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Great Nicobar Mega-Project: Development, Environment, and Tribal Rights

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ENVIRONMENT**POLITY****SOCIAL ISSUES****ECONOMY**

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WHY IN NEWS

The **Draft Master Plan for Great Nicobar Island Development Area–2047** was released, with tourism as the primary economic driver alongside a transshipment port, airport, and township. The project has reignited debate over the cost of strategic development: **~130 sq km of tropical rainforest** will be diverted, **~58 lakh trees** felled, leatherback sea turtle nesting grounds disrupted, and the indigenous **Shompen** — one of India’s most isolated tribal groups — potentially displaced. The National Green Tribunal cleared the project in **February 2026**, citing “strategic and national importance.”

GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND — THE BASICS

Great Nicobar is the **southernmost island** of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago:

FACT	DETAIL
Location	Southernmost tip of India’s island territory
Area	~910 sq km
Distance from Strait of Malacca	~90 nautical miles
Distance from Port Blair	~525 km
Distance from Indira Point (southern tip) to Sabang, Aceh (Indonesia)	~145 km
Biodiversity	Tropical rainforest; Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO, 2013 tentative list)
Protected status	Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve; part notified as wildlife sanctuary
Indigenous population	Shompen (~400; PVTG) and Nicobarese

THE HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECT — WHAT IS PLANNED

Project cost: ~₹81,000 crore | Implementing agency: **Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO)** | Timeline to 2047

Four Core Components

1. Transshipment Port — Galathea Bay

- Location: Galathea Bay, southern Great Nicobar
- Capacity: **16 million TEUs** (twenty-foot equivalent units) when fully operational
- Context: India currently lacks a major transshipment hub — about **75% of India's transshipment cargo is handled by Colombo (Sri Lanka), Singapore, and Klang (Malaysia)**
- Strategic argument: A port at Galathea Bay would capture transshipment traffic from the Bay of Bengal + Indian Ocean routes — commercially and strategically valuable
- Naval dimension: The port is designed for **dual use** (commercial + strategic naval base)

2. International Airport

- Greenfield airport to handle international traffic
- Will replace current limited air connectivity via Port Blair
- Enables direct cargo + passenger flights

3. Township for ~3.5 lakh residents

- Residential, commercial, institutional zones
- To house port workers, service sector, government employees

4. Tourism and Hotels

- Tourism projected: **98,000 visitors by 2029 → 1 million by 2055**
- High-end eco-tourism, beach resorts, adventure tourism

ENVIRONMENTAL COST — WHAT IS BEING LOST

Forest Diversion

IMPACT	FIGURE
Total forest to be diverted	~130 sq km (12,981 hectares)
Trees to be felled	~58 lakh (5.8 million)
Forest type	Tropical evergreen + semi-evergreen rainforest
Status of diverted area	Part falls within Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve buffer zone

This is among the **largest single-project forest diversions** in India's recent history.

Leatherback Sea Turtle — A Global Crisis

Leatherback sea turtles (*Dermochelys coriacea*) nest on Galathea Beach — where the port is proposed:

- Leatherbacks are the **world's largest turtle** (up to 600 kg)
- IUCN: **Vulnerable globally; Critically Endangered in the Pacific**
- India's WPA 1972: **Schedule I** (highest protection)
- Galathea Beach is one of the **most significant nesting sites in the Indian Ocean**
- Port construction during nesting season (November–April) would directly eliminate nesting habitat

Other Biodiversity Threats

- **Nicobar Megapode** (endemic, Schedule I bird) — nesting mounds in construction zone
- **Saltwater crocodile** (Schedule I) — rivers and mangroves in project area
- **Coral reefs** — Galathea Bay has live coral; dredging will cause turbidity and bleaching
- **Endemic flora** — approximately 25+ endemic plant species in the project area

Cumulative Environmental Impact

- The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) was criticised for **not conducting a cumulative impact assessment** across all four project components
- **Seasonal construction ban** (Nov–Apr for turtle nesting) was proposed but critics say it is insufficient
- River diversion for township freshwater needs will affect mangrove ecology

THE SHOMPEN — A VULNERABLE TRIBE AT RISK

The **Shompen** are one of India’s 75 **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)**:

