the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network on the UN International Day of Happiness (20th March).**

### **Key Findings**

- **Global Rankings: Finland remains the world's happiest country for the 9th consecutive year, followed by Iceland (2nd) and Denmark (3rd). Costa Rica emerged as a standout performer, rising to 4th place (23rd in 2023) while Israel ranked 8th.**
  
- **Afghanistan remains the unhappiest country globally (147th), followed by Sierra Leone (146th) and Malawi (145th). Among BRICS members, China ranked 65th followed by Russia (79th), and Iran (97th).**

- **Absence of Anglosphere:** For the 2nd consecutive year, no English-speaking countries feature in the Top 10. Notable rankings include New Zealand (11th), Ireland (13th), Australia (15th), United States (23rd), Canada (25th), and the United Kingdom (29th).
- **India's Performance:** India ranks 116th out of 147 countries, showing a marginal improvement from its 118th position in 2025. India continues to trail behind several neighbours; Nepal (99th) and Pakistan (104th) rank higher, while Bangladesh (127th) and Sri Lanka (134th) are lower.
- **Measurement Criteria:** Rankings are determined by life evaluations (Cantril Ladder) and analyzed through six key variables i.e., GDP per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, freedom, generosity, and perceptions of corruption.
- **"Goldilocks" Rule of Social Media:** Researchers found that moderate use (under 1 hour/day) is actually better for well-being than zero use, but the global average has climbed to 2.5 hours/day, crossing into the "harmful" zone.

# CJI shifts petitions against CEC selection law to another Bench

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

On Friday, the Chief Justice of India (CJI) Surya Kant expressed his reluctance to continue hearing a series of petitions challenging a law that replaced the CJI with a Union Minister in the selection panel for the appointments of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) and Election Commissioners (ECs).

Chief Justice Kant said that as the petitions challenging the CEC and other ECs (Appointment, Condi-

tions of Service, and Term of Office) Act of 2023 relate to the office of the CJI, he would not like a Supreme Court Bench headed by him to hear the case as that would expose his office to criticism of conflict of interest.

Advocate Prashant Bhushan, appearing for one of the petitioners, the Association for Democratic Reforms, suggested the case be shifted to a Bench which does not have a prospective CJI either as the lead or associate judge.

Acknowledging Mr.

Bhushan's recommendation, the Chief Justice said, "I should mark this matter to a Bench where the judge may not be in line to become the CJI. Then nobody can say anything." The Bench listed the case on April 7 before an appropriate Bench.

## **The main contention**

The petitioners argued that the 2023 law was introduced to dilute a Constitution Bench ruling delivered in March 2023 in *Anoop Baranwal vs Union of India*, which had includ-

ed the CJI as a member of the high-powered selection committee involved in the appointments of the CEC and the ECs.

The bone of contention is the validity of Section 7(1) of the statute.

The provision mandated that the President would appoint the CECs and ECs on the recommendation of a selection committee comprising the Prime Minister, the Leader of Opposition in the Lok Sabha and a Union Cabinet Minister to be nominated by the Prime Minister.

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## **Mains Question**

“The independence of the Election Commission of India is central to ensuring free and fair elections, yet concerns persist regarding its functional autonomy.” Critically examine the challenges to ECI’s independence and suggest reforms.

भारत के निर्वाचन आयोग की स्वतंत्रता स्वतंत्र एवं निष्पक्ष चिन्तन सुनिश्चित करके के लिए अत्यंत महत्त्वपूर्ण है, फिर भी इसकी कार्यात्मक स्वायत्तता को फिर चर्चाएं भी हुई हैं। ECI की स्वतंत्रता के समक्ष चुनौतियों का समीचीन वार्षिक की शक्ति तथा सुधार सुझाए।

