

India

Money, Military & Markets-XXVI

Great Nicobar: India's Indo-Pacific hub

- The Great Nicobar Project is a Rs720bn initiative to develop the island as a strategic economic and defence hub.
- Positioned near the Six Degree Channel and Malacca straits, it boosts India's maritime influence and counters China.
- There is local political debate regarding ecological aspects of the project; however, it's likely to fade as it is not an election issue.

The Great Nicobar project is one of most ambitious Indian projects

The Great Nicobar Project is a 30-year, Rs720bn initiative aimed at transforming Great Nicobar Island into a major economic, logistical, and strategic hub. Spanning 166 sq.km., the project encompasses the Galathea Bay International Container Transshipment Port, a new international airport, power plants, coastal townships, and tourism infrastructure. It is expected to create approximately 65,000 jobs and generate up to Rs300bn in annual revenue by 2040F. The Galathea Bay Port is strategically located above 6° near Malacca Strait, positioning India to enhance maritime security, trade, and influence in the Indo-Pacific region.

It's India's answer to China's 'String of Pearls' strategy

The project's purpose extends beyond economic development. It aims to strengthen India's maritime and defence capabilities in response to China's 'String of Pearls' strategy, enhance energy and trade security, and promote industrial and tourism growth. Major components include a four-phase container port capable of handling up to 16m TEUs annually, a 4,000-passenger international airport, a 450MW gas and solar power plant, and two coastal cities with residential, industrial, & commercial zones. While still in the pre-construction phase, the port can begin partial operations by 2028F.

The project can help India dominate the 6° Channel & Malacca Strait

Great Nicobar Island, and specifically Galathea Bay Port, occupies a strategically crucial position just above the Six Degree Channel, which is one of the main maritime routes connecting the Indian Ocean to the Malacca Strait. This strait handles roughly 40% of global trade, including a major portion of energy shipments to Asia. By developing a deep-water transshipment port, an international airport, and associated infrastructure on Great Nicobar, India gains the ability to monitor and control shipping traffic through this chokepoint, enhancing maritime domain awareness. The project has naval power and can respond to regional threats, particularly in the context of China's 'String of Pearls' strategy. It ensures uninterrupted access to key trade routes, which is critical for both energy and commercial security. Also, it strengthens defence logistics and regional alliances by enabling coordinated operations and surveillance in the Indo-Pacific region. The Great Nicobar project could function as a **strategic lever**, giving India both economic and military influence over one of the world's busiest and most sensitive maritime corridors.

Given its strategic nature, West criticizes it in the name of ecology

The strategic nature of Great Nicobar Project has drawn Western media criticism, focusing on environmental and indigenous concerns. Media outlets like *The Guardian* and *Time* highlight threats to the Shompen tribe and endangered species such as the Leatherback Sea Turtle, while framing the project as an ecological risk. These critiques often emphasize India's military & maritime ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, interpreting the development as a counter to China's influence, sometimes downplaying its economic and strategic rationale.

Local debate will fade soon - it's a non-election issue

The project has sparked political debate but is not directly tied to electoral concerns and is expected to gradually fade from the public spotlight. Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav has defended the initiative, emphasizing adherence to environmental and tribal safeguards, protection of forest cover, and allocation of funds for tribal welfare. Strategically, the Great Nicobar Project is positioned to serve as India's gateway to Southeast Asia, strengthening maritime security, trade, and defence readiness in the Indo-Pacific region, while contributing to national economic growth and regional influence.

