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The house of multilaterals

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

At the Bishkek Summit, member countries, including India, have condemned the military strikes on Iran, reaffirmed 'support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity', and criticised the U.S. and Israel for violating the principles of international law and the UN Charter

Kallol Bhattacharjee

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) held its 26th summit at Kyrgyz Republic's capital Bishkek on August 31-September 1, which was attended by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping, Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian and other leaders of the member countries. The summit marked the completion of 25 years of the organisation that was launched on June 15, 2001 with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan – the Shanghai five – as its founding members. India and Pakistan joined the group in 2017.

The Bishkek meet was the first summit of the grouping since the U.S. and Israel started their war on Iran on February 28, 2026, killing the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and a host of other senior officials. The Bishkek Declaration expressed "deep concern", and condemned military strikes on Iran, reaffirmed 'support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity', and criticised the U.S. and Israel for violating the principles of international law and the UN Charter.

They also condoled the assassination of Ali Khamenei and welcomed the peace process that is being supported and mediated by multiple countries, including SCO member Pakistan. In an indirect support for Iran in its nuclear negotiations with the U.S., the SCO summit advocated "inalienable right" of the member countries to "develop" "atomic energy for peaceful purposes".

The declaration also asserted that the only way to ensure lasting stability in the West Asian region is through a just settlement of the Palestine question. Member states maintained silence on Russia's role in the Ukraine war and added that "unilateral and unlimited build-up of global missile defence systems by groups of states" has a "negative impact on international security and stability".

The declaration also mentioned that "unauthorised satellite Internet



services on the territory of Member States" is a violation of international law – an obvious reference to entrepreneur Elon Musk's Starlink providing Internet services in parts of Eastern Ukraine and Iran.

Indian delegation

Prime Minister Modi led the Indian delegation at the summit where he spoke about ensuring that there is "no double standards" in fighting terrorism and called for peace and stability in Afghanistan. He highlighted India's role in ensuring supply of relief materials to Taliban-controlled Afghanistan over the years, and spoke in favour of greater connectivity between the markets of the SCO members while respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity of the states.

The declaration also called on Afghanistan to form an "inclusive government". Mr. Modi's mention of connectivity while respecting territorial integrity is an apparent reference to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) that has been a target of India's criticism over the years. This factor indicated a bit of dissonance within the grouping as India stayed away from endorsing the

China-led BRI but other member states expressed support and also advocated alignment between the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union.

Mr. Modi's focus on terrorism at the Bishkek summit highlighted an uncomfortable issue India will have to deal with over the next year. With the conclusion of the summit, Pakistan has assumed the chair of the SCO, and the group's next summit will be held in that country.

The Ministry of External Affairs has not yet clarified whether Mr. Modi will travel to Pakistan to attend the SCO summit next year. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had visited Islamabad in 2024 to attend the 23rd meeting of the SCO Council of Heads of Government. The Pahalgam terror attack of April 22, 2025, the subsequent Operation Sindoor, and India's decision to place the Indus Waters Treaty 'in abeyance' have further complicated India-Pakistan relations. These developments will be a factor in New Delhi's decision on the level at which the government sends representatives to next year's summit in Pakistan.

The Bishkek Declaration included strong language on the trioka of

challenges – "terrorism, separatism and extremism" – and "strongly condemned" terrorism, reflecting India's concerns as well as those of other members.

The SCO, which includes both Russia and Iran as members, provides a unique platform for the two countries to articulate their positions on the wars. It allows the primary actors in these conflicts to explain their objectives and positions in a multilateral setting. The SCO also gives the world an opportunity to engage China multilaterally, particularly on issues such as freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

A platform for engagement

It also provides India and Pakistan with a platform for sustained engagement within a broader multilateral framework. Such engagement is important for regional stability and can help prevent bilateral hostilities from spilling over. The SCO does not have a collective defence component and several of its members have differences and disputes with one another – for example, India-Pakistan tensions and India-China border problem – yet, the grouping has

managed to survive for 25 years.

The grouping has 29 charter bodies like the Council of Heads of State, the Council of Heads of Government, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, meetings of heads of ministries and/or agencies, the Council of National Coordinators, as well as over 40 working mechanisms of interaction in various fields.

These charter bodies meet throughout the year and serve as formal channels of communication on issues of concern to member states. In the event of a sudden conflict or a cross-border natural calamity, such frequent consultations can serve a practical purpose. The SCO also exerts some pressure on the Trump-era world order. Its leaders have periodically called for greater use of local currencies in trade, a practice viewed with scepticism in the West, particularly by the current U.S. leadership. The announcement of the establishment of an SCO Development Bank is another step in this direction.

Diplomatic objectives

India has used the SCO to advance its diplomatic objectives on multiple occasions since joining the grouping in 2017. Two relevant examples are the 2025 Tianjin Summit and the 2024 Kazan Summit. Seeking to rebuild ties after the setback at Galwan, India and China began to reengage at the Kazan Summit in Russia, where Mr. Modi met Chinese President Xi Jinping.

This was followed by another meeting between the two leaders in Tianjin where they agreed on an 'Early Harvest' proposal on boundary delimitation and resumption of border trade through three points. The Tianjin meeting demonstrated that the two sides retained the political will to meet despite the strain in ties following Operation Sindoor in May 2025, when China provided support to Pakistan as India targeted terror camps in Pakistani territory.

