

6. Great Nicobar Project – Geography

At the India Maritime Week 2025 in Mumbai, the Union Home Minister announced the Great Nicobar Project will play a transformative role in enhancing India's maritime global trade and shipbuilding capacity

India's Maritime Strength

Coastline and Coastal States—India has a coastline of over 11,500 km, spanning 13 coastal states and union territories. This long coastline provides strategic depth for maritime trade, naval operations, and coastal economic activities.

Economic Significance—Maritime activities contribute nearly 60% of India's GDP, reflecting their critical role in trade, commerce, and national development. Ports, shipping, fisheries, shipbuilding, and maritime logistics are key components of this economic contribution.

Port Capacity Expansion—India currently handles about 2,700 million tonnes per annum (MTPA) of cargo. The government aims to increase port-handling capacity to 10,000 MTPA through mega port projects, strategic investments, and improved logistics infrastructure.

The Great Nicobar Project

Project Overview—Includes an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), an international airport, a new township, and a 450 MVA power plant based on gas and solar energy. The project is planned at Galathea Bay on the southeastern corner of Great Nicobar Island, which currently has no human habitation. A proposed "greenfield city" will leverage both maritime trade and tourism potential.

Strategic Importance—The ICTT will integrate Great Nicobar into regional and global maritime trade networks, potentially reducing India's dependence on foreign transshipment hubs.

Power Infrastructure—The 450 MVA gas and solar hybrid power plant aims to ensure reliable energy supply for port operations, airport, and associated industrial activities.

Concerns Over the Great Nicobar Project

Ecological Concerns—The project threatens old-growth forests, home to ~24% of the island's species, potentially leading to irreversible biodiversity loss.

Legal and Procedural Issues—Alleged ignoring of ecological and anthropological objections by the Environmental Appraisal Committee raises questions about compliance with environmental norms.

Economic Viability Concerns—Experts question the financial feasibility of the project due to high costs and ecologically sensitive terrain.

Indigenous Rights Violation—The project risks displacing or disrupting the lifestyle of the Shompen, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), raising ethical and legal concerns.

Seismic and Geological Risks—The region is seismically active and experienced significant disruption during the 2004 tsunami, raising concerns about long-term infrastructure safety.

Transparency Issues—Project details have been withheld under Section 8(1)(a) of the RTI Act, citing sovereignty, security, and integrity concerns, limiting public scrutiny.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands – Geographic Overview

Location—Located about 1,300 km southeast of mainland India in the Bay of Bengal. Coordinates—6°45'N to 13°41'N latitude and 92°12'E to 93°57'E longitude.

Composition—Archipelago consists of over 500 islands, divided into—

1. Andaman Islands (north)
2. Nicobar Islands (south)

Ten Degree Channel separates the Andaman Islands from the Nicobar Islands.

The Andaman Islands

Sub-Groups—North Andaman, Middle Andaman, South Andaman.

Capital- Port Blair is located in South Andaman, serving as the administrative hub.

Topography- Saddle Peak (737 m) in North Andaman is the highest peak in the islands.

Volcanic Activity- Some islands, including Barren and Narcondam, are volcanic.

Coral Reefs- Several islands are fringed with coral reefs, supporting marine biodiversity.

Name Changes in 2018-

1. Ross Island → Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose Dweep
2. Neil Island → Shaheed Dweep
3. Havelock Island → Swaraj Dweep

The Nicobar Islands

Sub-Groups- Northern Group, Central Group, Southern Group.

Great Nicobar- Largest and southernmost island, located in the Southern Group. Indira Point, India's southernmost tip, is situated here.

Strategic Significance- Its location near major shipping lanes and proximity to the Strait of Malacca makes it geopolitically important for India's maritime security and trade.

Strategic and Economic Significance of India's Maritime Domain

Maritime Trade- India's coastline and ports enable robust trade facilitation, making India a hub for shipping and logistics in the Indo-Pacific.

Defense and Security- The Andaman and Nicobar Islands serve as a strategic military outpost, ensuring control over key sea lanes and supporting India's Indo-Pacific strategy.

Port-Led Growth- Expansion of mega ports and ICTTs is expected to strengthen India's regional maritime economy, attract global shipping traffic, and reduce dependence on foreign hubs.

Tourism and Blue Economy- Islands have tourism potential, contributing to local employment and supporting the blue economy, including fisheries, marine biodiversity conservation, and aquaculture.

Conclusion

India's maritime strength is underpinned by its extensive coastline, strategic island territories, and growing port infrastructure. Projects like Great Nicobar ICTT have potential to enhance trade, tourism, and regional influence, but must be balanced with ecological sustainability, indigenous rights, and disaster resilience. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands remain central to India's geopolitical and economic maritime strategy, ensuring both security and development in the Indo-Pacific region.

Source- <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/great-nicobar-project-will-boost-indias-maritime-global-trade-says-amit-shah/article70209108.ece>