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Index

- 1. NGT gives clearance to the Great Nicobar project**
- 2. Constitution Bench to hear pleas against DPDP Act**
- 3. Global platforms must respect local culture and laws:
Vaishnav**
- 4. A budgetary signal, as banks cannot bear it all**
- 5. A separate classification for denotified tribes**

1. NGT gives clearance to the Great Nicobar project

Why in the News?

The National Green Tribunal has cleared the ₹92,000-crore Great Nicobar Island mega infrastructure project, dismissing a batch of petitions challenging its environmental clearance (EC). The Tribunal held that the project is of strategic and national importance and found no valid ground to interfere, while directing strict compliance with EC safeguards. The decision revives momentum for one of India's largest island infrastructure projects.



Background: The Great Nicobar Project

The Great Nicobar project is a multi-component infrastructure initiative proposed at the southern tip of India, close to the Malacca Strait - one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

Key components:

- International container transshipment port
- Greenfield International Airport
- Gas/solar power plant
- Planned township for workers and residents

The project aims to:

- Position India as a regional maritime logistics hub
- Strengthen strategic presence in the Indian Ocean
- Reduce dependence on foreign ports like Colombo and Singapore
- Boost island development and connectivity

The environmental clearance granted in 2022 triggered legal challenges over ecological fragility and tribal rights. In 2023, the NGT ordered a High Powered Committee (HPC) to examine coral reefs, leatherback turtle nesting zones, and ecological zoning disputes.

Features of the NGT Order

- NGT upheld the 2022 environmental clearance
- Directed authorities to ensure strict compliance with EC conditions
- Accepted HPC findings on ecological concerns
- Recognised the project's strategic defence importance
- Allowed limited confidentiality of the HPC report
- Assigned the Environment Ministry responsibility to:
 - Protect coral reefs
 - Ensure coral regeneration
 - Prevent shoreline erosion
 - Safeguard turtle nesting beaches

The Tribunal emphasised a “balanced approach” - development with safeguards rather than total prohibition.

Environmental and Social Challenges

Ecological Fragility

- Habitat of endangered leatherback turtles
- Dense tropical rainforests with endemic biodiversity
- Sensitive coral reef ecosystems
- Coastal erosion risks

Climate Vulnerability

- Island exposed to sea-level rise
- Earthquake and tsunami zone (2004 memory still relevant)
- Extreme weather risks

Tribal Rights

- Indigenous Nicobarese and Shompen communities
- Concerns over land alienation
- Allegations of coercion in land surrender
- Forest rights settlement pending
- Case ongoing in the Calcutta High Court

Procedural Concerns

- Single-season Environmental Impact Assessment
- Transparency concerns over HPC report
- Questions on CRZ zoning verification

Strategic Significance

Great Nicobar sits near the Malacca Strait - a chokepoint through which ~40% of global trade passes. The project enhances:

- Maritime security

- Blue economy potential
- Indo-Pacific strategy

- Naval logistics and surveillance
- Trade competitiveness

It aligns with India's SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for All in the Region).

Way Forward

A sustainable pathway must reconcile national security with ecological and tribal justice.

Strong Environmental Governance

- Independent ecological monitoring
- Transparent compliance audits
- Real-time shoreline and coral tracking
- International best practices in island development

Tribal Consent Framework

- Free, prior, informed consent (FPIC)
- Fair rehabilitation and compensation
- Cultural protection zones
- Participatory decision-making

Climate-Resilient Infrastructure

- Nature-based coastal protection
- Low-impact construction models
- Disaster-resilient planning

Transparency and Public Trust

- Periodic public reporting
- Limited but meaningful disclosure of assessments
- Civil society oversight

Phased Development

- Pilot phases with ecological evaluation
- Adaptive management model

Conclusion

The NGT ruling marks a decisive push toward strategic infrastructure expansion in a geopolitically sensitive region. However, Great Nicobar is not just a development site; it is a living ecological and cultural landscape. India's credibility as a responsible rising power depends on whether it can build without ecological erasure and secure national interests without marginalising indigenous communities.

