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News / Explained / Strategic imperative and environment concern in Great Nicobar project

Premium

# Strategic imperative and environment concern in Great Nicobar project

The proposed Rs 72,000-crore infra upgrade is facing criticism from conservationists. What is the project on the island, and what does the proposed project entail?

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Know more about direct seeding of rice, mifepristone and RoDTEP scheme

Written by **Nikhil Ghanekar**

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The Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve. (Photo via Wikimedia commons)

The [Congress](#) party has described the proposed Rs 72,000-crore infra upgrade at the [Great Nicobar Island](#) as a “grave threat” to the island’s indigenous inhabitants and fragile ecosystem, and demanded “immediate suspension of all clearances” and a “thorough, impartial review of the proposed project, including by the [Parliamentary committees](#) concerned”.

Great Nicobar is the southernmost and largest of the Nicobar Islands, a sparsely inhabited 910-sq-km patch of mainly tropical rainforest in southeastern Bay of Bengal. Indira Point on the island, India’s southernmost point, is only 90 nautical miles (less than 170 km) from Sabang at the northern tip of Sumatra, the largest island of the Indonesian archipelago.

Great Nicobar has two national parks, a biosphere reserve, and a few Shompen and Nicobarese tribal peoples, and a few

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The [Andaman and Nicobar Islands](#) are a cluster of 836 islands, split into two groups — the [Andaman Islands](#) to the north and the Nicobar Islands to the south — by the 150-km wide Ten Degree Channel. President [Droupadi Murmu](#) visited

phase, 30-year project faced criticism from conservationists, wildlife biologists, naturalists, and some local tribal councils?

### The infra project

The mega infrastructure project — which is being implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO) — is proposed to include an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), a greenfield international airport with a peak hour capacity to handle 4,000 passengers, a township, and a gas and solar based power plant spread across 16,610 hectares.

The project for the “holistic development” of Great Nicobar Island was implemented after a report by NITI Aayog . A pre-feasibility report flagged the opportunity to leverage the strategic location of the island, which is roughly equidistant from Colombo in Sri Lanka to the southwest and Port Klang (Malaysia ) and Singapore to the southeast.

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The site for the proposed ICTT and power plant is Galathea Bay on the southeastern corner of Great Nicobar Island, where there is no human habitation. The project was granted in-principle forest clearance and environmental clearance in October 2022. A detailed project report (DPR) has been prepared, and the union government is likely to invite bids for the initial phase of construction of the terminal in the coming months.

## Express View on Andaman and Nicobar islands | Turning seaward

### Strategic importance

The Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean region are of vital strategic and security interest to India as the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy seeks to expand its footprint across the region. India is wary of a build-up of Chinese maritime forces at the Indo-Pacific choke points of especially Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok. China's attempts to expand its footprint in the region includes building a military facility at Coco Islands (Myanmar) lying just 55 km to the north of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands.

In April this year, [The Indian Express reported](#) that a major military infrastructure upgrade was underway at the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, including revamping airfields and jetties and building additional facilities, a base for military personnel, and a robust fleet of warships. The upgrade is aimed at facilitating the deployment of larger and more warships, aircraft, missile batteries, and other military assets.

Close surveillance of the entire area around the archipelago, and the building up of a strong military deterrence at Great Nicobar is of vital importance to India's national security.

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It has been alleged that the project violates the rights of the tribal population, and will impact the island's ecology with the felling of nearly a million trees. It is feared that the port project will destroy coral reefs with spinoff effects on the local marine ecosystem, and pose a threat to the terrestrial Nicobar Megapode bird and leatherback turtles who nest in the Galathea Bay area.

The Congress statement, issued by senior leader and former Environment Minister [Jairam Ramesh](#), has also pointed out that the proposed port is in a seismically volatile zone that saw permanent subsidence of about 15 ft during the 2004 tsunami. The statement has accused the local administration of not consulting the Tribal Council of Great and Little Nicobar Islands adequately as per legal requirements. In November 2022, the tribal council revoked a no-objection certificate it had issued for diversion of about 160 sq km of forest land, saying they had not been given full information.

In April 2023, the [Kolkata](#) Bench of the [National Green Tribunal \(NGT\)](#) declined to interfere with the environmental and forest clearances. However, the Tribunal, however, ordered that a high-power committee look into the clearances. There is no clarity yet on the committee, consisting mainly of government representatives, has submitted its report.

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