

As NGT clears Great Nicobar project, a look at its strategic importance and ecological fallout

Great Nicobar is an ecologically rich, remote and sparsely populated island. The mega project will severely affect its forests, wildlife and indigenous communities.

Written by: [Nikhil Ghanekar](#) 7 min read New Delhi Updated: Feb 19, 2026 06:32 AM IST



Great Nicobar island covers 910 sq km and is home to India's southernmost location, Indira Point.
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The National Green Tribunal (NGT) Monday **cleared the way** for the government's Rs 81,000-crore Great Nicobar mega infrastructure project, noting its "strategic importance" and observing that there were "adequate safeguards" in the project's environmental clearance.

The tribunal's order is significant as it will likely act as a reference point for future projects of strategic importance that are planned in ecologically sensitive areas.

It also casts a fresh spotlight on the 166-sq km project to create a strategic and economic hub that will require the diversion of 130 sq km of forest land and the felling of almost a million trees.

What is the Great Nicobar project?

Great Nicobar Island covers 910 sq km and is home to India's southernmost location, Indira Point.

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The government's main goal on the island is to create an economic and defence hub.

This goal rests on four pillars: An integrated township that will include defence facilities, a transshipment port, a civil and military airport, and a 450-MVA gas and solar power-based plant.

Initially driven by NITI Aayog, the project's implementing agency is now the Andaman and Nicobar Island Integrated Development Corp Ltd (ANIIDCO).

Of the cumulative area earmarked for the project, around 149 sq km will be used for the integrated township, 8.45 sq km for the new airport, 7.66 sq km for the port and .39 sq km for the power plant.

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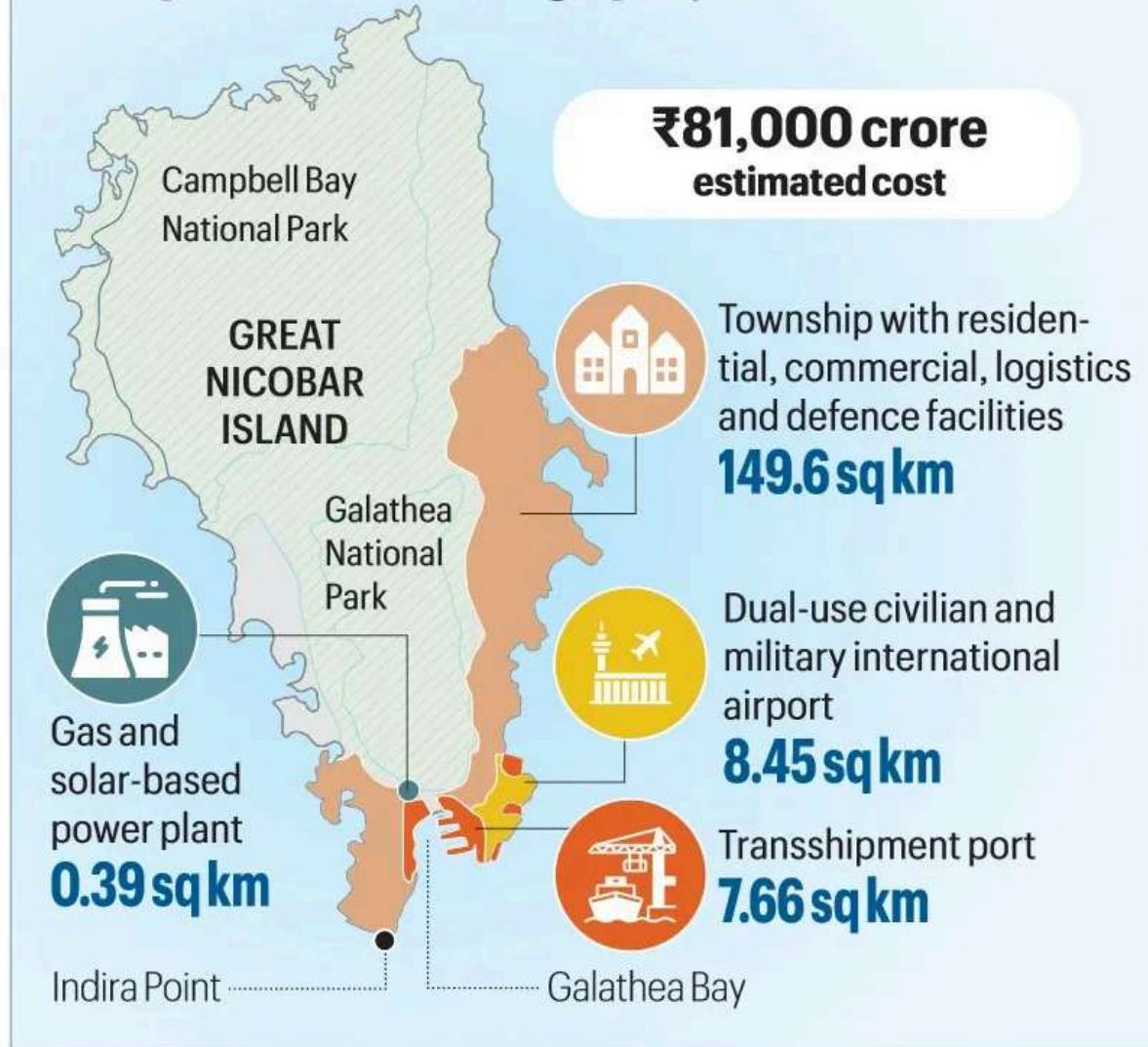
The integrated township will include residential, commercial, tourist, logistics and defence facilities.

