

Editorial of the Day – 19.02.2026

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1. Kashmir revival- On the path of tourism (TH)

General Studies 3- Internal Security

Topic- Linkages between development and spread of extremism; Role of external state and non-state actors in creating challenges to internal security.

Sub Topic- Government budgeting; Tourism as a tool for peacebuilding; Disaster and risk management.

Introduction

The Kashmir Valley is undergoing a strategic "Tourism Revival" following the April 2025 Pahalgam attack, which briefly crippled the region's hospitality sector. Through a combination of phased reopening of sites and the Union Budget 2026–27 allocations, the government is shifting toward a model that integrates national security with ecological sustainability and community-led governance.

1. Context- The April 2025 Pahalgam Attack & Aftermath

The attack served as a critical stress test for the region's tourism infrastructure and policy.

Immediate Impact- Total closure of 48 government-approved tourist sites to ensure visitor safety.

Phased Recovery- Recognizing that tourism relies on predictability, authorities initiated a phased reopening. By **February 16, 2026**, 14 key sites were restored to public access.

Core Lesson- Tourism resilience in conflict zones depends on the state's ability to provide a clear, transparent criteria for site closures and reopenings.

2. Tourism and Risk Perception

Security in Kashmir is as much about perception as it is about physical safety.

Visitor Differentiation- Analysis shows that tourists distinguish between "general conflict" and "targeted risks."

Policy Requirements- To maintain high footfalls, the government must ensure-

1. Transparency- Clear communication regarding safety protocols.
2. Reliability- Consistent permit systems and emergency response mechanisms.
3. Governance- Reducing administrative disruptions to incentivize local business growth.

3. Union Budget 2026–27- The Strategic Push

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman's budget introduced a two-pronged strategy for the region-

A. Institutional Capacity Building

1. Strengthening the administrative machinery to manage high-volume tourism.
2. Training local stakeholders in hospitality, digital literacy, and emergency medical support.

B. Sustainable Trail Development

Ecological Focus- Transitioning toward mountain trails to reduce the environmental footprint on fragile Himalayan ecosystems.

Management Systems- Implementing formal ticketing, permit systems, and the deployment of rangers.

Diversification- Moving beyond traditional "hotspots" (like Gulmarg/Pahalgam) to niche heritage and trekking sites to prevent "over-tourism."

4. The "Third Prong"- Shared Environmental Governance

A novel approach proposed to bridge the gap between the militarized nature of the region and civilian life.

Trust Building- Using environmental protection as a neutral ground for cooperation between the state and local communities.

Civilian Participation– Moving away from purely military-led security to a model where locals have a stake in regional stability.

5. Community Participation & Paid Civic Roles

The revival model suggests moving beyond "volunteerism" toward formalized local employment

Paid Roles– Establishing positions for trail maintenance, waste management, fire monitoring, and wildlife conflict mitigation.

Economic Ownership– Drawing from the "Forest Protection Committee" model to give locals a financial incentive to protect tourist assets.

Counter-Insurgency Link– When local families derive direct income from tourism, they are statistically more likely to oppose disruptive elements or terrorism.

6. Long-Term Economic and Social Impacts

National Integration– Tourism reduces the "psychological distance" and isolation between Kashmir and the rest of India.

Social Stability– Provides youth with skilling and employment, steering them away from radicalization.

Infrastructure Spillover– Improvements in roads, electricity, and communication for tourists directly benefit the local quality of life.

Negotiating Power– A thriving civilian-led economy increases the local population's leverage and reduces resentment toward governance structures.

Conclusion

The revival of Kashmir's tourism is not merely an economic goal but a strategic imperative. By balancing security with "Strategic Sustainability," the government aims to create an inclusive model where the local community acts as the primary guardian of peace. The success of the 2026–27 budget initiatives will depend on whether the state can successfully transition from a "security-first" approach to a "community-governance-first" approach.

Source– <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/kashmir-revival-on-the-path-of-tourism/article70648291.ece>

2. As NGT clears Great Nicobar project, a look at its strategic importance and ecological fallout (IE)

General Studies 3– Environment

Topics– Environmental pollution and degradation; Developments in Science and Technology.

Sub Topic– Infrastructure (Ports, Airports), Investment Models, and Security Challenges in Border Areas.

Introduction

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) recently cleared the ₹81,000-crore Great Nicobar Integrated Island Development Project. While the project is championed as a cornerstone of India's maritime strategy and economic sovereignty in the Indo-Pacific, it has sparked intense debate over the irreversible ecological costs to one of the world's most pristine biosphere reserves and the survival of isolated indigenous tribes.