FEATURE	DETAIL
Population	~ 350–400 individuals (one of India’s smallest tribal groups)
Location	Interior rainforests of Great Nicobar
Contact status	Minimal voluntary contact with outside world; semi-isolated
Language	Shompen language (linguistic isolate; not fully classified)
Livelihood	Hunter-gatherer; forest-dependent
Legal protection	Scheduled Tribe (Article 342); PVTGs under special government framework
Land rights	Forest Rights Act 2006 applies; no formal land titles held

Core concern: The township + tourism infrastructure will bring **tens of thousands of outsiders** into contact with a population that has survived for millennia through isolation. Historical precedent from the Andaman Islands:

- **Great Andamanese:** ~8,000 in 1858 → ~**57 today** (destroyed by contact-induced disease and displacement)
- **Onges:** Dramatically reduced; confined to Little Andaman reserve

The Shompen are not “consulted” in any meaningful sense — they have no literacy in Indian languages, no legal representation, and no mechanism for **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)** as required under international standards (ILO Convention 169) and Forest Rights Act.

THE STRATEGIC CASE — WHY THE GOVERNMENT IS PROCEEDING

Malacca Strait Chokepoint

India’s maritime vulnerability:

- ~**80% of India’s energy imports** transit the Strait of Malacca (or Lombok Strait) — controlled waters near Singapore/Indonesia
- In a conflict scenario, adversary naval power could choke India’s energy supply
- A **transshipment port + naval base** at Galathea Bay provides India with a forward position to monitor and, if necessary, interdict adversary movement through the Indian Ocean

China's String of Pearls

China has developed or supported ports in:

- **Hambantota** (Sri Lanka) — 99-year lease (debt-for-equity, 2017)
- **Gwadar** (Pakistan) — CPEC anchor
- **Kyaukpadaung** (Myanmar) — pipeline terminus
- **Djibouti** — China's first overseas military base

Great Nicobar as a **counter-String of Pearls** position allows India to monitor shipping lanes and project naval power into the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean without being dependent on regional partners.

Civilian Economic Case

- India's transshipment dependence costs: **\$250–350 million annually** in fees to Colombo, Singapore, Klang
- A domestic hub captures this revenue and enables India to offer competitive transshipment services to neighbouring countries (Bangladesh, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Maldives)

GOVERNANCE — CLEARANCES AND LEGAL CHALLENGES

STAGE	STATUS
Environment Clearance (MoEFCC)	Granted — October 2022; challenged in NGT
Forest Clearance	Stage I granted
Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) clearance	Granted
National Green Tribunal	February 2026: Upheld clearances citing strategic + national importance
Supreme Court	Petitions pending (filed by environmental groups + tribal rights activists)

Key legal arguments against:

- 1 EIA process was inadequate (no cumulative impact; no independent biodiversity survey)
- 2 FPIC not obtained from Shompen (Forest Rights Act violation)
- 3 High Tide Line and CRZ norms compromised for port
- 4 UNESCO Biosphere Reserve nomination incompatible with the project scale

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 — Environment	Leatherback turtle; Biosphere Reserve; forest diversion; EIA process; CRZ
GS2 — Governance	PVTG rights; Forest Rights Act; Free Prior Informed Consent; NGT; ANIIDCO
GS3 — Economy	Transshipment port economics; India's maritime trade dependence
GS2 — IR	Indian Ocean strategy; String of Pearls; Malacca Strait vulnerability
GS4 — Ethics	Development vs. tribal rights vs. environmental protection; intergenerational equity
Interview	"Can the Great Nicobar project be both strategic necessity and ecological disaster? How do you reconcile these?"
Mains Keywords	Great Nicobar, Galathea Bay, Shompen PVTG, leatherback turtle, transshipment port, String of Pearls, Forest Rights Act, FPIC, EIA, ANIIDCO

Cost: ~₹81,000 crore | Implementing agency: ANIIDCO | Components: Galathea Bay transshipment port (16 million TEU), airport, township, tourism | Forest diversion: ~130 sq km | Trees: ~58 lakh | Tourism: 98,000 (2029) → 1 million (2055) | Leatherback turtles (Schedule I; Galathea Beach nesting site) at risk | Shompen tribe (~350–400; PVTG; semi-isolated) | NGT: cleared Feb 2026 ("strategic + national importance") | Strategic: counters China's String of Pearls; 90 nautical miles from Malacca Strait | GS3: Environment, Economy; GS2: Governance, IR, Tribal Rights; GS4: Ethics

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