

BOSKY KHANNA @ Bengaluru

ON February 16, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) gave a green signal to the Great Nicobar Island Development Project (GNIDP). The six-member bench of NGT, headed by Justice Prakash Shrivastava, was satisfied that adequate safeguards were in place in the environment clearance (EC) for the ₹81,000 crore project that has been in news for quite some time over the ecological cost it might extract.

Great Nicobar Island

At 910 sq km, the Great Nicobar Island is at the southernmost tip of Andaman and Nicobar Archipelago. It is located in the Indo-Malayan bio-geographic zone. The Great Nicobar Biosphere Reserve is one of the 11 Biosphere Reserves declared under the Man and Biosphere Programme of Ministry of Environment, and Forests, Government of India and UNESCO.

The project

The GNIDP is a mega infrastructure project planned over 166 sq km area. It involves an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT) at Galathea Bay, a civil-cum-defence airport, development of a township and a 450 MVA gas and solar based power plant. Holistic development of the Great Nicobar Island is planned over a span of 30 years at an estimated ₹81,000 crore.

Forest clearance for 130.75 sq km was accorded by Centre in October 2022. The EC

MAKING SENSE OF THE GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND PROJECT

came the next month.

Strategic importance

The Great Nicobar Island Development Project is significant from the national security perspective. "The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) in general and the Indian Ocean in particular has turned into a strategic hotspot in recent years. In response to the increasing strategic value of this IOR, a critical mass of development in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands is necessary for strengthening India's regional presence," says the feasibility report.

The island is equidistant from Colombo, Port Klang and Singapore and very close to the East-West international shipping corridor. It is barely 40 km from the major international sea route passing through Malacca Strait. The ICCT is planned to tap into the route connecting East Asian exports with the Indian Ocean, Suez Canal and Europe.

Holistic development through greater connectivity will support tourism, bring in employment for local residents.

The persisting concerns

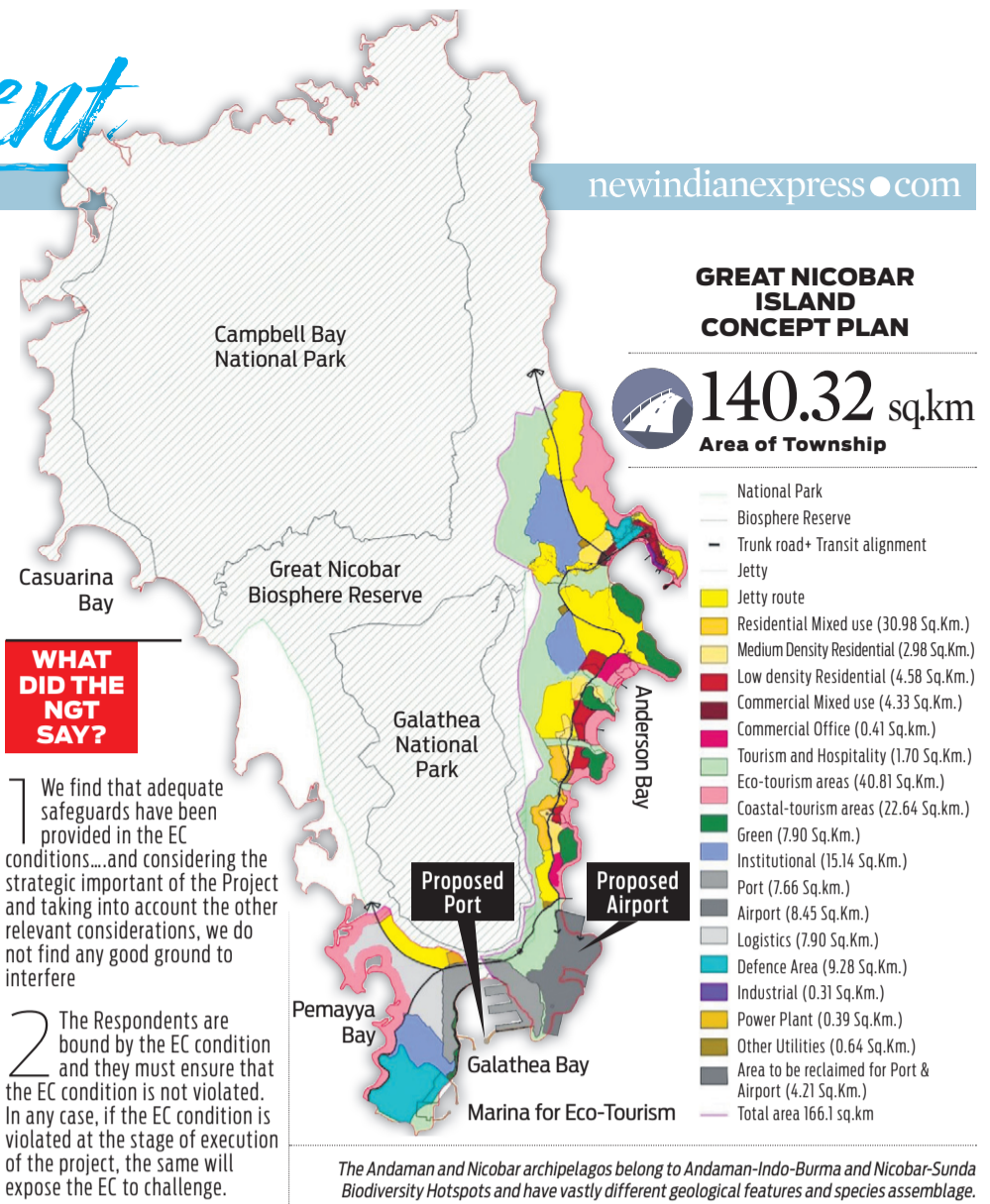
- 15% of forest land will be diverted for the project. Of the total area of 910.07 sq km, 166.1 sq km is required for development.

