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# DAILY CURRENT AFFAIRS

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## Topics Covered

- **India's new urban worry-rising overnutrition**
- **The Silver Jubilee of a strategic partnership**
- **Conservation of dugongs must remain a top priority for India**
- **Sikari festival**

## India's new urban worry-rising overnutrition

## Syllabus

GS Paper II (Health, Governance),

GS Paper III (Science and Tech, Economic Development),

Essay, Ethics (Policy Challenges)

## India's new urban worry — rising overnutrition

A recent article in *Nature* that studied the prevalence of Metabolic Dysfunction-Associated Fatty Liver Disease (MAFLD) among IT employees in Hyderabad had alarming findings: 84% of the participants had fatty liver, indicating MAFLD, and 71% were obese. This striking statistic underscores a larger, more insidious public health crisis that is emerging in tandem with the growth of India's urban economy. The underlying drivers are chronic stress, excess salt intake, disrupted sleep patterns, and prolonged sedentary routines, particularly among those in the technology sector. IT companies often tether employees to their desks by offering free kiosks stocked with snacks that fall short of nutritional standards.

### Urban India's crisis

India is grappling with a paradoxical nutritional landscape. While undernutrition remains a concern in many regions, overnutrition is now rapidly escalating in urban centres. In 2021, India ranked second globally in overweight and obesity prevalence. The trend is particularly evident in metropolitan IT corridors, where professionals are unwittingly becoming the face of a silent metabolic crisis. India's double burden of malnutrition — rampant undernutrition coexisting with overnutrition — is reflected in its low ranking on the Global Hunger Index.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) were responsible for 74% of global deaths in 2019 (it was 61% in 2000). These diseases disproportionately affect low- and middle-income countries, including India. WHO's 2024 World Health Statistics warns that NCDs and obesity are increasingly prevalent in the most economically productive segment of society. Without substantial policy interventions, regions such as South-East Asia are unlikely to meet the 2030 Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets to reduce premature mortality from NCDs.

In Tamil Nadu, the 2023-24 STEPS Survey paints a stark picture: over 65% of deaths in Chennai are attributable to NCDs. While the NCD cascade of care has shown improvement, there are significant gaps.

Among those receiving treatment for hypertension, only 16% have achieved blood pressure control, and for individuals aged 18-44, this drops to just 9.3%. Among diabetics in the same age group, only 9.8% manage to maintain glycaemic control. The prevalence of overweight and obesity stands at 31.6% and 14.2%, respectively. Additionally, 94.2% of respondents reported inadequate fruit and vegetable consumption, while 24.4% reported insufficient physical activity.

Tamil Nadu's Makkalai Thedi Maruthuvam (MTM) programme, deserves mention for its



**Dr. A. Chandiran Joseph**

is a doctor who is currently pursuing his post-graduation in community medicine in Chennai

In a paradoxical nutritional landscape, where undernutrition remains a concern in many regions, overnutrition is now escalating in urban centres

multisectoral approach to NCD control. From January 2024, 3,79,635 employees have been screened through workplace interventions. The eight-kilometre health walk and the "Eat Right Challenge" were introduced to encourage behavioural change and nutrition awareness. However, the unchecked growth of fast food outlets in metros remains a formidable obstacle.

The National Family Health Survey-5 shows that obesity steadily rises with age, from 7% among men (15-19 years) to 32% among those aged 40 to 49 years. The prevalence of overweight or obesity rises from 10% in the lowest wealth quintile to 37% in the highest wealth quintile.

The widespread prevalence of overweight and obesity across age groups and income levels underscores that this is not an isolated occupational hazard, but a population-wide health crisis in the making. These trends align closely with data for women. Waist-to-hip ratio (WHR), another NCD risk marker, also increases with age: 46% to 65% in women and 28% to 60% in men (ages 15 to 49). In Tamil Nadu, urban areas report a higher NCD prevalence when compared to rural areas. Overweight or obesity affects 46.1% of urban men and 43.1% of urban women, compared to 35.4% and 31.6%, respectively, in rural areas.

The 18 to 59 age bracket which contributes to Tamil Nadu's majority working force is most vulnerable to early-onset NCDs, also compounded by a growing dependence on ultra-processed foods, alongside other established factors.