It also showed that, amid an uncertain phase in India-U.S. relations, with President Donald Trump imposing punitive tariffs on Indian goods, New Delhi could engage all major stakeholders and maintain necessary diplomatic dialogue.

THE GIST

▼ The Bishkek Summit marked the completion of 25 years of the SCO that was launched on June 15, 2001 with China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan – the Shanghai five – as the original members. India and Pakistan became members of the group in 2017

▼ Prime Minister Modi led the Indian delegation at the summit where he spoke about ensuring "no double standards" in fighting terrorism and called for peace and stability in Afghanistan

▼ The Bishkek Declaration included strong language on the trioka of challenges – "terrorism, separatism and extremism" – and "strongly condemned" terrorism, reflecting India's concerns

19. एस० सी० ओ० के लक्ष्यों और उद्देश्यों का विश्लेषणात्मक परीक्षण कीजिए। भारत के लिए इसका क्या महत्त्व है?

(उत्तर 250 शब्दों में दीजिए)

Critically examine the aims and objectives of SCO. What importance does it hold for India?

(Answer in 250 words) 15

1. The House of Multilaterals — Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)

Source: The Hindu

GS Subject: GS-2 — International Relations | Multilateral Organisations | Regional Security

Context: The **26th SCO Summit at Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (31 August–1 September 2026)** marked **25 years of the SCO** and came amid conflicts in West Asia, the Russia–Ukraine war and growing geopolitical fragmentation.

1. Shanghai Cooperation Organisation — Composition & Role

- **Established in 2001** by **China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan**; **India and Pakistan** joined in **2017**, followed by **Iran (2023)** and **Belarus (2024)** — **10 members** today.
- It has evolved from a primarily **security-oriented grouping** into a broader Eurasian platform for **security, economic cooperation, connectivity, technology and people-to-people engagement**.
- Its importance lies in providing a forum where countries with **competing geopolitical interests** can continue institutional dialogue.

2. 2026 Bishkek Summit — Major Developments

- **Security:** Members reaffirmed **sovereignty, territorial integrity and the UN Charter** and condemned military strikes against Iran.
- **Terrorism:** India called for “**no double standards**” and stronger action against the complete ecosystem of terrorism.
- **Afghanistan:** India linked **Eurasian security with stability in Afghanistan**, stressing an inclusive political order and preventing Afghan territory from being used for terrorism.
- **Connectivity:** India supported connectivity that links markets and promotes trade, while insisting that it respect **sovereignty and territorial integrity**—a key concern regarding CPEC.
- **Broader cooperation:** The summit adopted the **Bishkek Declaration, four MoUs and 20+ decisions/statements** covering climate, nuclear safety, energy efficiency, drug control and other areas.

3. Why the SCO Matters to India

- **Central Asia:** Provides an institutional platform for India’s engagement with **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan** on energy, trade, connectivity and security.
- **Counter-terrorism:** Gives India a regional mechanism to push against **cross-border terrorism, radicalisation, extremism and terrorist financing**.
- **Afghanistan:** Offers a collective Eurasian framework to address terrorism, instability and connectivity concerns.

- **Strategic autonomy:** Enables simultaneous engagement with **Russia, China, Pakistan and Central Asia**, without becoming part of a formal geopolitical bloc.

4. What India Advanced at Bishkek

- **Security–Connectivity–Opportunity:** India pushed the SCO to translate these three pillars into **concrete outcomes**, rather than remaining declaration-oriented.
- **Institutional initiatives:** India supported inclusion of **English in the SCO Charter as an official language**, and will host the first **SCO Civilisation Dialogue Forum**.
- **Youth & science:** Indian initiatives such as the **Young Scientist Forum** and **Young Authors' Conclave** were incorporated into the summit outcomes.
- **Technology & entrepreneurship:** India highlighted **Artificial Intelligence, innovation, start-ups and digital capabilities** as areas for future SCO cooperation.

5. Challenges for India

- **Geopolitical divergence:** India–China and India–Pakistan tensions, the Russia–Ukraine war and West Asian conflicts make consensus difficult.
- **China's influence:** China's economic and strategic weight can shape the organisation's priorities in ways that may not always align with Indian interests.
- **Implementation gap:** The SCO has numerous declarations and mechanisms, but their value depends on **actual implementation and measurable outcomes**.
- **Connectivity dilemma:** India needs greater Eurasian connectivity but must balance this against concerns over **sovereignty and strategically sensitive projects**.

6. Way Forward for India

- **Prioritise practical convergence:** Focus on **counter-terrorism, Afghanistan, narcotics, energy, disaster management, technology and connectivity** where cooperation is possible.
- **Deepen Central Asian engagement:** Convert SCO diplomacy into stronger **trade, investment, energy, education and connectivity partnerships**.
- **Leverage Indian strengths:** Offer **Digital Public Infrastructure, Artificial Intelligence, space, pharmaceuticals, capacity-building and start-up expertise**.
- **Protect strategic autonomy:** Engage all members constructively while ensuring the SCO remains a platform for **cooperation rather than bloc confrontation**.