# Crowds throng lake for Mahad Satyagraha at 99

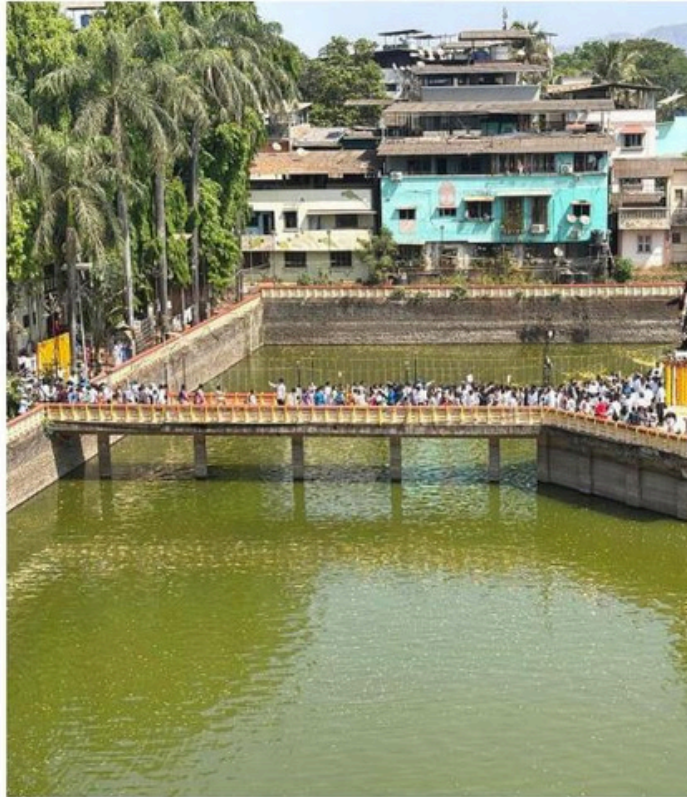
**Vinaya Deshpande Pandit**  
MAHAD (RAIGAD)

Shobha Dhone, a farm labourer from Marathwada's Latur, travelled over 450 km to reach Mahad on Friday. On the steps of Chavdar Tale, she broke into a song in Marathi to recall how Dalits were once denied water from the public tank.

"Cattle were allowed to drink water from the water body, but not the Dalits. He [Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar opened the doors to Chavdar Tale (lake) for us," the song in Marathi meant.

Septuagenarian Taibai Dhonde from Nanded cut her off, saying, "Our people were suffering without water. He fought for the entire society, not for any particular community."

Ninety-nine years ago, on March 20, 1927, Ambedkar led thousands to drink water from the public tank, asserting the right of the then "untouchable" communities to use public facil-



**Remembering the revolution** People gather at Chavdar Tale to mark 99 years of the Mahad Satyagraha on Friday. MAYUR BARGAJE

ities. This movement occurred three years before the Salt Satyagraha or Dandi March.

On Friday, the beginning of the centenary year

of the historic Mahad Satyagraha, the small town in coastal Maharashtra's Raigad resembled a pilgrimage site. Dressed in white, scores of families walked in

as temporary roadside stalls sold statues of Gautam Buddha, Ambedkar, jewellery, books and memorabilia. On the occasion, the Maharashtra government launched a Chavdar Tale water purification and premises beautification project with Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis performing the *bhoomi poojan*.

## Taking legacy forward

Speaking about the movement, CPI(M) general secretary M.A. Baby said it was important to take the legacy of social transformation to the masses throughout the year.

The CPI(M), along with Jaati Ant Sangharsha Samiti, All India Kisan Sabha, CITU and AIDWA, held a two-day human rights convention and protest march in Mahad on March 19-20.

The Congress also organised a programme in Mahad on the occasion. Speaking at the event, Tushar Gandhi, the great-

grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, drew parallels between Mahad Satyagraha and the Salt Satyagraha. Maharashtra Congress president Harshwardhan Sapkal termed Chavdar Tale water as "nectar of equality".

## Large gathering again

December 25 will mark the centenary of the burning of the *Manusmriti* by Ambedkar in Mahad. The CPI (M), along with All India Kisan Sabha and other organisations, plans to hold a larger gathering in Mahad then. "It will reaffirm the continued relevance of anti-caste and anti-capitalist struggles rooted in the historic legacy of Mahad," a party leader said.

"This government wants to strengthen *Manusmriti*, which will indirectly strengthen the caste system. We want to protect the Constitution of the country," said CPI(M) Polit Bureau member Mariam Dhawale.