A *Lancet* article (2025) estimates that India's overweight and obese adult population could touch 450 million by 2050 (180 million in 2021). Simultaneously, childhood obesity has surged by 244% over the past three decades and is expected to climb another 121% in the next three.

### Focus on manufacturing and marketing

While nutrition awareness at the consumer level is growing, it remains insufficient. The greater responsibility lies with regulators, producers, and policymakers. The market is saturated with ultra-processed foods that offer convenience but little in the way of nourishment. Consumers are frequently left choosing from options that are inherently unhealthy.

To address this, the Eat Right India movement, led by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), promotes safe, healthy, and sustainable food. It includes hygiene ratings, certification programmes, and campaigns such as "Aaj Se Thoda Kam," which encourages consumers to gradually reduce their intake of fat, sugar, and salt. In partnership with the Indian Council of Medical Research and the National Institute of Nutrition, the FSSAI advocates labelling high-fat, salt, and sugar (HFSS) foods,

empowering consumers to make informed choices. In 2022, the FSSAI proposed the Health Star Rating (HSR) aimed at clearer nutritional information on packaged foods. However, the HSR system has sparked debate among medical practitioners and nutrition experts, on its effectiveness.

The Supreme Court of India recently directed an FSSAI-constituted expert committee to submit scientific and technical advice on food safety matters, which includes recommendations on food labelling norms.

However, these efforts must be backed by stricter enforcement and broader multisectoral coordination. Nutritional regulation must extend beyond messaging campaigns to influence what is manufactured, marketed and made available.

### The Saudi Arabian model

Saudi Arabia offers a compelling model. As part of its Vision 2030 initiative, the kingdom has embedded NCD prevention into its national policy framework. It enforces calorie labelling in restaurants, imposes a 50% excise tax on sugar-sweetened beverages, and levies a 100% tax on energy drinks. It has instituted sodium limits in processed foods. Saudi Arabia is among the few nations meeting WHO's sodium reduction best practices and recognised for eliminating trans fats. Its success lies in the coherence of its strategy — integrating health, regulatory oversight, industry compliance, and civic engagement.

Meanwhile, India's urban landscape continues to evolve rapidly. Bengaluru, Hyderabad, Pune and Chennai have become economic engines, powered by the technology sector. To accommodate global operations, IT companies are embracing flexible and extended work hours. This transition has resulted in a considerable rise in demand for late-night eateries, cloud kitchens, and food delivery services. However, the vast majority of these offerings are energy-dense, nutrient-poor food products. As a nightlife culture expands in parallel with economic ambitions, so too does the risk of a nutrition-driven public health crisis. While the numbers among IT professionals are eye-catching, the escalating burden of NCDs extends well beyond this sector.

The message is clear: reversing the tide of NCDs demands not just awareness but action. Regulatory reforms, especially those addressing the food industry, are imperative.

Imposing taxes on foods high in sugar and salt — or those failing to meet nutritional standards — could be a logical next step. After all, if there is one thing India has never shied away from, it is introducing new taxes. Why not one that promotes health?

*The views expressed are personal*





## Context:

India, while still battling undernutrition in various regions, is now facing an alarming rise in overnutrition, especially in urban populations — a phenomenon reflective of the “**double burden of malnutrition**”.

- A **Nature study** among IT professionals in Hyderabad revealed:
  - ♦ **84% had fatty liver (MAFLD).**
  - ♦ **71% were obese.**

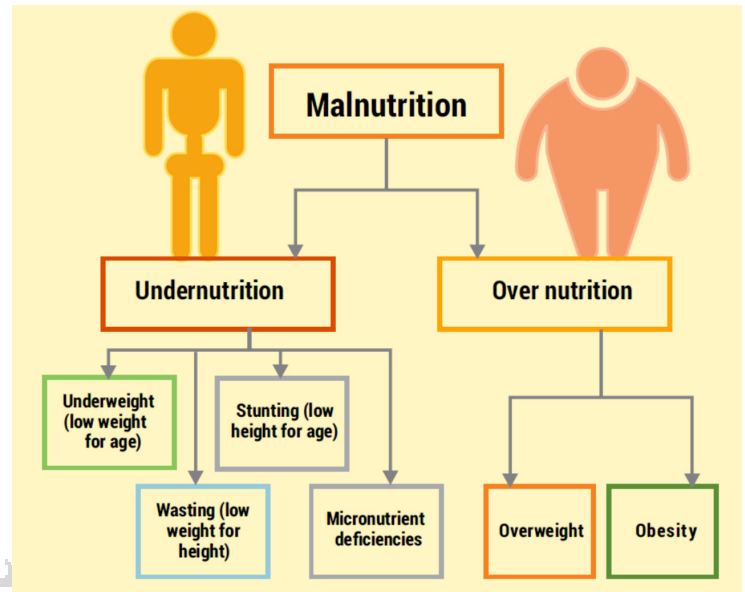
- **Overnutrition** is emerging as a serious **noncommunicable disease (NCD) driver**, particularly among urban professionals in the 18–59 age group.

