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Current Affairs - 12 September 2025

WHAT ARE BIODIVERSITY HERITAGE SITES (BHS)?



- BHS are rich biodiversity areas and are important components of local ecosystems which are being conserved and managed by the society.
- BHS are unique ecosystems having rich biodiversity comprising any one or more of the following components:
 - Richness of wild as well as domesticated species or intra-specific categories.
 - High endemism.
 - Presence of rare and threatened species, keystone species, and species of evolutionary significance.
 - Wild ancestors of domestic/cultivated species or their varieties.
 - Past pre-eminence of biological components represented by fossil beds and having significant cultural, ethical or aesthetic values and are important for the maintenance of cultural diversity, with or without a long history of human association with them.
- They may spread over terrestrial, aquatic, coastal and inland and marine ecosystems having rich biodiversity.
- Under Section-37 of the Biological Diversity Act, 2002, the State Government, in consultation with local bodies, may notify areas of biodiversity importance as BHS.
- State Governments are empowered to frame schemes for compensating or rehabilitating any person or section of people economically affected by such notification.
- The State Government, in consultation with the Central Government, may frame rules for the management and conservation of BHS.
- The creation of BHS may not put any restriction on the prevailing practices and usages of the local communities other than those voluntarily decided by them.



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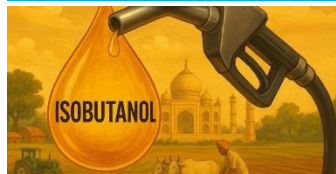
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WHAT IS ISOBUTANOL?



• Isobutanol, also called **isobutyl alcohol**, is an alcohol with the chemical formula $C_4H_{10}O$ and one of the four isomers of butanol.

- It is a **clear, colorless liquid** with a **characteristic odor**.
- It is only **moderately soluble in water**.
- It is **very flammable** and has a **flash point** that is only **slightly above normal room temperatures**.
- Its vapors are **heavier than air** and can **spread unnoticed along the ground**.
- **Skin contact, ingestion, and inhalation** of isobutanol can be **harmful to health**.
- The compound **causes skin irritation** and **severe eye damage**, including loss of vision.

Applications:

- It is **used as a solvent** in the **flavor, fragrance, pharmaceutical, and pesticide industries** and as a **chemical manufacturing ingredient** for products such as lacquer, paint strippers, paint primer, and craft paints.
- It is an approved **food additive** and is also **naturally occurring in some foods** and many **alcoholic beverages**.
- Isobutanol may also be **used as a biofuel** because, **like ethanol, it can be manufactured from plants**. It can be **made from ethanol using fermentation processes**.
- It possesses some favorable properties that make it an attractive fuel for internal combustion engines.
- For instance, when **compared to ethanol**, isobutanol features a **higher heating value**.
- Isobutanol is **less corrosive than ethanol** and is **much less hygroscopic**, which **enables it to be transported using the existing fuel infrastructure**.



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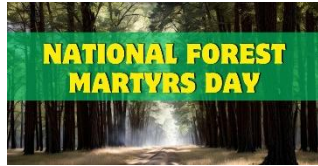
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NATIONAL FOREST MARTYRS DAY 2025



NATIONAL FOREST MARTYRS DAY

- It is observed annually on **September 11th** in India to **honor the sacrifices of those who have laid down their lives in defense of the country's forests and wildlife.**
- The day **honours protective environmentalists and personnel of the forest who have experienced certain risks in the process of conservation of natural resources.**
- **History:**
 - The day goes back to the memory of the **Khejarli Massacre**, which took place in **1730 in the Marwar Kingdom.**
 - The then **Maharaja Abhai Singh demanded Khejri trees from the Bishnoi village of Khejarli to be cut down** to provide timber for his new palace.
 - However, his action was **resisted by the Bishnoi community**, which has always been very sensitive towards the natural community.
 - Villagers **under the leadership of Amrita Devi Bishnoi protested by hugging trees** to safeguard them.
 - Unfortunately, **Devi and many other members of the village were slain while defending the trees.**
 - It was estimated that **363 of them died** while protesting.
 - Their legacy **inspired later conservation movements, including the Chipko Movement**, shaping India's environmental ethos.
 - In recognition of this sacrifice, the **Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change of India declared September 11 as the National Forest Martyrs Day in 2013.**