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Great Nicobar: India's Indo-Pacific hub

The **Great Nicobar Project** is a landmark 30-year initiative, estimated at Rs720bn, aimed at transforming Great Nicobar Island in the Andaman & Nicobar archipelago into a major economic, logistical, and strategic hub. Spanning 166 sq. km., the project includes the **Galathea Bay International Container Transshipment Port**, a new international airport, power plants, two coastal townships, and comprehensive tourism infrastructure. The project is expected to create approximately 65,000 jobs and generate up to Rs300bn in annual revenue by 2040F, positioning the island as a “growth pole” for the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia. Strategically, the project is of critical importance to India's **maritime and defence architecture**. The Galathea Bay Port, located near the Six Degree Channel and the Malacca Strait, lies along one of the world's busiest shipping routes, carrying about 40% of global trade. By developing deep-water port facilities, an international airport, and associated infrastructure, India gains the ability to monitor shipping traffic, project naval power, secure key trade routes, and enhance defence logistics and regional alliances in the Indo-Pacific. This development is also seen as a direct response to China's ‘String of Pearls’ strategy, reinforcing India's position as a regional security provider. The project's **pre-construction phase** has already secured major approvals, including designation of the Galathea Bay as India's 13th major port, making it eligible for central funding. Phase -1 of the port, with a capacity of 4m TEUs, is expected to be operational by 2028F, with the final phase projected for 2058F. While the government highlights the economic and strategic benefits, the project has faced criticism from environmentalists, Western media, and some political leaders, who warn of potential impacts on the **Shompen tribe**, a particularly vulnerable Indigenous group, and on endangered species such as the **Leatherback Sea Turtle**. In response, the government has emphasized **strict environmental safeguards**, tribal welfare measures, and compensatory afforestation outside the island to offset forest land diversion. Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav has highlighted consultations with experts, the maintenance of 82% forest cover, and allocation of over Rs2bn for tribal welfare initiatives, while assuring that the project does not fall within ecologically sensitive zones. Although the political debate has surfaced, it is not an election issue and is expected to **fade naturally**, allowing India to focus on realizing the project's long-term economic, strategic, and defence objectives, ultimately strengthening its presence and influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Great Nicobar Project and beyond: India's bold leap into the Indo-Pacific

The Great Nicobar Project is a large-scale, 30-year development initiative on the Great Nicobar Island, covering 166sq. km., with an estimated cost of Rs720bn. It aims to transform the island into a major economic, logistical, and strategic hub, including the Galathea Bay Port, an international airport, power plants, coastal townships, and tourism infrastructure. The project is strategically significant, enhancing India's maritime security and Indo-Pacific presence, while creating ~65,000 jobs. The Galathea Bay Project is a component of this larger plan, focused on building an International Container Transshipment Port near the Six Degree Channel. With a phased capacity up to 16m TEUs annually, it could generate Rs300bn in annual revenue by 2040F and create ~50,000 jobs. The port is still in the pre-construction phase but is a key strategic asset for India's defence and maritime influence. In short: The Great Nicobar Project is the overarching development plan, while the Galathea Bay Project is a major but singular component of it.

What is the Great Nicobar Project or the Galathea Bay Project? ➤

The Great Nicobar Project—often referred to as the Great Nicobar Island Development Project—is an ambitious infrastructure and strategic initiative by India aimed at transforming the southernmost part of Great Nicobar Island in the Andaman & Nicobar archipelago.

Purpose

1. To develop Great Nicobar Island as a major **economic, logistical, and defence hub**.
2. To enhance India's **maritime trade, energy security, and geopolitical positioning**, particularly in the **Indian Ocean Region (IOR)** near the **Malacca Strait**.
3. To boost **tourism, industrial growth, and employment** while countering regional strategic threats.

Major Components

1. **International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT)**
 - a. Located at Galathea Bay.
 - b. Designed to handle up to 16m TEUs annually.
 - c. Aims to reduce the dependence on ports in neighbouring countries.
2. **Great Nicobar International Airport (GNIA)**
 - a. A new airport to handle 4,000 passengers during peak hours.
 - b. Improves air connectivity.
3. **Gas and Solar Power Plant**
 - a. Provides **450MVA capacity** through gas and renewable energy.
4. **Two Coastal Cities & Township Development**
 - a. One city between **Campbell Bay** and **Galathea Bay**, another to the west.
 - b. Residential, industrial, and commercial zones.
5. **Tourism Infrastructure**
 - a. Cruise terminals, luxury resorts, eco-tourism spots.

