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GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT

SYLLABUS

GS 3 > Economic Development > Infrastructure

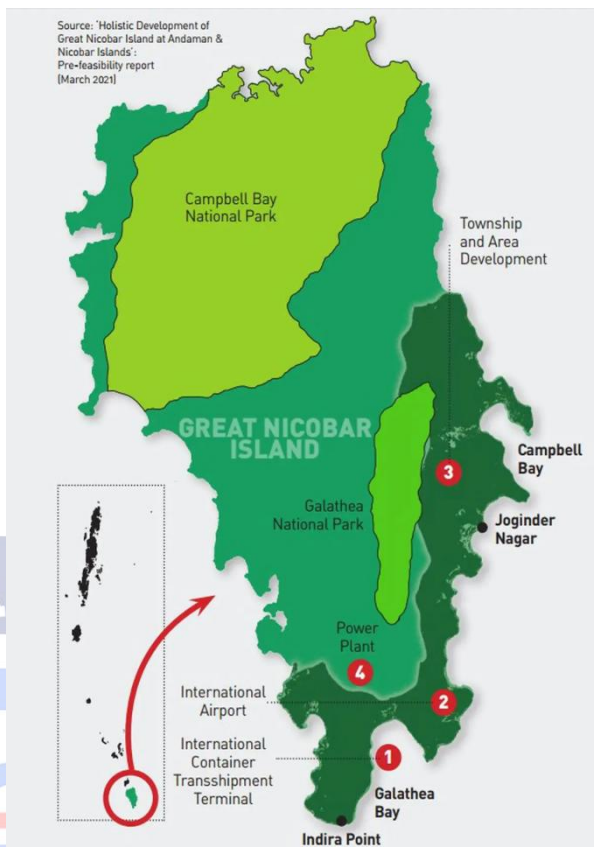
REFERENCE NEWS

- Recently, the Union environment ministry submitted, in a sealed envelope, the **report of a high-powered committee (HPC)** formed to revisit the Great Nicobar Island mega infrastructure **project's environmental clearance** to a six-member bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT).
- The report is **classified as confidential** and **not yet made public**.

ABOUT THE GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT

- The **₹81,000-crore** mega project involves a **comprehensive infrastructure upgrade** on Great Nicobar Island and is being implemented by the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO).
 - It includes:
 1. **An international container transshipment terminal**
 2. **A greenfield airport (civil and military dual-use)**
 3. **A new township**
 4. **A 450 MVA gas and solar-based power plant**
- **Spatial footprint:** 166 sq km
 - Requires diversion of **130.75 sq km of pristine tropical forest**
 - Will involve **felling of over 1 million trees**, per official estimates
- Located near the **Malacca Strait**, one of the world's busiest maritime trade routes, the project holds immense **strategic significance** for India's maritime security and regional connectivity.

- This is part of India's strategic vision to establish **Great Nicobar as a logistical, commercial, and strategic hub in the Indo-Pacific.**
- The project has received necessary clearances, including environmental and forest clearances, and is **expected to be developed over 30 years in a phased manner.**
- Promoted by **NITI Aayog** as a '**mega-infrastructure project**' and a '**strategic masterstroke**,' the ambitious 'Great Nicobar Island Development Project' **faces protests and appeals** to halt it on environmental grounds by conservationists, naturalists, political parties, and civil society groups.



HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE MINISTRY'S AFFIDAVIT

The HPC report on the project's environmental clearance was submitted in a sealed envelope and **remains confidential**. The ministry also filed an affidavit detailing follow-up actions and compliance measures. Here are the **highlights from the affidavit**:

₹80.84 Crore Already Released for Conservation (as of March 2024):

- **Out of ₹88.69 crore sanctioned** for the first year, ₹80.84 crore has been disbursed for conservation and mitigation.
- Break-up of released funds:
 - ₹15.72 crore to **Wildlife Institute of India (WII)**: Conservation of **leatherback sea turtles, Nicobar megapode, saltwater crocodile**
 - ₹24.5 crore to **Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON)**: **Bird hazard risk assessment** (airport), Conservation of **coconut crab, long-tailed macaque**

- ₹23.55 crore to **Zoological Survey of India (ZSI): Conservation and management of coral reefs and intertidal marine fauna**

Total Environmental Management Cost Estimated at ₹9,162 Crore:

- Includes:
 - **Wildlife and habitat conservation**
 - **Compensatory afforestation**
 - **Tribal welfare and rehabilitation**
 - **Mitigation during construction and operations**

Formation of Overarching Monitoring Committee:

- Formed in **January 2024** to oversee EC/CRZ condition compliance.
- Composed of:
 - **Chief Secretary**, Andaman and Nicobar Administration
 - Representatives from **WII, ZSI, BSI, ANIIDCO, and APWD**

HPC Conclusions Referenced:

- The HPC found that:
 - The **EC and CRZ clearances complied** with statutory norms.
 - The project **does not fall in prohibited coastal zones**.
 - **16,510 coral colonies** near the project must be **translocated** (ZSI observation).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT:

- **Economic Development:**
 - The centerpiece of this project is the **International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT)** at Galathea Bay, which aims to transform Great Nicobar into a critical hub for cargo transshipment.
 - By **reducing India's dependence on foreign ports** like Colombo and Singapore, this terminal is expected to boost trade, streamline shipping routes, and invigorate regional economic activity.
- **Strategic Advantage:**
 - Great Nicobar's location near the **Malacca Strait**, a vital maritime chokepoint through which a significant portion of global trade flows, gives India a unique strategic edge. This project strengthens India's role in global maritime commerce, allowing it to better influence critical sea lanes.

- For instance, as China's "**String of Pearls**" strategy builds ports across the Indian Ocean, this development becomes even more crucial to maintaining India's dominance in the region.
- **Security Considerations:**
 - The Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean are not just economic zones—they're **strategic frontlines**. As naval activities from countries like China expand, India needs a stronger foothold in these waters. This project enhances India's maritime security by solidifying its presence and acting as a **deterrent against external threats**.
- **Military Infrastructure Enhancement:**
 - The island's defense capabilities are set to receive a significant upgrade. Existing military facilities, like the **INS Baaz naval base** at Campbell Bay, will benefit from new airstrips, jetties, and advanced surveillance systems. These improvements will enhance India's ability to monitor its waters, respond quickly to threats, and protect vital shipping lanes.
- **Local Employment Generation:**
 - One of the most immediate benefits of this project is the job creation it brings. From construction to operations, the development of ports, airports, and other infrastructure is expected to create substantial employment opportunities for the local population, **raising living standards and supporting economic upliftment**.
- **Tourism Promotion:**
 - The plan also focuses on developing **eco-tourism and coastal tourism** to showcase the island's natural beauty and biodiversity. By drawing both domestic and international visitors, this initiative aims to diversify the economy while providing additional income streams for local communities.
- **Social Development:**
 - This project isn't just about trade and defense—it's about people. Plans include state-of-the-art healthcare and education facilities, improved air and sea connectivity, and robust digital infrastructure. E-governance initiatives like **telemedicine** and **tele-education**, aligned with the **Digital India initiative**, will ensure that residents have better access to essential services.

CONCERNS ASSOCIATED WITH THE GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT

- **Indigenous Rights Violations:**
 - The project threatens the rights of the **Shompen and Nicobarese tribes**, violating the **Forest Rights Act (2006)**, which grants the Shompen exclusive authority to manage and protect the tribal

reserve. Increased contact with outsiders also raises concerns about the spread of diseases to which the tribes have no immunity.