**MAFLD (Metabolic Dysfunction-Associated Fatty Liver Disease):** A chronic liver condition marked by fat accumulation due to poor diet and metabolic imbalance.

**Waist-to-Hip Ratio (WHR):** Indicator of fat distribution; a critical non-invasive marker for predicting cardiovascular and metabolic risk.

**HSR (Health Star Rating):** A front-of-pack nutrition labeling system indicating overall nutritional profile to help consumers make informed choices.

**Noncommunicable Diseases (NCDs):** Chronic diseases not spread by infection (e.g., diabetes, obesity, cardiovascular disease), driven by lifestyle factors.



## Key points from the article:

### 1. Double Burden of Malnutrition in India

- India faces both **undernutrition** and **overnutrition**, with the urban population increasingly affected by the latter.
- **Global Hunger Index (2023)** ranks **India at 111 out of 125 countries**, indicating persistent undernutrition amidst rising obesity.

### 2. Rise in Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs)

- **WHO Data (2019):**
  - ♦ NCDs account for **74% of global deaths** (up from 61% in 2000).
  - ♦ Disproportionately affect **low- and middle-income countries**, like India.
- **SDG Goal 3.4:** Reduce premature mortality from NCDs by one-third by 2030 – unlikely to be met without robust policy interventions.

### 3. State-level Alarms – Tamil Nadu Case Study

- **STEPS Survey (2023-24)** in Chennai:
  - ♦ **65% of deaths due to NCDs.**
  - ♦ **Obesity:** Overweight 31.6%, Obese 14.2%.
  - ♦ **Low fruit/vegetable intake:** 94.2%.
  - ♦ **Insufficient physical activity:** 24.4%.





- Blood pressure control in treated hypertensives: only **16%**.
- Glycaemic control in diabetics (18–44 age group): only **9.8%**.

#### 4. Alarming Trends Across Age and Wealth Levels

- **NFHS-5 Data:**
  - ♦ Obesity rises with **age** and **wealth**.
  - ♦ Among men: 7% obese (15–19 yrs) → 32% (40–49 yrs).
  - ♦ Among women: Waist-to-hip ratio risk increases from 46% to 65%

#### Urban vs Rural Disparity:

- ♦ Overweight/obesity in **urban men**: 46.1%
- ♦ In **rural men**: 35.4%
- ♦ Urban areas more prone due to sedentary jobs and processed food consumption.

#### 5. Unhealthy Food Environment

- **Rise of ultra-processed foods**, nighttime eating, food delivery services driven by IT sector's 24x7 schedule.
- **FSSAI's 'Eat Right India'** initiative:
  - ♦ “Aaj Se Thoda Kam” campaign: Reduce salt, sugar, fat.
  - ♦ **Health Star Rating (HSR)**: Nutritional labels for packaged food (contentious due to mixed expert opinions).
  - ♦ Collaborations with **ICMR** and **National Institute of Nutrition**.

#### 6. Regulatory Weakness & Policy Suggestions

- Current policy is **reactive** and **awareness-based**, lacking enforcement.
- Need for:
  - ♦ **Regulation of food manufacturing and marketing.**
  - ♦ **Taxes on HFSS (High Fat, Salt, Sugar) foods.**
  - ♦ **Stricter labelling norms.**
  - ♦ **Mandatory calorie disclosure in restaurants.**

#### 7. International Best Practice – Saudi Arabia

- **Vision 2030**: Integrated NCD strategy.
  - ♦ 50% tax on sugary drinks, 100% on energy drinks.
  - ♦ Sodium limits, calorie labelling, elimination of trans fats.
  - ♦ Recognized by WHO for best practices in **sodium reduction**

