

6. Great Nicobar Project

The Great Nicobar project is raising concerns over ecological governance, tribal rights, and compliance with environmental laws, including the Forest Rights Act, 2006

Great Nicobar Island Project

Vision and Objective - The Great Nicobar Island Project is a multi-component mega development initiative aimed at transforming Great Nicobar into a strategic logistics, trade, and defence hub in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

Key Objectives -

- i. Strengthen India's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean.
- ii. Promote economic development through industrial, trade, and tourism infrastructure.
- iii. Ensure environmentally sustainable development, preserving the unique biodiversity and fragile ecosystems of the island.
- iv. Foster employment generation and improve regional connectivity.

Project Components - The project envisions a comprehensive development plan including -

Port and Logistics Hub - Development of a greenfield deep-sea port, container terminals, and associated logistics infrastructure to support maritime trade and naval operations.

Airport Expansion - Upgradation of existing airstrips or construction of international-standard airports to enhance connectivity.

Industrial & Commercial Zones - Promotion of eco-sensitive industrial clusters, commercial hubs, and export-oriented units.

Tourism Development - Sustainable eco-tourism and resort facilities that leverage the natural beauty while minimizing ecological disruption.

Defence Infrastructure - Strategic military and naval installations to bolster India's security architecture in the IOR.

About ANIIDCO

Full Name - Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Ltd (ANIIDCO).

Nature - Quasi-government agency, incorporated in 1988 under the Companies Act.

Mandate - Commercially exploit natural resources in a balanced and environmentally friendly manner. Promote socio-economic development across the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Project Role - Appointed by the Andaman & Nicobar Administration in July 2020 as the project proponent for the Great Nicobar Island Project. Responsible for planning, implementation, and coordination of various components, while ensuring environmental compliance and community engagement.

Strategic Significance

Geopolitical Importance - Great Nicobar is located at the southern tip of India, near the Malacca Strait, one of the world's busiest maritime trade corridors. Enhances India's maritime surveillance and defence readiness in the IOR.

Economic Significance - Development of a port and logistics hub can facilitate regional trade with Southeast Asia. Promotes industrialisation, tourism, and local employment in the Nicobar Islands.

Environmental Consideration - Project emphasizes eco-sensitive planning, balancing development with protection of unique flora and fauna, including tropical rainforests and coral ecosystems.

Current Status and Next Steps

ANIIDCO Appointment - July 2020 as project proponent.

Planning Stage - Conceptual and feasibility studies being conducted for port, airport, and industrial zones.

Environmental Clearances - Required to comply with coastal regulation norms, biodiversity protection, and disaster-resilient infrastructure standards.

Investment and Partnerships - Expected to attract public and private investments, along with potential

foreign collaborations for trade and logistics.

Significance of the Project

Strategic Location – Great Nicobar lies near the Malacca Strait, through which nearly 30%–40% of global trade, including a large share of China's oil and gas imports, passes through this chokepoint.

Economic Potential – It supports Sagarmala initiative and aims to make India a regional transshipment hub like Singapore/Hong Kong.

Infrastructure Development – Four major components –

1. Transshipment port (14.5M TEUs annually).
2. Greenfield international airport.
3. 450 MW power plant (Gas + Solar).
4. Township for ~65,000 people.

Improves connectivity and infrastructure in a remote region.

Defence Importance – Enhances naval and air operational capacity in the eastern Indo-Pacific.

Regional Diplomacy – Positions India as a trade and logistics leader in Bay of Bengal and BIMSTEC region. It helps in reducing dependency on foreign ports for transshipment.

Concerns Associated with the Project

Ecological Concerns – Great Nicobar is a biodiversity hotspot (200 bird species, endemic flora, coral reefs).

Galathea Bay – Critical nesting site for giant leatherback sea turtle and Ramsar wetland with protective mangroves. UNESCO World Heritage Site candidature could be jeopardized.

Tribal Rights and FRA Issues

Shompen Tribe (PVTG) (~300–400 people) – Risk of displacement from 130 sq km of ancestral & sacred lands. Vulnerability to disease due to isolation (No immunity to outside pathogens).

Forest Rights Act (2006) – Requires recognition and settlement of rights before diversion of forest land. Complaint filed that administration falsely certified FRA compliance in 2022. Gram Sabha consent allegedly not properly obtained which is in violation of FRA spirit.

Governance and Institutional Concerns – ANIIDCO appointed as project proponent despite limited experience (previously handled liquor, milk, tourism resorts). Lack of environmental policy & expertise until 2022 → questions of credibility. Conflict of Interest – Same officials heading ANIIDCO also in charge of environmental oversight and clearances. Raises doubts about independent monitoring and transparency.

Legal and Regulatory Concerns – Project area includes Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ-1A) → normally prohibits large-scale construction. Environmental clearance by MoEFCC despite lack of preparedness flagged as irregular. Ongoing petitions before NGT & Calcutta High Court challenge forest clearances.

Political & Social Concerns – Opposition parties (Congress, etc.) criticize the project as “planned misadventure.” Risk of becoming a politically divisive issue instead of a consensus-driven development plan.

Earth Jurisprudence – Earth Jurisprudence is a legal philosophy that recognizes nature as a living entity with inherent rights. It shifts focus from human-centered (anthropocentric) laws to eco-centric governance, granting legal personhood to natural entities like rivers, forests, and mountains, allowing them to be represented and protected in court.

For Example – In 2017, the Uttarakhand High Court granted legal personhood to the Ganges and Yamuna rivers, as well as the Gangotri and Yamunotri glaciers. The judgment, in Mohd. Salim vs State of Uttarakhand and Others, conferred these entities with rights and obligations but only through a designated person.

Way Forward

1. **Earth Jurisprudence** – Countries like Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, and New Zealand follow ‘earth jurisprudence’ granting legal rights to nature—an approach India should adopt to strengthen ecological protection.

2. **Ensure FRA Compliance** – Conduct fresh Gram Sabha consultations with genuine participation of Nicobarese and Shompen tribes. Properly recognise and settle individual and community forest rights before proceeding.
3. **Independent Environmental Oversight** – Establish an independent monitoring body (outside ANIIDCO and A&N administration) for environmental safeguards. Involve credible external experts in biodiversity and disaster management.
4. **Revamp ANIIDCO's Capacity** – Strengthen with professional staff (urban planners, ecologists, tribal welfare experts). Consider PPP model with reputed infrastructure agencies for execution, while ANIIDCO handles coordination.
5. **Tribal Welfare Safeguards** – Protect Shompen and Nicobarese rights with special resettlement and health safeguards. Ensure no forced displacement; incorporate tribal advisory councils in decision-making.

Source – <https://indianexpress.com/article/upsc-current-affairs/upsc-essentials/how-great-nicobar-project-reignites-the-environment-vs-development-debate-10295376/>