- **Biodiversity Threats:**

- Environmental groups highlight the risks of deforestation, with nearly **a million trees slated for removal**, potentially devastating the island's fragile ecosystem.
- **Coral reefs, the Nicobar Megapode bird, and leatherback turtles** face severe threats from the planned development.
- Compensatory afforestation proposed in Haryana has drawn criticism for being geographically and ecologically disconnected from the affected area.

- **Insufficient Stakeholder Consultation:**

- The **Andaman and Nicobar Administration** and **ANIIDCO** raised concerns about the project's feasibility, suggesting the need for a **techno-economic feasibility study**.
- Stakeholder consultations with the Tribal Council and local communities have been inadequate.
- The **National Green Tribunal's high-powered committee report** on environmental clearances remains unpublished, raising transparency issues.

- **Seismic Risks:**

- Great Nicobar Island lies in a **seismically volatile zone** that experienced significant subsidence during the **2004 tsunami**. This raises safety concerns regarding large-scale infrastructure development in a high-risk area.

- **International Obligation Breaches:**

- The **Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary**, part of a **UNESCO World Heritage Site**, is located within the project area.
- Developing the island could breach India's international obligations to preserve biodiversity and protect pristine ecosystems.

- **Security and Strategic Concerns:**

- **RTI Denials:** Requests for project details have been denied under **Section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act**, citing sovereignty and strategic concerns.
- Critics argue that only information related to the **dual-use military-civil airport**, controlled by the **Indian Navy**, should remain classified, not the broader aspects of tourism and shipping facilities.
- Contradictions in Policy: The Ministry of Home Affairs' stance on maintaining the island's isolation contrasts with the Shipping Ministry's proposals for cruise terminals and shipbreaking

facilities, which could increase exposure to foreign vessels and international tourists.

- **Environmental and Legal Challenges:**
 - **Policy Inconsistencies:** Critics highlight contradictions in the project's stated strategic goals and the proposed infrastructure, such as shipbreaking yards and high-end tourism.
 - **Lack of Transparency:** Activists like **Debi Goenka** have raised alarms about the lack of clarity in environmental clearances and the potential for irreversible ecological damage.
 - Legal challenges before the **National Green Tribunal** continue, focusing on violations of established environmental safeguards.
- **Economic Viability Issues:**
 - Replicating the success of duty-free ports like Singapore or Hong Kong on the remote **Great Nicobar Island** is considered economically unrealistic due to its lack of hinterland, industrial support, and resource availability.
- **Administrative Pushback:**
 - **ANIIDCO** and local authorities argue that proposed ship repair facilities conflict with the envisioned greenfield township and waterfront tourism activities.
 - Coastal areas fall under **CRZ 1a regulations**, protecting coral reefs and restricting incompatible developments.

WAY FORWARD

- **Reassessing Economic Feasibility:** The necessity of building the **International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT)** at Great Nicobar should be revisited, especially with existing hubs like **Singapore, Port Klang**, and the recently inaugurated **Vizhinjam Terminal** in Kerala already serving similar purposes. Avoiding duplication is essential to ensure long-term economic viability.
- **Conducting Detailed Impact Assessments:** A thorough environmental and social impact assessment, in line with the **Environment Protection Act (1986)**, is critical to understand the project's full impact. Protecting biodiversity, including coral reefs, and ensuring the rights of indigenous communities are paramount.
- **Respecting Tribal Rights:** The **Shompen and Nicobarese tribes** must be directly involved in decision-making processes. The government should strictly adhere to the **Shompen Policy (2015)**, prioritizing the well-being of these communities while limiting unnecessary external interference.
- **Aligning Security and Development:** Security-related infrastructure, such as the **dual-use military-civil airport**, must remain distinct from

commercial tourism and shipping projects to avoid policy contradictions and maintain strategic focus.

