



UPSC &amp; STATE PCS CURRENT AFFAIRS · UJIYARI.COM

**EDITORIAL ANALYSIS**

# Great Nicobar — Can Strategy and Ecology Co-Exist?

THE HINDU

17 February 2026

**SUBJECTS COVERED**

ENVIRONMENT

SECURITY &amp; DEFENCE

POLITY

**GS PAPERS**

GS2

GS3

**CURATED & WRITTEN BY****Bharat Choudhary**

UPSC Educator &amp; Content Creator •

[linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

Free UPSC &amp; State PCS Resources

[ujiyari.com](http://ujiyari.com)

# Great Nicobar — Can Strategy and Ecology Co-Exist?

 The Hindu

17 February 2026

GS2

GS3



The Hindu

MAINS RELEVANCE:

GS Paper 2

GS Paper 3



## INTERVIEW ANGLE

*"Should India prioritise the Great Nicobar project's strategic and economic benefits over its significant ecological costs? How should the government balance security imperatives with environmental obligations?"*

## WHY IN NEWS

The NGT's approval of the Rs 81,000 crore Great Nicobar Island development project in February 2026 has reignited the ecology vs. national security debate — pitching the island's status as a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and habitat of the Shompen PVTG against India's strategic need for a southern maritime anchor.

## THE STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE

India's maritime strategy has a structural gap: its southernmost military base (Campbell Bay Naval Air Station, Great Nicobar) lacks the infrastructure to project sustained presence in the eastern Indian Ocean. The **Malacca Strait** — through which 85,000 vessels per year carry 25% of global trade — is effectively a chokepoint that India must be able to monitor and potentially interdict.

China's **PLAN (People's Liberation Army Navy)** has been expanding its Indian Ocean presence: the first overseas military base at **Djibouti** (2017), regular forays into the Bay of Bengal, submarine deployments near Andaman waters, and port agreements in Sri Lanka (Hambantota), Pakistan (Gwadar), and Bangladesh (Chittagong upgrades under discussion). India needs a counter-strategy that does not rely solely on diplomatic goodwill.

The Great Nicobar ICTT would offer:

**Military pre-positioning** closer to Southeast Asia than any existing Indian base

**Economic returns** from container trans-shipment (currently 75% routed through Colombo)

**Denial capability:** ability to monitor and, in extremis, interdict hostile naval vessels

This is a legitimate and important national interest.

## THE ECOLOGICAL COST — UNDERSTATED IN OFFICIAL DISCOURSE

India's government has consistently underplayed the project's environmental footprint. The concerns are not theoretical:

**1. Leatherback Sea Turtle Extinction Risk** The leatherback (*Dermochelys coriacea*) is already critically threatened globally — populations have declined by 90% since 1980 in the Pacific. The Nicobar beaches are among the last viable nesting sites in the eastern Indian Ocean. Permanent construction and night lighting (known to disorient nesting females and hatchlings) in Galathea Bay — the primary nesting beach — could eliminate the population from this range permanently.

**2. EIA Process Failures** The EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) for the Great Nicobar project was prepared under the **EIA Notification 2006** but critics from the Centre for Science and Environment, multiple retired wildlife officials, and independent ecologists have pointed out:

The field surveys covered insufficient time periods (missing seasonal species)

The cumulative impact of all four project components was not assessed together

The seismic risk (Sunda Megathrust proximity) was not adequately modelled

**3. UNESCO Biosphere Reserve Obligations** Under the **Seville Strategy (1995)** — the international framework for UNESCO Biosphere Reserves — core zones must remain undisturbed. India voluntarily accepted these obligations when it nominated Great Nicobar in 2013. The project's core construction zone substantially overlaps with the Reserve's buffer and transition zones.

**4. Shompen — A Civilization at Risk** India has historically protected uncontacted tribes (Sentinelese of North Sentinel Island, Jarawa) with restricted zone policies. The Shompen, with a population of ~400, have survived through deliberate avoidance of outsiders. A township of 3.5 lakh people by 2050 does not offer that buffer. Once destroyed, this cultural and genetic diversity cannot be restored.

