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Sustainably Developing Andaman & Nicobar

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This article is based upon **“Developing the sister islands of Indian Ocean”** which was published in the Hindustan Times on 03/06/2021. It talks about the significance of Andaman & Nicobar Islands, its sustainable development and how India’s maritime partner France can assist in the developmental projects in the Archipelago.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI), popularly known as ‘**Bay Islands**’, hold great significance for India from maritime as well as ecological point of view. ANI provides for nearly 30% of India’s Exclusive Economic Zone.

ANI, besides being a home to a rich floral and faunal diversity, is also home to a number of tribal and **Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups**, a few of which are on the verge of extinction.

In the immediate past, there have been quite a few projects proposed for these island groups for economic purposes as well as for **militarising Andaman and Nicobar Islands**.

As much potential these islands can prove to have for making India a maritime power, this ecological significance can and must not be undermined. A balanced development plan is the ultimate solution.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI)

- **Indigenous People of ANI:** The **Andaman and Nicobar Islands** are home to five PVTGs: **Great Andamanese, Jarwas, Onges, Shompens and North Sentinelese**.
 - The **Great Nicobarese** are a Scheduled Tribe.
 - The population of Andaman and Nicobar Islands’ primitive tribes has rapidly declined over the years.

- **Significance of ANI:** India's key maritime partners such as the US, Japan, Australia and France acknowledge and recognise the strategic location of the Andaman and Nicobar.

These islands not only provide Delhi with a **key maritime space** but also **carry significant potential in shaping the strategic and military dynamics** of the Indian Ocean region.

- **Island Territories Similar to ANI:** France's **La Reunion** island is similar to ANI and lies in the Southwest Indian Ocean near strategic waters.
 - Australia and the US too have similar island territories in the Indian Ocean with **Cocos (Keeling) islands and Diego Garcia** respectively.

However, Diego Garcia's sovereignty is disputed by Mauritius, which has garnered support through a United Nations (UN) resolution.
 - The ANI and Reunion islands are part of a series of island territories under **key maritime players in the Indian Ocean**.

Recent Developmental Plans for ANI

- **Japan's Overseas Development Assistance :** In March 2021, for the first time, Japan's government approved a grant aid of approximately ₹265 crore toward developmental projects in Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

It is **Japan's first Overseas Development Assistance (ODA)** initiative toward the islands.
- **ANI as a Maritime and Startup Hub:** In August, 2020 the Prime Minister had declared that the Andaman and Nicobar islands will be developed as a "**maritime and startup hub**"

12 islands of the archipelago have been **selected for high-impact projects** with an **emphasis on boosting trade of sea-based, organic and coconut-based products** of the region
- **NITI Aayog's Project for Great Nicobar:** Great Nicobar is the southernmost island of the Nicobar Islands Archipelago.

The **proposal** includes an international container trans-shipment terminal, a greenfield international airport, a power plant and a township complex spread over 166 sq. km. (mainly pristine coastal systems and tropical forests).
- **NITI Aayog's Proposal for Little Andaman:** The **plan** involves building a new greenfield coastal city that will be developed as a free trade zone and will compete with Singapore and Hong Kong.

Issues Faced by ANI

- **Lack of Connectivity:** The island groups, specially the Little Andaman Island, have **little connectivity with the Indian mainland** and global cities.

- **Geological Volatility:** The island's groups lie in a **seismically highly active zone**. The 2004 earthquake and accompanying **tsunami devastated large parts of the island chain**.
Nicobar and Car Nicobar (northernmost Nicobar island) lost almost one-fifth of its population and close to 90% of its mangroves.
- **Declining Population:** The population of native communities like the Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa and North Sentinelese has **plummeted from 1,999 to 550 since 1901 to 2011**.
 - Massive projects, epidemics and crippling health crises in the ecologically fragile Little Andaman Island have led to near-extinction of the Onge tribe.
 - The developmental project proposed by NITI Aayog for Little Andaman includes **de-reserving 32% of the reserved forest and denotifying 31% of the tribal reserve** thus rendering the habitations of the tribal groups at risk.
- **Aspects of Blue Economy:** The primary issues facing island nations in the Indian Ocean are related to the key aspects of the **Blue Economy**.
Sustainable development, illegal fishing, disaster management, the climate crisis, renewable energy and issues of waste management impacts both tourism as well as ecosystems specific to islands.
- **Development and Biodiversity:** A slew of infrastructure projects have been proposed in ANI to give a major boost to tourism and business.
 - While this may transform the islands substantially, it would also cause loss of biodiversity and have a negative impact on the indigenous people.
 - The **Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) Committee**, granted the clearance for the infrastructural projects on the condition that all large, medium, and small trees will be counted and geo-referenced and not felled.
However, **Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO)** is seeking an amendment to this clause so that trees may be felled if required

Way Forward

- **Balanced Development:** Militarising ANI and infrastructure and developmental projects will not doubt aid India's strategic and maritime capabilities, but such development should not come at the cost of the ruthless exploitation of Biodiversity hotspot i.e ANI.
- **Sustainably Developing ANI:** Given its economic, ecological & environmental constraints and the laws to protect the indigenous tribes, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands will have to be first **developed sustainably in order to maximise its economic and military potential**.
A sustainable island development framework is not only important for the ANI but will also be applicable and of interest to other island nations across the Indian Ocean.

- **Sister Islands:** Reunion is the **most developed island territory** among the above-mentioned four island territories, with a framework that supports both the island's economic needs as well as France's military priorities in the Indian Ocean.
 - Taking from the idea of "sister cities", the framework of "**sister islands**" can be formed.
 - India and France should lead an effort, utilising their island territories of Andaman and Reunion in developing a concept of sister islands aimed at **creating a foundation for a sustainable model for island development across the Indian Ocean.**

Similar to sister cities, a sister island concept would allow India and France to co-develop a sustainable framework for island development.

- **India's Development Plans in Indo-Pacific:** If India is to invest in capacity building initiatives and maritime projects in the Indian Ocean, there is a need to research and create an island model for development. Such an approach also creates a new avenue for Indian-led initiatives in the Indo-Pacific.

As India and its partners compete for access and influence across the Indo-Pacific toward achieving common interests, there is a need to engage with and address regional concerns and challenges of strategically located island nations.

- **Role of IOC:** Indian Ocean Commission (IOC) is the only island driven organisation in the Indian Ocean. It plays an important role in voicing the concerns and challenges of the islands of the western Indian Ocean.
 - France recently took over as the Chair of the IOC. India in 2020, formally joined the group as an Observer.
 - It provides an opportunity for both the countries to lead an island-focused development model.

India could also borrow lessons from France's island experiences in both the Indian Ocean as well as in the Pacific.

Conclusion

As India looks to maintain and strengthen its advantages in the Indian Ocean, it should look to leveraging its island territories and non-traditional security issues in offering solutions and addressing regional concerns and challenges. The Andaman and Reunion provide an excellent starting point to do so.

Drishti Mains Question

"Taking into account the significance that Andaman & Nicobar Islands have for India in various aspects, a balanced approach towards its ecological fragility and economic significance is the need of the hour. India's key maritime partners with similar interests can be approached for mutual assistance and benefits". Discuss.
