

2. NGT Upholds Environmental Clearance- Environment

Recently, a Bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) cleared the way for the Great Nicobar Island mega-infrastructure project, noting that 'considering the strategic importance' of it and 'other relevant considerations'

Great Nicobar Island Development Project

The Great Nicobar Island Development Project is a large-scale strategic infrastructure initiative conceptualised by NITI Aayog and implemented through the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDC). The project seeks to transform Great Nicobar into a major maritime, logistics, and economic hub in the Indo-Pacific region.

The project is one of India's most ambitious island development initiatives and involves substantial diversion of forest land and extensive infrastructure creation, thereby generating significant environmental and ecological debates.

Key Components of the Project

International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT)

An International Container Transshipment Terminal is proposed at Galathea Bay.

1. It is designed to reduce India's dependence on foreign ports such as Colombo, Singapore, and Port Klang for transshipment.
2. It aims to position India as a regional maritime logistics hub.
3. The location is strategically close to major East-West shipping routes.

Greenfield International Airport

The project includes a new international airport for both civil and military use.

1. It enhances civilian connectivity.
2. It strengthens India's defence logistics and rapid deployment capability.
3. It supports tourism and trade integration.

Integrated Township

An integrated township is planned to accommodate phased population growth.

1. It includes residential, commercial, institutional, and public infrastructure.
2. It aims to support long-term economic activity and workforce settlement.

450-MVA Power Plant

A gas- and solar-based power plant is proposed.

1. It ensures reliable energy supply.
2. It incorporates renewable components to reduce carbon footprint.

Strategic Significance

Maritime Importance

Great Nicobar is located near the Malacca Strait, one of the busiest maritime chokepoints globally.

1. A significant share of global trade and energy supplies pass through this route.
2. Control and presence in this region enhance maritime leverage.

Trade and Economic Positioning

The transshipment terminal can-

1. Reduce logistics costs.
2. Increase export competitiveness.

3. Strengthen India's participation in global supply chains.

Defence and Geopolitical Significance

The project enhances India's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific.

1. It supports naval presence.
2. It strengthens surveillance capabilities.
3. It counters growing Chinese maritime influence.

About Great Nicobar Island

1. It is the southernmost island of India in the Nicobar group.
2. Indira Point, India's southernmost tip, is located here.
3. It lies close to the Malacca Strait.
4. It is part of a UNESCO-recognised Biosphere Reserve.
5. It is ecologically fragile and falls under Seismic Zone V.
6. It was severely impacted during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

The island has dense tropical rainforests, coral ecosystems, and endemic biodiversity.

Environmental and Social Concerns

Coastal and Ecological Risks

Petitions before the National Green Tribunal alleged-

1. The project relied on limited baseline environmental data.
2. Approximately 700 hectares fell within ecologically sensitive or prohibited ICRZ areas.
3. Non-compliance with the NGT's 2023 order to revisit the Environmental Clearance.

Concerns included-

1. Damage to coral reefs.
2. Disruption of Leatherback turtle nesting sites.
3. Threats to Nicobar megapode and endemic bird species.
4. Impacts on mangroves and coastal ecosystems.

Seismic and Tsunami Vulnerability

1. Great Nicobar lies in a high seismic zone (Zone V).
2. The 2004 tsunami caused major land subsidence in Indira Point.
3. Large infrastructure development in such a fragile zone raises disaster-risk concerns.

Indigenous Communities

The island is home to-

1. Shompen tribe (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group – PVTG),
2. Nicobarese community.

Concerns relate to-

1. Land rights.
2. Cultural preservation.
3. Livelihood disruption.
4. Demographic changes due to township development.

National Green Tribunal (NGT) Examination

The National Green Tribunal examined multiple petitions challenging the Environmental Clearance granted to the project.

Protection of Coral Reefs

1. Based on submissions by the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), the NGT concluded that no coral reefs exist within the core project area.
2. Any scattered coral formations would be translocated.
3. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) was directed to ensure coral protection and regeneration.

Baseline Environmental Data

1. A High-Powered Committee (HPC), headed by a former Environment Secretary, reviewed the Environmental Clearance.
2. The Tribunal relied on the HPC's findings and held that the clearance complied with procedural requirements.

Compliance with ICRZ Norms

The NGT held that-

1. No part of the project falls within prohibited ICRZ areas.
2. Portions of port infrastructure falling under CRZ-1A or CRZ-1B categories would be excluded in the revised master plan.
3. Conditions under the ICRZ Notification must be strictly adhered to.

Environmental Safeguards

The Tribunal noted that the Environmental Clearance contains safeguards for-

1. Leatherback sea turtles,
2. Nicobar megapode,
3. Saltwater crocodiles,
4. Robber crabs,
5. Nicobar macaques,
6. Endemic bird species.

Shoreline Protection Measures

The NGT directed that-

1. Construction must not cause shoreline erosion.
2. Sandy beaches must be preserved as nesting grounds.
3. Coastal geomorphology must be protected.

Ultimately, the NGT disposed of the petitions while imposing strict compliance conditions.

National Green Tribunal (NGT)

Establishment

1. Created under the National Green Tribunal Act, 2010.
2. Replaced the National Environment Appellate Authority.
3. Headquarters- New Delhi.
4. Zonal Benches- Pune, Bhopal, Chennai, Kolkata.

Jurisdiction

The NGT adjudicates civil cases involving substantial environmental questions under laws such as-

1. Water Act, 1974;
2. Air Act, 1981;
3. Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980;

4. Environment (Protection) Act, 1986;
5. Biological Diversity Act, 2002;
6. Public Liability Insurance Act, 1991.

Its decisions are binding.

Institutional Strengths

1. Applies 'Polluter Pays' principle.
2. Applies 'Precautionary Principle'.
3. Comprises Judicial and Expert Members.
4. Aims for time-bound disposal, ideally within six months.
5. Can award compensation and order environmental restoration.

Broader Policy Debate

The Great Nicobar Project represents a classic tension between—

1. Strategic infrastructure and national security,
2. Economic growth and maritime competitiveness,
3. Environmental conservation and biodiversity protection,
4. Tribal rights and development expansion.

The project highlights the complexities of pursuing large-scale infrastructure in ecologically fragile and geopolitically sensitive regions.

Conclusion

The Great Nicobar Project is strategically transformative but environmentally sensitive. While the NGT has upheld the Environmental Clearance with safeguards, long-term sustainability depends on strict regulatory compliance, adaptive environmental monitoring, disaster-resilient planning, and protection of indigenous rights. The project will serve as a critical test case for balancing strategic imperatives with ecological prudence in India's island development model.

Source- <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/ngt-clears-nicobar-mega-project-cites-adequate-safeguards-in-environmental-nod-10534574/>