Building at the Edge: The Great Nicobar Project Debate

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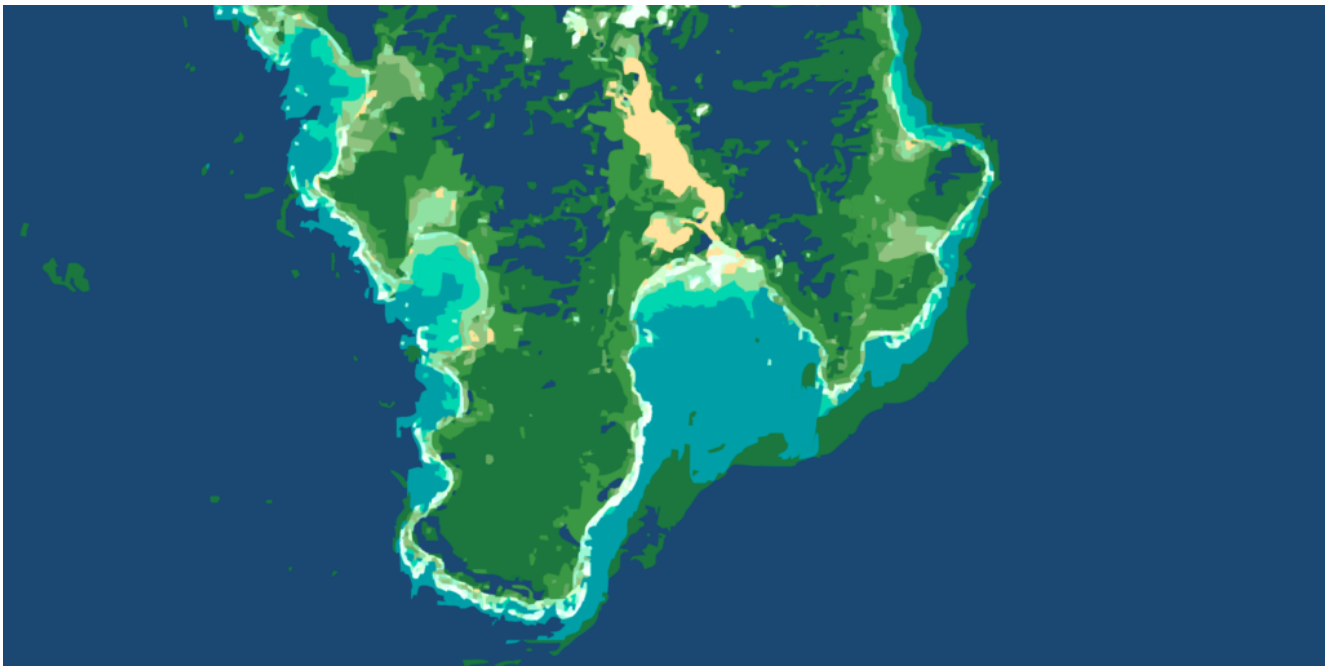

The Great Nicobar development project, first conceived under the "Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island" plan in 2021, has become the subject of sharp political and public debate. At its core, the INR 81,000 crore project is a multi-decadal, multi-sector plan to build an international container transhipment terminal (ICTT), a greenfield international airport, a 450 MVA gas+solar power plant and a 16,610-hectare township across roughly 166.10 sq km of Great Nicobar. Official papers put the ICTT capacity at about 14.2 million TEU and show that 130.75 sq km of forest land is in the project's footprint. The plan has formal clearances on file (Expert Appraisal Committee/environmental clearance; Stage-I forest diversion) and the MoEFCC says it has released funds to prepare wildlife conservation and mitigation plans. The project has been pitched by the government as both a strategic necessity—given the island's location near the Malacca Strait—and a vehicle for local development.

The latest controversy was triggered by an article by the

Congress party chairperson Sonia Gandhi in *The Hindu*, where she alleged that the project was being pushed through despite serious ecological risks, inadequate consultation with tribal communities, and a lack of transparency in environmental clearances.

In response, Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav published a counter-article in *The Hindu*. He rejected the allegations, emphasizing that the project had undergone rigorous scrutiny under environmental and forest clearance processes, and that all legal safeguards, including tribal rights and biodiversity protection, were being observed.

Both Sonia Gandhi's critique and Bhupendra Yadav's rebuttal capture different dimensions of this tension. The reality lies in the overlap and the gaps between these claims.

The Great Nicobar project draws strength and controversy from three overlapping axes of consequence – commercial, strategic, and ecological. Each offers a compelling rationale on its own, but when placed together, they create tensions that are difficult to reconcile.

