

1. Development of Great Nicobar

Prelims Syllabus: Places in News

Mains Syllabus: GS-III Conservation, environmental pollution and degradation, environmental impact assessment.



Why in News?

- The eastern bench of the National Green Tribunal (NGT) has ordered a stay on the ₹72,000 crore Great Nicobar Island project and constituted a committee to revisit the environmental clearance granted by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEF&CC).

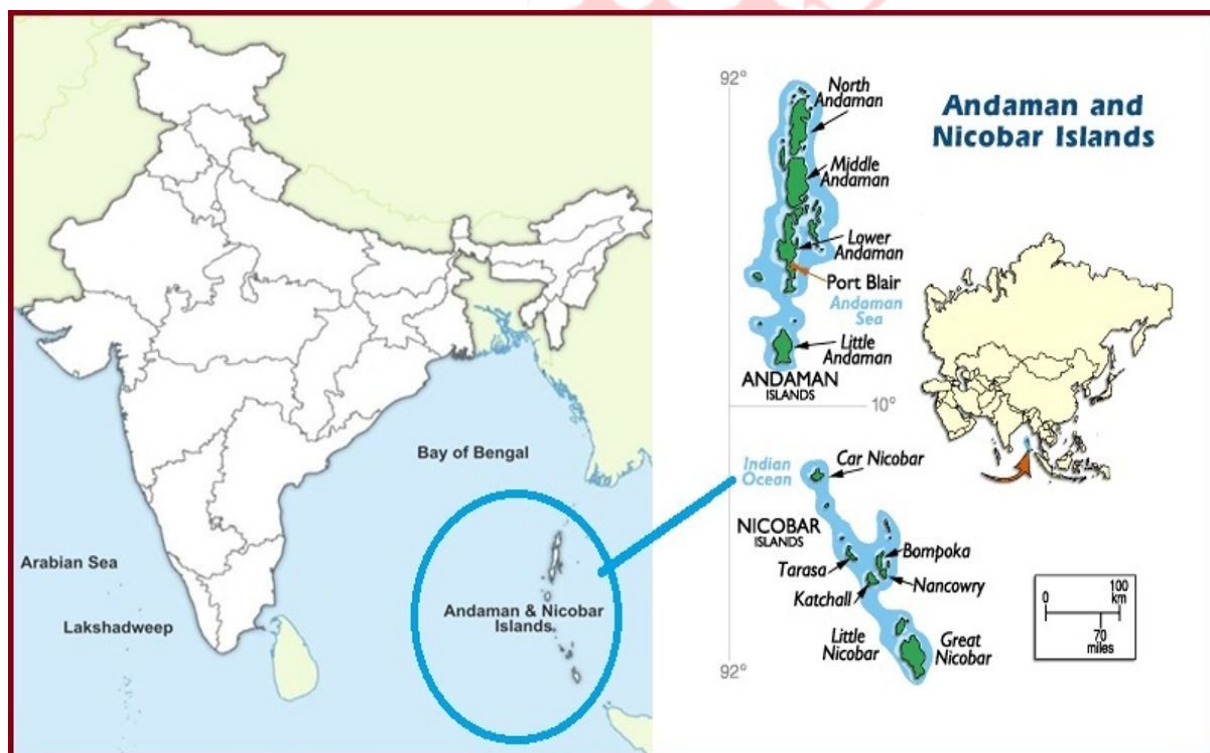
Background:

- The idea of developing Great Nicobar was first proposed in the 1970s, and its significance for national security and the consolidation of the Indian Ocean Region has been emphasised time and again.
- In recent years, increasing Chinese assertiveness in the Bay of Bengal and the Indo-Pacific has added urgency to this requirement.

About the Great Nicobar Island:

- The Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Islands are a cluster of about 836 islands in the eastern Bay of Bengal, the two groups of which are separated by the 150-km wide Ten Degree Channel – Andaman Islands in the north and the Nicobar Islands to the south.

- Great Nicobar, the southernmost of the A&N Islands, has an area of 910 sq km. Indira Point, the southern tip of Great Nicobar Island is India's southernmost point and is less than 150 km from the northernmost island of the Indonesian archipelago.
- The Great Nicobar Island has tropical wet evergreen forests, mountain ranges reaching almost 650 m above sea level and coastal plains.
- It is rich in biodiversity with some endangered species of mammals, birds, reptiles and amphibians. The leatherback sea turtle is the island's flagship species.
- Great Nicobar is home to two national parks (Campbell Bay and Galathea), a biosphere reserve and the Shompen and Nicobarese tribal peoples.
- An estimated 237 Shompen (hunter-gatherers who depend on forest and marine resources) and 1,094 Nicobarese (relocated after the 2004 tsunami along the west coast) now live in a tribal reserve, some of which are proposed to be denotified.
- The approximately 8,000 settlers (ex-servicemen from Punjab, Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh who were settled on the island in the 1970s) who live on the island are engaged in agriculture, horticulture, and fishing.
- **Strategic location of the Island:** Great Nicobar is equidistant from Colombo to the southwest and Port Klang and Singapore to the southeast, and is near the East-West international shipping corridor, which handles a significant portion of the world's shipping trade.



What are the proposed projects?

- A greenfield city
- An International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT)
- A greenfield international airport
- A power plant
- A township for the personnel who will implement the project

Economic Significance of the projects:

- By becoming a major player in cargo transshipment, the Island can participate in the regional and global maritime economy.
- It will promote tourism to the Island.
- Employment opportunities, as over 2.5 lakh direct and indirect jobs are likely to be created on the island.

Strategic Significance of the projects:

- Increasing the presence of the Indian Armed Forces, as the port will be controlled by the Indian Navy, while the airport will have dual military-civilian control.
- The government's greater goal is to leverage the locational advantage of the island for economic and strategic reasons.

Concerns:

- **An ecologically important and fragile region:** The loss of tree cover will not only affect the flora and fauna on the island, but it will also lead to increased runoff and sediment deposits in the ocean, impacting the coral reefs, and
- According to the government,
 - ✓ Expediting the project is of paramount national security and strategic importance.
 - ✓ The development area is only a small percentage of the area of the island and its forest cover, and 15% of the development area itself will be green cover and open spaces.
 - ✓ A conservation plan for the leatherback turtle is also being put in place.

Way ahead:

- India has successfully translocated a coral reef from the Gulf of Mannar to the Gulf of Kutch earlier. The Zoological Survey of India is currently in the process of assessing how much of the reef will have to be relocated for the project.