The project can become a global model for sustainable island development - but only if safeguards move from paper to practice.

2. Constitution Bench to hear pleas against DPDP Act

Why in the News?

The Supreme Court of India has agreed to refer petitions challenging a key provision of the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, to a Constitution Bench. Petitioners argue that Section 44(3) of the law undermines citizens' Right to Information (RTI) by imposing a blanket restriction on disclosure of "personal information", thereby weakening transparency and accountability in governance. The Court termed the issue a "complex and sensitive question of law" and indicated it may need to define the scope of "personal information". However, it declined to grant an interim stay on the provision.

Background

India's data protection framework emerged after the landmark privacy ruling in: Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017)

The judgment recognised privacy as a fundamental right under Article 21. This led to years of debate, balancing:

- Privacy
- Transparency
- Digital governance
- State accountability

The DPDP Act, 2023, was enacted to regulate the collection, storage, and processing of digital personal data. However, Section 44(3) amended Section 8(1)(j) of the RTI Act. Earlier RTI framework



Under the original RTI Act:

- Personal information could be denied only if
 - It had no relation to public activity, or
 - It caused an unwarranted invasion of privacy
- Even then, disclosure was allowed if public interest outweighed privacy

This required a case-by-case balancing test by the Public Information Officer.

What Section 44(3) changes

Petitioners argue for the amendment:

- Removes the public interest override
- Creates a broad shield against disclosure
- Expands privacy protection even for public officials
- Limits citizens' ability to scrutinise government functioning

Features

The petitions claim the amendment:

1. Violates Article 19(1)(a) — right to information as part of free speech
2. Violates Article 14 — equating public officials with private citizens
3. Misapplies privacy — extending it to the State
4. Removes proportionality safeguards built into RTI law

Petitioners rely on the 2019 Constitution Bench judgment:

Central Public Information Officer v. Supreme Court of India (2019)

This ruling held that privacy and transparency must be balanced using the proportionality doctrine.

Core Constitutional Issues

The Constitution Bench will likely examine:

- What counts as “personal information”?
- Can privacy override transparency automatically?
- Does the State enjoy privacy like an individual?
- Is a blanket restriction constitutionally valid?
- How should proportionality be applied?

This case could redefine the relationship between:

- privacy
- transparency
- digital governance
- democratic accountability

Challenges

Privacy vs Transparency Tension

- Strong privacy laws may unintentionally weaken anti-corruption tools.

Risk of Government Secrecy

- Broad exemptions may shield misconduct, asset disclosures, and decision-making.

Legal Ambiguity

- Undefined terms invite inconsistent interpretation.

Administrative Overreach

- Officials may default to denial to avoid scrutiny.

Democratic Trust Deficit

- Reduced transparency can erode citizen confidence.

Way Forward

Restore Public Interest Test

- Privacy exemptions should retain a balancing clause.

Clear Definition of Personal Data

Differentiate:

- private personal data
- official public conduct
- accountability-related information

Tiered Disclosure Framework

- Higher transparency standards for public officials.

Independent Oversight

- Strengthen Information Commissions to review denials.

Harmonisation, Not Hierarchy

- Privacy law and RTI must complement each other.

Conclusion

The Constitution Bench hearing is not merely a technical dispute; it is a foundational question about the character of Indian democracy in the digital age. A privacy regime that silences transparency risks, empowering opacity. Conversely, unchecked disclosure can harm dignity and autonomy. The Court's task is to reaffirm a constitutional equilibrium where privacy protects citizens but does not protect power from scrutiny.

3. Global platforms must respect local culture and laws: Vaishnaw

Why in the News?

Ashwini Vaishnaw, Union Minister for Electronics and IT, said global OTT and digital platforms must respect India's cultural context and legal framework while operating in the country. Speaking at a satellite event of the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi, he stressed that although the digital world has no physical borders, social acceptability and constitutional norms differ across societies. He also announced a forthcoming "Create in India" mission to position India as a global hub for digital content creation.