**The Silver Jubilee of a strategic partnership**

#### Syllabus :

- **GS-II (International Relations),**
- **GS-III (Environment, Economy)**







## The silver jubilee of a strategic partnership

**T**his month, India and Germany celebrate 25 years of strategic partnership. It is a partnership that has steadily evolved and is well equipped to take on the challenges of today's world. Germany's 'Focus on India' strategy outlines our vision for the future of the bilateral partnership. The new German Coalition Treaty, as well as early phone calls between German Chancellor Friedrich Merz and Prime Minister Narendra Modi as well as German Foreign Minister Johann Wadepuhl with his Indian counterpart S. Jaishankar speak a clear language – we will continue to build on this partnership, and to closely coordinate with our Indian partners.

Our ties are multifaceted, but essentially stand on four pillars – peace, prosperity, people and the future of our planet.

### A shared vision

Peace and stability are fundamental prerequisites for the development of our countries. India and Germany share a vision of a peaceful, stable and rules-based world. At the core of our trusted political relationship is a unique format: The Intergovernmental Government Consultations build a strong bridge between our government that solidifies and channels our ties in a comprehensive, productive and purposeful way. An area that has particularly thrived over the last years is our cooperation in the defence sector. I remember vividly standing on the hot tarmac at the Sullur Air Force station (Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu) during the Tarang Shakti Exercise (2024), witnessing the incredible air show of Indian and German pilots whizzing through the air with great skill, coordination and teamwork. These joint military exercises and port calls by the German Navy anchor the Indo-Pacific in the German geostrategic mental map. In the future, we can expect closer strategic cooperation, and closer ties between our defence industries.

Prosperity means more than just economic growth. In a more comprehensive sense, it allows our people to flourish, to find meaningful jobs, and to provide their families with the means for a



**Philipp Ackerman**  
is the German  
Ambassador to India

The German-India partnership is a multifaceted one that has evolved steadily; there is much optimism about what lies ahead

better future. Around 2,000 German companies are active in India, and they create more than 750,000 jobs for Indians.

One of my most memorable moments in Delhi was visiting the Delhi-Meerut Rapid Rail. These are high-tech trains on great infrastructure, operated by young, talented Indians in the uniforms of Deutsche Bahn, our national railway company, which runs the operations in Delhi. A growing number of Indian companies are also present in Germany, increasingly integrated into our high-tech supply lines.

In times of unprecedented global trade disruptions, these closely integrated supply lines testify to the trust that we place in each other. And this could be just the beginning, as a free trade agreement between India and the European Union – two of the global economic powerhouses – becomes tangible. Science and technology are another part of the prosperity equation. We do ambitious research together, and you will find Indian researchers in our top scientific institutions. With tech cooperation, we can transform environmental challenges into business cases.

### People-to-people ties

People fill our strategic partnership with life and stories. A growing number of Indians now call Germany their home. Over 50,000 Indians study in our country – by now the largest group of foreign students at German universities. Some of them spend a few years in Germany, get their first jobs, gain technical experience, earn good money. Many of them then return to India to build their families there. Some Indians also stay in Germany and see their children grow up in our country. Either way, they deepen and enrich our ties. Many young Indians showcase their life in Germany online. I have met many of them in person and listened to their stories. I am always impressed by this uniquely Indian ability to make a new place a home. I see young Indians adapting, thriving, and making their contribution to German society and economy. Germany offers many opportunities to young, ambitious and

gifted Indians, but more doors will open to those who learn German.

I witness a great interest in our language all across India and we will have to explore new ways together to match well-equipped German teachers with every interested Indian. The second hurdle is in getting more Germans to study and to work in India. We need more people who understand the story of India, more people who speak one of the many fascinating languages of India, and more people who settle down there to set up shop. Any investment in the younger German and Indian generations will be an investment in the people that will propel our strategic partnership to new heights in the next 25 years.