Power beyond the pulpit

Kanthapuram A.P. Aboobacker

The Muslim cleric and scholar based in Keralam has faced criticism over his recent comments that women should remain at home rather than occupy public spaces

Abdul Latheef Naha

Kanthapuram A.P. Aboobacker Musliar, the Grand Mufti of India, has been a leading figure in Keralam's traditional Sunni Muslim community for more than five decades. Not a stranger to controversies, Kanthapuram, as he is popularly known, recently hogged the headlines for jointly issuing a circular to *mahallus* in his capacity as general secretary of the Samstha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, asking them "not to exhibit women in front of other men on the streets or stages" during Islamic celebrations.

Issued in the context of the Milad festivities, the circular courted controversy, following which Kanthapuram said bringing women to public forums would cause serious "chaos" and that Islam prescribed purdah for women to prevent this. The comments triggered sharp criticism from different sections and leaders, including from Chief Minister V.D. Satheesan, who said the cleric's comments were unsuitable for modern, progressive Keralam. The CPI(M), his long-term ally, too, sharply attacked the decree.

But that controversy is only one part of the story of a scholar whose influence extends across In-

dia and to Muslim communities abroad. Kanthapuram, Ustad in Keralam, is known as Sheikh Abubakr Ahmad in the wider Muslim world. He is the founder of Jamia Markaz at Karanthur near Kozhikode, around which he has built a large religious, educational and social network.

At 89, he continues to teach the Hadith collection regarded by Muslims as the most authentic collection of reports on Prophet Muhammad's teachings and practices.

Kanthapuram's rise began within the Samastha Kerala Jamiyyathul Ulama, the traditional body of Islamic scholars in Keralam. He was one of its prominent secretaries under Shamsul Ulama E.K. Aboobacker Musliar. In 1989, differences over the influence of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) led to a split. Kanthapuram and his followers walked out and formed a separate organisation. The division conti-

ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR



nues, leaving Keralam's traditional Sunni community broadly divided between the E.K. and A.P. factions. He built his organisation around Markazu Saquafathi Sunniyya, founded at Karanthur in 1978.

His project Markaz Knowledge City near Kozhikode became controversial after a strand of hair claimed to belong to Prophet Muhammad was brought there. His followers regard it as a sacred relic; critics have questioned its authenticity. CPI(M) leader Pinarayi Vijayan famously called it "body waste". Kanthapuram has repeatedly faced criticism over his conservative views on women.

Political influence

His political influence grew after the 1989 split, when his group developed close ties with the CPI(M)-led establishment in Keralam. Yet Kanthapuram has maintained relations across party lines. Leaders

of the Congress, the IUML, the CPI(M) and the BJP have met him. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has met him several times.

His reach extends well beyond politics. He was associated with the Amman Message and A Common Word, international initiatives promoting Islamic unity and Muslim-Christian understanding.

He has used these networks for humanitarian causes. In 2025, he intervened in the case of Kerala nurse Nimisha Priya, who was facing execution in Yemen, and saved her from the gallows through contacts with influential Yemeni religious figures.

The disappearance of Islamic reformist Chekannur Moulavi in 1993 remains a difficult chapter. Kanthapuram was questioned by the CBI but was not made an accused. The Kerala High Court later rejected a petition seeking to arraign him for lack of sufficient evidence.

Few religious leaders in Keralam have remained so influential for so long. From a young scholar in Kozhikode to the head of an international network, Kanthapuram's influence extends far beyond Karanthur. To his followers, he is a scholar, teacher and institution-builder; to his critics, a conservative cleric with deep influence over public and political life.

2. भारत में 'नए युग की नारी' की परिपूर्णता एक मिथक है ।
Fulfilment of 'new woman' in India is a myth.

7. पितृ-सत्ता की व्यवस्था नजर में बहुत कम आने के बावजूद सामाजिक विषमता की सबसे प्रभावी संरचना है
Patriarchy is the least noticed yet the most significant structure of social inequality

2. Power Beyond the Pulpit — Patriarchy and Women's Public Space

Source: The Hindu

GS Subject: GS-1 — Indian Society | GS-2 — Women & Social Justice | GS-4 — Ethics | Essay

Context: Remarks by a prominent Kerala Sunni religious leader opposing the **public display of women during Milad celebrations**, including their presence on streets or stages before men, have sparked debate over **religious authority, gender norms and women's participation in public life**.

1. The Incident — A Reflection of Patriarchal Mindset

- **Regulation of public space:** Restricting women's visibility or participation reflects the traditional **public-private divide**, where men occupy public spaces while women are associated with the domestic sphere.
- **Control of agency:** When community authority determines where women may appear or participate, it can restrict their **mobility, autonomy and decision-making**.
- **Institutional reinforcement:** Influential religious and social institutions can strengthen traditional gender roles when such norms are presented as socially or culturally obligatory.

2. Patriarchy — The Larger Social Problem

- **Unequal power:** Patriarchy is fundamentally about **asymmetry of power**, where decisions concerning women are made by others rather than by women themselves.

- **Gendered roles:** Women are often expected to prioritise **care and household responsibilities**, while men receive greater freedom in economic, political and public spheres.
- **Socialisation:** Such attitudes are reproduced through **family, community, customs and institutions**, making gender inequality persist even where formal legal equality exists.

