

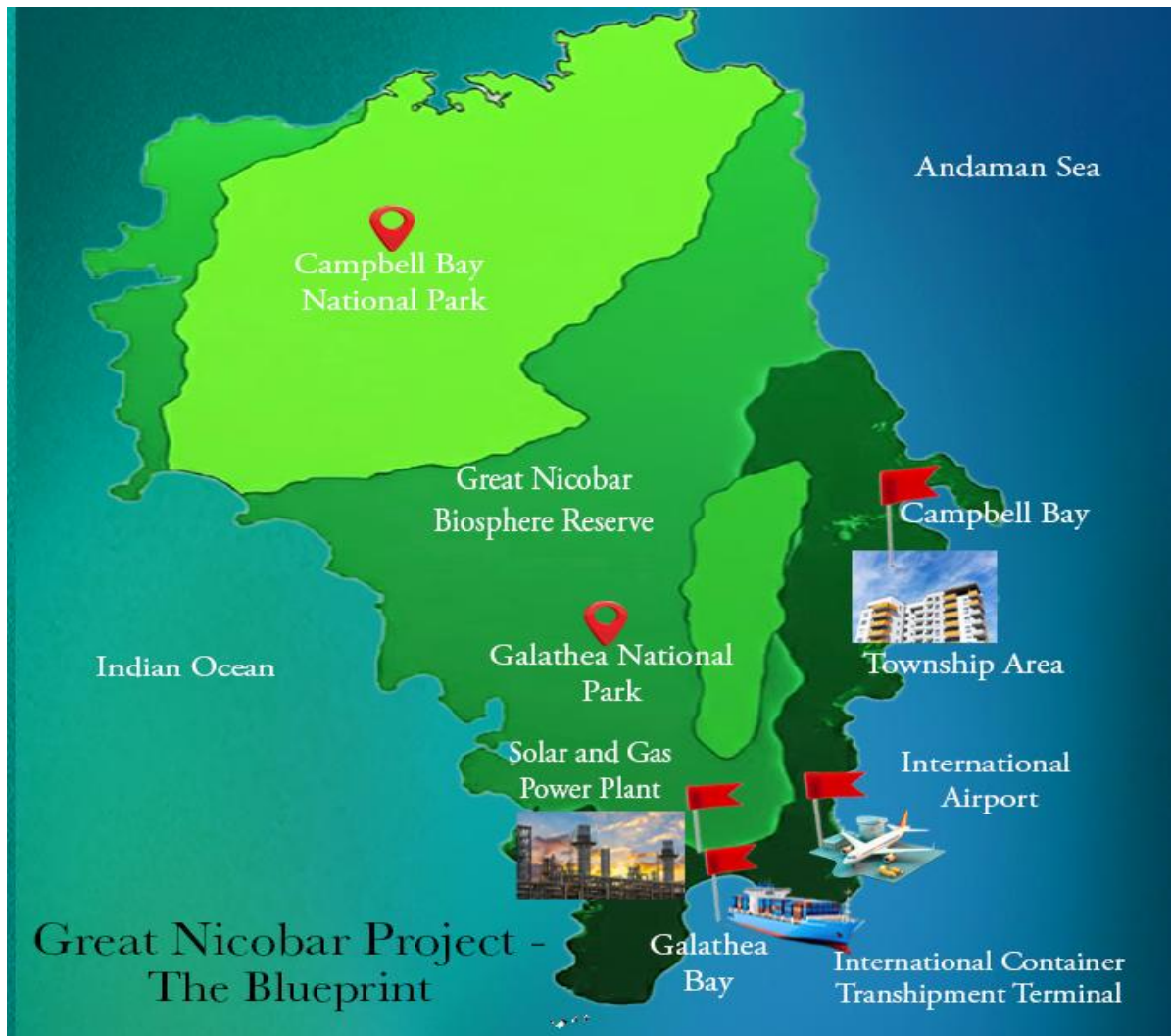
THE GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT- A STRATEGIC IMPERATIVE OR A PARADISE LOST ?

Hailed by some as India's "Future Hong Kong", the Great Nicobar Project is an ambitious megascheme to build an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), a dual-use civil and military port, a gas and solar power plant, and a township intended to leverage India's strategic and geoeconomic position in the Indian Ocean. The recent National Green Tribunal (NGT) award in February 2026, has upheld the environmental clearance for the project and greensignalled its implementation by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation despite initial legal challenges.