The day is **marked by memorial services, tree plantation drives, awareness campaigns, and educational events organised by the Ministry of Environment, state forest departments, and schools.**



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FAST TRACK IMMIGRATION-TRUSTED TRAVELLER PROGRAMME



- It is an initiative to **speed up the Immigration clearance process** for eligible persons from the following categories: **Indian Nationals and Foreign Nationals holding OCI Cards.**
- It was first launched at Delhi's **IGI Airport in 2024.**
- **Purpose:** It has been introduced with the purpose of **facilitating international mobility** with faster, smoother and secure immigration clearances.
- **FTI-TTP Enrollment Process**
 - The FTI-TTP has been **implemented through an online portal.**
 - To enroll in this program, applicants must register online on the portal by filling in their details and uploading the required documents.
 - The biometrics of registered applicants are collected at the Foreigners Regional Registration Office (FRRO) or while passing through the airport.
 - **Immigration Clearance Process**
 - **Boarding Pass Scan:** Registered travellers scan their boarding pass at the e-gates to retrieve flight details.
 - **Passport Scan:** The passport is scanned to confirm the traveller's identity.
 - **Biometric Authentication:** Biometrics is authenticated at the e-gates.
 - **Automated Clearance:** Once verified, the e-gate opens, completing the immigration process automatically.
 - **Validity of Registration:** It is valid until the **passport's expiry or five years**, whichever comes first, with an option for renewal.
 - Till now, this facility has been started at **13 airports across the country.**
 - **Nodal agency:** The **Bureau of Immigration**, under the Ministry of Home Affairs, is the nodal agency responsible for implementing the programme.



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VULTURES AND PUBLIC HEALTH: THEIR ROLE IN PREVENTING FUTURE PANDEMICS

- As India's National Action Plan for Vulture Conservation (2016–25) ends, the next phase highlights vultures as vital for pandemic preparedness.
- By swiftly consuming carcasses, they reduce risks of zoonotic spillover and act as the first line of defence in disease surveillance and carcass management.
- For centuries, vultures acted as nature's cleanup crew, preventing the spread of deadly pathogens such as anthrax, botulinum, and rabies.
- In the 1980s, carcass dumps swarmed with hundreds of vultures.
- India once had over 40 million vultures, but since the 1990s, numbers have plummeted by more than 95%, mainly due to the **veterinary drug diclofenac**.
- This decline is not just ecological — it poses a growing public health challenge by tying biodiversity loss to future pandemic risks.

Central Asian Flyway and Regional Linkages

- India's vultures are part of the **Central Asian Flyway (CAF)**, a vast migratory corridor connecting breeding grounds in Central Asia with wintering areas across South Asia.
- Spanning more than 30 countries, the CAF is used by millions of migratory birds, including raptors like vultures.
- As these birds move, they link ecosystems and disease risks across borders.
- Poorly managed landfills, carcass dumps, or stopover sites can quickly become hotspots for pathogen spillover.
- Thus, the CAF represents not just a biodiversity corridor but also a **public health corridor**, making regional cooperation crucial.

Conservation Challenges

- Despite this importance, conservation efforts remain fragmented and underfunded.
- Vulture protection is rarely integrated into **One Health strategies**, which link human, animal, and environmental health.



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- Infrastructure threats like electrocution from power lines and continued poisoning from toxic veterinary drugs remain largely unaddressed.
- Without stronger investment and policy alignment, regional ambitions to safeguard vultures — and in turn, human health — face major roadblocks.

Protecting India's Vultures Through a Post-2025 Strategy

- India's post-2025 vulture strategy could focus on **five key pillars**:
 - nationwide satellite telemetry to track habitats and hotspots;
 - a Decision Support System integrating wildlife, livestock, and health data;
 - stronger cross-sector coordination under the One Health framework;
 - transboundary collaboration through the Central Asian Flyway with global health commitments; and
 - community stewardship that empowers women, youth, and local groups in surveillance and awareness.
- Together, these measures would conserve vultures as keystone species, strengthen public health systems, reduce pandemic risks, and align with WHO's regional roadmap for health security.
- This approach shifts conservation from recovery to resilience, making India a leader in biodiversity-linked health security.