Background

AI Impact Summit focuses on the intersection of artificial intelligence, media, creativity, and digital governance. India is increasingly emerging as a regulatory voice in the global debate on:

- platform accountability
- cultural sovereignty
- AI ethics
- digital labour and creative industries

The rapid expansion of OTT platforms and AI-generated content has triggered debates worldwide on:

- cultural homogenisation
- misinformation
- copyright and creator rights
- platform regulation
- cross-border digital governance

India, with its large digital user base, is shaping a model that blends innovation with regulatory sovereignty.

Features of the Minister's Position

Cultural Context Matters

- Content acceptable in one society may be unacceptable in another
- Platforms must adapt to local cultural norms
- Digital globalisation cannot override social diversity



Legal Sovereignty in the Digital Age

- Platforms must follow host country laws, not parent-country standards

- Reinforces India's digital regulatory authority
- Aligns with data sovereignty and platform accountability debates

“Create in India” Mission

- Industry-driven creative economy initiative
- Focus on reskilling and upskilling
- Aim: make India a preferred global content production hub
- Long-term talent pipeline for digital industries

India's Demographic Advantage

- Large digitally native population
- Natural adaptability to emerging technologies
- Opportunity to lead AI-enabled creative sectors

Challenges

Balancing Regulation and Creativity

- Overregulation may discourage innovation and foreign investment.

Cultural Subjectivity

- Defining “acceptable cultural norms” is complex and contested.

Platform Compliance Burden

- Global firms face fragmented regulatory regimes across countries.

Free Speech Concerns

- Content control debates may raise censorship fears.

AI Governance Gaps

- Rapid tech evolution outpaces regulatory frameworks.

Way Forward

Co-regulatory Model

- Partnership between government, platforms, and civil society.

Transparent Content Standards

- Clear, predictable compliance frameworks.

Global Norm Setting

- India can lead multilateral AI and platform governance forums.

Skill Ecosystem Expansion

- Massive creative-tech workforce training.

Innovation-Friendly Regulation

- Encourage experimentation while protecting public interest.

Conclusion

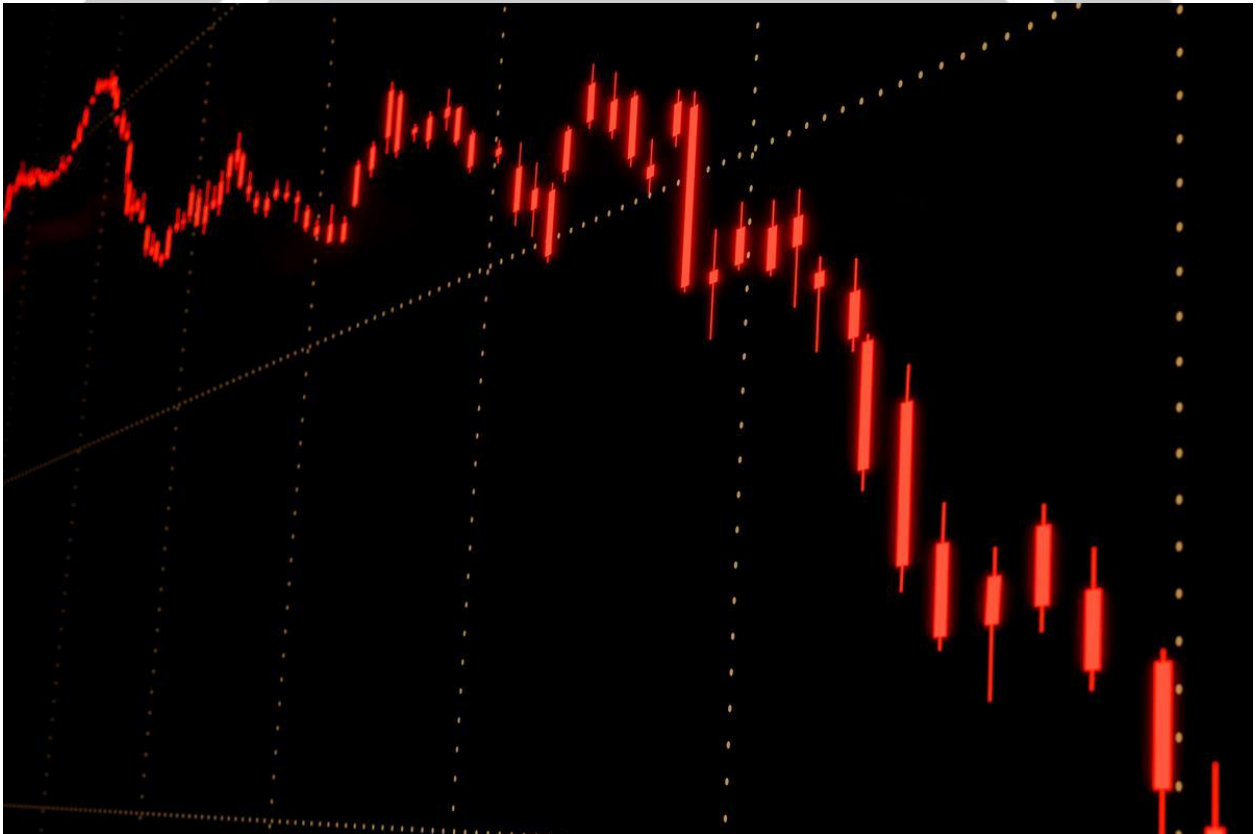
India's digital policy direction signals a shift from passive platform hosting to active digital sovereignty. The emphasis is not on restricting global platforms but on ensuring that globalisation respects local identity, law, and democratic values.