### Green development

Our partnership on the challenges and the future of our planet is one of the most important one: Planet earth is our common ecological lifeline, it future-proofs our livelihoods. In 2022, Germany committed €10 billion in preferential loans and grants for India, over a span of 10 years. This is what we call the Indo-German Green and Sustainable Development Partnership (GSDP). We cooperate with our Indian friends on a large scale on renewables, on biodiversity and on smart city projects. In addition to that, private sector cooperation in this area is also noteworthy. Recently, I visited renewable energy projects in Gujarat, whose scale and ambition are just astonishing – solar panels and windmills in all directions. The rotor blades of the wind turbines are partly produced by a German company – with our technology, we want to be a part of India's energy transition, and of the fast-paced economy of this country.

I have had the privilege of serving in India twice – between 2007 and 2010 – and as Ambassador since 2022. In these years, India has developed in the most impressive way. And so has our strategic partnership. Looking back at what we have achieved together fills me with a sense of accomplishment, and with great optimism for what is yet to come.

## Germany



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## Key Points from the article

- **Four Pillars of Strategic Partnership**

The partnership is based on:

- ◆ **Peace**
- ◆ **Prosperity**
- ◆ **People**
- ◆ **Planet (Environment/Climate)**

- **Peace and Strategic Cooperation**

- **Shared commitment to a rules-based international order, especially in the Indo-Pacific.**

- **Defence collaboration:**

- ◆ Example: Tarang Shakti 2024 joint air force exercise in Sullur (Tamil Nadu).
- ◆ **Port calls** by the German Navy show growing Indo-Pacific engagement.

- **Scope for deeper defence industry ties and joint military exercises.**

- **Economic Ties & Prosperity**

- ◆ **2,000+ German companies in India** – providing over **7.5 lakh jobs**.
- ◆ German companies involved in **infrastructure projects**: e.g., **Delhi-Meerut RRTS**, operated in partnership with **Deutsche Bahn**.
- ◆ Increasing **Indian business presence in Germany**.
- ◆ Hopes pinned on **India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA)** under negotiation.
- ◆ India-EU FTA under India-EU Trade and **Technology Council (TTC)** framework (launched 2023).
- ◆ Germany is India's **largest trading partner in the EU**.

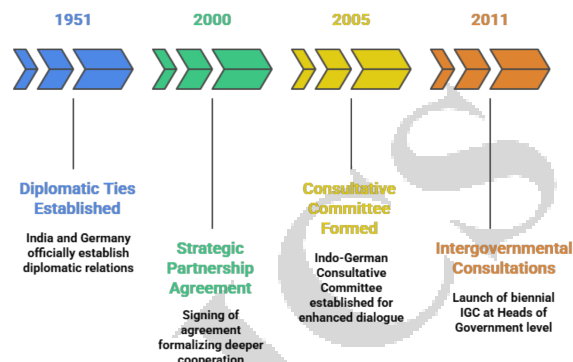
- **Climate & Green Partnership**

- ◆ In 2022, Germany committed €10 billion to India under the Indo-German Green and Sustainable Development Partnership (GSDP) for:
  - Renewable energy projects
  - Smart city collaborations
  - Biodiversity conservation
- ◆ German tech being used in **solar and wind projects in Gujarat** (example of green industrial cooperation).

- **Schemes to Mention:**

- ◆ India's **National Hydrogen Mission, ISA (International Solar Alliance)**
- ◆ Germany is a member of the **Climate Club** launched by the G7 (India attended as a partner in 2023).

Key Milestones in India-Germany Relations





## Bilateral & Multilateral Relevance

- Germany is a key member of G4 (India, Germany, Japan, Brazil) seeking UNSC reforms.
- Both countries share concern over:
  - Climate change
  - Global supply chain resilience
  - Russia-Ukraine war impacts
  - China's assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific

## Conservation of dugongs must remain a top priority for India

### GS III-Environment and Biodiversity Conservation, Marine Ecology, Government Initiatives and Species Protection



Along the Indian coastline, dugongs primarily inhabit waters around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay, and the Gulf of Kutch. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

## Conservation of dugongs must remain a top priority for India

The threats dugongs face worldwide include declining populations and degradation of the seagrass habitats that they feed on. In India, they are classified as regionally endangered, once widespread of India, their numbers have fallen, with population size and geographic range on the wane.

Prithvi Banerjee

**W**ithing measures of coastal grasses part as a poorly digested diet through the shallow waters. Like all things that enter, the threat to the Indian dugong is partly global as it is evident on the seagrass that underpins the food web of the shallow seabed, coral reefs reveal themselves in a state of stress, with the loss of life-sustaining out of the way, and an entire ecosystem comes into view.