Commercially the offer is attractive on paper. India currently lets much of its container traffic flow through foreign hubs: Singapore and Colombo alone handle tens of millions of TEUs a year – Singapore crossed 40-41 million TEUs while Colombo handles roughly 7–8 million – and a large fraction of India's containers are transshipped abroad. The industry estimate that India forfeits roughly USD 200-220 million annually in transshipment value. It is a recurring annual leakage that affects shipping costs, port charges, and value capture in the logistics chain. India has already tried to correct course: Vallarpadam (Kochi) was built to be an alternative ICTT; in FY24-25 Cochin recorded record traffic (834,665 TEUs handled by DP World Cochin; transshipment volumes remain under 200k TEUs), but it is still orders of magnitude smaller than Singapore. That gap underlines the arithmetic challenge. An

ICTT on Great Nicobar could, if properly integrated with liner services and competitive handling economics, attract substantial east-bound traffic – its proximity to the Malacca-Sumatra corridor is naturally advantageous.

Strategically the argument is harder to dismiss. Great Nicobar's strategic value is concrete and geographic: it lies close to the Strait of Malacca and to Sumatra—roughly 150–190 km away. Much of the traffic that skirts the Andaman–Nicobar chain funnels through the broad, roughly 200-kilometre-wide Six Degree Channel, while a smaller stream uses the Ten Degree Channel between the Andamans and the Nicobars. This routing means ships routinely pass within a few hundred kilometers of Great Nicobar. India has been worried about secure lines of communication, surveillance gaps, and regional balance in the region. An ICTT plus a dual-use airport provides both commercial and defense synergies: improved logistics, faster projection and hosting of sensors. New Delhi's investments in island connectivity, for example the 2,300 km submarine optical-fiber cable from Chennai to the Andaman & Nicobar Islands (project cost ~INR1,224 crore) show a deliberate effort to harden command, control and communications, underlining that Great Nicobar is being read as a strategic node.

Ecological sensitivity

The ecological trade-off in Great Nicobar is stark and, in many ways, non-fungible. Unlike mainland India, where plantation drives can restore some fraction of lost forest function, islands represent closed, tightly interlinked ecosystems. Great Nicobar's forests are old-growth tropical systems, evolved over millions of years, harboring endangered and exotic species. They are not just tree cover but part of an integrated coastal shield, with mangroves, turtle-nesting beaches, and coral reefs forming a continuous line of defense against storms, erosion, and tsunamis. Disrupting one element cascades into the others.

Official tree-felling estimates themselves tell a contested story. Government numbers vary between 7.1 lakh and 18.65 lakh trees for different phases, while independent assessments by ecologists suggest a possible impact running into several million if secondary clearances are included. Replacing 50-year-old dipterocarps with eucalyptus saplings in Haryana, as compensatory afforestation proposes, is legally compliant but ecologically meaningless. Aravalli scrubland is not an analogue for equatorial rainforest; reports already note that parts of the land designated in Haryana have been auctioned for mining. Marine systems face an equally fraught equation. Roughly 20,600 coral colonies have been mapped in the project's footprint, of which authorities propose to "translocate" about 16,000. Case studies from Maldives, Seychelles, and even Lakshadweep suggestmortality rates can exceed 70%, with limited evidence of restored ecological function even after years. Similarly, attempts to safeguard turtle nesting sites by reclassifying zones from CRZ-IA to CRZ-II, or by shifting monitoring windows outside nesting seasons, do not align with known biological rhythms of species like the leatherback turtle.

While the project has mitigation plans, it lacks efficacy. The calculus, therefore, is not between "destruction" and "safe mitigation," but between permanent, irreversible ecological loss and a legally dressed framework of partial offsets.

Community rights and vulnerabilities

The small, distinct communities of Great Nicobar—the Nicobarese and the much smaller Shompen—are central to the social-rights debate. The Shompen, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), number only a few hundred (229, according to 2011 census) and live in near isolation, while the Nicobarese population is larger but still in the low thousands. Both rely heavily on forests and coasts for food, medicine and cultural practices. Many Nicobarese were also displaced by the 2004 tsunami and have long sought to return

to ancestral villages.

The law offers protections through the Forest Rights Act, Gram Sabhas and constitutional safeguards (Article 338A), but here the process is disputed. The Tribal Council first gave consent for the project and later withdrew it, saying they had been pressured and inadequately informed. Studies of past displacements show the risks go far beyond housing loss—access to food, health and cultural life is often permanently disrupted, leaving small communities vulnerable and poorer over time.

What next?

The immediate path is legal and procedural. The government has submitted a High-Powered Committee (HPC) report to the National Green Tribunal in a sealed envelope and flagged conservation funds already released; activists and expert petitioners have challenged the confidentiality and sought full disclosure, arguing parts of the project remain inside CRZ-IA and that independent seasonal data are needed. Expect continued NGT hearings, fresh filings by conservation groups, and pressure to unseal the HPC documentation for external audit.

Second, the political theatre: national security and geopolitical messaging will keep the project publicly defended by the Centre; political opposition and international civil society will keep the pressure alive.

If litigation does not permanently block the scheme, the real test will be implementation. It will test whether remote compensatory afforestation, coral translocation and the proposed wildlife plans actually work at scale.