1. Project Overview & Core Components

The project is being implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO). It aims to transform the island into a multi-sectoral hub.

Integrated Township– Spread over ~149 sq. km.

International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT)– A 7.66 sq. km port at Galathea Bay.

International Airport– A dual-use (civil and military) facility covering 8.45 sq. km.

Energy Infrastructure– A gas and solar-based power plant to sustain the new population and industries.

Scale– Diversion of 130 sq. km of forest land and the felling of approximately one million trees.

2. Strategic and Geopolitical Significance

The project is driven by "National Security" interests, which the NGT cited as a primary reason for its clearance.

Chokepoint Proximity– Located near the Malacca Strait, a global maritime artery handling ~94,000 ships annually and 30% of global trade.

Logistics Sovereignty– The ICTT aims to capture transshipment traffic currently handled by foreign ports like Colombo, Singapore, and Port Klang, keeping revenue and data within India.

Indo-Pacific "Net Security Provider"– Enhances the Andaman & Nicobar Command (ANC)—India's only tri-service command—facilitating better maritime domain awareness and surveillance.

Act East Policy– Serves as a bridge for India's diplomatic and economic outreach to Southeast Asia.

3. Ecological Sensitivity & Biodiversity

Great Nicobar is not a standard landmass; it is a unique oceanic ecosystem within the Sundaland Biodiversity Hotspot.

Biosphere Reserve– Most of the 910 sq. km island is a UNESCO-recognized Biosphere Reserve.

Endemic Species– Home to the Nicobar Megapode (a scrub bird that builds mounds) and the Nicobar Long-tailed Macaque.

Galathea Bay– The primary site for the port is also the most important nesting site in the northern Indian Ocean for the Leatherback Sea Turtle (the world's largest turtle).

Geological Fragility– The island is seismically active (prone to earthquakes and tsunamis) and highly vulnerable to sea-level rise.

4. Major Environmental Concerns

Massive Deforestation– The removal of a million trees threatens the "lungs" of the region and carbon sequestration capacity.

Habitat Disruption– Construction at Galathea Bay may permanently deter Leatherback turtles from nesting.

Marine Ecology Damage– Reclamation of land using 33 million cubic metres of material risks burying coral reefs and altering sediment flow, suffocating marine life.

Carrying Capacity– Critics argue the island cannot ecologically sustain the projected population surge (from ~8,500 to 6.5 lakh by 2050).

5. Socio-Cultural Impact on Indigenous Tribes

The project poses an existential threat to two main groups protected under the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956

The Shompen Tribe– A **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG)** of ~250 hunter-gatherers. Their limited contact with the outside world makes them biologically vulnerable to common diseases.

The Nicobarese– Indigenous communities who lost ancestral lands during the 2004 Tsunami and are still navigating rehabilitation; they fear the project will lead to further displacement.

Consent Issues– Allegations exist regarding the lack of "Free, Prior, and Informed Consent" (FPIC) from Tribal Councils, potentially violating the Forest Rights Act (2006).

6. Governance and Regulatory Challenges

Strategic Balancing– The NGT's decision prioritizes "Strategic Importance" over "Ecological Integrity," setting a controversial precedent for future projects in fragile zones.

Denotification of Sanctuaries– The government denotified the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary to facilitate the port, which critics view as a dilution of the Wildlife Protection Act.

Compensatory Mitigation– Plans to create "equivalent" sanctuaries on Little Nicobar are questioned by ecologists, as habitats are location-specific and cannot be "moved."

Assessment Gaps– There is a call for a Cumulative Impact Assessment rather than individual sector clearances to understand the total burden on the island.

Conclusion– The Path Forward

The Great Nicobar Project represents a classic "Development vs. Conservation" dilemma. While the strategic necessity in a changing Indo-Pacific is undeniable, the project must adhere to the principle of "Strategic but Sustainable."

Recommendations

Strict Environmental Oversight- Implementing a "Zero Discharge" policy for the port and township.

Tribal Buffer Zones- Ensuring the Shompen's foraging grounds remain strictly off-limits to the 6.5 lakh projected settlers.

Independent Monitoring- Establishing a high-level committee of ecologists and anthropologists to monitor construction in real-time.

Source- <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/as-ngt-clears-great-nicobar-project-a-look-at-its-strategic-importance-and-ecological-fallout-10539365/>

