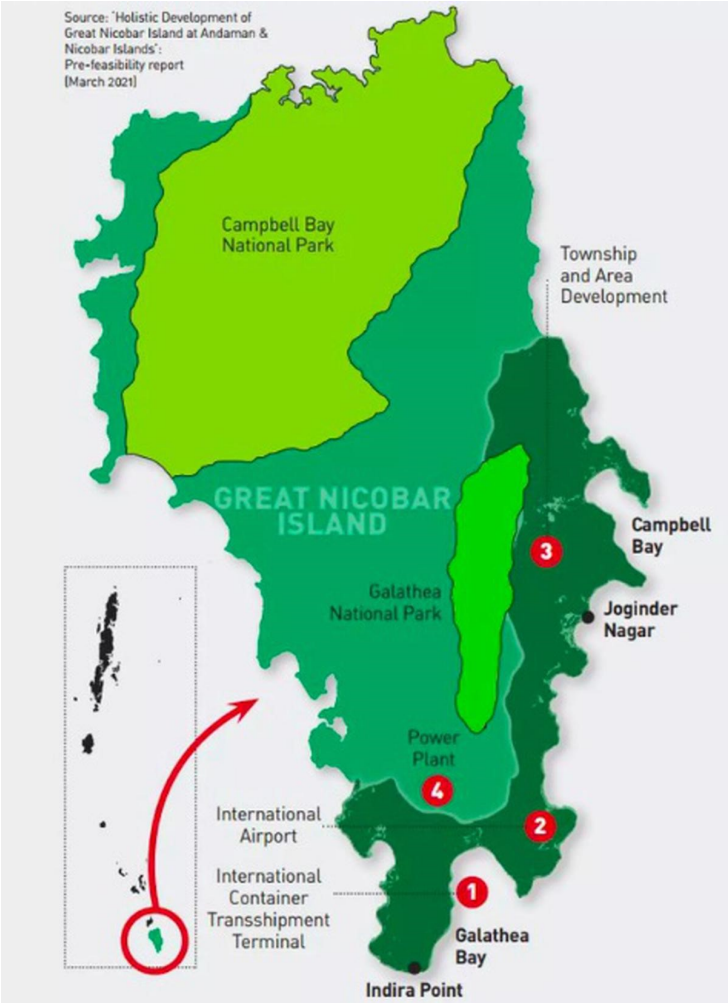
Ecological Disaster in the Nicobar Island

Mains: *GS – III - Environmental Pollution and Degradation and Conservation, Government Policies and Interventions and Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs)*

Why in news?

Recently, the former Environment minister of India labelled the Great Nicobar Island (GNI) infrastructure project as 'a maha ecological disaster'.

What is Great Nicobar Island (GNI) infrastructure project?



- **The GNI project** – It refers to the "*Holistic Development of Great Nicobar,*" which is a large-scale infrastructure project on the Great Nicobar Island in India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- **Conceived by** – NITI aayog in 2021.

- **Budget** – Central Government has granted Rs. 72,000 Crore for this project.
- **Components –** The various components of the projects are
    - Airport, for civilian and defence use
    - International container trans-shipment terminal (ICIT)
    - Township
- **Implementation** – Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Limited (ANIIDCO) is the project's implementing agency.
- The project is to be implemented in *3 phases* over the next 30 years.
- **Significance** – It has various significance as
    - It ensures development in the Islands.
    - More than 1 lakh new direct jobs and 1.5 lakh indirect jobs are likely to be created on the island over the period of development.
    - It is important for national security and for consolidation of the Indian Ocean Region as a strategic location.

To know more about the Strategic significance of Andaman & Nicobar Islands, click here

What are the current issues associated with the project?

- **Lack of consultation** – As per the Article 338-A of the Constitution, the Government should have consulted the National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, but it has failed to do so.