- For execution of the project, over 9.65 lakh trees will be felled. The region includes the nesting ground of leatherback turtles, salt-water crocodiles, coral reefs, mangroves and avian species.

- Of the 8,000 people live on the island, important bare indigenous islanders, categorized as Scheduled Tribes. The Mongoloid Shompens are hunter-gatherers, dependent on the forest and marine resources for sustenance. Nicobarese, another Mongoloid tribe lived along the west coast, were relocated to Afra Bay on the north coast and to Campbell Bay after the 2004 tsunami devastated their settlement. There are about 237 Shompen and 1,094 Nicobarese individuals. For the project 84 sq km of their land will be occupied.

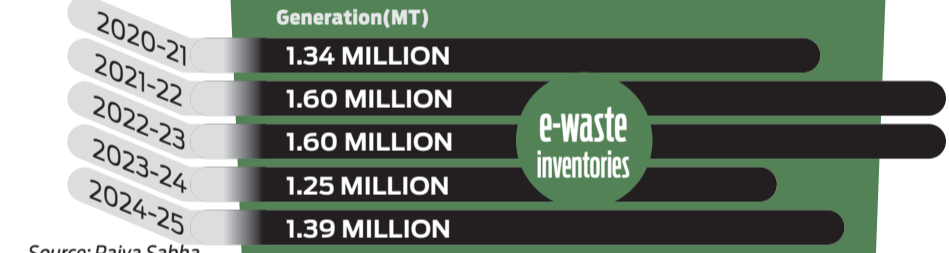
- Members of Nicobarese Tribal Council have expressed disagreement with their lands being designated as project area which they say was without their consent.

- The island sits on a major seismic fault line. The epicentre for the earthquake and Tsunami of 2024 was 80 miles from this location under which the southern tip of the island sunk. Geologists warn against any developmental activities.



17 states, UTs lack adequate e-recycling facilities

21 states, UTs do not maintain proper records of inter-state transportation



JITENDRA CHOUBEY @ New Delhi

THE Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) has reported that India faces an uneven distribution of e-waste recycling units, which are predominantly dominated by the informal sector.

There is lack of oversight and significant gaps in inter-state transportation as well as inventory management, despite having various e-waste rules in place for over a decade.

In a detailed status report filed with the National Green Tribunal (NGT), the CPCB highlighted that most states and Union Territories (UTs) have not developed the necessary capacity to manage the increasing amounts of e-waste.

India is the third-largest producer of e-waste in the world but only manages approximately 15 per cent of it through the formal channels. This leads to contamination of soil and water and poses severe health risks to workers. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change notified the 2022 E-waste (Management) Rules, introducing a new provision for the extended producer responsibility (EPR) regime which replaces the 2016 rules to enhance environmental governance. The first e-waste rules were introduced in 2011.

E-waste typically comprises metals, plastics, cathode ray tubes, printed circuit boards, cables and other components. Valuable metals such as copper, silver, gold, and platinum can be recovered from e-waste if it is processed scientifically.

