



Concerns with Great Nicobar Island Project

For Prelims: [Great Nicobar Island \(GNI\)](#), [Galathea Bay](#), [Tropical Rainforest](#), [Leatherback Sea Turtle](#), [Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary](#), [Coastal Regulation Zone](#), [International Container Transshipment Terminal \(ICTT\)](#), [Maritime India Vision 2030](#).

For Mains: Concerns associated with the Great Nicobar Island (GNI) project and way forward.

[Source: HT](#)

Why in News?

The proposed **Rs 80,000 crore** mega infrastructure project on [Great Nicobar Island \(GNI\)](#) has raised **serious concerns** among environmental activists.

- The project, spearheaded by **NITI Aayog**, includes a **transshipment terminal** in [Galathea Bay](#), an **greenfield airport**, a **greenfield township**, and a **tourism project** with a **gas-powered plant**.

Click Here to Read: [What is the Great Nicobar Island Project?](#)

[What is Great Nicobar Island?](#)

What Concerns are Associated with the Great Nicobar Island Project?

- **Environmental Concerns:**
 - **Massive Deforestation:** The project will destroy **130 sq km of primary [tropical rainforest](#)**, leading to **biodiversity loss** and ecological imbalance.
 - Initial estimates of **tree cutting (8.65-9.64 lakh)** have been found to be significantly lower than actual numbers, potentially exceeding **10 million trees**.
 - **Impact on Wildlife:** The project threatens species like the nesting [leatherback sea turtle](#) in [Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary \(WLS\)](#).
 - The **Galathea Bay WLS**, designated for marine turtle conservation in **1997**, was **denotified in 2021** for the port, contradicting **India's Marine Turtle Action Plan (2021)**.
 - **Compensatory Afforestation Issues:** The diversion of pristine Nicobar forests is being "**compensated**" by land in **Haryana and Madhya Pradesh**, which does not replicate the **biodiversity lost**.
 - **Coral Reef Destruction:** The coastline falls under [Coastal Regulation Zone \(CRZ 1a\)](#), making ship-repair and other industrial activities a **threat to marine ecosystems**.
- **Legal Concerns:**
 - **Violation of SC Orders:** The SC appointed **Shekhar Singh Commission 2002**

report recommended a **total ban on tree felling in tribal reserves and national parks** and **afforestation before felling**, a rule not being followed.

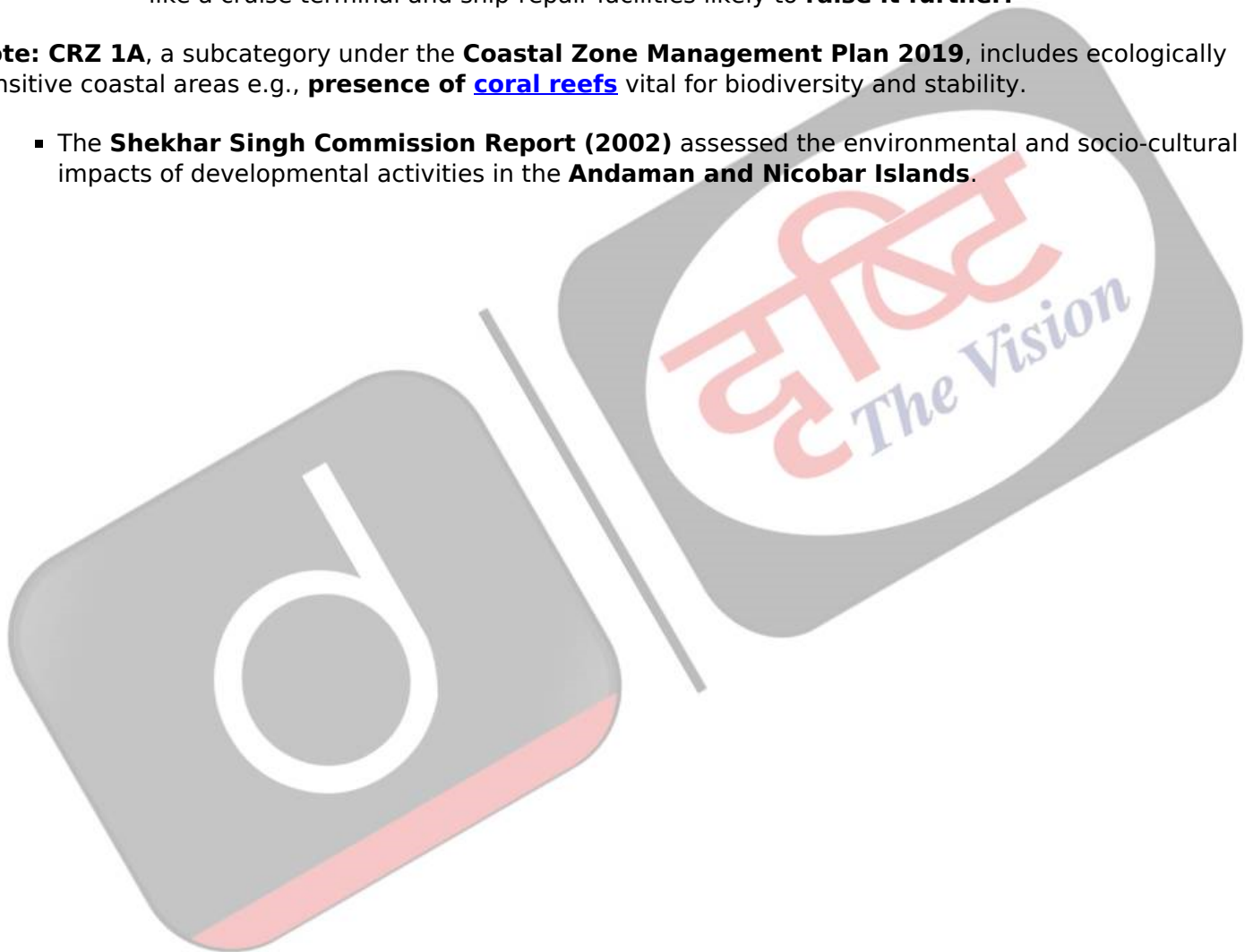
- **Lack of Tribal Consultation:** The project **disregards** the rights and survival of indigenous communities like the **Shompen**, whose existence is deeply tied to these forests.
- **Lack of Transparency:** The government **withheld environmental clearance details** citing national security, but experts argue only the airport has a defense link, not the entire project.