3. Constitutional and Ethical Perspective

- **Articles 14 & 15:** Establish **equality** and prohibit discrimination on grounds including sex.
- **Article 21:** Protects **life, dignity, liberty and personal autonomy**.
- **Constitutional morality:** Religious and cultural practices must coexist with the constitutional commitment to **equality, dignity and individual liberty**.
- **GS-4:** The ethical shift is from **paternalistic protection of women to recognition of women as autonomous moral agents**.

4. Tradition, Religion and Reform

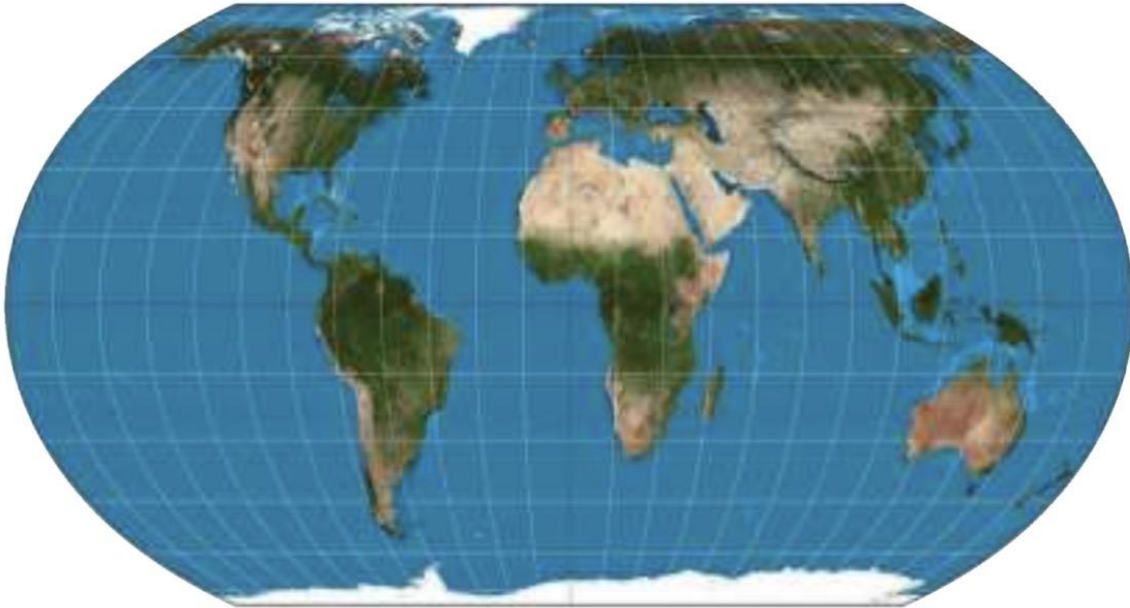
- **Religious freedom:** Freedom of religion is an important constitutional value, but its exercise must be balanced with other constitutional rights.
- **Reform:** Traditions are not static; **dialogue, education and reinterpretation within communities** can reconcile cultural identity with gender equality.
- **Non-stereotyping:** The issue should be examined as a question of **gender, power and social reform**, rather than as a judgement on an entire religious community.

5. Way Forward — From Protection to Participation

- **Transform mindsets:** Gender-sensitive education and socialisation should challenge stereotypes from an early age.
- **Strengthen agency:** Empower women to exercise meaningful choice over **mobility, education, employment and public participation**.
- **Inclusive institutions:** Increase women's participation in **community and decision-making spaces**.
- **Balance values:** Preserve legitimate cultural and religious freedoms while ensuring that **equality, dignity and individual agency remain non-negotiable**.

NEW YORK

UN General Assembly endorses using Equal Earth projection map



The United Nations General Assembly on Friday endorsed a new world map that represents Africa more accurately in its larger size. The resolution encourages governments and institutions around the world to replace the traditional Mercator map with the Equal Earth projection that “shows locations more accurately”. AP

3. United Nations General Assembly Endorses Equal Earth Projection Map

Source: The Hindu

GS Subject: GS-1 — Geography | Cartography | Map Projections

Context: The **United Nations General Assembly (UNGA)** has endorsed the use of the **Equal Earth projection**, encouraging governments and institutions to move away from the traditional **Mercator projection** because it represents the relative size of continents more accurately.

1. Why Do We Need Different Map Projections?

- **Earth is spherical:** A three-dimensional Earth cannot be transferred onto a flat map without some form of **distortion**.
- Different projections preserve different properties—**area, shape, distance or direction**—depending on their purpose.

2. Mercator Projection — The Existing Standard

- Developed by **Gerardus Mercator in 1569**, it is a **cylindrical map projection** widely used historically, particularly for navigation.
- **Major limitation:** It preserves direction well but increasingly **distorts area towards the poles**.
- **Visual effect:** Greenland, Europe and other high-latitude regions appear much larger than their actual area, while **Africa and regions near the Equator appear relatively smaller**.

3. Equal Earth Projection — What Is Different?

- **Equal-area projection:** Developed by **Tom Patterson, Bernhard Jenny and Bojan Šavrič in 2018**, it preserves the **relative area of landmasses**.
- **More realistic scale:** Africa appears much closer to its actual geographical size compared with its representation on Mercator maps.
- **Trade-off:** Like every flat-world projection, Equal Earth cannot preserve every geographical property simultaneously; it prioritises **area accuracy**.

4. Why the Change Matters

- **Geographical understanding:** Gives a more accurate perception of the **relative size of continents and countries**.
- **Education:** Helps students understand global geography without the major area distortions associated with Mercator.

- **Representation:** Maps are not merely technical tools; their visual choices influence how people perceive the relative importance and scale of different regions.
- **Africa:** Particularly significant because Africa's actual size is often **visually underestimated** on commonly used Mercator maps.

No provision in Forest Rights Act to obtain gram sabha consent for projects: Ministry

The law explicitly states that the Ministry of Tribal Affairs is responsible for its implementation; Centre's rules and regulations require that all processes under the forest Act be completed before the concerned government authority can issue a certificate diverting the forests formally

Abhinav Lakshman
NEW DELHI

In deliberations with the Union Ministry of Power over government projects delayed due to the "critical bottleneck" of "100% gram sabha consent under the Forest Rights Act (FRA)" for forest clearance, the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs has said that the 2006 law has "no provision for obtaining consent of the gram sabha for forest clearance", adding that "such matters" related to gram sabha consent "do not fall under the purview of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs".

In an official communication to the National Hydroelectric Power Corporation (NHPC) Desk of the Power Ministry on August 31, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs said, "There is no provision for obtaining consent of the Gram Sabha for forest clearance for Stage-II forest clearance in the Scheduled Tribes and

Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 and Rules made thereunder. Therefore, such matters do not fall under the purview of the Ministry of Tribal Affairs."

While the FRA itself does not have the language of gram sabha consent specifically with respect to diverting forest land for non-forestry purposes, the Union government's rules and regulations governing the diversion of forests specifically require that all processes under the FRA be completed before the concerned government authority can issue a certificate diverting the forests formally.

These guidelines, under the Forest Conservation Act of 1980, require the identification of potential FRA claimants, the recognition of their rights where applicable, the vesting of these rights, and then obtaining a no-objection certificate (NOC) from the



Parliamentary panel report on NHPC Limited said the average time for forest clearance of projects is 106 months.

gram sabhas concerned regarding the proposal to divert the said forest land for the stated purpose – all of it as mandated under the FRA. This procedure of obtaining an NOC from gram sabhas is what has commonly come to be known as the procedure for gram sabha consent for forest clearance.

The FRA explicitly states that the Ministry of Tribal

Affairs is the nodal ministry responsible for the law's implementation.

House panel report

The deliberations between the Union Power Ministry and the Tribal Affairs Ministry were initiated after an August 3 report by the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Undertakings on NHPC Limited. In this report, the committee, based on discussions with NHPC officials, observed that the average time for forest clearance of under-construction projects was 106 months, and that the requirement that all concerned gram sabhas consent to the diversion of forest land required for the projects had become the "single most critical bottleneck, with projects like the Teesta-IV HEP being indefinitely stalled because consent from small minority of

Gram Panchayats remains pending". In its report, the committee, headed by BJP MP Baijayanta Panda, took to the NHPC's recommendation that a "qualified super-majority consent" – consent of 70-75% of the affected gram sabhas – should be sufficient for "large hydropower infrastructure projects of national importance".

The House panel had thus recommended that the Power Ministry discuss the "feasibility" of such a proposal with the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

Previously, in cases such as the Nicobar mega-infrastructure project or other independent cases related to the implementation of the FRA in States like Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and many others, the Tribal Affairs Ministry has claimed that it has no role to play and argued that this was because the FRA mandates implementation of the law to the State or Union Territory governments.

4. Forest Rights Act and Gram Sabha Consent: The Legal and Governance Debate

Source: The Hindu

GS Subject: GS-2 — Tribal Affairs | Gram Sabha | Local Governance

GS-3 — Environment | Forest Governance | Infrastructure

Context: The Ministry of Tribal Affairs has clarified that the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006) contains no explicit provision requiring Gram Sabha

consent for forest clearance, while FRA-related processes must nevertheless be completed before forest land is formally diverted for non-forest purposes.

1. **Forest Rights Act, 2006 — What Does It Provide?**

- **Purpose:** Recognises and vests forest rights of **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers**.
- **Gram Sabha:** Plays a central role in the **identification, verification and recognition of forest-right claims**.
- **Legal distinction:** The Act provides for recognition of rights through the Gram Sabha, but **does not expressly state that Gram Sabha consent is mandatory for forest clearance**.

2. **Where Does the Consent Issue Arise?**

- **Forest diversion:** Government rules require processes relating to **identification of claimants, recognition of rights and settlement of claims** to be completed before forest land is formally diverted.
- **No-Objection Certificate (NOC):** Obtaining an NOC from the concerned Gram Sabha has emerged as a practice in forest-clearance processes, creating a debate over whether this should be treated as a statutory requirement.
- **Core issue:** Tribal rights and participatory governance vs timely implementation of infrastructure projects.

3. **Why Has It Become a Project Bottleneck?**

- **Long clearance timelines:** A Parliamentary committee examining **NHPC Limited** projects found the average forest-clearance period for under-construction projects to be **106 months**.
- **Teesta-VI Hydroelectric Power Project:** The project has reportedly faced prolonged delays linked to the requirement of consent from a **small minority of Gram Sabhas**.
- **Competing concerns:** Delays affect **hydropower and infrastructure development**, while bypassing genuine community rights can cause displacement, livelihood loss and social conflict.

