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May 23 Observances: Day to End Obstetric Fistula and World Turtle Day

23 May 2026

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23 May 2026 · 10 min read ·

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WHY IN NEWS:

May 23, 2026 marks two important global observances — the **International Day to End Obstetric Fistula** (United Nations; observed since 2013) and **World Turtle Day** (American Tortoise Rescue; observed since 2000). The first spotlights a preventable maternal-health injury that still afflicts hundreds of thousands of women in the developing world, while the second highlights the accelerating extinction crisis facing turtles and tortoises. Both have significant Indian implications — for maternal health policy and for biodiversity conservation, especially of Olive Ridley populations on the Odisha coast.

PART A — INTERNATIONAL DAY TO END OBSTETRIC FISTULA

Origin and Mandate

The International Day to End Obstetric Fistula is observed every year on **May 23**. It was established by **United Nations General Assembly Resolution A/RES/67/147** adopted on **December 20, 2012**, and was first observed in **2013**. The lead UN agency is the **United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)**, which launched the global **Campaign to End Fistula in 2003**.

The **2026 theme** is: *“Her Health is a Right; Invest in Ending Fistula and Childbirth Injuries.”* The theme reinforces the human-rights framing — that fistula is not just a medical condition but a marker of denied rights to safe motherhood, dignity, and health.

What is Obstetric Fistula?

Obstetric fistula is an **abnormal opening between the birth canal and the bladder (vesicovaginal fistula) and/or the rectum (rectovaginal fistula)**. It is caused by **prolonged obstructed labour** without timely access to emergency obstetric care — typically a labour lasting several days where the foetal head presses against soft tissues, cutting off blood supply and causing tissue necrosis.

Key features:

- Causes chronic **incontinence** (continuous leakage of urine and/or faeces).
- Leads to severe **social stigma**, marital abandonment, and depression.
- **More than 90% of fistula cases** are associated with **stillbirth**.

- It is **preventable** (through skilled birth attendance and timely C-section) and **treatable** — reconstructive surgery has a success rate of approximately **90%**.

Global Burden

INDICATOR	ESTIMATE
Women globally living with fistula	~500,000 (WHO/UNFPA)
New cases each year	50,000–100,000
Geographic concentration	>90% in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia
Key risk factors	Early marriage, malnutrition, lack of skilled birth attendants, poverty

India's Maternal Health Framework

India has built a layered architecture of schemes targeting the safe-motherhood continuum:

SCHEME	LAUNCHED	FOCUS
Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY)	April 12, 2005	Conditional cash transfer for institutional delivery
Janani Shishu Suraksha Karyakram (JSSK)	June 1, 2011	Free delivery, C-section, drugs, diagnostics, transport
Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyan (PMSMA)	June 9, 2016	Free quality ANC on the 9th of every month
Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana (PMMVY)	January 1, 2017	Cash transfer for pregnant and lactating women
LaQshya (Labour Room Quality Improvement)	December 11, 2017	Quality of intra-partum and immediate post-partum care
Anaemia Mukht Bharat	2018	Anaemia reduction across life-cycle
Surakshit Matritva Aashwasan (SUMAN)	October 10, 2019	Assured, free, dignified maternal and newborn care

India's MMR and the SDG Goalpost

- **Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR): 97 per lakh live births** (Sample Registration System 2018–20).
- Decline from **130** (2014–16) and **178** (2010–12) — a sharp downward trajectory.

- **SDG Target 3.1:** Reduce global MMR to **less than 70** per lakh live births by 2030.
- **Institutional delivery rate (NFHS-5, 2019–21): 88.6%**, up from 78.9% in NFHS-4.

Inter-state divergence

STATE	MMR (SRS 2018–20)
Kerala	19
Madhya Pradesh	173
Uttar Pradesh	167
Assam	195

The **Empowered Action Group (EAG) states** — Bihar, Jharkhand, MP, Chhattisgarh, Odisha, Rajasthan, UP, Uttarakhand plus Assam — continue to record the highest MMRs and remain the priority geographies for fistula prevention.

Treatment Capacity in India

The WHO classifies fistula repair under **Comprehensive Emergency Obstetric and Newborn Care (CEmONC)**. Dedicated fistula centres in India include:

- **AIIMS New Delhi** and **AIIMS Patna**
- **Christian Medical College (CMC), Vellore**
- **Sant Parmanand Hospital, Delhi** (Mission Smile partnership)
- **L V Prasad / Pravara Medical Trust** units

Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY includes a fistula-repair surgical package of approximately **₹50,000**, removing the catastrophic out-of-pocket barrier for poor women.