If executed carefully, the "Create in India" vision can transform India into a global creative-tech powerhouse — one that combines cultural confidence with technological leadership.

4. A budgetary signal, as banks cannot bear it all

Why in the News?

India's Budget 2026 has introduced a set of financial-sector measures aimed at deepening capital markets and reducing excessive dependence on banks for long-term financing. Economist Saumitra Bhaduri argues that these moves signal recognition of a structural imbalance: Indian banks are carrying risks that functioning financial markets should absorb.



Background: India's Bank-Centric Financial Architecture

India's financial system has historically been bank-dominated, with public sector banks acting as the primary providers of long-term capital.

Key structural facts:

- Government bond market: ~90% of GDP (deep and liquid)
- Corporate bond market: ~15–16% of GDP (shallow)
- Banks hold 60–65% of corporate debt
- Comparable figures:
 - U.S.: ~30% bank share

- Europe: ~40%

Because India lacks a mature corporate debt ecosystem, banks end up financing:

- highways
- power plants
- ports
- telecom networks
- infrastructure projects with 15–20 year horizons

But banks are funded by short-term deposits, creating a maturity mismatch.

This architecture forces banks to become a warehouse for systemic risk.

Key Budget 2026 Reform Signals

The Budget gestures toward risk redistribution through markets rather than balance sheets.

- Market-Making Framework for Corporate Bonds
- Improves liquidity and secondary trading.
- Total-Return Swaps & Bond Index Derivatives
- Allows risk hedging and price discovery.

Infrastructure Risk Guarantee Fund

- Provides partial credit guarantees to attract investors.

CPSE Real Estate via REITs

- Converts illiquid public assets into tradable market instruments.
- These reforms aim to shift India from a bank-dominated model to a market-mediated financial structure.

Structural Problems Identified

Overburdened Bank Balance Sheets

- Banks hold long-duration project risk that they are not designed to absorb.

Fiscal Cost of Bank Failures

- ₹3.2 lakh crore recapitalisation since 2017 = socialisation of private losses.

Credit Crowding-Out

- Capital locked in infrastructure reduces credit for MSMEs.

Weak Monetary Transmission

- Interest rate changes do not pass smoothly due to stressed bank balance sheets.

Shallow Corporate Debt Market

- Private placements dominate
- Limited investor diversity
- Low liquidity
- Concentration in top-rated firms

Challenges

Investor Base is Narrow

- Retail and foreign participation remain low.

