



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**GREAT NICOBAR: BETWEEN
MARITIME AMBITION AND
ECOLOGICAL PRUDENCE**

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In Context

- The **Great Nicobar Island Development Project (GNIDP)** embodies India's **"Viksit Bharat"** aspirations while raising sharp concerns about **ecological resilience and indigenous rights**. It has become a flashpoint debate on how the country balances strategic, economic, and environmental imperatives.

Strategic Rationale

- **Geostrategic Location:** Indira Point, India's southernmost tip, sits barely 145 km from Indonesia's Aceh, overlooking the Malacca Strait — the world's busiest maritime chokepoint.
- **Maritime Security:** 80% of India's trade and all its energy imports traverse the Indian Ocean. Chinese naval forays and growing competition underscore the need for forward bases.
- **Economic Potential:** The container terminal aims to rival Singapore and Colombo as a trans-shipment hub. The airport and greenfield townships promise connectivity and job creation, integrating India more firmly into Indo-Pacific commerce.

Ecological and Social Concerns

- **Biodiversity Loss:** Over 8.65–10 lakh trees and 130 sq km of rainforest risk being cleared, affecting coral reefs, megapodes, saltwater crocodiles, and India's prime nesting habitat for leatherback turtles.
- **Mitigation Limits:** Compensatory afforestation elsewhere (Aravallis, Haryana) cannot replicate unique island biodiversity. "Translocating" corals and designating alternative sanctuaries remain controversial.
- **Seismic Sensitivity:** Construction is planned in a high-risk earthquake and tsunami-prone zone, with soils susceptible to liquefaction.
- **Indigenous Rights:** Both Shompen and Nicobarese tribes' habitats and livelihoods face threat. Rapid clearances raise doubts about genuine tribal consent; the legal mandate for their participation (PESA, Forest Rights Act) is seen as inadequately met.

Governance & Legitimacy

- **Due Diligence:** Environmental Impact Assessments incorporated studies by major institutions, but critics allege these were rushed, lacked transparency, and recommendations (e.g., phased clearance, full tribal consent) are weakly enforced.
- **Monitoring:** The clearance includes 42 specific and multiple standard conditions, and formation of committees for pollution, biodiversity, and tribal welfare; however, real capacity and authority of these bodies remain uncertain.

Way Ahead

- **Strategic Imperative Is Real:** India cannot afford to remain passive in the Indo-Pacific. With most of India's trade and energy imports passing through these waters, building maritime infrastructure in Great Nicobar is a matter of long-term security and regional influence.
- **Ecological Responsibility:** The island's mangroves, turtle nesting beaches, and coral reefs are not just statistics; they are living shields that protect both biodiversity and coastal communities. Protecting them in-situ—right where they stand—must take priority over the idea of planting trees elsewhere as "compensation."
- **Inclusive Governance:** Development will carry legitimacy only if those who live there are partners, not bystanders. The Nicobarese and Shompen tribes must be heard through free and informed consent. Beyond safeguards, there is scope for building skills, creating jobs, and ensuring that communities benefit from, rather than fear, this transformation.

- **Phased and Adaptive Approach:** Instead of unleashing mega construction all at once, the project should grow in phases, guided by real demand. This allows time for ecosystems to recover, impacts to be studied, and course corrections to be made before moving ahead.

Source: TH

Daily Mains Practice Question

Q. The Great Nicobar Island Development Project has been hailed as a strategic necessity and criticised as an ecological disaster. Critically analyse how India can balance maritime ambitions with ecological and tribal rights.