Where is the project located? It is on the Greater Nicobar Island and is also known as Galathea Bay Project ➤

The project is located in Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which have a total area of approximately 8,100sq.km. All major infrastructure, including the port, will be developed on Greater Nicobar Island, which covers an area of 910sq. km. The total area allocated for the project is around 166sq.km.

The development will include the Galathea Bay port, an international airport, a 450 MW power plant, and a township. Approximately 65,000 people are expected to be employed through this project. The airport will be designed for dual use, with a runway approximately 3,300 metres long.

The Galathea Bay port is strategically located just above the Six Degree Channel, a major shipping lane for the Malacca Strait through which about 40% of global trade passes. The total estimated cost of the project is around Rs720bn.

Figure 1: The Great Nicobar Project is situated just north of the Six Degree Channel, a critical maritime corridor facilitating approximately 40% of global trade and serving as a primary navigational approach to the Malacca Strait

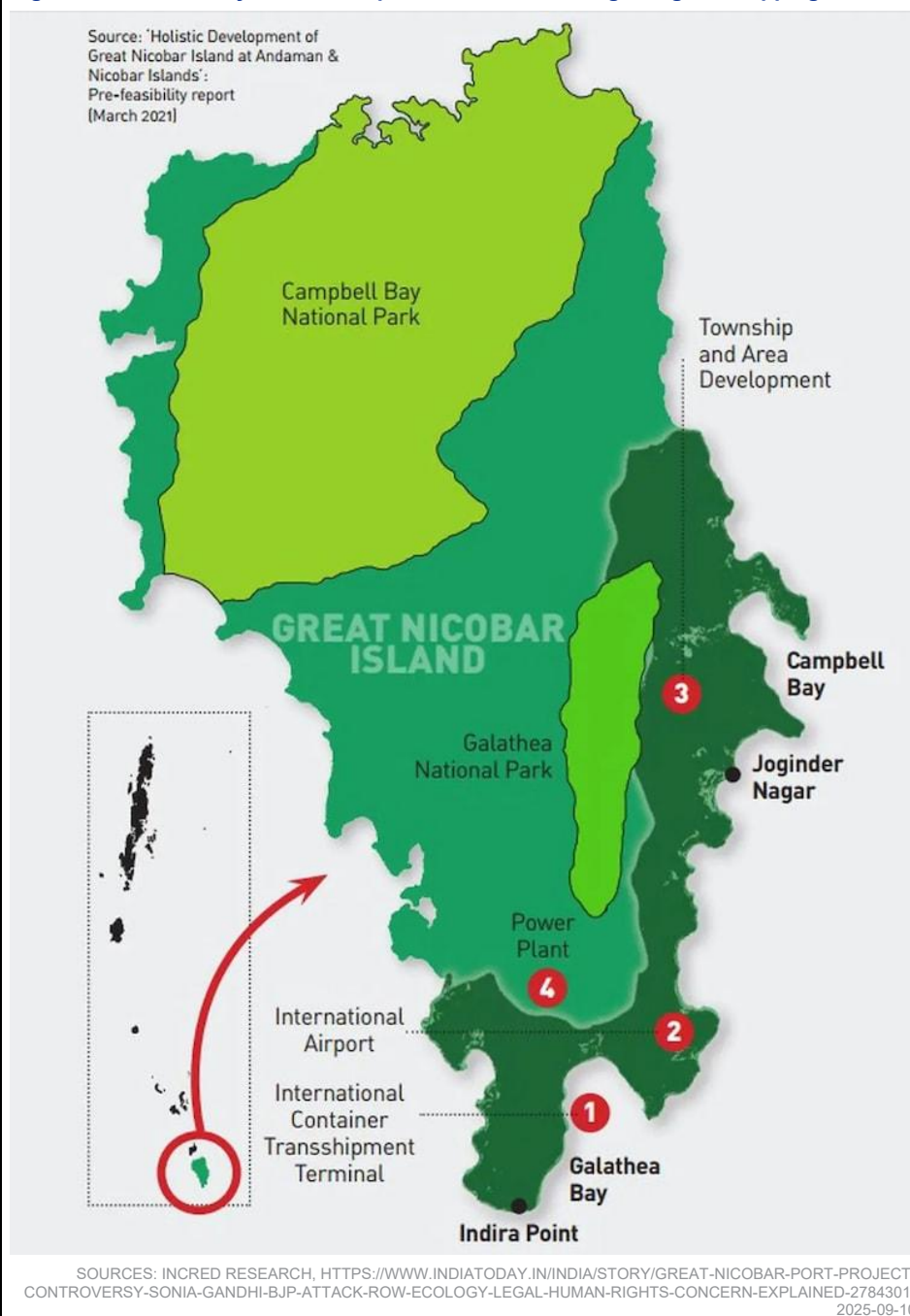
India and Indonesia



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It is a natural bay port that can become a major transshipment hub for global trade ➤

Figure 2: Galathea Bay is a natural port and is overlooking 6 degree shipping channel



What is the current status of the project? It's still in a pre-construction phase ➤

The Great Nicobar Project, formally called the Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island, was approved by the Narendra Modi Cabinet in 2021. The project is spearheaded by Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO), a government entity, and will be built over 30 years at an estimated cost of Rs720bn.

As of Sep 2025-end, the Galathea Bay project is in a pre-construction phase, with key government approvals secured and plans for tendering underway. Officially designated as a 'Major Port,' the project is set to be developed as an International Container Transshipment Port (ICTP). While the government promotes its strategic and economic benefits, the project continues to face significant opposition due to its severe potential environmental and social impacts.

Major Port status: In Sep 2024, the International Container Transshipment Port (ICTP) at the Galathea Bay was officially designated as India's 13th major port. This status makes it eligible for central funding.