- **The historic Mahad Satyagraha marks its 99th anniversary and the beginning of its centenary year on 20th March 2026. This day is also officially observed across India as Social Empowerment Day to commemorate this landmark movement led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in 1927.**
- **In 1923, social reformer S.K. Bole passed a resolution in the Bombay Legislative Council mandating that public water sources, wells, and dharamshalas be opened to the Depressed Classes.**
- **The Mahad Municipal Council adopted this resolution in 1924, but severe resistance from dominant-caste Hindus prevented the Depressed Classes from actually accessing the town's Chavdar Tale (Chowder Tank).**
- **In response, the Mahad Satyagraha was launched under Dr. B.R. Ambedkar to assert the legal and moral right of Dalits to access the Chavdar Tank.**

## **Events of the Mahad Satyagraha (1927):**

- **March for Dignity (1927):** On 20th March 1927, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar led a peaceful march to the Chavdar Tank and drank water from it, breaking a centuries-old caste taboo and asserting equality.
- **Violent Backlash:** Upper-caste groups attacked protestors amid rumours of temple entry. The tank was symbolically “purified” with cow dung and urine, reflecting caste prejudice.
- **Burning of Manusmriti:** Dr. Ambedkar planned a second Satyagraha in December 1927 but was blocked by a court injunction filed by upper-caste Hindus claiming the tank was private property.
- **Ambedkar did not access the tank again but burned the Manusmriti, rejecting caste ideology.**
- **Legal Victory (1937):** After a decade-long struggle, the Bombay High Court ruled in favor of Dr. Ambedkar, legally opening the tank to all communities.

**Q.The Vital-Vidhvansak, the first monthly journal to have the untouchable people as its target audience was published by (2020)**

**(a) Gopal Baba Walangkar**

**(b) Jyotiba Phule**

**(c) Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi**

**(d) Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar**

**Q.Satya Shodhak Samaj organized (2016)**

**(a) a movement for upliftment of tribals in Bihar**

**(b) a temple-entry movement in Gujarat**

**(c) an anti-caste movement in Maharashtra**

**(d) a peasant movement in Punjab**

# Delhi HC restores plea on absence of IPC Section 377-like provision in BNS

**The Hindu Bureau**  
NEW DELHI

The Delhi High Court on Friday said it will consider a public interest litigation seeking penal provisions in the criminal law for non-consensual unnatural sex, akin to section 377 of the erstwhile Indian Penal Code (IPC).

A Bench of Chief Justice D.K. Upadhyaya and Justice Tejas Karia restored the petition by Gantavya Gulati that was disposed of in August 2024 with a direction to the Centre to expeditiously decide his representation on the issue. The petition highlighted a “legal lacuna” following the enactment of the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), which does not contain a provision equivalent to Section 377. It argued that the absence of

**The High Court also rebuked the Centre over the delay of one and a half years in addressing the issue**

such a provision leaves victims, especially the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community, without a specific legal remedy against certain forms of sexual assault.

“The direction for consideration and taking a decision on the representation was issued by the court on August 28, 2024. A time period of one and a half years can be safely said to be reasonable time to take any decision. However, the decision is nowhere in sight. In view of the aforesaid, the writ petition is restored to its original num-

ber,” the court said.

The court also sought an affidavit from the Centre to state the steps taken by it to ensure compliance with the earlier direction.

The Central government counsel submitted that the petition raised a “sensitive issue” and inputs have been invited from the stakeholders.

Section 377, after the Supreme Court decriminalised consensual same-sex relations, continued to apply to non-consensual acts, offences involving minors, and bestiality. The BNS replaced the IPC from July 1, 2024. The petitioner contended that the absence of a similar provision creates a gap in protection, including in cases where a man is allegedly sexually assaulted by another man, requiring legislative intervention.

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- **gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community, without a specific legal remedy against certain forms of sexual assault.**

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- **LGBTQIA+ is an acronym that represents lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual.**
- **The "+" represents the many other identities that are still being explored and understood. The acronym is constantly evolving and may include other terms like non-binary and pansexual.**

## **Recognition of LGBTQIA+ in India:**

- **The Delhi High Court in Naz Foundation v. Government of NCT of Delhi (2009) held that criminalising sexual activities with consent in private not only impairs the dignity of those persons, but it is also discriminatory and impacts the health of those people.**
- **The Delhi High Court decriminalised homosexuality on the grounds that Section 377 is a violation of Article 14, 15 and 21.**
- **Supreme Court, in Suresh Kumar Koushal v. Naz Foundation (2013) case, set aside the Delhi High Court judgment and said that homosexuality under Section 377 of IPC is illegal and will continue to be an offense.**
- **2014: The Supreme Court recognizes transgender people as a "third gender" in National Legal Services Authority V/s Union of India Case.**
- **2018: In a historic decision, the Supreme Court strikes down Section 377, decriminalizing same-sex relationships in Navtej Singh Johar v. Union of India.**