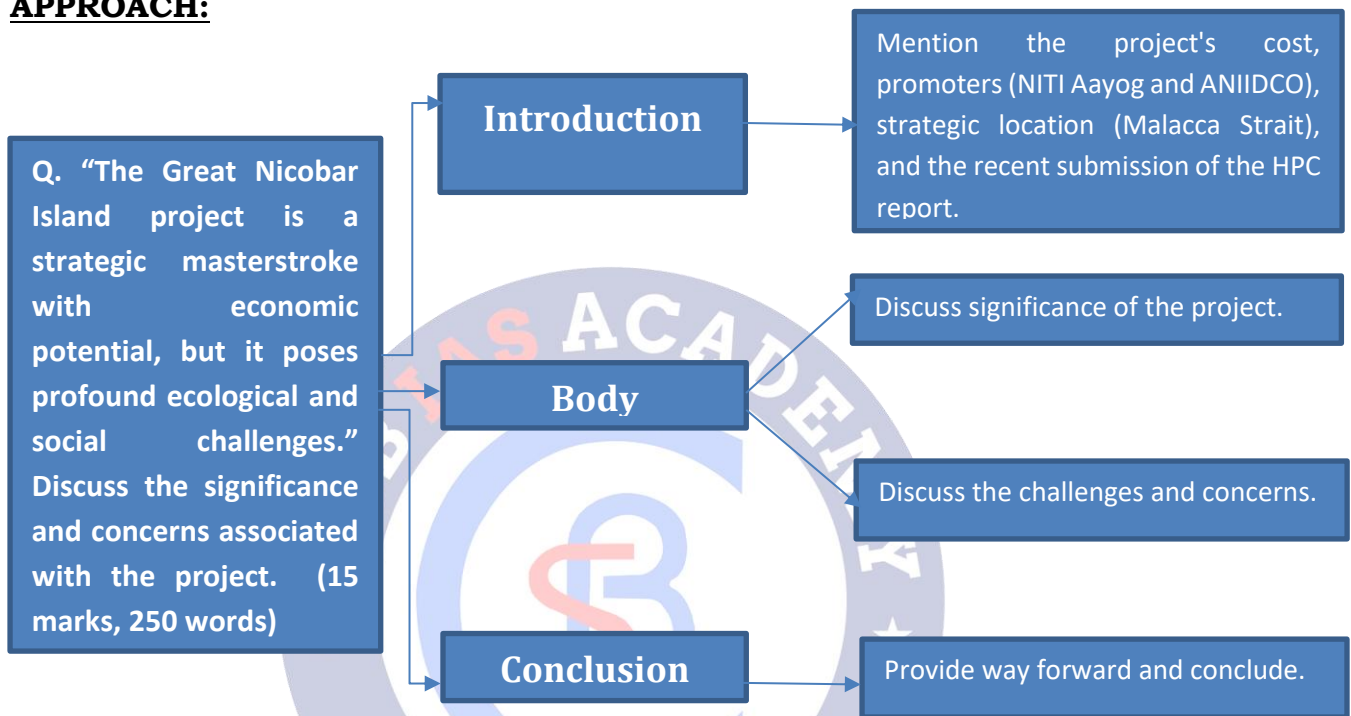
- **Focusing on Sustainable Construction:** Eco-friendly practices, like adherence to the **GRIHA code** for construction and strict compliance with **CRZ 1a regulations**, should be non-negotiable to minimize environmental harm, particularly to coral reefs and marine ecosystems.
- **Ensuring Transparency and Stakeholder Inclusion:** Transparency is key to building public trust. The **National Green Tribunal's report** on the project's environmental clearances and feasibility studies should be made public, allowing for informed discussions among stakeholders.
- **Learning from International Models:** Collaborating with countries like **Japan** and **South Korea**, which have successfully balanced development and environmental preservation on islands, can offer valuable lessons for sustainable growth.
- **Decentralizing and Phased Development:** Consider spreading some components of the project to other Nicobar Islands, like **Little Nicobar** or **Kamorta**, to reduce pressure on Great Nicobar's fragile ecosystem. Phased construction would also help mitigate risks in this seismically active zone.
- **Promoting Responsible Tourism:** Tourism plans should focus on eco-tourism principles to showcase the island's natural beauty without damaging its ecological balance. Strict guidelines can ensure tourism development aligns with conservation goals.
- **Coordinating Better Among Ministries:** Improved coordination between the **Shipping Ministry** and the **Home Ministry** is essential to resolve conflicting priorities and create a unified plan that respects the island's ecological and strategic importance.

