GENERAL STUDIES II

Great Nicobar Project 2026: UPSC Analysis & Controversy

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The Great Nicobar Infrastructure Project is a strategically significant development initiative involving a transshipment port, international airport, township and power plant. A November 2026 boundary-demarcation tender has renewed debate over forest clearance, indigenous rights, coastal biodiversity and sustainable development. This comprehensive UPSC analysis examines the project's strategic importance, environmental concerns, legal framework, Shompen and Nicobarese communities, and Prelims and Mains relevance.

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UPSC CURRENT AFFAIRS | ENVIRONMENT & ECOLOGY | GS PAPER III

GS Paper I | GS Paper III | GS Paper IV | Environment | Indo-Pacific | UPSC 2027

Great Nicobar Project, November 2026 boundary tender, Galathea Bay transshipment port, tribal rights, environmental concerns and sustainable development.

1. Why Is the Great Nicobar Project in the News?

The **Great Nicobar Island Holistic Development Project** has returned to the national debate following the issuance of a tender for the construction of reinforced cement concrete boundary pillars on Great Nicobar Island.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands administration invited bids for surveying, demarcating and erecting boundary pillars along approximately **43.4 kilometres** of forest boundary associated with the proposed infrastructure development.

The tender relates to an overall project area of approximately **166.1 square kilometres**. Contemporary reporting describes the broader development programme as a project of approximately **?92,000 crore**, although cost estimates have varied across project documents and reporting periods.

The development has attracted attention because challenges concerning forest clearance and alleged non-compliance with the Forest Rights Act remain before the Calcutta High Court.

As of 22 November 2026, hearings concerning those challenges are scheduled for **25–26 November 2026**. No outcome of those future hearings is assumed here.

166.1
Project Area (sq. km)

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43.4
Boundary Length (km)

4
Major Infrastructure Components

2026
Latest Tender Development

UPSC Current Affairs Insight: The issuance of a tender is an administrative and procurement step. It does not, by itself, establish that construction has been completed or that every environmental and legal obligation has been fulfilled.

2. What Is the Great Nicobar Island Project?

The Great Nicobar Island Project is a large-scale infrastructure development initiative intended to strengthen India's maritime connectivity, strategic capabilities and economic presence in the Indian Ocean Region.

The development plan includes an international container transshipment terminal, a greenfield airport, a township and supporting power infrastructure.

Its strategic rationale is based largely on Great Nicobar's geographical position near major international shipping routes connecting the Indian Ocean with South East Asia.

Four Major Components

Component	Proposed Development	Purpose
International Container Transshipment Terminal	Deep-water container port at Galathea Bay	International shipping, cargo handling and logistics
Greenfield International Airport	New airport infrastructure	Air connectivity, strategic access and regional development
Township Development	Residential, commercial and institutional facilities	Support population and infrastructure requirements
Power Infrastructure	Proposed gas and solar-based power generation	Reliable electricity supply for project operations

The official project framework describes the port as having a planned capacity of approximately **14.2 million TEUs** and the associated power facility as approximately **450 MVA**.

TEU stands for **Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit**, a standard measure of container-handling capacity.

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3. Geographical Location of Great Nicobar Island

Great Nicobar is the southernmost major island of the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**, a Union Territory of India situated in the eastern Indian Ocean.

It lies to the south of the other Nicobar Islands and near important maritime routes connecting the Bay of Bengal, Andaman Sea and Strait of Malacca.

Important Geographical Facts

- **Archipelago:** Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- **Location:** Eastern Indian Ocean.
- **Union Territory:** Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- **Southernmost point:** Indira Point.
- **Important coastal location:** Galathea Bay.
- **Important national parks:** Campbell Bay National Park and Galathea National Park.
- **Strategic importance:** Proximity to international east-west maritime trade routes.

> **UPSC Prelims Geography:** Great Nicobar is not part of the Lakshadweep Islands. Lakshadweep is located in the Arabian Sea, whereas Great Nicobar lies in the eastern Indian Ocean.

4. Why Is Great Nicobar Strategically Important?

A. Proximity to the Strait of Malacca

The Strait of Malacca is one of the world's most important maritime passages, connecting the Andaman Sea with the Strait of Singapore and onward routes toward the South China Sea.