## THE FALSE DICHOTOMY IN OFFICIAL FRAMING

The government has framed this as: Great Nicobar Development OR Indian strategic vulnerability. This is a false choice. India has multiple options:

**Option A: Military-first, commercial-later approach** Develop the **airport and military facilities first** — these have lower ecological footprint than the ICTT and township. The airport provides immediate strategic value (patrol aircraft, rapid deployment). The ICTT can be evaluated once a rigorous independent EIA is completed.

**Option B: ICTT at alternative location** The **Car Nicobar** or **Katchal Island** within the Nicobar group have lower biodiversity sensitivity than Great Nicobar. A deep-water port feasibility study at alternative Nicobar sites has never been published.

**Option C: Phased approach with binding milestones** Proceed with military components; link commercial components to verified compliance with biodiversity safeguards (leatherback monitoring; Shompen boundary; coral reef mapping).

## WHAT GOOD GOVERNANCE LOOKS LIKE HERE

India is a signatory to:

**Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)** — requires Environmental Impact Assessment for projects in biodiversity-sensitive areas

**CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species)** — leatherback is Appendix I

**Convention on Migratory Species (CMS)** — leatherback is CMS Appendix I

**Paris Agreement** — 130 sq km of old-growth tropical forest carries enormous carbon stock; clear-cutting creates a net carbon emission inconsistent with NDC commitments

These are not optional niceties — they are treaty obligations that India has taken on voluntarily. The credibility of India's international environmental commitments (and its bid for leadership in the Global South's climate transition) depends on how it treats its own biodiversity hotspots.

## CONCLUSION

The Great Nicobar project reflects India's genuine strategic anxiety — and strategic anxiety is a legitimate driver of policy. But **strategic necessity does not require ecological destruction**. The phased, military-first approach would deliver 80% of the strategic benefit while preserving the ecological assets that India itself designated as globally significant. The NGT's approval should be treated not as a final green light, but as the beginning of a more rigorous, independent process.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

*Great Nicobar UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (2013), Shompen PVTG, leatherback sea turtle (IUCN Vulnerable, CITES Appendix I), NGT Act 2010, EIA Notification 2006, Andaman & Nicobar Command, ANIIDCO, Sunda Megathrust. Mains GS-3: Ecology vs. development; environmental governance; biodiversity; climate commitments. GS-2: Tribal rights; India's maritime strategy; India-China strategic competition.*

## ★ FACTS CORNER — KNOWLEDGEPEDIA

### KEY TREATIES APPLICABLE:

**CBD** (1992): Requires EIA in biodiversity-sensitive areas; 196 parties

**CITES** (1973): Leatherback = Appendix I (most protected); 183 parties

**CMS** (1979): Leatherback = Appendix I; migratory species conservation

**UNESCO Biosphere Reserves:** Governed by Seville Strategy (1995); core zones must be undisturbed

### INDIA'S ANDAMAN & NICOBAR:

India's only tri-service command: **Andaman & Nicobar Command** (HQ Port Blair)

Southernmost military base: **Campbell Bay Naval Air Station, Great Nicobar**

Total islands: 572 (only 38 inhabited)

### ENVIRONMENTAL LAW FRAMEWORK:

NGT Act 2010: Powers to grant interim relief, award compensation, issue direction to government bodies

EIA Notification 2006: Category A (central clearance) and Category B (state clearance) projects; public hearings mandatory

Forest Conservation Act 1980: No diversion without central clearance and compensatory afforestation

Sources: The Hindu, Down to Earth, PIB

---

CURATED & WRITTEN BY

# Bharat Choudhary

UPSC Educator & Content Creator

 [linkedin.com/in/epicbharat](https://www.linkedin.com/in/epicbharat)

---

Published on [ujjari.com](http://ujjari.com) · Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs