

Challenges with Great Nicobar Island (GNI) Infrastructure Project

Why in news?

Recently, the reports of the high-powered committee (HPC) formed by National Green Tribunal in 2023 to revisit the green clearance of Great Nicobar Island (GNI) infrastructure project were submitted before the bench.

What is GNI?

- **GNI** - It refers to *Great Nicobar Island* (GNI) infrastructure project.
- The Great Nicobar 'Holistic Development' Project was *conceived by the NITI Aayog*.
- **Budget** - Central Government has granted *Rs. 72,000 Crore* for this project.
- **Components**
 - Airport, for civilian and defense use
 - International container transshipment terminal (ICIT)
 - Township
- **Area coverage** - In total, the project will be spread *over 166 sq km* along the island's *southeastern and southern coasts* along with a coastal strip of width between 2 km and 4 km.
- **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 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.
 - Increasing Chinese assertion in the Bay of Bengal and the Indo-Pacific has added great urgency to this imperative in recent years.

To know about the 'Strategic significance of Andaman & Nicobar Islands, click [here](#)

What are the challenges associated with this project?

- **Lack of impact assessment** - There is inadequate environmental impact studies and assessment of the *impact on Shompen and Nicobarese tribal* communities.
 - The coastline where the port and the project is proposed to come up is an earthquake prone zone, and saw a permanent subsidence of about 15 feet during the tsunami of December 2004.
- **Threat to tribals** - The Tribal Council of the Islands was not adequately consulted, as is legally required.

- Consultations with the Scheduled Tribes Commission, legally mandated by **Article 338(9)** of the Indian Constitution.

The Andaman and Nicobar Island's Shompen Policy, notified by the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, which requires authorities to prioritise the tribe's welfare when considering "large scale development proposals.

- 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.
- It can potentially result in the genocide of the Shompen.

Shompen is an indigenous community classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG). The Shompens are hunter-gatherers, while the Nicobarese people's ancestral lands are likely to be affected by the project.

- **Clearance issues** - There is an *opacity* in the clearance process and non-compliance with due process in granting statutory clearance.
- **Conflict of interest** - The Secretary, Environment and Forests, of the UT of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, was also the Managing Director of the ANIIDCO.
- **Deforestation** - It involves felling of 130.75 sq km of forests that is 15% of island's area, and a nationally and globally unique rainforest ecosystem.
- **Impact on biodiversity** - Irreversible damage that the project would cause to biodiversity.

AND THE PERILS

- **Over 8.5 lakh trees to be felled** over an area of **130 sq kms**
- Destruction of tropical rainforests in Galathea National Park, home to **648 species of flora** and **330 species of fauna**, including Nicobar's **wild pig, tree shrew**, the Great Nicobar crested serpent eagle, Nicobar paradise flycatcher and the Nicobar **megapode**.
- **Threat to the Shompen tribe:** Proposed project areas have been important foraging grounds for the hunter-gatherer nomadic community.
- Threat to nesting sites of iconic species like **Giant leatherback turtle** and the **Nicobar megapode**.
- **Threat to coral and marine ecosystem:** ZSI reported presence of 117 species of scleractinian corals in Galathea. But the Environment Impact Assessment of the project states that there is no coral located in the Galathea Bay region.
- Threat to **Dugongs** due to loss of seagrass meadows, rising anthropogenic activities.



- **Violates CRZ** - The parts of the project site reportedly come under CRZ 1A (areas

with turtle nesting sites, mangroves, coral reefs) that restricts the construction of Ports.