Great Nicobar's geographical position gives India an important strategic advantage for monitoring maritime activity in the eastern Indian Ocean.

B. International Maritime Trade

A significant volume of international container trade passes through Indo-Pacific maritime routes.

The Government has highlighted the island's proximity, approximately 40 nautical miles, to an important east-west international shipping route.

A deep-water transshipment terminal could potentially attract cargo currently handled through established foreign transshipment hubs.

C. National Security

Greater maritime infrastructure could support strategic logistics, surveillance, transport connectivity and India's defence presence.

Such infrastructure has particular relevance in the context of maritime security challenges in the Indo-Pacific.

D. Act East Policy

The project could strengthen India's economic and logistical connectivity with Southeast Asia.

Its location is therefore relevant to India's broader **Act East Policy** and Indo-Pacific engagement.

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E. Maritime Supply-Chain Resilience

Additional domestic maritime handling capacity may help India diversify logistics options and reduce dependence on selected overseas transshipment facilities.

> **GS Paper III Analytical Point:** Strategic location can provide a strong justification for infrastructure investment, but successful development also depends on economic viability, environmental compliance, social safeguards and operational resilience.

5. What Is the Importance of Galathea Bay?

Galathea Bay is located near the southern part of Great Nicobar Island and has been identified as the proposed location for an international container transshipment terminal.

The location offers deep-water characteristics and access to important shipping routes.

At the same time, Galathea Bay is ecologically sensitive and internationally significant for the nesting of the **leatherback sea turtle**.

What Is a Transshipment Port?

A transshipment port is a maritime logistics hub where cargo containers are transferred between ships before proceeding to their final destinations.

Such ports allow shipping networks to combine large international vessels with smaller regional services.

Potential Advantages

- Greater international container-handling capacity.
- Improved shipping connectivity.
- Potential reduction in reliance on foreign transshipment hubs.
- New investment and logistics opportunities.
- Strengthening India's maritime presence.

Important Ecological Risks

- Alteration of coastal habitats.
- Dredging and sediment disturbance.
- Disturbance to turtle nesting and movement.
- Artificial lighting and increased vessel traffic.
- Potential effects on marine biodiversity.

6. Great Nicobar Island: Ecological Significance

Great Nicobar is known for its tropical evergreen forests, coastal habitats, wetlands and exceptional biological diversity.

The island forms part of the **Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve**, included in UNESCO's World Network of Biosphere Reserves in **2013**.

The biosphere reserve contains a wide range of terrestrial and coastal ecosystems and provides habitat for several endemic and threatened species.

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Important Species

Species / Group	Ecological Significance
Leatherback Sea Turtle	Threatened marine turtle that nests on Great Nicobar beaches
Nicobar Megapode	Distinctive ground-nesting bird associated with island habitats
Nicobar Long-tailed Macaque	Primate associated with the Nicobar island ecosystem
Saltwater Crocodile	Important coastal and estuarine predator
Corals and Coastal Marine Life	Support biodiversity, fisheries and coastal ecosystem processes

7. Leatherback Sea Turtle: An Important UPSC Topic

The **leatherback sea turtle (Dermochelys coriacea)** is the largest living species of sea turtle.

Unlike most other sea turtles, it does not have a conventional hard, bony shell. Its flexible carapace has a leathery surface.

The species undertakes long-distance migrations and is closely associated with marine food webs.

Why Is Galathea Bay Important?

Galathea Bay provides important nesting habitat for leatherback turtles.

Recent observations and reported nesting records have renewed concerns about the potential long-term effects of large-scale port development in the area.

Potential Environmental Impacts

- Loss or modification of suitable nesting beaches.
- Artificial light affecting nesting turtles and hatchlings.
- Underwater noise from marine construction and vessels.
- Changes to sediment movement and coastal morphology.
- Disturbance caused by increased human activity.

> **UPSC Conservation Lesson:** For highly sensitive habitats, conservation must consider the suitability of the original ecosystem, not merely the creation of alternative habitat elsewhere.

8. Indigenous Communities: Shompen and Nicobarese

Great Nicobar is home to indigenous communities with distinct cultural, social and ecological relationships with the island.

A. Shompen Community

The Shompen are an indigenous community recognised among India's **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)**.

They have traditionally maintained close relationships with the forest environment and include groups with limited sustained contact with outside populations.