Liquidity Trap

- Thin trading discourages participation → self-reinforcing cycle.

Regulatory Fragmentation

- Multiple regulators slow market innovation.

Risk Aversion

- Institutional investors prefer government securities.

Governance Concerns

- Corporate transparency and rating reliability remain uneven.

Way Forward

Deepen Institutional Investor Participation

- Encourage pension funds, insurance, and global investors.

Credit Enhancement Ecosystem

- Expand guarantee structures and pooled risk vehicles.

Strengthen Market Infrastructure

- Electronic trading, clearing, and transparency.

Regulatory Coordination

- Harmonise RBI–SEBI–Finance Ministry frameworks.

Improve Corporate Governance

- Better disclosure standards build investor trust.

Retail Bond Access

- Simplify retail participation channels.

Conclusion

Budget 2026 quietly acknowledges a truth long ignored: banks cannot be the economy's shock absorbers forever. A resilient financial system distributes risk across markets, institutions, and investors. If India succeeds in building a deep corporate debt ecosystem, it will:

- reduce fiscal recapitalisation burdens
- improve credit flow to productive sectors
- strengthen monetary transmission
- stabilise long-term growth

The budget measures are small steps - but they point toward a necessary architectural redesign of India's financial system.

5. A separate classification for denotified tribes

Why in the News?

A renewed movement by Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) is demanding a separate Census classification and Constitutional recognition. The Union government has assured that these communities will be enumerated in the 2027 Census, but leaders want a distinct column to ensure visibility, welfare access, and dignity. The demand has revived debate on historical injustice, incomplete rehabilitation after Independence, and failures in welfare delivery - especially after problems in implementing the SEED scheme.



Background: Why Were DNTs Called “Criminal Tribes”?

Criminal Tribes Act, 1871

During British rule, colonial administrators labelled certain nomadic and mobile communities as hereditary criminals. The logic was rooted in racial anthropology and caste stereotypes.

The law allowed:

- compulsory registration
- surveillance and movement restrictions
- forced settlements
- police reporting
- stigma across generations

The British claimed crime was hereditary within these tribes — a deeply racist assumption tied to colonial control.

After Independence:

- CTA was repealed in 1952

- Communities were “denotified”
- But replaced by the Habitual Offenders Acts in many States
- Surveillance and policing stigma continued

Thus, legal repeal did not erase social stigma.

History of Enumeration

- First explicit enumeration: 1911 Census
- Last enumeration: 1931 Census
- After Independence: no separate Census counting
- Most DNTs are absorbed into the SC/ST/OBC lists
- Many communities are left unclassified

What Did the Idate Commission Recommend?

National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (Idate Commission, 2017)

Key findings:

- ~1,200 DNT communities identified
- 268 communities remained unclassified
- Extreme socio-economic marginalisation
- Continued police harassment and stigma
- Lack of documentation and identity

Major recommendations:

- Permanent constitutional commission for DNTs
- Dedicated budget and targeted welfare
- Separate enumeration in the Census
- Sub-classification within DNTs
- Focused education and housing programmes
- Protection from police discrimination

However:

- Permanent commission not created
- Welfare board formed instead
- Key anthropological study on 268 groups shelved

Problem with the SEED Scheme

The Social Justice Ministry launched:

SEED Scheme (Scheme for Economic Empowerment of DNTs)

Focus areas:

- livelihood
- education
- housing
- health

Allocated: ₹200 crore over five years

- Actual spending: fraction of allocation

Core problem:

- Beneficiaries needed DNT certificates

But:

- Most States do not issue DNT certificates
- Only select districts in a few States provide them
- Administrative confusion over identity
- Communities already in the SC/ST/OBC lists face overlap issues

Result:

- Policy exists on paper
Benefits do not reach the ground.
- This reinforced demands for separate classification.

Why Community Leaders Want Separate Classification

Recognition of Historical Injustice

- DNTs seek formal acknowledgement of colonial criminalisation.

Administrative Visibility

- Without classification → no data → no policy targeting.

Welfare Access

- Uniform identity certificates across India.

Continued Stigma

- Habitual offender policing practices persist.

Uneven Development

- Some DNT groups progressed; many remain extremely marginalised.

Political Representation

- Separate classification strengthens voice in governance.
- Leaders argue that SC/ST/OBC categories dilute their specific experience of discrimination.

Challenges

- Overlap with existing reservation structure
- Fear of fragmentation of social justice categories
- Administrative complexity
- Political sensitivity around new constitutional categories
- Need for reliable anthropological mapping

Way Forward

Separate Census Column for DNTs

- Data is the foundation of policy.

Legal Protection from Stigma

- Review Habitual Offenders laws.

National DNT Commission

- Constitutional status with enforcement power.

Uniform Certification Mechanism

- Portable identity across States.

Sub-classification Within DNTs

- Target the most vulnerable.

Dedicated Budgetary Envelope

- Outcome-based welfare tracking.

Awareness & Police Reform

- End inherited colonial prejudice.

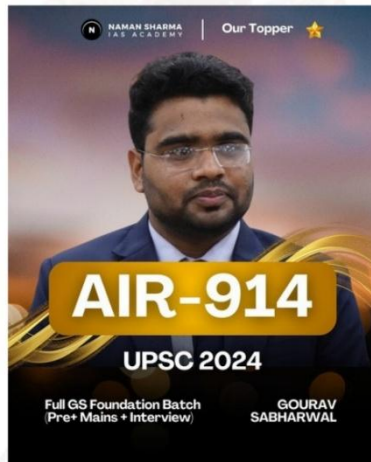
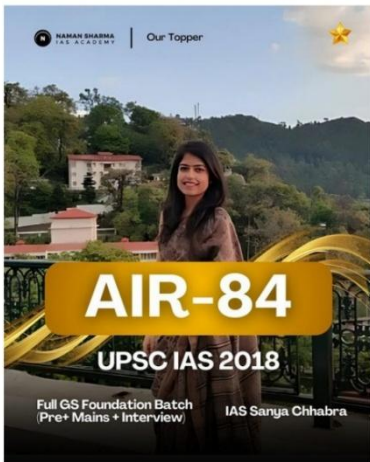
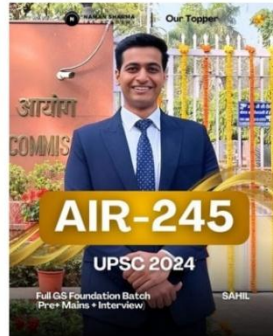
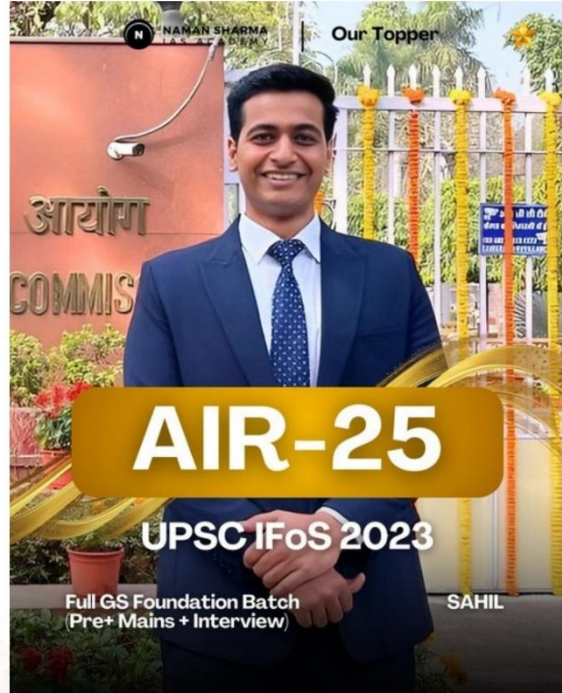
Conclusion

Denotified tribes are a reminder that legal freedom does not automatically erase historical stigma. India repealed a colonial law, but never fully repaired its social consequences. The demand for a separate classification is not merely administrative -it is a demand for dignity, visibility, and justice.



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