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## Reimagining Development: Evaluating the Great Nicobar Project through Political, Economic and Environmental Perspectives

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### Abstract:

*The Great Nicobar Island Development Project represents one of India's most ambitious contemporary infrastructure initiatives, combining strategic, economic, and geopolitical objectives. Located near the Malacca Strait, one of the busiest maritime trade routes in the world, the project proposes the development of a transshipment port, a greenfield international airport, a power plant, and an integrated township. While the initiative promises to strengthen India's Indo-Pacific strategy and economic competitiveness, it has simultaneously triggered intense debates regarding environmental sustainability and indigenous rights. This paper critically evaluates the Great Nicobar Project through the lenses of modernization theory, dependency theory, sustainable development, and the anti-development perspective. The paper argues that although the project aligns with India's strategic and economic ambitions, it raises serious concerns about ecological fragility and indigenous displacement, thereby demanding a balanced and participatory model of development.*

**Keywords:** Great Nicobar Project, sustainable development, indigenous rights, environmental governance, Indo-Pacific strategy

### Introduction:

Development has historically been associated with industrial expansion, infrastructure creation, and economic growth. However, contemporary development discourse increasingly recognises that growth alone cannot serve as the sole indicator of progress. The modern understanding of development now incorporates environmental sustainability, social justice, and participatory governance. As a result, large infrastructure projects are increasingly evaluated not only for their economic potential but also for their social and ecological consequences.

The Great Nicobar Island Development Project has emerged as a major site of debate within this evolving discourse. The project proposes to transform Great Nicobar Island into a strategic maritime and economic hub through the establishment of a container transshipment terminal, a greenfield international airport, a power generation facility, and an integrated township. Situated near

the Malacca Strait, through which a substantial share of global maritime trade passes, the project has been presented as a crucial step toward strengthening India's maritime capabilities and Indo-Pacific strategic presence. Despite these ambitions, the project has generated intense concern among environmentalists, scholars, and civil society groups due to the ecological sensitivity of the region and the presence of indigenous communities whose livelihoods depend on the island's fragile ecosystem. This paper critically evaluates the project within the broader development versus anti-development debate.

### **Background of the Project:**

Great Nicobar Island lies at the southernmost tip of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago and holds immense strategic importance due to its proximity to international shipping routes. The project aims to reduce India's dependence on foreign transshipment hubs and position the country as a major maritime trade centre. The scale of investment, estimated to exceed seventy thousand crore rupees, reflects the magnitude of the government's vision to transform the island into a major economic and strategic hub.

The project must be understood within the broader context of India's aspiration to enhance its role in global trade and regional geopolitics. As maritime trade continues to dominate international commerce, the establishment of a domestic transshipment hub has been viewed as a necessary step toward strengthening India's economic sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

### **Theoretical Framework:**

The evaluation of the Great Nicobar Project requires a multidisciplinary theoretical framework. Modernization theory provides the first lens for analysis. This perspective views development as a process of transformation from traditional economic structures to modern industrial societies through infrastructure expansion and technological progress. From this standpoint, the project represents a logical step toward integrating remote regions into national and global economic systems.

Dependency theory offers a contrasting perspective by highlighting the possibility that large infrastructure projects may reproduce inequalities and disproportionately benefit national elites and global trade networks while marginalising local communities. This perspective raises questions regarding who ultimately benefits from such projects and who bears the social and environmental costs. Sustainable development theory provides a balancing framework by emphasising the need to harmonise economic growth with environmental protection and social inclusion. This perspective has become central to contemporary policy discourse and is particularly relevant for evaluating projects located in ecologically fragile regions.

The anti-development perspective further deepens the critique by questioning the assumption that large-scale infrastructure projects necessarily represent progress. Scholars associated with this perspective argue that development projects often lead to ecological destruction, cultural displacement,

and centralised decision-making that excludes local communities.

### **Economic Significance:**

The economic rationale for the Great Nicobar Project is substantial. India currently relies heavily on foreign ports for cargo transshipment, resulting in increased logistics costs and strategic dependence. The establishment of a domestic transshipment terminal has the potential to reduce these costs and enhance India's competitiveness in global trade.

In addition to trade benefits, the project is expected to stimulate regional economic growth through employment generation, infrastructure development, and tourism expansion. The project also aligns closely with India's broader Indo-Pacific strategy, which emphasises maritime security, trade connectivity, and regional influence.

From an economic perspective, the project reflects a high-growth development model that prioritises infrastructure-led economic expansion and strategic positioning.

### **Environmental Concerns:**

Despite its economic promise, the project has generated serious environmental concerns. Great Nicobar Island forms part of a UNESCO-recognised biosphere reserve and hosts diverse ecosystems, including tropical rainforests, coral reefs, and mangroves. These ecosystems support numerous endemic and endangered species, making the region one of the most ecologically sensitive areas in India.

Large-scale infrastructure development threatens to disrupt these ecosystems through deforestation, habitat fragmentation, and increased human activity. The diversion of significant forest land raises concerns regarding biodiversity loss and carbon emissions. Furthermore, the island's location in a seismically active and tsunami-prone zone increases the risks associated with major infrastructure construction.

These concerns highlight the tension between economic development and ecological sustainability.

### **Indigenous Communities and Ethical Concerns:**

One of the most contentious aspects of the project involves its potential impact on indigenous communities, particularly the Shompen and Nicobarese tribes. These communities possess unique cultural identities and maintain close relationships with the island's natural environment. Development activities that disrupt their habitats may threaten their cultural survival and expose them to new health risks.

International norms emphasise the importance of free, prior, and informed consent in projects affecting indigenous communities. Critics argue that consultation processes have been inadequate and that the project risks marginalising vulnerable populations in the name of national development.

### **Governance and Policy Challenges:**

The governance of the project raises broader questions about environmental regulation and participatory decision-making. While environmental impact assessments have been conducted, concerns remain regarding transparency and the adequacy of public consultation. The project reflects a broader pattern of centralised decision-making in large infrastructure planning, which can limit the participation of local stakeholders.

### **Development versus Anti-Development Debate:**

The Great Nicobar Project encapsulates the broader philosophical debate between growth-oriented development and ecological sustainability. Proponents view the project as essential for national growth and strategic security, while critics warn of irreversible environmental damage and social displacement. The debate ultimately centres on the fundamental question of what development should prioritise.

### **Toward a Balanced Development Model:**

A balanced approach to development requires meaningful engagement with indigenous communities, strong environmental safeguards, and climate-resilient infrastructure planning. Development must be inclusive, participatory, and environmentally responsible in order to be truly sustainable.

### **Conclusion:**

The Great Nicobar Island Development Project represents a defining case in India's contemporary development trajectory. While the project promises significant economic and strategic benefits, it simultaneously raises serious environmental and social concerns. The project demonstrates that development in the twenty-first century must move beyond purely economic metrics and embrace a broader vision that integrates sustainability, inclusion, and ethical governance.

The future of development lies not in rejecting infrastructure projects but in ensuring that they are designed and implemented in ways that respect ecological limits and social justice.

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