However, the project's design and clearances have received serious concerns from environmentalists and anthropologists, who warn that it could jeopardise the island's rich and exotic flora and fauna and threaten way of life of Shompen people, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) indigenous to the island. The project stands at a classic crossroads, forcing a difficult tradeoff between prioritising India's urgent strategic needs in its niche domain of the Indian Ocean while mitigating potential loss of country's one of the most pristine island ecosystems.



Illustration by the SIOS



Map by the SIOS

The Delayed Green Nod

On February 16, 2026, a bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) cleared the pathway for the Great Nicobar Project¹, citing its “strategic importance” and other relevant considerations. The tribunal stated that there was “no good ground to interfere” with the environmental clearance granted to the project in November, 2022 by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC).²

The Great Nicobar Project had received the Union Cabinet approval in 2021, following its conception by NITI Aayog in a technical report titled ‘*Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island at Andaman and Nicobar Islands.*’ Since then, the project has been embroiled in a series of lengthy litigations. In 2022, environmentalist Ashish Kothari filed a petition challenging the environmental clearance on several grounds.³

First, the alleged a violation of the *Indian Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Notification, 2019*, which prohibits the development of large infrastructure projects in ecologically sensitive zones, claiming that parts of the project fall under the critical ICRZ-IA category.⁴ Second, the legality of the diversion of nearly 130 sq km of forest land for the project, arguing that it was prohibited under the *Forest Conservation Act, 1980*. Third, the petition questioned the feasibility of coral translocation. It also highlighted inadequate baseline data collection, which was conducted for only one season instead of the required three seasons.⁵

The NGT subsequently directed the constitution of a High-Powered Committee to re-examine the environmental clearance. Although the committee's report was not released in the public domain citing national security reasons and was kept outside the purview of the RTI Act, it reportedly found no violations. These findings became the basis of NGT, February 2026 approval order.

The Mega Infrastructure Blueprint

The Great Nicobar Project is being implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Limited (ANIIDCO), the commercial arm of the Andaman & Nicobar Administration under the Ministry of Home Affairs. Initially estimated at ₹75,000 crore, the project cost was revised to about ₹81,000 crore by 2025. The holistic master plan covers 166.10 sq km of Great Nicobar Island, spanning seven revenue villages and three gram panchayats. At present, INS Baaz is the island's only major existing infrastructure.

The project is planned to be implemented over a 30-year period in two phases. It comprises the development of the Galathea Bay International Container Transshipment Terminal with a capacity of 16 million TEUs; the Great Nicobar International Airport (GNIA), designed to handle around 4,000 passengers and intended for both civilian and military use; a 450 MVA gas-and-solar-based power plant; and the development of two coastal cities. The blueprint also includes luxury tourism resorts and villas, industrial hubs, and a cruise ship terminal.⁶

Phase I of the project, with an estimated cost of ₹40,000 crore, is proposed to be implemented under the public-private partnership (PPP) model. Bids for this phase were invited in 2023.

Capturing the Locational vantage

Historically claimed by multiple countries, the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago comprises 836 islands, of which Great Nicobar Island is the southernmost and most strategically consequential. Located near the Six Degree Channel, Great Nicobar sits, in close proximity to key Indo-Pacific sea lanes and major choke points such as the Sunda, Lombok Straits, and most critically the Malacca Strait which alone carries nearly 25-30% of global seaborne trade, accounts for a substantial share of global energy flows, and facilitates around 60% of India's maritime trade and the bulk of its LNG imports annually.

Geostrategically, the project's position can be juxtaposed with India's "Diamond Necklace" strategy, to counter China's expanding naval and commercial footprint in the Indian Ocean, often described as the "String of Pearls."⁷ Notably, Great Nicobar is located just 80 nautical miles from Indonesia, underscoring its proximity to Southeast Asia. The Project reinforces India's role as a net security provider in the Indian Ocean Region and offers India a forward base to operationalise its Act East Policy and deepen regional coordination with partners in ASEAN countries while complementing broader initiatives like SAGARMALA and MAHASAGAR, with broader alignment to Maritime Vision 2030.⁸

Strategic Anchor in Indian Ocean Region

The project aims to bridge a structural gap in India's maritime infrastructure and leverage its long-underplayed locational advantage in the Indian Ocean.⁹ As of 2025, an estimated 75 % of India's container cargo is transhipped through foreign ports such as Dubai, Colombo, and Singapore, as most Indian ports lack sufficient draft or capacity to handle ultra-large container vessels, with the recently inaugurated Vizhinjam Port (Kerala) being a notable exception.¹⁰ The proposed the Great Nicobar Port would enable India to claim its due share in the regional and

global maritime trade economy by being a key player in cargo transshipment and bridging its revenue losses.