Island Coastal Regulation Zones (ICRZ)

- **Declaration** - Island Protection Zone Notification, 2011 declared certain coastal stretches of Andaman and Nicobar and Lakshadweep as the Island Protection Zone under Environment (Protection) Act, 1986.
- **Coverage** - 8 Oceanic Islands in Andaman and Nicobar.
- **Group-I islands** - Islands with geographical areas >1000 sq.km such as South Andaman, Middle Andaman, North Andaman and Great Nicobar.
 - The land area from High Tide (HTL) to 200 meters on the landward side along the sea front for Group-I Islands.
- **Group-II islands** - Islands with geographical areas >100 sq.km but < 1000 sq.km such as Baratang, Little Andaman, Havelock and Car Nicobar.
 - The land area from High Tide Line (HTL) 100 meters on the landward side along the sea front for Group-II Islands.
- **Classification of ICRZ** - ICRZ-I areas are environmentally most critical.
- **ICRZ-IA areas** - Areas of Mangroves, Corals and coral reefs, Sand Dunes, Biologically active Mudflats, National parks, marine parks, sanctuaries, reserve forests, wildlife habitats and other protected areas under the provisions of Wild Life (Protection) Act, Biosphere Reserves, Salt Marshes, Turtle nesting grounds, Horse shoe crab's habitat, Sea grass beds, Seaweeds, Nesting grounds of birds, Areas or structures of archaeological importance and heritage sites.
- **ICRZ-I B** - Intertidal zone area between Low Tide Line and High.
- **ICRZ-II** - Developed land areas up to or close to the shoreline.
- **ICRZ-III** - Land areas that are relatively undisturbed (viz. rural areas etc.) and those do not fall under ICRZ-II.

What is the current issue?

- **Legal challenge** - In 2022, Mumbai-based non-profit Conservation Action Trust (CAT) challenged the environmental clearance, forest clearance and CRZ clearances granted to the GNI project.
- **Formation of the HPC** - A special bench of the NGT, Kolkata had constituted the High Powered Committee, headed by Secretary, Union Environment Ministry, in April 2023.
 - It was tasked to enquire
 - Protection of 4,518 coral colonies.
 - Limited one-season baseline data collection for assessing the project's environmental impact.
 - Issue of project components falling in the ecologically sensitive ICRZ-IA area.
- **Committee report** - The proposed transshipment port does not fall in the ICRZ-IA (ICRZ-IA), where ports are prohibited.
- It is in ICRZ-IB where these are permitted.
- **Issues** - The HPC's conclusions of port location at ICRZ-IB are at variance with the information submitted by the Andaman and Nicobar Coastal Management Authority.
- The HPC's operations have been opaque and the report of HPC has not been made public.
- The new information that would have justified the recategorisation of the land has not

been provided to stakeholders.

- MoEFCC had not passed any order after revisiting the clearance.

What lies ahead?

- Conduct comprehensive environmental impact assessment.
- Evaluate the socio economic and health impacts of the project on the islands and tribal groups.
- Ensure that Tribal Council of the Islands are integrated in all decision making processes.
- Make the environment clearances more legal compliant.

Quick Facts

- **Ecological significance of Andaman & Nicobar Islands** - The present forest coverage is 86.2% of the total land area.
- Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve is one of the 18 Biosphere Reserves in India.
- **National Parks** - 9
 - Campbell Bay National Park
 - Galathea National Park
 - Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park
 - Middle Button Island National Park
 - Mount Harriet National Park
 - North Button Island National Park
 - Rani Jhansi Marine National Park
 - Saddle Peak National Park
 - South Button Island National Park
- **Flora** - 2200 varieties of plants, out of which 200 are endemic.
- **Forests** - Deciduous forests are common in the Andamans, and they are almost absent in the Nicobars.
- Grasslands occur only in the Nicobars.
 - South Andaman Forests - Epiphytic vegetation, mostly ferns and orchids.
 - Middle Andaman - Moist deciduous forests
 - North Andaman - Wet evergreen type.
 - Central and South Nicobar Islands - Mostly evergreen forests.
- **Faunas** - There are about 50 varieties of mammals.
- Rat is the largest group having 26 species followed by 14 species of bat.
- Leatherback turtles and Nicobar megapode bird nest here during breeding season.
- It house some of the larger & most spectacular butterflies of the world.
- Mount Harriet National Park richest area of butterfly.
- The Island is also enriched with *corals, shells, fishes*.

References

1. [Indian Express | Legal Challenges to Great Nicobar Project](#)
2. [The Hindu| Need for review of Clearances of GNI Project](#)
3. [MoEFCC | Island Coastal Regulation Zone regulations](#)



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