Pre-construction phase: The project is currently securing necessary government and financial approvals, including the formation of a Special Purpose Vehicle (SPV) for funding. Land acquisition has started, but construction tenders have not yet been awarded.

Timeline: Phase-1 of the port, with a capacity of 4m TEUs, is expected to be commissioned by 2028F. The port will be developed over four phases, with the final phase projected for completion by 2058F.

Partnerships: The port will be developed under a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) model, following the 'landlord model'.

The project is of strategic importance for India and it is Indian response to China's 'String of Pearls' strategy ➤

The Great Nicobar Project is also of critical defence importance. It could serve as India's frontline in the eastern Indo-Pacific against potential maritime threats. The project is seen as a response to China's 'String of Pearls' strategy.

India has ramped up strategic military enhancements in the Nicobar Islands, including extending the runway at INS Baaz in Campbell Bay. Despite its **economic and defence potential**, experts and Congress Member of Parliament Sonia Gandhi have raised concerns over the Great Nicobar Project's ecological impact. They have also flagged threats to indigenous rights, reported legal lapses in the project, and investment risks.

Figure 3: The Galathea Bay and INS Baaz (which is near the Campbell Bay) is one of the key ingredients of India's response against China's 'String of Pearls' strategy



SOURCE: INCRED RESEARCH, <https://samvada.world.com/featured/can-india-strategically-utilise-andaman-nicobar-islands-against-china-in-the-indian-ocean>

In alignment with India's long-term defence objectives, the development of this port supports broader maritime strategy, reinforces deterrence against emerging threats, and positions India as a key security provider and stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific theatre.

The resistance to the project- flimsy arguments

The question of rare Shompen tribe in the Galathea Bay area of the Great Nicobar Island ➤

The rare, isolated tribe in the Galathea Bay area on Great Nicobar Island is the Shompen people, an uncontacted indigenous group that relies on the rainforest and faces threats from a proposed mega-development project in the region. Due to their isolation and potential lack of immunity to outside diseases, contact with the Shompen could be devastating to their population.