## Restoring rights

### Adoptive mothers have the same rights as biological mothers

**C**ourts with a tinge of judicial activism have expansively interpreted the Constitution to secure fresh rights for citizens, over the years. In the latest instance, a view that encompasses evolving social systems, and a keen feminist perspective, taken by the highest court in the land, has recognised maternity leave for working women as a basic human right. The Court ruled that adoptive mothers are entitled to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, regardless of the child's age at the time of adoption, thus striking down a previous restriction allowing maternity leave only for women who had applied for adopting children less than three months of age. The judgment, delivered by Justices J.B. Pardiwala and R. Mahadevan, came in response to petitioner Ham-saanandini Nanduri challenging this provision in the Maternity Benefit Act, recently replaced by the Code on Social Security. She also pointed out that the legal process of adoption itself took over three months to be completed. The judges observed that an adoptive mother had the same rights and obligations towards the child as a biological mother. Reading adoption as an 'expression of reproductive autonomy', the Court said that the emotional bond with the child has to be consciously nurtured through time, presence

of reproductive autonomy', the Court said that the emotional bond with the child has to be consciously nurtured through time, presence and sustained caregiving. "Adoption is an equally valid pathway for the creation of a family. It is not biology that constitutes a family of a mother, father, and children, rather, it is the shared meaning, responsibility, and emotional bonds that sustain such a relationship," it explained. Maternity benefit is extended to working women during the early phase of motherhood to support them financially and provide economic security without them having to depend on family members. This equally applies to biological and adoptive mothers. Further, the judges urged the government to legally recognise paternity leave as a social security benefit, noting that parenthood is not a solitary function performed by one parent alone.

The judges have, with one judgment, conferred equal rights to adoptive parents, and restored child rearing to a gender-neutral parenting paradigm. The patriarchal enabling system has feminised raising children, leading to it being undervalued or inadequately compensated, if it ever is. Nobel winner Claudia Goldin's work has identified that the gender pay gap often emerges with the birth of a first child. The top court has given India an opportunity to set right the inadequate laws governing maternity leave in adoption, and to a large extent, the gender imbalance in society. It is the duty now of the state to make sure that this progressive judgment finds effective implementation in every corner of the country.

- **The Court ruled that adoptive mothers are entitled to 12 weeks of paid maternity leave, regardless of the child's age at the time of adoption, thus striking down a previous restriction allowing maternity leave only for women who had applied for adopting children less than three months of age.**
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- **This equally applies to biological and adoptive mothers.**
- **Further, the judges urged the government to legally recognise paternity leave as a social security benefit, noting that parenthood is not a solitary function performed by one parent alone.**

- **Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017:** The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961, as amended in 2017, provides paid maternity leave and related benefits to women employees both before and after childbirth.
  - **Applicability:** The Act applies to factories, mines, plantations, government establishments, shops, and other workplaces with 10 or more employees.
- **Women covered under the Employees' State Insurance Act, 1948** are also entitled to maternity benefits.
- **Maternity Leave:** Women are entitled to 26 weeks of paid maternity leave for up to two children, and 12 weeks for with more than two i.e., the Act does not prohibit maternity leave for women with more than two children; it only limits the duration based on the number of children.

# Making It Easy For Mothers

The Maternity Benefit (Amendment) Act, 2017 amends the Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 to provide the following

**26 weeks** maternity leave for the first two children

**12 weeks** maternity leave for children beyond the first two

**12 weeks** leave for mothers adopting a child below the age of three months



The Act makes it mandatory for employers in establishment with 30 women or 50 employees, whichever is less, to provide creche facilities either in office or in any place within 500-meters.

**Working mothers** will be permitted to make four visits

during working hours to the creche

**The employer** may permit a woman to work from home if it is possible to do so

**Every establishment** will have to make these benefits available from the time of appointment

## **Mains Question**

“The Maternity Benefit Act, 1961 (amended in 2017) aims to safeguard the employment and health of working women, yet its implementation remains limited.” Critically examine the effectiveness of the Act and highlight key challenges.

मातृत्व िाभ अचधनियम, 1961 (2017 में संशोधित) कायरात महहिओं के रीगारऔर  
स्त्रास्य की सुरक्षा का उद्देचय रखता है, फिर भी इसका फियान्त्रिय सीलमत रहाहै।  
अचधनियम की प्रभाशीता का समीोचिात्मक परीक्षर् कीशएि तथा प्रमुखु चिुनतयों  
को उिगर कीशएि।

# India's Iran stance does fuel a foreign policy debate

Page No. 8, GS 2

A debate, for the most part civilised, is going on in India about foreign policy. The provocation for the debate is the ongoing Israeli-American war on Iran, now in its third week and India's response to it.