4. **Parliamentary Committee's Proposal**

- The House panel recommended that the Power Ministry examine “**qualified super-majority consent**” for large hydropower infrastructure projects.

- **Proposed threshold:** Consent of around **70–75% of affected Gram Sabha members** could be considered sufficient for projects of national importance.
- The proposal seeks to balance **collective community participation with prevention of indefinite project delays**.

5. Governance Significance

- **Gram Sabha as grassroots democracy:** It provides local communities a voice in decisions affecting **forests, livelihoods and traditional rights**.
- **Participatory development:** Development projects become more legitimate when affected communities are **consulted meaningfully**.
- **Legal clarity:** Ambiguity between **FRA compliance and forest-clearance requirements** can create both administrative delays and disputes over community rights.

6. Way Forward

- **Clarify the law:** Clearly distinguish the **FRA's forest-right recognition process** from the separate **forest-diversion clearance process**.
- **Ensure rights before diversion:** Properly identify and settle legitimate forest-right claims before project implementation.
- **Meaningful Gram Sabha participation:** Consultation should be **informed, transparent and representative**, rather than a mere procedural formality.
- **Time-bound process:** Improve coordination between **Tribal Affairs, forest authorities and State governments** to protect rights without creating indefinite delays.

The political cost of UCT schemes

Since 2020, Unconditional Cash Transfer (UCT) schemes have become an important electoral strategy in India, particularly to attract women voters. Some examples of such schemes include the Kalaingar Magalir Urimai Thittam in Tamil Nadu, the Lakshmi Bhandar in West Bengal, and Gruha Lakshmi Yojana in Karnataka. Yet, despite increasing the amount of cash before the 2026 elections, some governments which implemented these schemes were defeated. One possible explanation for the loss could be the political cost associated with UCTs.

UCT schemes are well-intentioned as they provide financial support to women. They partially advance SDG (Sustainable Development Goal) 5.4, which calls for a recognition of women's unpaid domestic and care work. According to the Ministry of Finance's latest Economic Survey, States are expected to spend about \$18 billion on UCTs in 2025-26, much of it targeted towards women.

Critics, however, argue that these schemes function as electoral "freebies." Their financing often requires expenditure switching or larger fiscal deficits, and reduces resources available for productive investments, including employment generation and self-employment programmes. Moreover, once households become dependent on UCTs, withdrawing them is difficult as political parties encourage competitive welfarism.

Targeting challenges

A fundamental challenge in targeted UCT programmes is beneficiary identification. Since governments cannot



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**Sankarganesh
Karuppiah**

Indian Revenue
Services Officer

Linking benefits
to socially
desirable
outcomes
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broader
developmental
gains

directly observe incomes for most workers in the informal sector, they rely on proxy indicators such as land ownership, electricity consumption, or household assets. This inevitably produces both inclusion errors (benefits reaching ineligible households) and exclusion errors (eligible households being left out). These targeting errors, whether real or perceived, can impose significant political costs.

The Kalaingar Magalir Urimai Thittam scheme illustrates this challenge. Although the ruling party at the time promised ₹1,000 per month to all women-headed households before the 2021 election, fiscal constraints led the government to restrict eligibility based on income, land ownership, and other criteria when the scheme was launched in September 2023. Initially, about 1.13 crore women were covered. Following widespread complaints from women who believed they met the eligibility criteria, another 16.94 lakh beneficiaries were added in December 2025. The scheme cost ₹13,807 crore in 2025-26.

Despite the expansion, dissatisfaction persisted. Many women who considered themselves unfairly excluded reportedly became even more aggrieved when eligible beneficiaries received an advance payment of three months' entitlement along with a special summer relief payment. Although the precise electoral impact cannot be measured, even modest shifts in voter preferences can influence outcomes in closely contested constituencies.

These experiences highlight an important

feature of targeted welfare programmes. Political costs arise not only from actual errors but also from perceived ones. Individuals who fail to satisfy official eligibility criteria may nevertheless believe that they have been treated unfairly. Likewise, households that legally qualify may be perceived as undeserving because they appear relatively affluent. Such perceived targeting errors can be as politically consequential as actual administrative mistakes.

This reveals an inherent tension between economics and politics. Economics favours targeted programmes so that scarce public resources reach those most in need. Politics, however, rewards broader inclusion because voters evaluate governments not only by the benefits they receive but also by those they believe were unfairly denied. Consequently, targeted UCT programmes carry an unavoidable political cost.

Conditional cash transfers and other incentive-based welfare programmes offer a more sustainable alternative. Linking benefits to socially desirable outcomes produces broader developmental gains. Tamil Nadu's Midday Meal Scheme illustrates this principle. Since participation depends on school enrolment, self-selection reduces grievances.

The broader lesson is that welfare programmes tied to education or other desirable behaviours can achieve developmental objectives with lower political costs. In contrast, UCTs remain inherently vulnerable to inclusion, exclusion, and perceived targeting errors.

5. The Political Cost of Unconditional Cash Transfer Schemes

Source: The Hindu

GS Subject: GS-2 — Governance | Welfare Schemes | Women & Social Justice

GS-3 — Inclusive Growth | Public Finance

Context: Since 2020, **Unconditional Cash Transfer (UCT)** schemes, particularly women-focused transfers, have expanded across Indian States. They provide immediate income support but raise concerns over **targeting, fiscal sustainability, political incentives and long-term developmental impact**.