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Large-scale infrastructure development raises concerns about cultural disruption, outside contact, disease exposure, forest access and long-term community welfare.

B. Nicobarese Community

The Nicobarese are another indigenous community associated with the Nicobar Islands.

Their livelihoods, settlement patterns and cultural traditions have historically been closely linked to coastal and island environments.

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami also caused major disruption to communities in the Nicobar Islands.

Why Are Tribal Rights Important?

- Recognition of customary and legally protected rights.
- Meaningful community consultation and participation.
- Protection of traditional livelihoods and cultural identity.
- Safeguards against unwanted displacement.
- Access to effective grievance redressal.

> **Important Governance Distinction:** Government statements maintain that protective measures and consultation processes have been incorporated into the project framework. However, petitioners and community representatives have raised objections concerning forest rights, consent procedures and potential impacts on indigenous communities. These competing positions must be distinguished from a final judicial determination.

9. Forest Rights Act, 2006: Legal Issues

The **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006** recognises specified individual and community forest rights.

The Act is intended to address historical injustices experienced by eligible forest-dwelling communities.

Major Principles

1. Recognition of eligible individual and community forest rights.
2. Protection of customary forest-dependent livelihoods.
3. Role of the Gram Sabha in the prescribed rights-recognition process.
4. Safeguards against eviction before completion of the applicable recognition and verification procedures.
5. Community participation in conservation and management.

Challenges to the Great Nicobar project have raised questions concerning the application of these legal safeguards.

The proper validity of the challenged decisions depends on the applicable legal provisions, administrative records and judicial findings.

10. Environmental Clearance and Coastal Regulation

Large infrastructure projects may require environmental assessment and statutory permissions under applicable Indian environmental laws.

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Important Legal Frameworks

Law / Framework	Relevance
Environment (Protection) Act, 1986	Umbrella environmental regulatory framework
EIA Notification, 2006	Environmental appraisal and prior clearance for covered activities
Island Coastal Regulation Zone Notification, 2019	Regulation of specified activities in island coastal areas
Forest Conservation Framework	Approvals and conditions for diversion of forest land
Wild Life (Protection) Act, 1972	Protection of wildlife and protected habitats
Forest Rights Act, 2006	Recognition and protection of scheduled forest rights

Project-Specific Environmental Measures

The Government's May 2026 project backgrounder stated that environmental clearance was granted under the applicable framework and contained **42 specific compliance conditions**.

These conditions address areas including air, water, noise, waste, marine ecology, public health and disaster management.

The Government also reported the formation of separate monitoring committees covering pollution, biodiversity and tribal welfare.

Whether the safeguards are sufficient and how effectively they are implemented remain important matters for environmental monitoring and public accountability.

11. Forest Diversion and Biodiversity Concerns

The overall project development area is approximately 166.1 sq. km.

Official project documentation describes approximately **130.75 sq. km** of forest land within the development area, along with approximately 35.35 sq. km of revenue land.

The potential effects of forest diversion are significant because tropical island forests provide habitat, store carbon, stabilise soil and support watershed functions.

Key Ecological Concerns

- Habitat fragmentation and biodiversity loss.
- Disturbance to endemic and threatened species.
- Alteration of coastal and forest ecosystems.
- Effects on freshwater and watershed conditions.
- Increased pressure from human settlement and transport networks.
- Cumulative impacts of multiple infrastructure components.

Compensatory afforestation can be an important mitigation measure, but it cannot automatically reproduce the ecological complexity of mature tropical forests.

12. Natural Disaster Vulnerability

Great Nicobar lies in a seismically active part of the Indian Ocean region.

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The island experienced severe effects from the **26 December 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami**.

Coastal infrastructure must therefore address high-impact natural hazards.

Important Disaster Risks

- Earthquakes and strong ground shaking.
- Tsunami inundation and coastal damage.
- Coastal erosion and shoreline changes.
- Intense rainfall and associated flooding.
- Disruption of critical transport, power and communication infrastructure.

Disaster Management Linkage: Major coastal infrastructure should incorporate site-specific hazard assessment, resilient construction, early-warning systems, evacuation planning and emergency response capacity.

13. Legal Developments up to November 2026

2022

The project received environmental clearance subject to applicable conditions and safeguards.