I belong to the tribe of 'professional' diplomats. We consider ourselves experts with special skills to propound on foreign policy issues. It is true that we are trained to read between the lines and to research whatever issue occupies the attention of the international community at a given time. However, it is not as if we are born with a particular gift for foreign policy; the gift or expertise is cultivated over a period of time. Almost anybody can handle foreign policy with experience and exposure to the issues. Everyone has an opinion on foreign policy, and it would not be correct to dismiss those opinions as ill-informed or irrelevant.

## The two sides

The debate is argued between those who generally support the government's stand on the war, which began on February 28, and those who criticise it as weak-kneed or surrendering to the Americans, or as hostile to Iran, a close and civilisational friend. The deliberate decision not to condole the assassination of Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has come in for particular criticism.

Foreign policy is an instrument in the hands of the government to protect and promote the country's national interests. It follows that it is within the province of the government of the day to define what the national interests are and how to protect them. Some interests are sui generis, such as defending the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country. For a country such as India, the improvement in the standard of living of its citizens is an extremely important objective.

In a highly globalised and interdependent world, this task imposes on the government the duty to chart its policy with deliberation and calculation. A government led by one party may take one position whereas a government led by another party may take another. The same party may take one position when in opposition but might pursue that very policy when in power. The Congress-led government under Manmohan Singh decided that obtaining the nuclear deal



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New Delhi's Iran policy may be influenced by U.S.-Israel dynamics in the war

with America was in India's interest whereas the Bharatiya Janata Party at the time opposed the deal. Once in power, it went beyond what even the previous government had not agreed; it absolved the suppliers of nuclear reactors from any liability, for accident or defect in the reactors.

Foreign policy often is, but should not be, influenced by the ideological orientation of the ruling party. If it is to adhere strictly to the objective of promoting national interest, it cannot afford to be too concerned about principles or rights and wrongs. At times, a particular position might offend our sense of justice or morality, but the government of the day will have to make an objective decision, even if it is not popular.

Equally important, the government must explain to the people the rationale for its decision. In a democracy, this is extremely important. People, certainly the Indian people, are fully capable of understanding and approving or disapproving of the government's actions.

## Labels and policy

Much time and intellectual energy is spent on giving a label to foreign policy. The one currently in fashion is 'strategic autonomy'. By adding the word 'strategic', it sounds profound and gives the impression of a concept beyond the understanding of ordinary citizens. But then, why 'autonomy'? Why not 'independent'? Is not independence more precious than autonomy? P.V. Narasimha Rao used to say that Kashmiris can have as much autonomy as they want, but not independence. In any case, why give any label at all? How many countries have given adjectives to their foreign policy? If a name has to be given, just call it 'independent'.

The best definition of foreign policy was given by Jawaharlal Nehru in a letter to Einstein written a few weeks before India's independence. Foreign policy, Nehru wrote, essentially is selfish. The only principle it follows is the principle of national interest.

The Narendra Modi government is essentially following Nehru's foreign policy, that is 'selfish' foreign policy. Its approach to the Iran war seems to be based on a cold calculation that India has too much at stake with America and the Gulf states. America is India's largest trading partner, and India needs its support for state-of-the-art

technology, especially for developing India's defence capabilities. As for the Gulf countries, nearly 10 million Indians are working there. Their welfare is of overriding concern. They send hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of remittances back home. Collectively, the Gulf countries are a most valuable source for India's energy needs.

## Application of 'strategic autonomy'

These are valid considerations. Nevertheless, within the parameters of these factors, the government could and should have shown some 'strategic autonomy'. No harm would have been done if the assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei had been condoned or if the External Affairs Minister rather than the Foreign Secretary had signed the condolence book in the Iranian Embassy in Delhi. Since the Prime Minister did speak to the Iranian President to press for the safety of the 9,000-strong Indian community in Iran, would it not have been proper for him to also express condolences for the assassination?

His telephone conversations with the leaders of the Gulf states would surely have ensured their support to take care of India's citizens living there. The fact that Iran has allowed oil tankers destined for India safe passage through the Strait of Hormuz speaks not so much to the success of India's diplomacy as to the graciousness of the Iranians. Despite India's unfriendly attitude, Iran took a friendly approach towards India. In the final analysis, India needs to be on the winning side. The government has obviously concluded that the Israeli-American coalition will come out the winner and that Iran will be defeated or surrender.

There is also the question of the Prime Minister's visit to Israel (February 25-26, 2026), its timing more than the visit per se. It was evident from watching his address to the Israeli Knesset that he was deeply moved by the warm reception that was accorded to him by its members. His visit was a demonstration of the ideological affinity that he feels with Israel and, more so with its Prime Minister. That Israel and the U.S. were going to attack Iran any day was known to all those following such matters. The timing of the visit was unfortunate.

Let the debate continue.

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# 'Undemocratic' politics in Great Nicobar over land

Page No.8 , GS 3

**I**n January 18 this year a Great Nicobar Island based online news portal, [www.nicobartimes.com](http://www.nicobartimes.com), published an important news item related to the mega-infrastructure project on the island that has been headline news across the country for many months now. This particular issue has, however, barely been noticed, leave alone creating anything close to even a ripple.

The report, "DEF-GNI Objects to Low Minimum Circle Rates Fixed for Villages of Campbell Bay Tehsil, Seeks Revision Ahead of Airport Land Acquisition", highlighted the grievances of the Great Nicobar's settler (non-tribal) community in the matter of the compensation being awarded for their land that is being acquired for the mega-project under the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (RFCTLARR) Act, 2013. About 300 families of ex-servicemen were settled in Great Nicobar between 1969 and 1975 for which about 40 square kilometres were de-notified from the Tribal Reserve. The descendants of these settlers now form the majority of the population here. "The Dependents and Ex-Servicemen Forum for Equitable Negotiation, Compensation & Entitlements - Great Nicobar Island (DEF-GNI)", the report noted, "has raised strong objections to the minimum circle rates fixed for villages under Campbell Bay Tehsil, terming them unreasonably low and unjust."

## **Inadequate compensation**

At the heart of the matter is the low rates of compensation, ranging from ₹113 to ₹180 per square metre, they are being offered as against the ₹11,370 - ₹20,500 per square metre offered in the Andaman islands when land is acquired for tourism projects. The forum requested that the rates be fixed in a manner that ensures a minimum compensation of not less than ₹1 crore per acre of agricultural land to affected landowners.

The matter has also been raised regularly by the lone Member of Parliament (MP) from the



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is the author/editor of seven books on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the latest being 'The Great Nicobar Betrayal' (Frontline Magazine, 2024) and 'Island on Edge - The Great Nicobar Crisis' (2025)

Inequities arise between settler families and original islanders over land compensation for the Great Nicobar mega-infrastructure project

Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Bishnu Pada Ray of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). In December, he had written to the Prime Minister and the Home Minister making a number of related points: that the land was being acquired from ex-servicemen settler families who were originally brought here by the government to serve strategic and national security purposes; these families had already faced two major displacements, one during the initial settlement and then again after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami; there were major procedural violations in the land acquisition process; there were serious deficiencies in the social impact assessment carried out for this land, and that compensation being offered should be ₹32 lakh per hectare as against ₹9 lakh being offered currently.

There are two things that stand out: first the claim makers – the MP included – are explicit that they, the settler families, are not opposing the project. Their only request is adherence to due process and ensuring that no family is left without land or livelihood.

The second is the deep contradiction at the heart of (un)democratic representation and politics here: the settler community and their representatives, while seen seeking fairness and justice over their own land, are also collaborating with the same authorities in alienating land, livelihood and the resources of Great Nicobar's tribal communities (the Shompen and the Great Nicobarese) to make it available for the same project.

## **Alienating tribal lands**

In a process marked by serious substantive and procedural impropriety, nearly 84 sq.km of legally notified tribal reserve is sought to be denotified and handed over to project authorities. Everyone from local agencies such as the Andaman and Nicobar Tribal Welfare Department, to the local settler communities, to national level bodies such as the Union Ministries of Environment and of Tribal Affairs have been complicit.

Evidence of this can be seen in the near-complete absence of the Shompen in discussions, the pressure being exerted on the Nicobarese to 'voluntarily' surrender their lands for the project, the public and vociferous support expressed by settlers and authorities, and the explicit violation of provisions of the Forest Rights Act, in which representatives of the settler community have signed documents freeing up tribal reserve land for the project.

## **Pertinent issues being ignored**

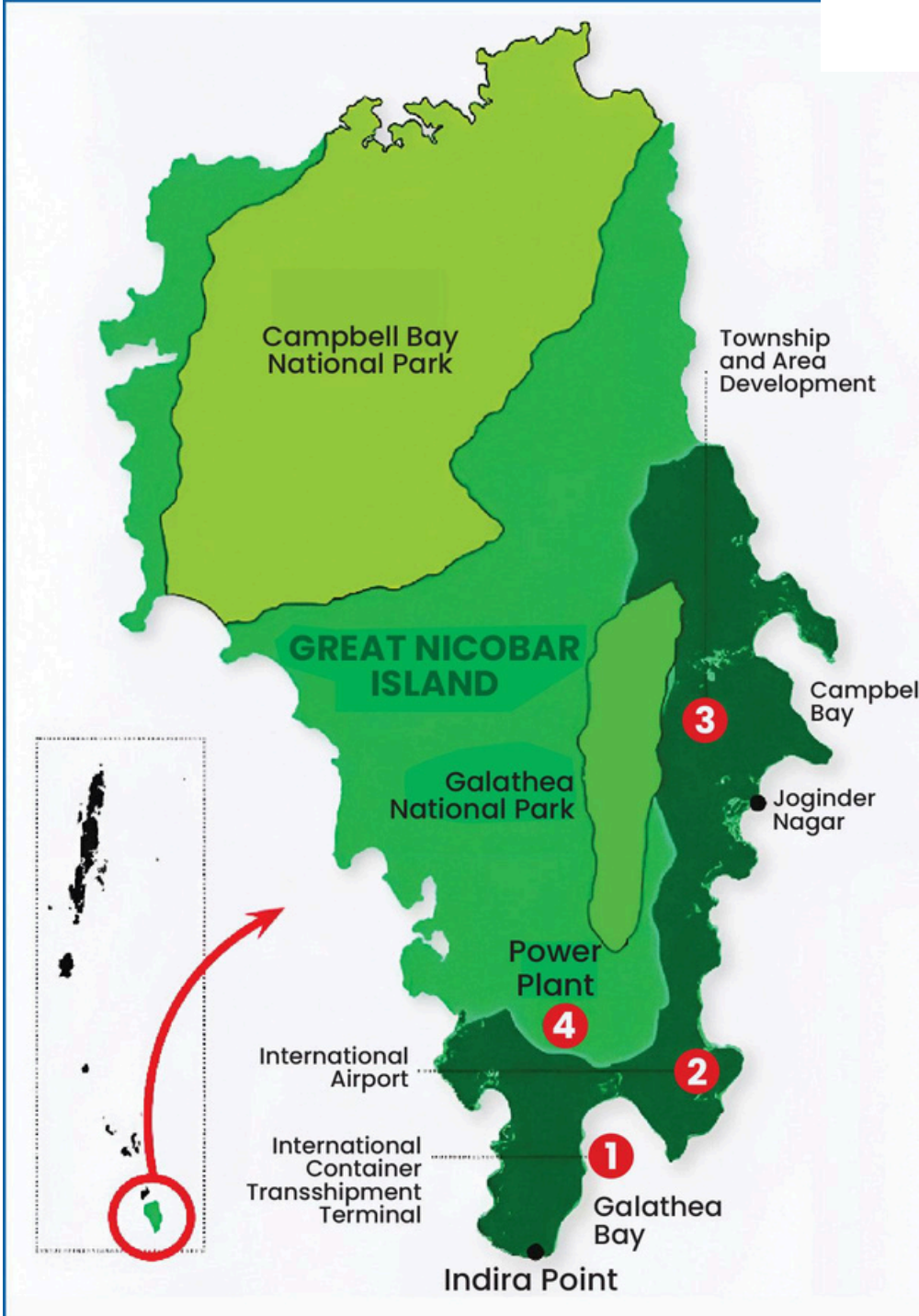
No one can deny the right of the settlers to adequate compensation. But what about the original islanders such as the nomadic hunter gatherer Shompen that is notified as a particularly vulnerable tribal group, a PVTG? They may not want compensation because they have no use for the money we offer. What about the Nicobarese who wish to return to their traditional pre-tsunami lands and settlements but are not being provided the means to do so? And what of the impact on lives, livelihoods and cultures of these communities that are completely dependent on the sea and the forests? What also of the pristine forests and unique biodiversity that will be lost forever?