The presence of toxic substances such as liquid crystal, lithium, mercury, nickel, polychlorinated biphenyls, selenium, arsenic, barium, brominated flame retardants, cadmium, chromium, cobalt, copper and lead make e-waste highly hazardous. If dismantled and processed using rudimentary techniques, e-waste poses significant risks to human health, wildlife



No recycling units in UTs except J&K

Most struggle to maintain e-waste inventories

Uneven distribution of recycling units

The CPCB noted that 17 states and UTs lack adequate e-recycling facilities. With the exception of Jammu & Kashmir, there are no recycling units in any of the UTs. Most recycling units are concentrated in 16 states, including Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Telangana and Maharashtra.

States without facilities manage e-waste through inter-state transportation to registered recyclers. Meanwhile, 21 states and UTs are not maintaining proper records of inter-state e-waste transportation, and only 12 state pollution control boards are keeping such records.

Lack of inventory and monitoring

Many states struggle to maintain e-waste inventories and there is limited monitoring of the informal recycling sector. According to the action taken report, only seven states and UTs have completed the inventory covering all 106 categories of electrical and electronic equipment as required by the new rules.

The CPCB indicated that only a few states reported full compliance with the new rules, while most, including Gujarat and Telangana, reported non-compliant units. Furthermore, 27 states and UTs reported no informal e-waste activities during inspections. However, informal activities were identified in Delhi and Chhattisgarh, leading to enforcement actions, the CPCB claimed in its status report.

The CPCB informed the Tribunal that draft guidelines for nationwide e-waste inventories have been prepared and shared with the states. Final guidelines will be issued after receiving pending responses from Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand. The Tribunal has directed the CPCB to file a comprehensive status report by May 21, 2026.

SV KRISHNA CHAITANYA @ Chennai

EXTREME heat is rapidly emerging as one of the world's most lethal climate risks, with the evidence pointing to around 500,000 deaths annually. As cooling demand is projected to triple by 2050, the global development challenge is no longer just about expanding air conditioning, but about rethinking how buildings and cities stay cool. Against this backdrop, Martin Krause, Director of the Climate Division at UNEP, who was in Chennai to participate in the Tamil Nadu Climate Summit 4.0 and engage with state authorities and the real estate sector, spoke exclusively to The New Indian Express.

Q How is UNEP currently prioritising India and where do you see the biggest implementation gaps on the ground?

India is a very important partner for UNEP. We engage primarily at the national level, but increasingly also at state and city levels because climate impacts are felt locally. India has made strong commitments on renewable energy, electric mobility and long-term net-zero pathways.

The main gaps we see are in operationalising policies on the ground — especially around climate resilience and adaptation. Awareness around extreme heat and cooling solutions is only now emerging globally, including in India. Until three or four years ago, heat was not a prominent policy issue. That is changing rapidly.

Q States like Tamil Nadu are emerging as key climate actors. Is UNEP rethinking its engagement to work more deeply with sub-national governments?

It is not either-or. As a UN body, our primary counterparts are national governments. They are the member states, but many climate actions, especially on cooling and urban heat, must happen at the city and state level.

So we are expanding engagement at all levels. In India, we are actively working with about eight states. Tamil Nadu is among our deepest collaborations, along with Maharashtra. Actions like building codes, urban planning and partnerships with developers can only be effectively implemented locally.

Q UNEP has stressed the need to catalyse private climate finance. What

CLIMATE CRISIS

“EXTREME HEAT RISING FAST, CITIES MUST RETHINK COOLING”



concrete progress has been made in mobilising adaptation and cooling finance in India?

India has accessed significant funding from global mechanisms like the Green Climate Fund and Global Environment Facility over the years. But it is true, access can be complex, slow and insufficient relative to the scale of need.

Public international grant funding will never be enough. We need smarter blending of public and private finance, domestic and international. Capital is risk-averse. If governments create stable, long-term policy frameworks, private finance will flow more easily into climate-smart investments, including cooling.

Q UNEP has warned that conventional air conditioning cannot be the sole answer to rising heat. How urgent is the shift toward passive cooling in countries like India?

It is extremely urgent. Conventional air conditioning alone is not a sustainable solution. It increases electricity demand and adds heat to the outdoor environment.

Globally, 3.8 billion people are already exposed to dangerous heat conditions, and 2 billion people still lack adequate access to cooling, which shows the scale of the challenge.

The first step is proper heat mapping. In Tamil Nadu, we have worked with partners to develop a granular urban heat island mapping methodology. This helps pinpoint hotspots at a micro level so responses can be targeted. The study will be published shortly. Passive cooling, through reflective roofs, shading, better materials, must become mainstream building practice.

Q What policy or market barriers are preventing passive cooling and climate-responsive building design from scaling rapidly in Indian cities?

