

2. Great Nicobar Project – Environment

Union government seeks 'factual report' on forest rights complaint concerning Nicobar project. The ₹81,000-crore Great Nicobar project, vital for India's strategic goals, faces a major controversy over alleged violations of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006. This has created a significant conflict between national security ambitions and the constitutional duty to protect the island's fragile ecology and the rights of indigenous tribes.

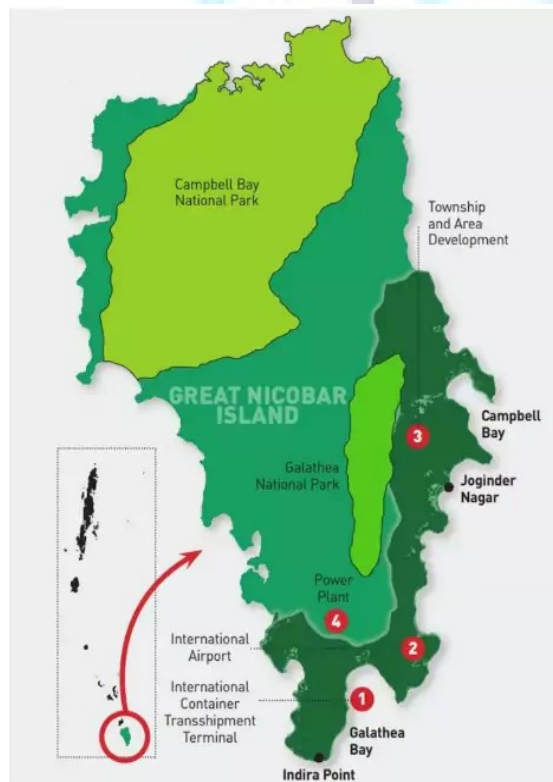
The Core Controversy – Forest Rights vs. Development

The Complaint – The Tribal Council of Little and Great Nicobar has filed a complaint with the Union government, alleging significant violations of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006.

Central Issue – The complaint disputes a certificate issued in August 2022 which claimed that all forest rights on the 13,000 hectares of land being diverted for the project had been identified and settled. The Tribal Council asserts this is false and that the process was not compliant with the law.

Government and Political Action – The Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs has requested a "factual report" from the Andaman and Nicobar administration. The issue has also drawn criticism from opposition parties and is currently under judicial scrutiny in a petition pending before the Calcutta High Court.

The Great Nicobar Island Project – An Overview



Vision and Scope – It is a massive ₹81,000-crore multi-component mega-project designed to transform Great Nicobar Island into a strategic logistics, trade, and defense hub for India in the Indian Ocean.

Key Components –

1. **International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT)** – A massive port with a capacity of 14.2 million TEU (twenty-foot equivalent units) to reduce India's reliance on foreign transshipment hubs like Colombo and Singapore.
2. **Greenfield International Airport** – To enhance air connectivity for both civilian tourism and military logistics.
3. **Power Plant** – A 450 MVA Gas and Solar Power Plant to ensure a sustainable energy supply.
4. **Integrated Township** – A modern, planned township to provide housing and amenities for residents and workers.

Implementing Agency – The project is being executed by the Port Blair-based Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Ltd (ANIIDCO).

Guiding Policies – The project is supposedly guided by regulations like the EIA Notification 2006 and the Shompen

Policy 2015, which mandates that the welfare of the indigenous Shompen tribe must take precedence over development initiatives.

Geographical and Ecological Context of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Geography – The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are two distinct archipelagos separated by the Ten Degree Channel. Key features include the Duncan Passage (separating Little and Great Andaman) and the volcanic Barren and Narcondam islands.

Great Nicobar Island (GNI) – It is the southernmost island of the entire group and is home to India's southernmost point, 'Indira Point'. It is also a UNESCO World Network of Biosphere Reserve (designated in 2013), a biodiversity hotspot with protected areas like Campbell Bay and Galathea National Parks.

The Strategic and Economic Imperative (Why the Project is Important)

Strategic Location – Great Nicobar's proximity to the Malacca Strait, a critical chokepoint for global trade and energy, provides India a vantage point for maritime surveillance and to counter China's "String of Pearls" strategy.

Economic Potential – The project is a cornerstone of the Sagarmala initiative and Amrit Kaal Vision 2047, aiming to make India a regional transshipment hub and generate significant revenue and employment.

Defense Importance – It will substantially enhance India's naval and air operational capacity in the eastern Indo-Pacific, strengthening surveillance over critical sea lanes and aligning with India's Act East Policy.

Grave Concerns Associated with the Project

Ecological Devastation – The project threatens a pristine biodiversity hotspot. Concerns include massive deforestation, the destruction of Galathea Bay (a critical nesting site for the endangered giant leatherback sea turtle), and severe damage to marine ecosystems and coral reefs in a seismically active zone.

Violation of Tribal Rights – The project risks displacing the Shompen Tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) with only a few hundred members, from their ancestral lands. Their isolation makes them extremely vulnerable to outside diseases. The Nicobarese community has raised concerns that their consent for the project was obtained "under pressure" and without proper consultation, as mandated by the Forest Rights Act (FRA).

Governance and Institutional Lapses – The implementing agency, ANIIDCO, has limited experience in such mega-projects and faces a significant conflict of interest, as the same officials are in charge of both project execution and environmental oversight.

Understanding the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006

Core Purpose – The FRA is a landmark law enacted to recognize and vest forest rights and occupation in Forest Dwelling Scheduled Tribes (FDST) and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (OTFD) who have lived in forests for generations.

Four Types of Rights Recognized –

1. **Land Rights** – Right to ownership of land being cultivated (up to 4 hectares).
2. **Use Rights** – Right to collect Minor Forest Produce (like bamboo, tendu patta), graze animals, etc.
3. **Relief and Development Rights** – Right to rehabilitation in case of illegal eviction and access to basic amenities.
4. **Forest Management Rights** – Right to protect, regenerate, and manage community forest resources.

Vesting Authority – The Act empowers the Gram Sabha (village assembly) as the primary authority to initiate the process of determining forest rights. Its resolution is then examined by sub-divisional and district-level committees for final approval.

The Way Forward – A Path to Balanced Development

Ensure FRA Compliance – Conduct fresh, transparent Gram Sabha consultations with genuine participation from the Nicobarese and Shompen tribes before any further work proceeds.

Establish Independent Oversight – Create an independent monitoring body, separate from the project implementers, with credible external experts to ensure environmental safeguards are met.

Adopt a Phased, Eco-Sensitive Approach – Begin with lower-impact infrastructure and integrate disaster-resilient design suitable for a seismically active region.

Prioritize Tribal Welfare – Implement robust safeguards to protect the Shompen and Nicobarese rights, ensuring no forced displacement and incorporating their advisory councils in all decision-making.

Promote Transparency and Dialogue – Make all project documents, clearance reports, and progress updates available in the public domain to build trust and political consensus.

Conclusion – Reconciling Ambition with Obligation

The Great Nicobar Project holds immense strategic and economic potential for India. However, its ultimate success and legitimacy depend on the government's ability to address the serious concerns regarding ecological fragility, the constitutional rights of indigenous tribes under the FRA, and significant governance lapses. A balanced, transparent, and eco-sensitive approach is the only way forward to reconcile India's strategic ambitions with its constitutional and environmental obligations.

Source – <https://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/centre-seeks-factual-report-on-forest-rights-complaint-concerning-nicobar-project/article70029644.ece>