Meet the dugong – the former of the sea. It is distributed every year in the World Dugong Day. Dugongs (dugongs) mammals found in India's marine ecosystems. The gentle giant – known as the sea cow but resembling a cross between a seal and a whale – is distributed through the Indo-Pacific region. One of their dependencies on seagrass beds for habitat and food, dugongs are restricted to shallow waters, where they spend the day foraging on seagrasses of the genera *Cymodocea*, *Ruppia*, *Phyllophora*, and *Halodule*. They rest at the base of seagrass meadows, eating thistles, stems, and leaves, thus clearing the shallow waters. This is how they earned their epithet: "sea cow".

Once in the shallow waters, dugongs meet their daily requirements. They can consume 20-30 tonnes of seagrass a day, crushing leaves and stems against their beaked teeth before swallowing. Unlike other marine mammals, they may not allow digestion to digest. Unfortunately, although the process wears down their teeth slowly, for the seagrass, digging rapidly wears down their multiple iterations throughout their lives.

Unlike mammals, their close relatives, dolphins are more strictly marine, preferring waters a few metres deep. They are found along the Indian coastline, primarily inhabiting waters around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Gulf of Mannar, Palk Bay, and the Gulf of Kutch. The largest is a herd of 100, able to live up to 70 years.

Dugongs are generally solitary or found in small mother-off calf pairs. Researchers have occasionally observed small groups, but large herds – as are common in Australian waters – are rare in India. Individuals reach reproductive maturity after only one to two years and can give birth at intervals of around three to four years. Due to its slow reproductive cycle, extended time to maturity, and frequent calving, a dugong population's maximum potential growth rate is estimated to be just about 3% per year.

**Threatened waters**

But for their interesting waters, dugongs are listed as being "vulnerable" on the IUCN Red List for "Threatened Species". The threats they face worldwide include rapidly declining populations and the ongoing degradation of their seagrass habitats. In India, they are classified as regionally endangered.

Once widespread in Indian waters, their numbers have dwindled to an estimated 200 individuals, with both their population size and geographic range

continuing to decline. According to research by independent marine researcher Prithvi Banerjee, coastal areas around India are increasingly under pressure from expanding residential, commercial, and agricultural activities. To many people make claim to these spaces, the risk of depletion rises. Pollution can also affect them directly, with studies showing the accumulation of mercury and organochlorine compounds in their muscle tissues.

Recent dugong population surveys and seagrass meadow assessments have revealed that dugongs are highly vulnerable to human disturbances. Seagrass meadows, their primary habitat, are being lost at an alarming rate.

Primary threats stem from changing fishing methods, which threaten the seagrass. Bottom trawling, which involves non-mechanised boats to fish in shallow waters, has been banned in India. However, studies have indicated that this ban is the least developed for the fishermen in Indian waters, and the severe area has around 12.5 km. In fact, the seagrass beds, covering habitat and food for the dugong population.

This move to protect the species at a national level, stems from long-term monitoring and research by the IUCN Foundation and NCC, the Wildlife Institute of India, and the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, they have been working to improve dugong conservation and seagrass restoration for more than a decade. Their efforts can go a long way in ensuring the survival of dugongs and their habitat.

"Dugongs are gentle giants and an important part of the marine ecosystem," Mr. Harish said. "But their survival now depends on us – as humans, we act to protect their fading habitats from pollution, coastal development, and neglect."

Improving dugong conservation and seagrass restoration can take us to a more sustainable future. To do so, we need urgent mapping and monitoring of existing seagrass meadows

to identify more priority conservation areas, such as the Gulf of Mannar Biosphere Reserve. Activities that damage seagrass need to be restricted, and community-led seagrass stewardship, including involving local fishers in monitoring and rescue operations, can go a long way in maintaining the dugong habitat. Regulating harmful fishing practices, such as blowing off reefs and bottom trawling, is known to damage habitats and also help prevent accidental entanglement. We also need to promote low-destructive, sustainable fishing techniques that fishers have used in the past, alternative livelihood systems such as diving tourism, and creating local youth eco-guides can fill the role of diminishing dugong populations while raising awareness of their habitat and behaviour of wildlife, empowering local communities.

