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Great Nicobar's Faustian Bargain: Port, Forest, and the Shompen

 THE HINDU

13 April 2026

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EDITORIAL SUMMARY

The Great Nicobar Holistic Development Project — a ₹81,000 crore infrastructure push on India's southernmost island — cleared its latest legal hurdle when the National Green Tribunal upheld environment and forest clearances in February 2026. The draft tourism master plan released in April 2026 projects 1 million visitors annually by 2055. But the project's ecological and human rights costs — 130 sq km of tropical rainforest, the world's largest sea turtle nesting sites, and the Shompen PVTG — raise questions about whether "strategic necessity" can override environmental and tribal law.

THE CASE FOR: WHY INDIA NEEDS GREAT NICOBAR

India's argument for the project rests on three strategic pillars.

First, transshipment sovereignty. India currently pays \$250–350 million annually in transshipment fees to Colombo, Singapore, and Port Klang — ports that handle cargo destined for or originating in India. The Galathea Bay port, with a projected capacity of 16 million TEUs, would capture this traffic domestically, reduce costs, and position India as a transshipment hub for Bangladesh, Myanmar, and smaller Indian Ocean economies.

Second, Indian Ocean strategic presence. Great Nicobar sits approximately 90 nautical miles from the Strait of Malacca — through which passes the bulk of Asia's seaborne trade, including ~80% of India's energy imports. China's "String of Pearls" — naval-capable ports at Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), and Kyaukpyu (Myanmar) — has progressively encircled India's maritime periphery. A dual-use port-and-naval-base at Galathea Bay is India's answer: a forward position in the eastern Indian Ocean that changes the strategic calculus.

Third, economic development of India's island territories. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands contribute less than 0.1% of India's GDP despite their strategic location and natural wealth. The project is, its proponents argue, overdue development for a region historically neglected by mainland policy.

THE COST: WHAT IS BEING SACRIFICED

Against these arguments must be placed the ecological balance sheet — and it is devastating.

Forest loss: ~130 sq km of tropical evergreen and semi-evergreen rainforest will be diverted — some of the most carbon-dense, biodiverse forest in India. This is not secondary growth; it is primary rainforest that has evolved over millennia without human disturbance. The [Environmental Impact Assessment \(EIA\)](#) for the project was criticised for failing to conduct a cumulative impact assessment across all four project components (port, airport, township, tourism) — treating each as if the others did not exist.

Leatherback sea turtles: Galathea Beach, where the port is to be built, is one of the most significant leatherback sea turtle nesting sites in the Indian Ocean. Leatherbacks (*Dermochelys coriacea*) are the world's largest turtles — up to 600 kg — and are listed under Schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. In the Indo-Pacific, they are classified as Critically Endangered. Port construction during the nesting season (November–April) — which the EIA itself acknowledges — will directly eliminate nesting habitat that took evolutionary time to establish.

The Shompen: Most gravely, the project's township and tourism footprint will bring tens of thousands of outsiders into sustained contact with the Shompen — a PVTG of approximately 350–400 individuals who have survived for millennia through near-complete isolation in the island's interior forests. Historical precedent from the same [archipelago](#) is unambiguous: the Great Andamanese numbered ~8,000 in 1858; they number 57 today. The Onge have been similarly reduced. Isolation has been the Shompen's survival strategy. The Forest Rights Act, 2006 requires free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) from forest-dwelling communities before diversion of their habitat. The Shompen have no mechanism — no literacy in Indian languages, no legal representation, no institutional interface — through which this consent could be meaningfully obtained.

THE LEGAL ARCHITECTURE AND ITS FAILURES

The NGT's February 2026 clearance, citing “strategic and national importance,” reveals the limits of India's environmental governance architecture when confronted with projects framed as security imperatives. The Supreme Court has petitions pending — but the construction timeline means that by the time judicial review concludes, ecological facts may be irreversible.

India's EIA regime — based on the [Environment \(Protection\) Act, 1986](#) — requires impact assessment before clearance. But the assessment process has structural weaknesses: public hearings in remote areas with affected communities who lack institutional voice; timelines that do not allow independent scientific review; and a provision for categorical exemptions when projects are declared strategically sensitive.

The Forest Rights Act, 2006 — one of India's most progressive pieces of legislation, recognising the prior rights of forest-dwelling communities — has been systematically circumvented in the Great Nicobar case. The Shompen's status as a PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) ordinarily demands the highest level of consultation and consent. The project record contains no evidence that this standard was met.

THE ETHICS OF STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT

The question the Great Nicobar project ultimately poses is not whether India should have strategic infrastructure in the Indian Ocean — it should, and the Galathea Bay port serves legitimate national interests. The question is whether these interests must be pursued at the cost of an irreplaceable rainforest, a globally significant sea turtle nesting site, and one of humanity’s most isolated surviving communities.

The GS4 (Ethics) framing is precise: this is a conflict between **consequentialist reasoning** (strategic and economic benefits for 1.4 billion Indians justify costs to 400 Shompen and a turtle nesting beach) and **deontological constraints** (there are things a state may not do regardless of the aggregate benefit — and one of them is destroying an isolated community’s only means of survival).

There are paths that would partially reconcile these tensions: relocating the port to a less ecologically sensitive location within the island, phasing the township to prevent rapid population influx, establishing a permanent no-go buffer zone around Shompen-inhabited forest. Whether the project’s planners have genuinely considered these alternatives — or whether strategic urgency has foreclosed them — will determine whether Great Nicobar is remembered as India’s most consequential infrastructure achievement or its most avoidable ecological disaster.

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 — Environment	EIA process; forest diversion; Schedule I species; leatherback turtle
GS2 — Governance	PVTG rights; Forest Rights Act; FPIC; NGT; clearance architecture
GS2 — IR	Indian Ocean strategy; String of Pearls; transshipment economics
GS4 — Ethics	Consequentialism vs. deontology; intergenerational equity; tribal rights
Mains Keywords	Great Nicobar, ANIIDCO, Galathea Bay, Shompen, FPIC, leatherback turtle, String of Pearls, EIA, Forest Rights Act

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