> ***Around 130 sq km*** *of pristine forest inhabited by the* ***Nicobarese****, a Scheduled Tribe (ST), and the* ***Shompens,*** *a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), whose population is estimated to be between 200 and 300.*

- **Neglected of council's view** – The Government should have consulted the Tribal Council of Great Nicobar and Little Nicobar Island.
- Instead, the Council Chairman's plea that the Nicobarese tribals be allowed to return to their ancestral villages has been neglected.
- **Concerns for Nicobarese** – This project will now permanently displace the Nicobarese tribal community from their ancestral villages.
- These tribal people were forced to evacuate their villages during the Indian Ocean tsunami of 2004.
- **Concerns on Shompen** – The project denotifies a significant part of the Shompen tribal reserve
    - It destroys the forest ecosystems where the Shompen live,
    - It will cause a large-scale influx of people and tourists on the island.

> ***The Island's Shompen Policy****, notified by the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, specifically requires the authorities to prioritise the tribe's welfare and integrity, when considering large scale development proposals.*

- **Inadequate impact assessment** – There is inadequate environmental and social

impact studies and assessment of the impact on Shompen and Nicobarese tribal communities.

The Social Impact Assessment (SIA) *is being conducted as per the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act, 2013.*

- **Violation of FRA** – It violates the letter and spirit of the Forest Rights Act (2006), which holds the Shompen as the sole legally empowered authority to protect, preserve, regulate and manage the tribal reserve.
- **Environmental catastrophe** – The project will require the *cutting down of trees on an estimated 15% of the island's land*, decimating a nationally and globally unique rainforest ecosystem.
- The Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change estimates that *8.5 lakh trees may be cut*.
- **Concerns with the afforestation measure** – The planned afforestation is in Haryana, which is thousands of kilometres away.
- This quarter of this land has now been auctioned off by the Haryana Government for mining.
- **Issues with High-powered committee (HPC)** – The committee reported that the port does not fall in the ICRZ-IA (ICRZ-IA), where ports are prohibited.
- It is in ICRZ-IB where these are permitted.
- **Violates CRZ** – The planned port site is also controversial with some of it falling under the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) 1A.
- *Port construction is prohibited in CRZ 1A areas* due to the presence of turtle nesting sites and coral reefs.

To know more about Island Coastal Regulation Zones (ICRZ), click here

What are the challenges associated with this project?

- **Impact on biodiversity –** It threatens one of the world's most unique flora and fauna ecosystems.
- These concerns about the project's impact on the Nicobar long-tailed macaque have been ignored.
- **Flaws in methodology** – The biodiversity assessments for the projects have come under questioning for critical methodological flaws.
- The assessment of sea turtle nesting sites was conducted in the off-season for nesting.
- Drones were employed to gauge the project's impact on dugongs, but these drones have limited capacity and can only assess shallow areas.
- **Undue pressure for assessment** – Evidence has emerged that the institutes were made to conduct these assessments under highly unusual conditions, bordering on duress.

Duress *is a legal concept where a person or entity acts not by free will but under the threat of something detrimental, such as financial pressure, a threat to life,*

or other illegitimate pressures.

- **Highly susceptible to natural disasters** – The project including the port is coming up in a seismically sensitive earthquake prone zone and attacks of tsunami (December 2004).

What can be done?

- **Developing a balanced approach** – To reconcile national security and economic imperatives with the urgent need to protect Great Nicobar's unique ecological and cultural fragility.
- **Increasing transparency** – An independent monitoring body should be established to oversee compliance with environmental and social safeguards.
- **Conducting new assessments** – A new, detailed and credible environmental and economic assessment could necessarily be conducted based on comprehensive, on-site biodiversity studies.
- **Prioritizing indigenous rights** – Any development must proceed only with the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous communities, as required by the Forest Rights Act.

References

1. The Hindu | Great Nicobar ‘Holistic Development’ Project

2. The Economic Times | Great Nicobar project - Maha ecological disaster

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