Way Forward

- Strengthen **First Referral Units (FRUs)** and CEmONC facilities at the block level.
- Expand the **Nurse Practitioner in Midwifery (NPM)** cadre (introduced in 2018 with an 18-month course) to free up obstetricians for complications.
- Reduce child marriage — enforce the **Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006** and pursue the **Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2024** to raise the legal age for women.
- Strengthen **108 emergency ambulance services** in rural and tribal pockets.
- Expand survivor reintegration — counselling, skill training, livelihood support for women treated for fistula.

PART B — WORLD TURTLE DAY

Origin and Theme

World Turtle Day is observed every year on **May 23**, since **2000**. It was founded by the **American Tortoise Rescue (ATR)** — a US non-profit set up in **1990** by **Susan Tellem** and **Marshall Thompson**. **2026 marks the 26th year** of the observance.

Important distinction: World Turtle Day is **not a United Nations–designated day**. It is observed globally, but informally, led by ATR and partner conservation groups. The **2026 theme** is *“I Promise to Help Turtles!”* — the Turtle Protector Pledge campaign.

A Global Extinction Crisis

According to the **Turtle Conservation Coalition (2024 report)**, **more than half of the world’s 359 turtle and tortoise species face extinction**, making turtles among the most threatened vertebrate groups on Earth.

Key drivers:

- Habitat loss (coastal development, wetland drainage, dam construction).
- Illegal **pet trade** and consumption (meat, eggs, traditional medicine).
- **Bycatch** in commercial fisheries (especially shrimp trawlers and longliners).
- **Plastic pollution** — turtles mistake plastic bags for jellyfish.
- **Climate change** — turtles exhibit **temperature-dependent sex determination (TSD)**; warmer sands skew clutches toward more females, threatening long-term breeding viability.

Turtle Diversity in India

India hosts roughly **29 species of freshwater turtles and tortoises** and **5 species of marine turtles**.

Marine turtles of India

SPECIES	SCIENTIFIC NAME	IUCN STATUS
Olive Ridley	<i>Lepidochelys olivacea</i>	Vulnerable
Green sea turtle	<i>Chelonia mydas</i>	Endangered
Hawksbill	<i>Eretmochelys imbricata</i>	Critically Endangered
Loggerhead	<i>Caretta caretta</i>	Vulnerable
Leatherback	<i>Dermochelys coriacea</i>	Vulnerable

Key freshwater/terrestrial species

- **Indian Star Tortoise** (*Geochelone elegans*) – IUCN Vulnerable; moved to **CITES Appendix I** at CoP18, Geneva, **2019**.
- **Indian Softshell Turtle** (*Nilssonia gangetica*).
- **Red-crowned Roofed Turtle** (*Batagur kachuga*) – Critically Endangered; surviving population centred on the Chambal river.
- **Northern River Terrapin** (*Batagur baska*) – Critically Endangered.

Olive Ridley Arribadas in India

Odisha hosts the **world’s largest known nesting aggregation** of Olive Ridley turtles. The phenomenon of **arribada** – Spanish for “arrival by sea” – refers to the synchronised mass nesting in which tens of thousands of females come ashore over a few nights.

The three Indian arribada sites are all in **Odisha**:

SITE	LOCATION	NOTES
Gahirmatha	Within Bhitarkanika National Park, Kendrapara	World’s largest known Olive Ridley rookery
Rushikulya	Ganjam district	Second major mass-nesting beach
Devi river mouth	Puri district	Third arribada site

The **2024 arribada season** recorded over **6 lakh nests at Gahirmatha** alone – a strong indicator of population recovery when nesting beaches are protected.

Protection Framework

INSTRUMENT	YEAR	APPLICATION TO TURTLES
Wildlife (Protection) Act	1972 (amended 2022)	Most freshwater turtles placed in Schedule I (highest protection) after 2022 amendment
Wildlife Crime Control Bureau (WCCB)	Statutory under WLPA 1972; MoEFCC	Enforcement against illegal turtle trade
CITES	1973	Indian Star Tortoise moved from Appendix II to Appendix I in 2019 (CoP18 Geneva)
CMS (Bonn Convention)	1979	Leatherback listed on Annex I
Indian Coast Guard “Operation Olivia”	Annual since the 1980s	Escorts and protects nesting Olive Ridleys off Odisha

India's Enforcement Operations

- **Operation Save Kurma** (2017, repeated 2021) — WCCB-led pan-India operation against illegal freshwater turtle trade.
- **Operation Turtshield** (2022) — WCCB with state police and Customs to dismantle smuggling networks.
- Recurrent seizures at **Chennai, Howrah, Mumbai, and Kolkata airports** — India is a major transit corridor for South-East Asian smuggling routes.

Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs)

TEDs are simple grid devices fitted inside shrimp trawl nets that allow turtles to escape through an exit panel while retaining the shrimp catch.

- Originated in the **United States in the 1970s** following Olive Ridley bycatch concerns.
- **Mandatory** for shrimp trawlers in Indian coastal states under the **Merchant Shipping Act** and respective **Marine Fishing Regulation Acts**.
- Compliance remains uneven — many trawlers either do not install or partially disable TEDs.

Marine Protected Areas Important for Turtles

- **Bhitarkanika National Park** and Marine Sanctuary (Odisha).
- **Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park** (Tamil Nadu).
- **Lakshadweep** Marine Reserve.
- **Galathea National Park** and **Cuthbert Bay Wildlife Sanctuary** (Andaman & Nicobar).

India-specific Threats

- Rapid coastal development and new ports near nesting beaches.
- Trawler **bycatch** despite TED mandates.
- **Plastic pollution** ingestion by Olive Ridleys and Green turtles.
- **Cyclone-driven beach erosion** destroying nests (e.g., cyclones Fani, Yaas, Dana).
- **Light pollution** from coastal towns — hatchlings, which orient toward the brighter sea horizon, become disoriented and crawl inland.

LINKAGE BETWEEN THE TWO OBSERVANCES

COMMON THREAD	FISTULA DAY	TURTLE DAY
Preventable loss	Maternal injury preventable through skilled care	Species loss preventable through habitat protection
Systemic intervention	Health-system strengthening, CEmONC	MPA networks, anti-trafficking, TEDs
Equity dimension	Women, especially rural and poor	Coastal and tribal communities dependent on coastal ecology
SDG anchor	SDG 3 (Health), SDG 5 (Gender)	SDG 14 (Life Below Water), SDG 15 (Life on Land)

Together, the two observances reinforce that **sustainable development is indivisible** — it requires both a human-rights-based approach to health and an ecosystem-based approach to biodiversity.

UPSC RELEVANCE

- **GS Paper 2 — Social Justice and Health:** Maternal health, schemes for women and children (JSY, JSSK, PMSMA, SUMAN, PMMVY, LaQshya), Ayushman Bharat PM-JAY, SDG 3 targets, role of UNFPA and UN bodies.
- **GS Paper 2 — International Institutions:** UNGA resolutions; UNFPA Campaign to End Fistula.
- **GS Paper 3 — Environment and Biodiversity:** IUCN Red List species, CITES (Appendix I/II), CMS, Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 and 2022 amendment, WCCB, Olive Ridley conservation, Bhitarkanika, Operation Olivia, TEDs.
- **GS Paper 3 — Internal Security adjacent:** Illegal wildlife trade and trafficking corridors (Save Kurma, Turtshield).
- **Prelims fact load:** scheme launch dates, MMR figures, IUCN statuses, CITES CoP18 decision on Indian Star Tortoise, arribada sites.

FACTS CORNER

INTERNATIONAL DAY TO END OBSTETRIC FISTULA

Observed: May 23 annually since 2013

Established by: UNGA Resolution A/RES/67/147 (December 20, 2012)

Lead UN agency: UNFPA; Campaign to End Fistula launched in 2003

2026 theme: *“Her Health is a Right; Invest in Ending Fistula and Childbirth Injuries”*

Global burden: ~500,000 women living with fistula; 50,000–100,000 new cases/year; >90% in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia

Surgical success rate: ~90%; >90% of cases associated with stillbirth

India MMR: 97 per lakh live births (SRS 2018–20); down from 178 (2010–12)

SDG 3.1 target: MMR <70 by 2030

NFHS-5 institutional delivery rate: 88.6%

Key schemes: JSY (2005), JSSK (2011), PMSMA (2016), PMMVY (2017), LaQshya (2017), SUMAN (2019), Anaemia Mukt Bharat (2018)

WORLD TURTLE DAY

Observed: May 23 annually since 2000 (26th edition in 2026)

Founded by: American Tortoise Rescue (ATR), USA (founded 1990); not a UN-designated day

2026 theme: *“I Promise to Help Turtles!”*

50% of the world’s face extinction (Turtle Conservation Coalition 2024)

India: ~29 freshwater species + 5 marine species (Olive Ridley, Green, Hawksbill, Loggerhead, Leatherback)

Olive Ridley arribada sites (all Odisha): Gahirmatha (inside Bhitarkanika NP — world’s largest known rookery), Rushikulya (Ganjam), Devi river mouth (Puri); 2024 Gahirmatha season > 6 lakh nests

Wildlife (Protection) Act 1972 — most freshwater turtles in Schedule I after the 2022 amendment

CITES Appendix I: Indian Star Tortoise (moved from App II at CoP18, Geneva, 2019)

CMS Annex I: Leatherback

WCCB operations: Operation Save Kurma (2017, 2021), Operation Turtshield (2022)

Operation Olivia: Indian Coast Guard, annual since the 1980s, protects nesting Olive Ridelys off

Odisha

TEDs (Turtle Excluder Devices): mandatory for shrimp trawlers under Marine Fishing Regulation Acts; technology originated in the US in the 1970s

Sources: [UNFPA](#), [MoEFCC](#), [WCCB](#)

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