1. UCTs — Purpose and Growing Importance

- **UCT:** Direct cash support provided to beneficiaries **without requiring a specific behavioural condition**.
- **Major examples:** Kaalignar Magalir Urimai Thittam (Tamil Nadu), Lakshmir Bhandar (West Bengal) and Gruha Lakshmi (Karnataka).
- **Women's empowerment:** Such schemes provide direct financial resources to women and recognise the economic value of **unpaid domestic and care work**, linked to **SDG 5.4**.
- **Scale:** The **Economic Survey 2025–26** estimates aggregate spending on UCT programmes, particularly for women, at about **₹1.7 lakh crore in FY2025–26**; the number of States implementing such schemes increased **more than fivefold between FY2022–23 and FY2025–26**.

2. The Core Challenge — Targeting

- **Information gap:** A large informal workforce makes household income difficult for governments to observe directly.
- **Proxy-based targeting:** Eligibility may therefore depend on indicators such as **land ownership, electricity consumption and household assets**.
- **Inclusion error:** Ineligible households may receive benefits.
- **Exclusion error:** Eligible households may be left out.

- **Perceived exclusion:** Even households that technically meet criteria may feel unfairly denied when others receive benefits, creating a **political cost beyond actual administrative errors**.

3. **Five Major Costs of UCT-Based Welfare**

- **1. Fiscal pressure:** Recurring transfers increase the **revenue expenditure burden** and can be difficult to reduce once established.
- **2. Opportunity cost:** Greater spending on transfers can reduce fiscal space for **capital expenditure, employment generation, skilling and productive investment**.
- **3. Political lock-in:** Once beneficiaries become dependent on a transfer, withdrawal or reduction becomes politically difficult, encouraging **competitive welfare promises**.
- **4. Targeting-related grievance:** Inclusion and exclusion errors can generate perceptions of **unfairness**, influencing electoral behaviour.
- **5. Limited capability creation:** Cash provides immediate purchasing power but, by itself, may not generate improvements in **education, health, nutrition, skills or employment**.

4. **Tamil Nadu's Kaalignar Magalir Urimai Thittam — Illustrative Case**

- The scheme provides **₹1,000 per month** to eligible women heads of households.
- Tamil Nadu's **2025–26 Budget** allocated **₹13,807 crore** for the scheme and reported coverage of about **1.15 crore women**.
- The case illustrates the central dilemma: **expanding coverage can improve inclusion but also increases fiscal cost and does not automatically eliminate perceptions of exclusion**.

5. **UCTs vs Development-Oriented Welfare**

- **UCTs:** Best suited for **immediate income support, consumption smoothing and social protection**.
- **Conditional/linked welfare:** Connecting benefits with outcomes such as **school attendance, nutrition or healthcare** can simultaneously build human capital.
- **Midday Meal Scheme:** A useful example where school participation provides **self-selection**, while the programme simultaneously improves **nutrition and education**.
- **Balanced approach:** Cash transfers should complement—not replace—investment in **public services, employment and human capital**.

6. **Way Forward**

- **Better targeting:** Use updated databases, data integration and effective grievance redressal to reduce exclusion.
- **Fiscal sustainability:** Assess transfers against **State revenue capacity and opportunity costs**, rather than treating them as permanent entitlements without review.
- **Capability + cash:** Combine income support with **health, education, nutrition, skilling and employment**.
- **Outcome-based welfare:** Where appropriate, design benefits around **measurable developmental outcomes**.

Bhutan leads Southeast Asia region in eliminating rabies

Ramya Kannan
CHENNAI

Bhutan has become the first country in the World Health Organization's Southeast Asia region to eliminate dog-transmitted rabies as a public health problem. The WHO, on Saturday, validated Bhutan's achievement. The mountain kingdom's last rabies death was in June 2023.

Rabies is a viral disease that is almost always fatal if clinical symptoms appear. It is estimated that rabies still claims the lives of approximately 59,000 people each year, with a third of these fatalities occurring in India, where it remains a

huge problem with local bodies failing at animal birth control and vaccination programmes.

The disease is endemic throughout the country except for the Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep Islands, and cases are reported from all over the country, the year round. About 96% of the mortality and morbidity is associated with dog bites.

Target for 2030

The National Rabies Control Programme aims to reduce mortality from rabies among human beings and progressively achieve the target of bringing rabies deaths to zero by 2030.



Rabies is almost always fatal if clinical symptoms appear.

In a message shared on the WHO website, its Director-General, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, congratulated Bhutan "which is another step towards our goal to end human deaths from dog-transmitted rabies by 2030".

He further noted the interventions that made the

success possible: "Bhutan's success shows that the health of humans, animals and the environment we share is inextricably linked. By uniting health workers, veterinarians, and communities, Bhutan has shown that the fight against rabies is won not in silos, but through solidarity across all sectors."

Two-pronged strategy

WHO validation recognises that a country has eliminated dog-transmitted human rabies and consequently through the absence of human deaths from the disease for at least two years, while demonstrating the capacity to prevent trans-

mission from re-emerging.

