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Great Nicobar Project – NGT Approval and the Ecology vs. Development Debate

17 February 2026

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WHY IN NEWS

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) approved the ₹81,000 crore Great Nicobar Island development project in February 2026, green-lighting India’s most strategically significant but ecologically contentious infrastructure plan — involving clearance of 130 sq km of tropical rainforest and potential displacement of the Shompen tribe.

THE PROJECT — OVERVIEW

The **Great Nicobar Island Holistic Development Project**, conceived by **NITI Aayog** (2021) and implemented through **Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO)**, is a ₹81,000 crore mega-project at India’s southernmost tip.

Four major components:

Component	Details
International Container Transhipment Terminal (ICTT)	Deep-water port; handles large container ships (15,000–24,000 TEU capacity)
Greenfield International Airport	Serves both civil aviation and military use
Township	Residential/commercial for ~3.5 lakh projected population by 2050
Gas and Solar Power Plant	Hybrid energy supply

Project area: 166 sq km (of ~910 sq km island area).

WHY GREAT NICOBAR? — STRATEGIC LOCATION

Great Nicobar is at the **southern tip of India**, close to one of the world’s busiest shipping lanes:

Malacca Strait: 85,000 vessels/year, carrying ~25% of global trade

Equidistant from **Colombo** (Sri Lanka), **Port Klang** (Malaysia), and **Singapore**

The proposed ICTT could capture **15–25% of the trans-shipment cargo** currently routing through these hubs — India currently has minimal trans-shipment capacity

Military significance:

Great Nicobar hosts the **Campbell Bay Naval Air Station** (India's southernmost military base)

Andaman & Nicobar Command — India's only tri-service command (Army+Navy+Air Force, HQ Port Blair) — conducts surveillance of Malacca Strait

India's ability to monitor, deny, or interdict Chinese naval vessels (PLAN) transiting the Strait would be greatly enhanced with expanded facilities

ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS

Biodiversity

Great Nicobar is a **UNESCO Biosphere Reserve** (designated **2013**) and one of India's most biodiverse islands — isolated from mainland for millions of years, resulting in high endemism.

Key threatened species:

Leatherback Sea Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*): World's largest sea turtle; IUCN **Vulnerable**; nests on Great Nicobar's beaches (Galathea Bay); India's WPA 1972 Schedule I; CMS Appendix I; CITES Appendix I

Nicobar Megapode (*Megapodius nicobariensis*): Endangered bird endemic to Nicobar Islands; ground-nesting; highly sensitive to habitat loss

Saltwater Crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*): World's largest reptile; Schedule I WPA 1972; Vulnerable
Coral reefs (100+ species); mangroves; dugong habitats

Forest Impact

130 sq km of tropical rainforest to be cleared (~10 million trees)

The island hosts **undisturbed old-growth forest** estimated to store ~200+ tonnes of carbon/hectare

Rain-shadow effects, soil erosion, and hydrological changes from clearing could cascade across the remaining island ecosystem

Seismic Risk

Great Nicobar lies directly on the **Sunda Megathrust** — the same fault zone that triggered the **2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami** (the deadliest natural disaster of the 21st century, killing ~2.28 lakh people). The island's coastal infrastructure faces existential risk from major seismic events and associated liquefaction.

TRIBAL RIGHTS — SHOMPEN AND NICOBARESE

Shompen

Population: ~400 individuals (2021 estimate; possibly fewer)

Classification: Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) — India has 75 PVTGs

Lifestyle: Hunter-gatherer; semi-nomadic; have traditionally avoided contact with outsiders

Historical contact: First friendly contact with outsiders only in 2001

Shompen territory is entirely within the project area; the township component threatens their habitat even if direct contact is avoided

Legal protection: Andaman & Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation, 1956 creates restricted zones; FRA 2006 should apply; UN DRIP (Declaration on Rights of Indigenous Peoples) norms

Nicobarese

Larger tribal community (~20,000); more integrated; primarily Christian

Also face displacement from project township expansion

Had significant land allocated pre-project for tribal use

NGT APPROVAL — CONDITIONS AND CONTROVERSY

The NGT's approval came with environmental safeguards:

EIA (Environmental Impact Assessment) — however, the original EIA was critiqued for being prepared in the pre-UNESCO Biosphere Reserve period

Leatherback sea turtle nesting season closure of project activities

Green buffer zones around Shompen settlement areas

Carbon offsetting commitments

Critics argue:

The **EIA was inadequate** — covering a compressed timeline and lacking independent peer review

Biosphere Reserve status creates an **obligation under the Seville Strategy** (UNESCO) to protect core zones — the project's core area overlaps substantially

Forest Clearance (Stage-I and Stage-II) under FCA 1980 were obtained but not adequately reconciled with wildlife clearances

Wild Life Board (under MoEFCC) approved wildlife clearance but dissenting notes from experts were not publicly disclosed

STRATEGIC VS. ECOLOGICAL: THE CORE TENSION

India's strategic interests are legitimate — the Chinese string of ports in the Indian Ocean, declining space for India in Sri Lanka (Hambantota), and Bangladesh underscore the need for Indian naval dominance in the Andaman Sea. The ICTT and airport would provide India with:

- A **blue-economy anchor** in the Bay of Bengal
- A **military staging point** closer to Southeast Asia
- Economic returns through shipping revenue

However, India's international commitments — CBD (Convention on Biological Diversity), Paris Agreement, UNESCO Biosphere Reserve obligations — require a higher standard of environmental justification than has been publicly demonstrated.

The missing middle: A phased approach — developing the airport and military component first, while conducting a rigorous independent environmental study before proceeding with the ICTT and township — would better balance these interests.

UPSC RELEVANCE

NGT Act 2010, EIA Notification 2006, UNESCO Biosphere Reserves (India: 18), Leatherback sea turtle (IUCN status, WPA Schedule), Shompen (PVTG), Andaman & Nicobar Command, Malacca Strait, FCA 1980.

Mains GS-3: *Ecology vs. development debate; environmental governance (EIA, forest clearance); climate change + infrastructure planning; biodiversity.* **GS-2:** *Tribal rights (FRA, PVTGs), India's maritime security strategy, India-ASEAN connectivity.*

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GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT — CORE DATA:

Cost: **₹81,000 crore** | Approved: NGT, February 2026

Implementing agency: **ANIIDCO** (Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation)

Conceived by: **NITI Aayog** (2021) | EIA: Ministry of Environment

4 components: ICTT + Greenfield Airport + Township + Gas/Solar Power

Forest clearance required: **130 sq km** (~10 million trees, ~15% island area)

ECOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

UNESCO Biosphere Reserve: Designated **2013**

Leatherback Sea Turtle: *Dermochelys coriacea* | IUCN **Vulnerable** | WPA Schedule I | CITES Appendix I

Nicobar Megapode: Endemic bird | **Endangered** | Ground-nesting

Sunda Megathrust: Seismic zone; site of **2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami**

TRIBAL DATA:

Shompen: **PVTG** | Population ~**400** | Hunter-gatherer; semi-nomadic | Regulated by ANI Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation, 1956

India's total PVTGs: **75** (across 18 states + 1 UT)

STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE:

Location: Equidistant from **Colombo, Port Klang, Singapore**

Malacca Strait traffic: **85,000 vessels/year; 25% of global trade**

Campbell Bay Naval Air Station: India's **southernmost military base**

Andaman & Nicobar Command: India's **only tri-service command**

OTHER RELEVANT FACTS:

UNESCO Biosphere Reserves in India: **18** (Sundarbans, Nilgiris, Gulf of Mannar, Nanda Devi, Nokrek, Pachmarhi, Simlipal, Achanakmar-Amarkantak, Great Nicobar, Agasthyamalai, Dehang-Debang, Khangchendzonga, Panna, Cold Desert, Seshachalam, Pench, Khasi Hills, Banni Grasslands)

India's Trans-shipment capacity: Currently minimal (~<1% global share); Colombo Port handles ~75% of India's trans-shipment cargo

Sources: Drishti IAS, Down to Earth, PIB

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