India's Opportunities in Linking Vulture Conservation with Health Security

- India has a unique chance to show **how biodiversity conservation can also serve as pandemic prevention**.
 - By integrating surveillance across human, animal, and environmental health, and cutting detection-to-response time, systemic resilience can be built at modest cost compared to outbreak losses.
 - With its significant share of Central Asian Flyway vulture species like **Himalayan griffon, cinereous, and Eurasian griffon**, India can scale telemetry, use Decision Support Systems, and embed vulture protection in One Health strategies.
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A 'HEALTH CHECK' FOR THE NEW GST HEALTH-CARE REFORMS

- One of the most significant reforms is the **complete removal of GST on individual health and life insurance premiums.**
- Earlier, families paying ₹50,000 annually for health insurance had to bear an additional ₹9,000 as GST, making coverage costlier.
- From **September 22, 2025**, this extra burden is removed, reducing costs by 18%.
- The exemption applies to all categories of **life insurance** — including **term, ULIP, and endowment policies** — as well as **health insurance plans** such as family floaters and senior citizen policies.

Business Impact of GST Cuts on Healthcare and Wellness

- **Cheaper Medicines and Medical Devices**
 - Most medicines are now taxed at 5%, while life-saving drugs are zero-rated.
 - Medical devices and diagnostics also fall under a uniform 5% slab, down from earlier higher rates.
- **Affordable Diagnostics and Services**
 - Laboratories themselves remain GST-exempt on services, but inputs like kits, reagents, and equipment are taxed less.
 - This should reduce procurement costs and may make blood tests, X-rays, MRIs, and other diagnostics cheaper if labs pass on the savings.
- **Push for Preventive Health**
 - The reforms go beyond treatment to encourage preventive health.
 - GST on gyms, yoga centres, fitness studios, salons, and wellness services has dropped from 18% to 5%, making healthy lifestyle choices more affordable.
- **Sin Goods and Sugary Drinks**
 - While healthy living gets a boost, harmful products face stricter taxation.
 - Cigarettes continue to attract 28% GST plus cess, leading to an effective tax >50%



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GST Reforms in Perspective

- The new GST reforms aim to align India's healthcare system with the **2047 Viksit Bharat vision** by easing financial barriers across the health-care chain.
 - Removal of GST on insurance, lower taxes on medicines and equipment, and reduced rates for preventive services create a more accessible and affordable framework.
 - However, the real measure of success will lie in outcomes: whether
 - more people can access treatment;
 - preventive services become routine;
 - consumer trust in healthcare strengthens;
 - misuse of antibiotics is curbed, and
 - ultimately, whether these changes save more lives.
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THE GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND PROJECT - A PROJECT OF A STRATEGIC AND NATIONAL IMPORTANCE

Strategic and Economic Significance

- The **location of Great Nicobar** at the mouth of the Malacca Strait makes it **vital for India's strategic interests**.
- A **modern transshipment hub** will allow India to compete with existing global shipping centres and reduce dependence on foreign ports.
- Likewise, **the airport and power facilities will strengthen connectivity and support both civilian and military operations** in a region of increasing geopolitical competition.

Environmental Scrutiny and Mitigation

- Given the island's **rich biodiversity and fragile ecosystem**, environmental safeguards have been emphasised in project documentation.
- Detailed **Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)** and **Environmental Management Plans (EMP)** were prepared, supported by inputs from reputed research organisations such as the **Zoological Survey of India, the Botanical Survey of India**.



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Challenges and the Way Forward: Balancing Development with Ecology and Identity

- The government frames the Great Nicobar Project as a synthesis of **economy and ecology**, promoting growth while safeguarding environment and culture.
- Its phased execution, stretching to 2047, demonstrates long-term vision. By limiting the footprint to just **2% of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands' total area**, proponents argue that the project balances ecological and strategic needs.
- However, **balancing growth with sustainability is complex**.
- Development-driven deforestation, compensatory afforestation outside the islands, and potential disruptions to **tribal ways of life raise fundamental questions about whether modernisation can truly coexist with ecological conservation** and indigenous protection.

Conclusion

- The Great Nicobar Island Project embodies India's attempt to align its **strategic imperatives with developmental goals** while maintaining a veneer of environmental and tribal sensitivity.
 - On paper, the project incorporates safeguards, consultations, and compensatory measures.
 - Yet, **the real test will lie in its execution**, whether commitments to ecology and tribal welfare are honoured not just formally but substantively.
 - **Ultimately, the project reflects the broader dilemma** faced by developing nations: the pursuit of rapid economic and strategic advancement while **upholding principles of sustainability and cultural integrity**.
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