▪ **Government Stand:**

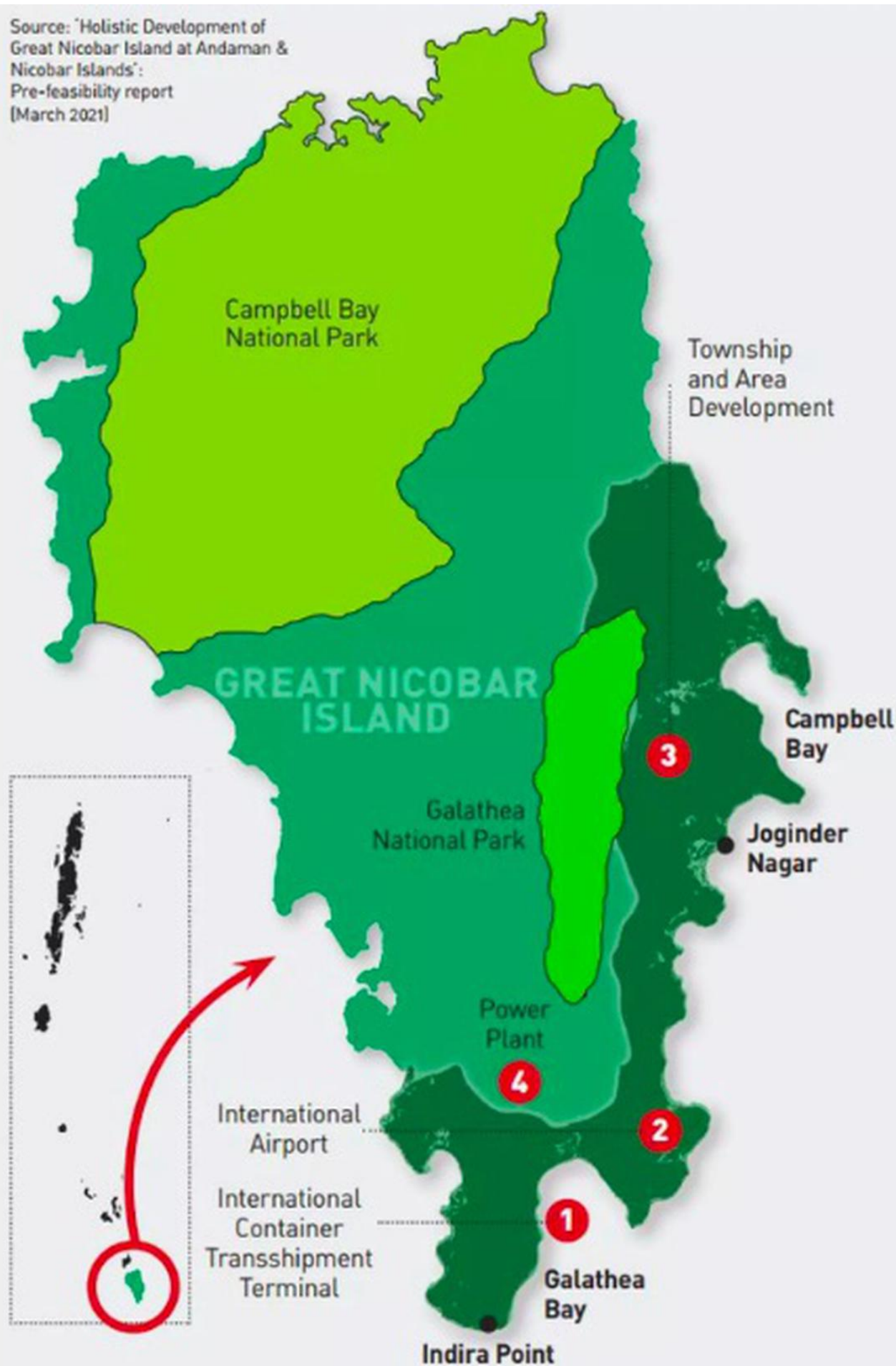
- **Contradictory Stance:** The Ministry of Home Affairs cites **security concerns** to withhold **project details**, while the **Ministry of Shipping** promotes **high-end tourism**, creating a strategic contradiction.
- **Unplanned Additions:** New additions like **cruise terminals, shipbuilding, and EXIM ports** can create additional pressure on the environment.
- The transshipment terminal's cost rose by **20% from 2021 to 2024**. With new additions like a cruise terminal and ship-repair facilities likely to **raise it further**.