From a security standpoint, with only 31 of the Andaman and Nicobar island group inhabited, the region remains vulnerable to threats such as drug trafficking, illegal fishing, and maritime infiltration, as evidenced by reported incidents of illegal poachers from Myanmar being detained for destroying Indian marine resources and extracting valuable fish.¹¹ The project's infrastructure thus fulfils India's need for robust maritime domain awareness, surveillance, and intelligence gathering.

It would enhance India's deterrence and response capabilities by enabling swifter deployment and providing scope for sustained naval operations in the eastern Indian Ocean. Moreover, it would critically bolster the Andaman and Nicobar Command- India's only integrated tri-service theatre command -which requires substantial logistical and infrastructure support, a need repeatedly highlighted in the Group of Ministers' reports following the Kargil Review Committee.

Between Fragile Frontiers and Government Guardrails

These equatorial islands are the hotspot of dense tropical evergreen forests, mangroves, nesting beaches, and coral reefs, supporting endangered and critically endangered species such as Great Nicobar megapode, dugong, and endemic macaques. Except for eastern margin between Galathea and Campbell Bay, the island's land area comes under the Great Nicobar Biosphere reserve comprising two important national parks. Galathea Bay is a globally significant leatherback turtle nesting site, while the surrounding coral ecosystems remain highly vulnerable to disturbance.

The island's volcanic origin and location in a seismically active subduction zone - highlighted by the 2004 tsunami and the submergence of Indira Point -raise concerns about infrastructure resilience.

Anthropologically, Great Nicobar is home to the Shompen Tribe with minimal external contact. Large-scale development risks health, cultural disruption, and livelihood insecurity. Reports also indicate that consent from a tribal council has not been secured, and post-tsunami rehabilitation remains incomplete.¹²

To mitigate impacts, the government has identified new wildlife sanctuaries at Little Nicobar, Menchal, and Meroe Islands for the conservation of turtles, megapodes, and coral ecosystems, alongside coral translocation measures. Compensatory afforestation has been planned in the Aravalli region of Haryana.¹³ According to project development authority ANIIDCO, the project includes safeguard provisions such as ₹2,000 crore for wildlife conservation, with technical support from national institutions, and a ₹375 crore allocation from the Ministry of Home Affairs for tribal welfare, healthcare, education, skill development, environmental monitoring, waste management, and groundwater regulation.¹⁴

Choosing Priorities, Confronting Precedents

While the dilemma remains real, with acute ecological and developmental trade-offs, priorities must be set pragmatically -without overinflating fears that foreclose strategic choices or national ambitions. A noteworthy observation is that all major maritime powers have invested in port infrastructure to underpin sustained strategic reach. The United States has long consolidated facilities in offshore territories such as Diego Garcia and Guam, while China is

pursuing artificial island construction in the South China Sea, military upgrades of existing features, and an expanding network of overseas port lease agreements spanning the Indo-Pacific and Atlantic oceans.¹⁵ If India aspires to be an influential power at least in its own expected domain, the Indian Ocean, strategic hesitation could be a costly self-inflicted error.

Precedents from the Andaman Islands, particularly the development of Port Blair Airport, the growth of a regulated tourism economy, and the experience of the Jarawa reserve, by and large, also illustrate how developmental projects have yielded expanded access to healthcare, connectivity, and livelihood opportunities for locals.

Environmental concerns, moreover, must be contextualised and astutely assessed. Internationally, island states have implemented the construction of massive ports, multiple international airports, and advanced logistics hubs alongside evolving environmental regulatory regimes, recognising connectivity as essential to nation's economic viability and maritime relevance. Great Nicobar, with an area of 921 sq. km, is larger than Singapore, nearly twice the size of Seychelles, and several times larger than the Maldives -islands with comparable geo-ecological sensitivities that nonetheless sustain substantial developmental infrastructure

The Great Nicobar project, thus need not be viewed merely with lens of skepticism. Rather, it can serve as a litmus test of India's ability to reconcile strategic ambition with environmental safeguards & social responsibility, thereby setting a benchmark for planning development with institutionalised environmental diligence.

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Garima Singh
The SIOS