The transshipment port will be located on the southern tip of Great Nicobar at Galathea Bay, an ecologically important area that is home to the nesting sites of Leatherback turtles, and where the Galathea River drains into the sea.

The dual-use international airport is proposed to the east of the port. It will be the second one on the island after the Navy's airstrip at INS Baaz Naval Air Station. The airport will require the acquisition of 4.2 sq km of land and affect 379 families, largely those who have settled on the island from the mainland.

Land reclamation has also been proposed for the port and the airport. An estimated 2.98 sq km of land will be reclaimed for the port and 1.94 sq km for the airport. It is also estimated that 33.35 million cubic metres of material will be required for this purpose. Cement, rocks, sand, steel will have to be shipped to the construction sites, according to the 2021 pre-feasibility report that was prepared by AECOM India Pvt Ltd for NITI Aayog.

• The pillars of the mega project



Strategic interests

The Centre's push for the project appears to be driven by three key factors: geopolitics, maritime trade and geographic advantage.

The Great Nicobar island is India's closest territory to the Malacca Strait, a narrow maritime choke point linking the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. This trade route sees 94,000 ships pass through it annually, according to the World Economic Forum. It accounts for an estimated 30% of all traded goods globally and a third of the world's maritime oil trade.

Transshipment ports are equipped to transfer cargo containers from larger to smaller vessels before they head to their eventual destination. India has only one

operational transshipment port at Vizhinjam in Kerala, on the west coast.

The port at Galathea Bay will thus contest for a share of the maritime trade pie with Sri Lanka's Colombo and Hambantota ports, Malaysia's Port Klang, and the Port of Singapore.

The government has projected that the Nicobar port can handle approximately 14.2 TEU (twenty-foot equivalent unit) of cargo — this means it can handle 14 million 20-foot containers every year.

Apart from the port, India has also stepped up defence infrastructure activity in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, revamping airfields, jetties, storage facilities and surveillance infrastructure, as previously reported by The [Indian Express](#).

A tri-services Andaman and Nicobar Command has been operational at Port Blair since 2001. The INS Baaz Naval Air Station is also located at Campbell Bay, north of the proposed township. The project plans show that defence-related infrastructure will be part of the first of three construction phases.

Environment and social impact

Great Nicobar is an ecologically rich, remote and sparsely populated island. The mega project will severely affect its forests, wildlife and indigenous communities.

To begin with, the infrastructure construction will lead to the felling of over a million trees through the diversion of 130 sq km of pristine forest. The Nicobar group of islands are part of the Sundaland biodiversity hotspot.

The entire Great Nicobar Island, excluding its revenue land, is part of the Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve. The island is home to littoral or coastal wetland forests, mixed evergreen and evergreen hill forests. The Galathea Bay wildlife sanctuary and a megapode wildlife sanctuary were denotified for the project. The Nicobar megapode is a ground-dwelling bird found only on the Nicobar group of islands and the project area will affect its nesting mounds.

The environmental clearance document itself acknowledges the impact of the port on leatherback turtle nesting sites in Galathea Bay. It has said that no activity shall be

undertaken on the island's western parts as they are likely to be used by the turtles as alternative sites.



The project area will affect the nesting mounds of the Nicobar megapode, a ground-dwelling bird found only on the Nicobar islands. Wikimedia Commons

To mitigate the denotification of wildlife habitats, the Andaman and Nicobar administration was asked to notify a leatherback turtle sanctuary on Little Nicobar Island, a Megapode sanctuary on Menchal Island and a coral sanctuary covering the entire Meroe Island.

The project will also affect the forests and tribal reserves used by the indigenous Shompen and Nicobarese community. The Shompen are hunter-gatherers numbering around 250, and are not exposed to regular contact with the outside world. Researchers have expressed fears over their health.

The Nicobarese, a number of whom died in the 2004 tsunami, reside in Rajiv Nagar and New Chingenh settlements in Campbell Bay.

All these projects and activities will lead to a massive surge in the island's population

— from around 8,500 (according to the 2011 census) to 6.5 lakh by 2050.

A long-pending Nicobarese demand — to be resettled in their pre-tsunami villages — could also remain unfulfilled. In January, the tribal council of Great Nicobar alleged that the island administration was pressuring them to surrender claims to these villages. In the past, the tribal council has also revoked its no-objection certificate for the denotification of a tribal reserve, citing concealment of information on the project's scope and impact.

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