The number one barrier is awareness. Recognition that extreme heat is a serious economic and health risk is still emerging globally. The second barrier is regulatory inertia. Changing zoning laws, building codes and urban planning frameworks is politically and institutionally complex. However, I must say Tamil Nadu shows unusual openness and awareness compared to many places globally. That makes progress here faster.

Q With heat stress disproportionately affecting low-income urban populations, how can passive cooling be deployed at scale without increasing housing costs?

This is a critical concern. Our studies show that basic passive cooling features — reflective paint, window shading, improved insulation — typically add only about 3 per cent to 4 per cent to construction costs, not the double-digit increases often feared. We are currently working with six developers across around a dozen projects in Tamil Nadu who have voluntarily integrated passive cooling. Many are absorbing the marginal upfront cost because long-term electricity savings benefit residents. Over time, occupants recover the additional cost through lower energy bills. The key is to avoid over-engineering and focus on simple, cost-effective measures.

PETROCHEMICAL BOOM IN BUDGET 2026

Fossil lock-in amid climate crisis

INDIA'S 2025 was a year of unrelenting climate catastrophe. Extreme climatic events battered the country on 99 per cent of days from January to November, devastating 17.4 million hectare of crops and claiming over 4,400 lives. The 'Year of Extremes' brought heat waves that scorched Delhi, floods that submerged Assam and cyclones that ravaged coasts. Yet, the Union Budget 2026 doubles down on fossil fuels, pouring a whopping 56 per cent more than the prior year into petrochemicals, to expand chemical parks despite glaring overcapacity and emissions risks.

OVERCAPACITY IN A GLUTTED MARKET

India's petrochemical drive promises 'Atmanirbhar Bharat,' but evidence flags caution. The sector's capacity utilization hovers below 90 per cent, with \$37 billion capex aiming to add 46 million tonne by 2030. This risks Asia-Pacific oversupply, following a model where Chinese state firms flood markets at losses, depressing prices and squeezing Indian margins amid high crude costs.

Budget 2026's ₹16,001 crore injection accelerates this trajectory by financing petrochemical infrastructure dependent on refineries. Petrochemical plants use naphtha, a crude oil derivative produced by refineries, as their primary feedstock. Expanding poly-

mer and plastics production, therefore, necessitates parallel or expanded refining capacity, incentivizing more refinery expansions while ignoring critical demand gaps and the urgent need for a circular economy. This is a profound hypocrisy: as the nation struggles with a plastic waste crisis and battles false solutions like waste-to-energy, public policy is subsidizing the factories that churn out more plastic.

FOSSIL LOCK-IN AND GREENHOUSE GAS SURGE

Petrochemical expansion will lock India into higher oil imports and an exploration spree, since refineries must produce naphtha for plastics. The production process alone accounts for ~2.5% of national GHG emissions (70Mt of CO e). New factories mean decades of locked-in emissions, clashing with India's Greenhouse Gas Emission Intensity targets and 2070 net-zero pledge. While the climate goals demand reduced refinery emissions, Budget 2026 builds new plants instead of cleaning existing ones. By 2050, primary plastic production will account for 21-26 per cent of the global carbon budget to keep the average global temperature rise below 1.5°C. However, the 2026 union budget ignores these upstream impacts and the downstream plastic waste crisis — plastic-choked rivers, overflowing land-

fills and microplastics in our bodies. This expansion also positions India as a growing petrochemical hub just as the world negotiates a global treaty to end plastic pollution.

MISPLACED PRIORITIES

The Economic Survey flags climate adaptation as a front-line priority. The budget, however, tells a different story. The funding for National Coastal Management Programme dips 12.84 per cent to ₹1,205 crore from 2025. National Programme for Climate Change and Human Health gets zero dedicated funding; and biodiversity conservation crawls at ₹52 crore. These meager allocations stand against ₹1,33,721 crore for oil exploration, refineries, and petrochemicals. Additionally, deep ocean mining (₹625 crore) overshadows coastal defenses, leaving vulnerable ecosystems and public health exposed as fossil fuel sectors receive disproportionate fiscal support.

A PRAGMATIC RETREAT?

India's path forward requires radical cuts to primary plastic production, ending the lock-in in this budget perpetuates. Budget 2026's petrochemical gamble isn't just a missed opportunity; it's an active acceleration of climate catastrophe for the millions already living on its front lines, a choice that sacrifices ecology and equity at the altar of fossil-fueled growth.



Dr Vishvajaya Sambath

(Dr Vishvajaya Sambath is associated with the Centre for Financial Accountability)