Note: CRZ 1A, a subcategory under the **Coastal Zone Management Plan 2019**, includes ecologically sensitive coastal areas e.g., **presence of coral reefs** vital for biodiversity and stability.

- The **Shekhar Singh Commission Report (2002)** assessed the environmental and socio-cultural impacts of developmental activities in the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands**.



Source: 'Holistic Development of
Great Nicobar Island at Andaman &
Nicobar Islands':
Pre-feasibility report
(March 2021)



What is the Significance of the Great Nicobar Island Project for India?

- **Strategic Importance:** Nicobar's strategic location near the [Malacca, Sunda, and Lombok Straits](#) allows India to monitor key sea routes vital for **global trade and energy supply**.
 - It is aligned with India's [Act East Policy 2014](#) and the [QUAD's Indo-Pacific strategy](#), reinforcing regional security.
 - A greenfield airport will speed up **defense deployment**, strengthening India's ability to **monitor Chinese naval activity**.
- **Economic Significance:** The [International Container Transshipment Terminal \(ICTT\)](#) is expected to reduce India's reliance on foreign ports like Singapore and Colombo and position India as a **global transshipment hub**, attracting ships and investment.
 - It is part of [Maritime India Vision 2030](#) and **Amrit Kaal Vision 2047**, supporting India's long-term economic strategy.
- **Sustainable Development:** It can boost **high-end tourism** like Singapore and the Maldives while ensuring sustainable development.
 - A new township will attract businesses, **improve living standards** with better infrastructure, and promote **renewable energy** and sustainable housing with minimal environmental impact.

Way Forward

- **Minimizing Ecological Damage:** Conduct a **comprehensive biodiversity assessment** to identify critical habitats and explore **alternative locations** for infrastructure development while ensuring compliance with environmental laws.
 - Prioritize **restoration** of degraded forests within the **Andaman and Nicobar Islands** to maintain ecological balance.
- **Tribal Rights Protection:** Minimize displacement of **Shompens and Nicobarese**, ensure **fair compensation, livelihood support**, and skill development, and establish a **community council** for inclusive decision-making.
- **Strengthening Institutional Oversight:** Form an independent monitoring body with **environmentalists, local representatives, and officials** to ensure compliance and accountability.
- **Resource Management:** Develop sustainable **water, food, and energy management** while strengthening climate-resilient infrastructure and disaster preparedness.

Drishti Mains Question:

Analyze the Great Nicobar Island (GNI) project's impact on India's national security while highlighting its environmental and social challenges.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims

Q. Consider the following statements: (2018)

1. The Barren Island volcano is an active volcano located in the Indian territory.
2. Barren Island lies about 140 km east of Great Nicobar.
3. The last time the Barren Island volcano erupted was in 1991 and it has remained inactive since then.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 only

(b) 2 and 3

(c) 3 only

(d) 1 and 3

Ans: (a)

Q. Which one of the following pairs of islands is separated from each other by the 'Ten Degree Channel'? (2014)

(a) Andaman and Nicobar

(b) Nicobar and Sumatra

(c) Maldives and Lakshadweep

(d) Sumatra and Java

Ans: (a)

Mains

Q. Project 'Mausam' is considered a unique foreign policy initiative of Indian government to improve relationship with its neighbours. Does the project have a strategic dimension? Discuss. **(2015)**

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