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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Great Nicobar Task: Pursuing National Security with Ecological Responsibility

INDIAN EXPRESS

4 June 2026

ENVIRONMENT

POLITY

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GS2

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CURATED & WRITTEN BY

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Great Nicobar Task: Pursuing National Security with Ecological Responsibility

 **The Indian Express** 4 June 2026 **GS2** **GS3**

Source: ujjyari.com — Free UPSC & State PCS Current Affairs

EDITORIAL SUMMARY

The *Indian Express* addresses the **Great Nicobar Island mega-project controversy**, arguing that India’s genuine strategic need for a deep-water port and naval base near the Malacca Strait is undermined by the **quality of its environmental governance** in executing the project. The editorial calls for a **transparent, science-backed EIA** — covering all seasons and ecological parameters — rather than clearances obtained through limited surveys. It emphasises that protecting the **Shompen tribe** (a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) and the island’s unique biodiversity are not obstructions to national security but are essential to India’s credibility as a responsible environmental actor.

WHY GREAT NICOBAR MATTERS STRATEGICALLY

Great Nicobar Island occupies a position of **exceptional strategic value**:

STRATEGIC FACTOR	DETAILS
Location	Southernmost point of India; ~150 km from Malacca Strait
Malacca Strait significance	~80% of India’s oil imports; 40% of global trade passes through
Counter-Chinese footprint	Balances China’s Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan), Kyaukphyu (Myanmar)
Naval base	Could become India’s most southern deep-water naval facility
Transshipment	Competes with Singapore and Port Klang; could capture 5–10% of IOR transshipment
Deterrence	Forward operating base for Indian Navy’s submarine and surface fleet

The editorial does not dispute these imperatives. What it disputes is **how** the project is being executed.

THE EDITORIAL'S CORE ARGUMENT

Problem 1: Inadequate EIA

The EIA for the Great Nicobar project was conducted primarily over **4 months (October–January)** — the dry season. The editorial argues this is scientifically insufficient because:

- **Monsoon season** (May–September) is when many species are most active — breeding birds, nesting turtles, migratory species
- **Galathea Bay's reef ecology** cannot be adequately assessed in a single dry season
- **Hydrological modeling** for port construction dredging impacts requires multi-year baseline data

Recommendation: A full **12-month baseline EIA** is the minimum standard for a project of this ecological significance and financial scale.

Problem 2: Coral Translocation Is Not Conservation

The government's translocation of **15,000+ coral colonies** from the Galathea Bay construction zone is presented as ecological **mitigation**. The editorial argues:

- **Coral translocation survival rates** are 30–60% in best-case scenarios
- Translocated corals **lose their ecological position** — the structural habitat they provided is gone
- **Galathea Bay's reef** is not just individual corals but a complex, interacting ecosystem built over centuries
- “Translocation” of 15,000 colonies does not replace the ecosystem services of an intact reef

Problem 3: Shompen Rights

The **Shompen** are among India's most isolated PVTGs — an estimated 200–400 individuals who have lived in voluntary isolation in Great Nicobar's forests for millennia. The editorial raises:

- No evidence of **Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC)** being obtained from Shompen representatives
- The township and airport construction will bring 50,000+ non-tribal workers and residents — fundamentally altering the island's human ecology
- **Forest Rights Act 2006** and **PESA 1996** protections may not have been fully invoked

WHAT “ECOLOGICAL RESPONSIBILITY” IN NATIONAL SECURITY LOOKS LIKE

The editorial argues that other democracies show it is possible to build strategic infrastructure with rigorous environmental safeguards:

- **Australia's HMAS Stirling** (Western Australia) — major naval expansion done with marine environmental surveys, reef protection exclusion zones, and indigenous consultation
- **Japan's Henoko base** (Okinawa) — years of environmental litigation; government eventually had to fund large-scale coral relocation with 5-year survival monitoring
- **India itself:** INS Kadamba at Karwar underwent phased ecological impact assessment over multiple years

The standard: Strategic necessity does not exempt a project from **scientific rigour** in environmental assessment. It raises the bar — because strategic projects are long-term investments that must survive legal challenge and international scrutiny.

UPSC RELEVANCE

Prelims

- Project location: Galathea Bay, Great Nicobar Island
- Cost: ₹72,000 crore
- Distance from Malacca Strait: ~150 km
- Coral colonies translocated: 15,000+ (ZSI supervised)
- Turtle species: Leatherback sea turtle
- Indigenous community: Shompen (PVTG, ~200–400 persons)
- Implementing agency: ANIIDCO
- EIA notification: 2006 (MoEFCC)

Mains Angles

- 1 **GS3 — Environmental Governance:** Critically examine the Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2006. Does it provide adequate safeguards for biodiversity-sensitive strategic infrastructure projects?
- 2 **GS2 — Tribal Rights:** What obligations does India have under PESA 1996 and FRA 2006 toward PVTGs like the Shompen in the context of large infrastructure projects?
- 3 **GS3 — Security vs. Environment:** Is it possible to reconcile India's national security imperatives with its international environmental commitments? Use the Great Nicobar project as a case study.

FACTS CORNER

FACT	DETAIL
Project	Great Nicobar Island Mega-Project
Cost	₹72,000 crore
Location	Galathea Bay, Great Nicobar Island, A&N UT
Strategic value	~150 km from Malacca Strait
Key ecological concern	Leatherback turtle nesting, tropical rainforest, coral reef
Indigenous concern	Shompen (PVTG, voluntary isolation)
EIA critique	Only 4-month dry-season survey; insufficient
Implementing agency	ANIIDCO
Editorial stance	Strategic need is valid; EIA process is inadequate

Source: Great Nicobar Task: Pursuing National Security with Ecological Responsibility — Ujjayari.com | Free UPSC & State PCS Editorial Analysis

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