Increasing awareness and community involvement have always been important aspects of dugong conservation. Many conservation programmes are conducting awareness campaigns in coastal villages about the ecological importance of dugongs, and many local communities and fishers are trained to report dugong sightings or strandings, facilitating rescue operations when needed.

Another important factor is strengthening research. Researchers need more support, both financial and institutional, for long-term studies of dugongs, their habitats, and their genetic diversity. Developing citizen science programmes and using traditional ecological knowledge of local communities will be another dimension to existing research. Additionally, advances in tagging and more technology can be utilised to track dugongs, and more research is needed to identify critical habitats.

**Additional: why seagrass matters** Seagrass is an underwater flowering plant, not to be confused with seaweed. Classified as wetland ecosystems, seagrass meadows stabilise the seabed, support fisheries, capture carbon, and shelter marine life. India's seagrass is essential for dugongs and marine life such as mud crabs. In 2022, by the National Centre for Sustainable Coastal Management documented 16,500 km. of seagrass habitat in India. This translates to a potential of up to 434 tonnes per sq. km each year. India has marine ecosystems comprising 10% of the world's seagrass, and Palk Bay, off the coast of Tamil Nadu, is the largest seagrass bed in India.

Seagrass is the highest diversity in the Indian Ocean. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands also support rich seagrass beds and associated biodiversity. While seagrass is present in the shallow reefs of the Lakshadweep Islands and along the coast of Kerala, Palk Bay, and Odisha, they are strictly dependent on healthy seagrass beds along coasts, but these habitats are not extensive or suitable for digging populations.

Prithvi Banerjee is a doctoral student and researcher at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bangalore. [prithvi@atreenet.org](mailto:prithvi@atreenet.org)

## About Dugongs

## Significance of Dugongs

- Dugongs (Dugong dugon) are the only herbivorous marine mammals found in India.
- Often called "sea cows," they resemble a cross between a whale and a seal.





- Nicknamed the “farmers of the sea” for their role in maintaining healthy seagrass ecosystems.

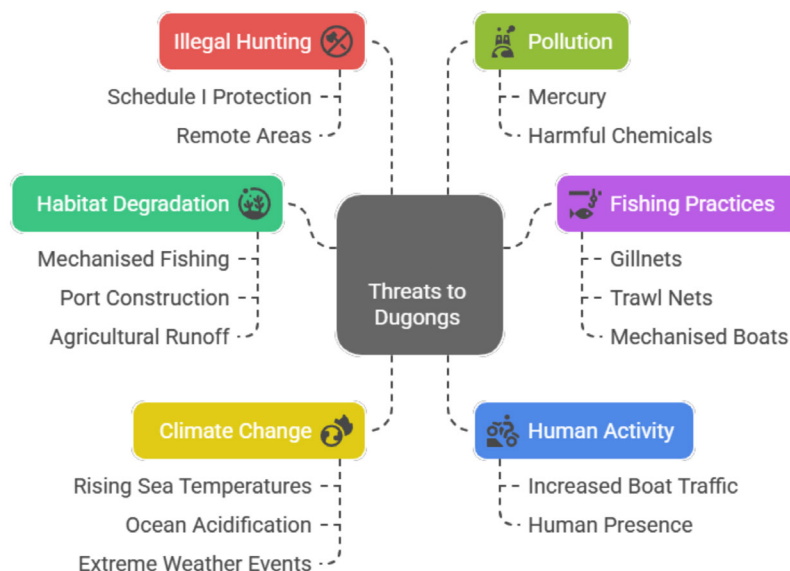
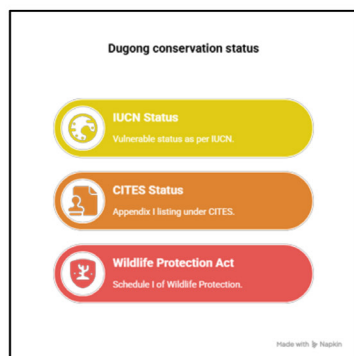
## Habitat and Distribution

- Found in shallow coastal waters along:
- Andaman & Nicobar Islands
- Gulf of Mannar
- Palk Bay
- Gulf of Kutch
- Prefer warm, shallow waters with extensive seagrass beds.