2023

The National Green Tribunal considered challenges to the project and directed further examination of specified environmental concerns through a high-powered committee.

February 2026

The National Green Tribunal declined to interfere further with the environmental clearance, while emphasising strict compliance with the applicable conditions.

October 2026

The Supreme Court declined to interfere with the Calcutta High Court's decision to entertain petitions challenging aspects of the project's clearance process.

November 2026

The boundary-demarcation tender attracted attention as questions concerning forest rights and clearance procedures remained before the Calcutta High Court.

Legal Analysis for UPSC: The National Green Tribunal's environmental-clearance proceedings and the pending Calcutta High Court forest-rights litigation involve related but legally distinct questions. A decision in one proceeding must not be treated as automatically disposing of every separate challenge.

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14. Development versus Environment: A Balanced Assessment

Potential Development Benefits	Potential Risks and Challenges
Stronger maritime connectivity	Coastal habitat disturbance
Improved strategic infrastructure	Sensitive island ecology
Potential logistics and trade opportunities	Forest diversion and habitat fragmentation
Regional infrastructure and service development	Pressure on freshwater and waste systems
Greater transport connectivity	Indigenous community welfare concerns
Enhanced strategic resilience	Earthquake and tsunami exposure

The central challenge is not simply choosing between development and environmental protection.

It is ensuring that project choices are supported by credible evidence, lawful processes, effective safeguards and a transparent assessment of alternatives.

15. What Should Be the Way Forward?

1. **Independent Environmental Monitoring:** Conduct long-term studies of forest, coastal and marine ecosystems with transparent reporting.
2. **Protect Sensitive Habitats:** Use avoidance and impact-minimisation measures for critical nesting beaches and biodiversity areas.
3. **Strengthen Tribal Safeguards:** Ensure lawful recognition of rights, meaningful consultation and protection of vulnerable communities.
4. **Improve Disaster Resilience:** Integrate earthquake, tsunami and coastal hazard considerations into infrastructure design.
5. **Assess Project Alternatives:** Evaluate location, design and operating alternatives to minimise irreversible ecological harm.
6. **Transparent Compliance:** Publish monitoring findings, clearance-condition compliance and grievance outcomes.
7. **Phased Development:** Link future stages to measurable environmental and social performance.
8. **Integrated Island Planning:** Coordinate maritime, ecological, community and disaster-management objectives.

> **Policy Recommendation:** A credible model of island development must combine strategic infrastructure with science-based environmental management, legally protected community rights and continuous public accountability.

16. UPSC Prelims 2027: Rapid Revision

- Great Nicobar is part of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
- It lies in the eastern Indian Ocean.
- Indira Point is India's southernmost point.
- The proposed container transshipment port is at Galathea Bay.
- The island is strategically important due to its proximity to major shipping routes.
- Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve entered UNESCO's World Network in 2013.

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- The Shompen are a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group.
- Leatherback turtles nest on Great Nicobar beaches.
- The project includes a port, airport, township and power plant.
- The relevant island coastal framework includes the ICRZ Notification, 2019.
- Forest Rights Act: 2006.
- The 2026 boundary tender concerns approximately 43.4 km of boundary.
- The overall proposed development area is approximately 166.1 sq. km.

17. Original UPSC Prelims Practice MCQs

Question 1

With reference to Great Nicobar Island, consider the following statements:

1. It is part of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.
2. It is located in the Arabian Sea.
3. Indira Point lies on Great Nicobar Island.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

(A) 1 and 2 only
(B) 1 and 3 only
(C) 2 and 3 only
(D) 1, 2 and 3

View Answer and Explanation

Correct Answer: (B)

Statements 1 and 3 are correct.

Statement 2 is incorrect because Great Nicobar lies in the eastern Indian Ocean, not the Arabian Sea.

Question 2

Which of the following communities associated with Great Nicobar is classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group?

(A) Toda
(B) Shompen
(C) Khasi
(D) Bhil

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View Answer and Explanation

Correct Answer: (B) Shompen

The Shompen are an indigenous PVTG community associated with the forests of Great Nicobar.

Question 3

Consider the following statements regarding Galathea Bay:

1. It has been identified for a proposed international container transshipment port.
2. It provides important nesting habitat for leatherback sea turtles.
3. It is located in Lakshadweep.

Which of the above statements are correct?