CONCLUSION:

- The Great Nicobar project offers strategic and economic benefits, but raises serious ecological and social concerns. Balancing development with sustainability, transparency, and indigenous rights is essential to ensure it becomes a model of responsible island development in the Indo-Pacific.

PRACTICE QUESTION

Q. “The Great Nicobar Island project is a strategic masterstroke with economic potential, but it poses profound ecological and social challenges.” Discuss the significance and concerns associated with the project. (15 marks, 250 words)

APPROACH:**MODEL ANSWER:**

The ₹81,000-crore Great Nicobar Project, promoted by NITI Aayog and implemented by Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO), aims to develop a strategic maritime hub near **the crucial Malacca Strait**. Recently, the Environment Ministry submitted a confidential HPC report and an affidavit to the NGT outlining conservation efforts. While central to **India's Indo-Pacific vision**, the project faces **criticism over its ecological and social impacts**.

Significance of the Project:

1. **Strategic Location:** Situated near the Malacca Strait, the project enhances India's maritime presence and counters regional geopolitical strategies like China's 'String of Pearls'.
2. **Transshipment Hub:** The proposed International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT) at Galathea Bay will reduce India's reliance on Colombo and Singapore.

3. **Defense Infrastructure:** Enhances military readiness through dual-use airport and upgrades to INS Baaz, reinforcing India's Indo-Pacific strategy.
4. **Economic Activity:** Expected to create large-scale employment in logistics, infrastructure, and services.
5. **Tourism Development:** Focus on eco- and coastal tourism can generate local revenue and diversify the economy.
6. **Social Development:** Planned upgrades in digital, health, and education infrastructure aim to uplift island communities through e-governance.

Challenges and Concerns:

1. **Deforestation:** Requires diversion of 130.75 sq km of forest and felling of over 1 million trees—an ecological shock.
2. **Biodiversity Loss:** As per the affidavit, ₹80.84 crore was disbursed for conserving leatherback turtles, megapode, coconut crab, coral reefs—but risks remain severe.
3. **Tribal Rights Violation:** The Shompen and Nicobarese tribes risk displacement, violating Forest Rights Act (2006) and Shompen Policy (2015).
4. **Transparency Issues:** The HPC report submitted to NGT remains sealed; RTI requests were denied citing sovereignty.
5. **Seismic Vulnerability:** Located in a high-risk seismic zone, the island saw major subsidence during the 2004 tsunami.
6. **Policy Contradictions:** Shipping Ministry's cruise terminal plan clashes with the Home Ministry's isolationist stance; afforestation proposed in Haryana undermines ecological compensation.

Way Forward:

The Environment Ministry's affidavit notes that **₹80.84 crore out of the ₹88.69 crore** sanctioned for the first year has been released to bodies like WII, SACON, and ZSI for **targeted conservation**. A monitoring committee formed in January 2024 is overseeing compliance with environmental and CRZ clearances. However, long-term solutions include:

- Making the HPC report public for transparency
- Conducting detailed environmental and social impact assessments

- Revisiting the economic feasibility, especially in light of the new Vizhinjam transshipment hub
- Strict CRZ compliance and ecologically sensitive construction
- Ensuring active tribal consultation under the Shompen Policy (2015)

The Great Nicobar project reflects India's strategic and economic aspirations in the Indo-Pacific, but its execution must balance development with ecological integrity, legal safeguards, and tribal rights. With transparent governance and sustainable planning, it can become a model for responsible island development.