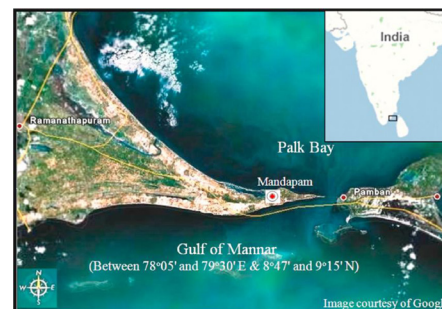
*Feed on species like Cymodocea, Halophila, Thalassia, and Halodule*

## Threats to Dugongs: A Comprehensive Overview



## Conservation Efforts

- India joined the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) in 1983.
- Signatory to CMS's MoU on Dugong Conservation since 2008.
- 2022: Creation of India's first Dugong Conservation Reserve (448.3 sq. km) in Palk Bay, Tamil Nadu.
- ~122.5 sq. km of intact seagrass beds identified.







## Sikari Festival

### *It is time to stop ritualistic hunting*

Sikari Utsav is a challenge for the Forest Department in parts of West Bengal

#### STATE OF PLAY

##### Singaram Kulandaivel

**S**ince the 1980s, West Bengal's Joint Forest Management committees, which are local community organisations that work with the State Forest Department to protect and manage forests, have fostered community cooperation, improved forest cover and biodiversity, and local livelihoods. However, south-west Bengal continues to face significant challenges related to wildlife protection. One of these challenges is ritualistic hunting.

Sikari Utsav is a regional festival that celebrates the hunting tradition. It is held during the dry season (March-May) in the districts of Jhargram, Paschim Medinipur, Bankura, Purulia, and Birbhum. During this time, thousands of villagers, along with people from neighbouring districts and States such as Jharkhand, Odisha, and Bihar, enter the forests to hunt small wildlife species, such as wild boars and wild hares. This practice affects wildlife and adds pressure on already under-resourced forest authorities. As the festival also coincides with the peak period of forest fires, it causes further damage to the environment.

The forests of south-west Bengal are vast, open, and easily accessible. Human settlements can be found around forest areas. While many villagers use the forests in an ecologically sustainable manner, some others exploit the resources for personal gain, without regard for the long-term consequences. The Forest Department, with limited manpower, finds it increasingly difficult to guard such a vast and interconnected ecosystem. Forest staff in the



field are overwhelmed by the sheer number of hunters during the Sikari Utsav. As a result, the efforts to stop this activity are often thwarted, and the forest staff are unable to fully enforce conservation regulations.

The practice of hunting during the Sikari Utsav is often justified by its cultural significance. Many of those involved in these hunts view the event as a traditional celebration harking back to the time when archery and shooting were celebrated. They see it as a practice that has been passed down generations. However, the biodiversity and environmental consequences of these actions are undeniable today.

While it is crucial to respect tradition, there is equally an urgent need for awareness and change. Wildlife faces unprecedented threats from overexploitation and human encroachment. The actions taken today will directly affect future generations, potentially leaving them with a world devoid of the biodiversity we now take for granted.

There is no time to waste when it comes to protecting our ecosystems. The current trajectory of environmental degradation, fuelled by human activities, could lead to the extinction of many species, making them only visible in photographs or books, but not in the wild. This stark reality should be a wake-up call

for all. It is not too late to take action, but the time for doing so is rapidly running out.

The effort to restore the forest vegetation and wildlife diversity in this terrain through participatory forest management has been substantial. It has taken nearly four decades to witness the return of high-quality vegetation alongside its native wildlife species.

The need for cooperation between local communities, government authorities, environmental organisations, and other stakeholders is greater than ever. The Joint Forest Management model has shown that people can play a positive role in forest conservation. But this model needs to be expanded and strengthened. We must invest more time and energy in building awareness campaigns, ensuring law enforcement and forest protection, and strengthening infrastructure to prevent destructive practices from continuing.

There must also be a concerted effort to engage with local communities and educate them about the long-term benefits of sustainable living and the importance of preserving biodiversity. The narrative needs to shift from one of exploitation to one of coexistence. This can only happen through dialogue, education, and the active involvement of all stakeholders.

The world we leave for future generations depends on our actions today. Protecting forests and wildlife is essential not for nostalgia's sake, but for the well-being of future generations. It is the only way of ensuring a harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment.

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