(A) 1 only
(B) 2 only
(C) 1 and 2 only
(D) 1, 2 and 3

View Answer and Explanation

Correct Answer: (C)

Statements 1 and 2 are correct.

Statement 3 is incorrect. Galathea Bay is located on Great Nicobar Island.

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Question 4

With reference to Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), consider the following statements:

1. It helps evaluate likely environmental effects of proposed projects.
2. It can support decisions on mitigation and environmental safeguards.
3. An environmental clearance automatically removes all other applicable statutory obligations.

Select the correct answer:

(A) 1 and 2 only
(B) 2 and 3 only
(C) 1 and 3 only
(D) All three

View Answer and Explanation

Correct Answer: (A)

Statements 1 and 2 are correct.

Statement 3 is incorrect because environmental clearance does not automatically eliminate other legal requirements or continuing compliance obligations.

18. UPSC Mains Practice – GS Paper III

15 Marks | 250 Words

"The Great Nicobar Infrastructure Project reflects the challenge of reconciling India's strategic and economic objectives with biodiversity conservation and indigenous rights."

Critically examine the statement with reference to the environmental and governance issues associated with the project.

Suggested Answer Structure

Introduction: Briefly explain Great Nicobar's strategic location and the main components of the project.

Strategic Importance: Discuss maritime connectivity, logistics, national security and Indo-Pacific opportunities.

Environmental Concerns: Discuss forest diversion, marine biodiversity, leatherback turtle nesting and disaster vulnerability.

Social Concerns: Explain Shompen and Nicobarese community welfare, forest rights and consultation.

Way Forward: Recommend transparent monitoring, stronger community safeguards, scientific alternatives and sustainable island planning.

Conclusion: Long-term strategic development should be assessed through ecological resilience, social inclusion and effective legal compliance.

19. GS Paper IV: Ethical Dimensions

The Great Nicobar Project also offers a case study in ethical public decision-making.

- **Intergenerational Equity:** Balancing present development needs with future ecological well-being.
- **Justice:** Protecting the rights and interests of vulnerable communities.
- **Transparency:** Ensuring access to reliable environmental and compliance information.
- **Accountability:** Making authorities answerable for implementation outcomes.
- **Precautionary Principle:** Taking appropriate preventive action where serious ecological harm is possible.
- **Public Interest:** Evaluating national benefits without overlooking local costs and risks.

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20. Frequently Asked Questions

What is the Great Nicobar Project?

It is a proposed integrated infrastructure development programme involving an international container transshipment terminal, airport, township and power infrastructure.

Why is the Great Nicobar Project in the news in November 2026?

A tender for surveying and constructing boundary pillars along approximately 43.4 km of project-related forest boundary attracted attention amid continuing legal and environmental concerns.

Where is Galathea Bay located?

Galathea Bay is located on Great Nicobar Island in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago.

Why is Great Nicobar strategically important?

Its proximity to international shipping routes provides potential advantages for maritime logistics, connectivity, national security and India's Indo-Pacific presence.

Which indigenous communities are associated with Great Nicobar?

The Shompen and Nicobarese communities are associated with Great Nicobar Island.

Why are leatherback turtles important in this debate?

Galathea Bay is an important nesting area for leatherback sea turtles, and infrastructure activity may alter sensitive nesting and marine habitats.

Does the project's environmental clearance eliminate all legal concerns?

No. Environmental clearance is subject to applicable conditions, and separate legal requirements or judicial proceedings may remain relevant.

21. Conclusion

The Great Nicobar Infrastructure Project illustrates the complex relationship between strategic infrastructure development and ecological sustainability.

Its geographical location offers India significant opportunities to strengthen maritime connectivity and regional logistics.

At the same time, Great Nicobar's tropical forests, coastal ecosystems, indigenous communities and disaster exposure make it an exceptionally sensitive development setting.

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The November 2026 boundary-demarcation tender and associated legal debate underline the importance of transparent procedures and continuing compliance with applicable safeguards.

For UPSC aspirants, the central lesson is that sustainable development requires balancing economic and strategic objectives with biodiversity protection, community rights and accountable governance.

> **Final UPSC Takeaway:** The success of major island infrastructure should be judged not only by investment, connectivity and strategic capacity, but also by environmental performance, disaster resilience, institutional transparency and protection of indigenous communities.

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