The Shompen are a particularly vulnerable tribal group with little or no contact with the outside world. They inhabit the rainforests of Great Nicobar Island, which is home to a variety of unique and endemic flora and fauna. A large-scale development project, including a port in Galathea Bay, has been proposed for the island, which could destroy their habitat and potentially lead to a "death sentence" for the Shompen people, according to experts.

Their continued isolation makes them one of the most remote and vulnerable indigenous groups in the world. As uncontacted people, they lack immunity to infectious diseases that outsiders carry, and contact could have catastrophic health consequences.

How many tribal people live on the Great Nicobar Island? Anywhere between 200-300 people ➤

As of the 2011 Census, the Shompen tribe, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), had a population of 229 individuals, with 141 males and 88 females. The *Deccan Herald* newspaper estimate suggests that the current population ranges between 200 and 300. These communities, particularly the Shompen, face significant threats from the ongoing Great Nicobar Island Development Project, which includes plans for a major port, airport, and other infrastructure. Experts have raised concerns that such developments could lead to the extinction of the Shompen tribe due to the exposure to diseases and environmental disruptions.

Which endangered animal species live on the island? Quite a few, but the most notable is Leatherback Sea Turtle ➤

Great Nicobar Island, part of India's Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, is home to several endangered and endemic animal species, many of which are threatened by habitat loss and environmental changes. Here are some notable examples:

Endangered and Endemic Birds

Nicobar Megapode (*Megapodius nicobariensis*)- This ground-dwelling bird is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List. It faces threats from habitat destruction and human activities such as egg collection and hunting.

Nicobar Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter butleri*)- An endemic species found in the Nicobar Islands, it is considered Vulnerable due to its limited range and habitat degradation.

Nicobar Scops Owl (*Otus alius*)- This owl species is endemic to the Nicobar Islands and is listed as Near Threatened. Its population is affected by habitat loss and limited distribution.

Great Nicobar Serpent Eagle (*Spilornis klossi*)- Endemic to the Great Nicobar Island, this eagle is classified as Endangered due to habitat destruction and human encroachment.

Endangered Mammals

Nicobar Long-Tailed Macaque (*Macaca fascicularis*)- This primate is endemic to the Nicobar Islands and is listed as Vulnerable. It faces threats from habitat loss and human-wildlife conflict.

Nicobar Tree Shrew (*Tupaia nicobarica*)- Endemic to the Nicobar Islands, this species is classified as Endangered. It is threatened by habitat loss and fragmentation.

Nicobar Spiny Shrew (*Crocidura nicobarica*)- This critically endangered species is endemic to the Great Nicobar Island. Its population is declining due to habitat destruction and other environmental pressures.

Marine life

Leatherback Sea Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*) in the Great Nicobar Island is a significant nesting site for this critically endangered species. Conservation efforts are crucial to protect their nesting habitats from human activities and environmental changes.

Coconut Crab (*Birgus latro*)- The world's largest terrestrial arthropod, it is found on Great Nicobar Island. Threats include habitat loss and human interference.

Multiple conservation efforts are being undertaken in the Great Nicobar project ➤

Identification of new wildlife sanctuaries - The government has proposed the establishment of new wildlife sanctuaries on nearby islands—Little Nicobar, Menchal, and Meroe—to offset the ecological impact on Great Nicobar. However, these areas have faced opposition from local tribal councils, who argue that such measures are being implemented without adequate consultation with indigenous communities.

Compensatory afforestation - In response to the anticipated loss of forest cover, the government plans to undertake compensatory afforestation in Haryana's Aravalli range. Critics contend that this approach fails to replace the unique biodiversity of Great Nicobar's rainforests, as the ecological characteristics of the Aravallis differ significantly from those of the Nicobar Islands.