Rabies deaths are preventable. A two-pronged strategy is advocated globally – vaccinating dogs to curb the disease at source, and using post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) after a bite. PEP consists of thoroughly washing the bite area with water and soap, administering a full course of human rabies vaccine, and whenever necessary, rabies immunoglobulins.

Nilesh Buddha, Officer-in-Charge, WHO South-East Asia Region, complimented the country: "The dedication of health workers, veterinary professionals and De-suung volunteers known as 'Guardians

of Peace' helped take dog vaccination, population management and community awareness to every part of the country."

A strong collaboration was initiated between the Ministries of Health and the Agriculture and Livestock, together with partners, local governments and communities, united through a One Health approach, Bhutan's Health Ministry sources explained. Continued access to PEP, mass dog vaccination, dog population management, community engagement and strengthened surveillance marked the country's programme.

6. Bhutan Eliminates Dog-Mediated Human Rabies as a Public Health Problem

Source: The Hindu

GS Subject: GS-2 — Health | International Organisations | One Health GS-3 — Science & Technology | Biotechnology | Disease Control

Context: The World Health Organization (WHO) has validated Bhutan as the first country in the WHO South-East Asia Region to eliminate dog-mediated human rabies as a public health problem. Bhutan has recorded zero human deaths from dog-mediated rabies since June 2023.

1. Rabies — Why Elimination Matters

- **Rabies:** A viral zoonotic disease transmitted mainly through the **saliva of infected animals**, usually through bites or scratches.
- **Fatality:** Once clinical symptoms appear, rabies is **virtually 100% fatal**, but deaths are preventable through timely intervention.
- **Dog transmission:** Dogs account for **up to 99% of human rabies transmissions globally**; around **59,000 people die annually** from rabies worldwide.
- **Important distinction:** Bhutan has eliminated **dog-mediated human rabies as a public health problem**, not eradicated the rabies virus itself.

2. **Bhutan's Two-Pronged Strategy**

- **Control at source:** Sustained **mass vaccination of dogs and dog-population management** reduced transmission from the main animal reservoir.
- **Protection after exposure:** Universal access to **Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)**—wound washing, human rabies vaccine and, when required, **rabies immunoglobulin**—prevents the virus from reaching the nervous system.
- **Surveillance:** Integrated human–animal surveillance enabled **early detection, investigation and response** to suspected cases.

3. **One Health — The Core of Bhutan's Success**

- **One Health:** Recognises that **human, animal and environmental health are interconnected** and therefore require coordinated action.
- **Multi-sectoral coordination:** Bhutan brought together the **Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, veterinarians, local governments, communities and De-suung ("Guardians of Peace") volunteers**.
- **Community participation:** Vaccination, dog-population management and **public awareness on dog bites and prevention** were taken across the country.

4. **WHO Validation — What Does It Mean?**

- WHO's validation requires evidence of **zero human deaths from dog-mediated rabies for at least two years** along with the capacity to prevent re-emergence.
- Bhutan underwent a **two-stage independent assessment**—dossier review followed by a field mission from **17–22 August 2026**, including health-facility visits, laboratory assessment, record verification and a visit to the **Bhutan–India border**.

- Bhutan will continue **free PEP, mass dog vaccination, dog-population management and integrated surveillance** to prevent re-emergence.

5. **Lessons for India**

- **Vaccinate dogs, not only humans:** Sustained dog vaccination is the most effective way to interrupt transmission at its source; WHO notes that around **70% sustained dog-vaccination coverage** can control canine rabies.
- **Universal PEP access:** Ensure affordable and timely access to **vaccines and immunoglobulins**, particularly in rural and high-risk areas.
- **One Health approach:** Strengthen coordination between **health, veterinary, local-government and animal-management systems**.
- **Dog-population management:** Combine vaccination with **sterilisation, responsible ownership and surveillance**, rather than relying only on reactive measures.
- **Cross-border surveillance:** Bhutan's experience is particularly relevant to India because rabies transmission risks can cross **porous international borders**.

BIG SHOT



In this drone photo released by the Geological Agency (Badan Geologi) of Indonesia's Ministry of Energy and Mineral Resources, Mount Anak Krakatau spews volcanic smoke in Sunda Strait, Indonesia on September 5. AP

7. Mount Anak Krakatau Erupts in Sunda Strait

Source: The Hindu

GS-1 | Geography | Volcanism & Natural Hazards

Context: Mount Anak Krakatau in Indonesia's Sunda Strait witnessed a prolonged eruption, causing ash-related flight disruptions and highlighting volcanic and tsunami risks.

- **Location:** Situated in the **Sunda Strait between Java and Sumatra**, Anak Krakatau emerged within the caldera formed by the **1883 Krakatau eruption**.
- **Current eruption:** Continuous eruption began on **4 September 2026**, lasting about **25 hours**; the volcano remains at **Level III (Alert)** with a **3-km exclusion zone**.
- **Hazards:** Lava, incandescent rocks and volcanic ash pose risks to nearby areas and aviation.
- **Tsunami risk:** The **1883 Krakatau eruption** generated devastating tsunamis; the **2018 Sunda Strait tsunami** was triggered by the partial collapse of Anak Krakatau.

- **Geography link:** Indonesia lies along the **Pacific Ring of Fire**, where active plate boundaries cause frequent volcanic eruptions and earthquakes.