This situation underlines multiple things at the same time. On the ground it highlights the stark nature of (un)democratic local politics as adjacent communities are forced into competition and conflict over land and resources. At the macro level, it highlights how local communities and rights to resources are only minor pawns in the larger geo-political and development agendas of the state, of its larger political economy, and indeed the rhetoric of national sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

The contradictions might not be visible to the local settler communities or perhaps they do not have the agency or the choice. The same surely cannot be said for the state, the nation and for society at large. There is much for us to think about and ponder over.

*The views expressed are personal*

- On January 18 this year a Great Nicobar Island based online news portal, [www.nicobartimes.com](http://www.nicobartimes.com), published an important news item related to the mega-infrastructure project on the island that has been headline news across the country for many months now.
- At the heart of the matter is the low rates of compensation, ranging from ₹113 to ₹180 per square metre, they are being offered as against the ₹11,370 - ₹20,500 per square metre offered in the Andaman islands when land is acquired for tourism projects.
- The forum requested that the rates be fixed in a manner that ensures a minimum compensation of not less than ₹1 crore per acre of agricultural land to affected landowners.
- In a process marked by serious substantive and procedural impropriety, nearly 84 sq.km of legally notified tribal reserve is sought to be denotified and handed over to project authorities.



- **The Great Nicobar Island (GNI) Project, conceived by the NITI Aayog and launched in 2021, is a mega infrastructure initiative aimed at transforming the southernmost island of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago into a strategic and economic hub. It aligns with India's Maritime Vision 2030 and Amrit Kaal Vision 2047.**
- **Project Overview: It involves development at Galathea Bay, Pemmaya Bay, and Nanjappa Bay. The island is approximately equidistant from Colombo (Sri Lanka), Port Klang (Malaysia), and Singapore, placing India at the centre of regional sea trade.**

#### **Key Infrastructure Components:**

- **International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT): Aimed at enabling Great Nicobar to become a major player in the regional and global maritime economy by participating in cargo transshipment.**
- **Greenfield International Airport: To enhance civilian connectivity, tourism, and provide dual-use defence capability.**
- **Greenfield Township: To support the projected population and economic activities.**
- **Gas and Solar-Based Power Plant: To meet the energy requirements of the new infrastructure.**

- **Andaman and Nicobar Islands:** It consists of 836 islands, geographically divided into the Andaman group to the north and the Nicobar group to the south by the Ten Degree Channel, which is approximately 150 km wide.  
**Great Nicobar Island:** It is the largest island in the Nicobar group, predominantly covered with tropical rainforest. It hosts Indira Point, the southernmost point of India, located just 90 nautical miles from Sumatra, Indonesia.  
**Ecological Significance:** The island is home to two national parks namely Campbell Bay National Park and Galathea Bay National Park. It also contains the Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve, which was included in the UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme in 2013.  
**Demographic Profile:** The island has small populations of indigenous tribal communities, including the Shompen and Nicobarese, along with a few thousand non-tribal settlers. Other indigenous tribes historically associated with the region include the Onge and Andamanese.
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- PVTGs is a sub-classification of Scheduled Tribes that are more vulnerable than regular Scheduled Tribes due to their limited access to education, healthcare, and modern infrastructure.
- These groups are often referred to as "primitive" because of their traditional lifestyles and limited exposure to modern amenities.

Article 342(1) allows the President, after consulting the Governor (in the case of a state), to specify tribes or tribal communities as Scheduled Tribes in a State/UT.

Identification Timeline: In 1973, the Dhebar Commission classified Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) as a

- distinct category for the least developed tribal groups, which were later renamed PVTGs by the Government of India in 2006.

- In 1975, India began identifying the most vulnerable tribal groups as PVTGs, initially declaring 52 groups, with an additional 23 added in 1993, bringing the total to 75 PVTGs out of 705 Scheduled Tribes.

- Population: Odisha has the highest number of PVTGs (13), followed by Andhra Pradesh and Telangana (12).

**Consider the following statements about Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India: (2019)**

- 1. PVTGs reside in 18 States and one Union Territory.**
  - 2. A stagnant or declining population is one of the criteria for determining PVTG status.**
  - 3. 4 There are 95 PVTGs officially notified in the country so far.**
- Which of the statements given above are correct?**

- 1, 2 and 3**
- 2, 3 and 4**
- 1, 2 and 4**
- 1, 3 and 4**