Coral translocation - To address the potential loss of coral reefs, the project proposes translocating corals to other reef areas around the island. This method, however, has been met with scepticism regarding its effectiveness, as coral translocation is a complex and often unsuccessful endeavour.

However, the sudden concern in the western world for turtles and local tribes is quite amusing ➤

1. [Time magazine - Modi's Mega Projects Could Destroy Great Nicobar Island](#)
2. [The Guardian- India's Plan for Untouched Nicobar Isles Will Be 'Death Sentence' for Isolated Tribe](#)
3. [Hindustan Times- Over 1,000 Nests of Leatherback Turtles Recorded Every Year](#)
4. [Dakshin Foundation- Monitoring and Conservation of Leatherback Turtles](#)

In fact, in recent times Sonia Gandhi, a well-known Indian leader, has written against this project ➤

Sonia Gandhi, the Congress Parliamentary Party chairperson, has been a vocal critic of Great Nicobar Project. In a strongly worded op-ed titled 'The Making of an Ecological Disaster in the Nicobar,' published in *The Hindu*, she termed the project a "planned misadventure" and warned of its potentially catastrophic impact on the island's indigenous communities and fragile ecosystem. Mrs. Gandhi criticized the government's approach as insensitive and accused it of making a "mockery of all legal and deliberative processes."

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav has defended the Great Nicobar Island project in an op-ed in *The Hindu* newspaper only ➤

Union Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav has defended the Great Nicobar Island development project, emphasizing that it received environmental clearance after thorough due diligence and adherence to statutory processes. He assured that tribal rights would be safeguarded and that the project would not adversely affect the interests of indigenous communities, particularly the Shompen tribe. Mr. Yadav's response came in the form of a detailed letter addressing concerns raised

by Congress leader Jairam Ramesh, who had questioned the project's environmental and social implications.

The project, estimated at Rs720bn, includes the construction of a transshipment port, an international airport, a township, and a power plant on Great Nicobar Island. Mr. Yadav highlighted that despite forest land diversion for the project, 82% of the island remains under protected forests, eco-sensitive zones, and biosphere reserves, exceeding the required two-thirds forest cover. He also noted that compensatory afforestation would occur in arid areas outside the island due to limited available land within Great Nicobar.

Addressing concerns about the project's impact on tribal communities, Mr. Yadav stated that consultations with experts, including the Anthropological Society of India, had been conducted to ensure the safety and well-being of the Shompen tribe. He emphasized that no objections were raised during the statutory period for public consultation and that the administration had allocated over Rs2bn (Rs201.98 crore) for tribal welfare initiatives, including a special medical unit.

Regarding the project's environmental impact, Mr. Yadav defended the findings of the High-Powered Committee (HPC), asserting that extensive ground-truthing had been conducted and that no portion of the proposed project falls within the most ecologically sensitive Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ 1A). He also addressed concerns about the project's seismic vulnerability, stating that while earthquakes are possible, the probability of a mega earthquake similar to the 2004 disaster is low.

While the political circus may go on for some time, remember that it's not an election issue and hence, it will die its natural death ➤

The project has garnered attention due to its potential environmental and social implications. In this context, while the political discourse may persist for some time, the issue is not directly linked to electoral considerations. Consequently, the controversy is expected to diminish naturally as other pressing matters emerge.

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- Hold** The stock's total return is expected to be between 0% and positive 10% over the next 12 months.
- Reduce** The stock's total return is expected to fall below 0% or more over the next 12 months.

The total expected return of a stock is defined as the sum of the: (i) percentage difference between the target price and the current price and (ii) the forward net dividend yields of the stock. Stock price targets have an investment horizon of 12 months.

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- Neutral** A Neutral rating means stocks in the sector have, on a market cap-weighted basis, a neutral absolute recommendation.
- Underweight** An Underweight rating means stocks in the sector have, on a market cap-weighted basis, a negative absolute recommendation.

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- Neutral** A Neutral rating means investors should be positioned with a neutral weight in this country relative to benchmark.
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