

UNDERSTANDING THE GREAT NICOBAR DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

A Report on the Two-day online deliberation
8th - 9th February 2023



Understanding the Great Nicobar Development Project

Two-day online deliberation: A Report



Published by : Centre for Financial Accountability
R21, South Extension Part II,
New Delhi - 110049

Website : www.cenfa.org | Email : info@cenfa.org

February 2023

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UNDERSTANDING THE GREAT NICOBAR DEVELOPMENT PLAN: *Development or Derangement?*

Online Deliberation | Day 1
8th February | 3-5 pm

PANKAJ SEKHSARIA

Prof., IIT Bombay. His research area lies at the intersection of science, society and environment. He has written about the many violations that raise alarm about the project in Nicobar.

JANKI ANDHARIA

Prof., TISS Mumbai. Her research area includes gender issues, environmental concerns and democratic governance. She has written about the ill-conceived Nicobar infrastructure plan.

SWATHI SESHADRI

She leads the Oil, Gas and Petchem research at CFA and has been long associated with issues in the environment, community and development interface.

Moderated by

THOMAS FRANCO

Former Gen Sec, AIBOC & People First



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UNDERSTANDING THE GREAT NICOBAR DEVELOPMENT PLAN: *Development or Derangement?*

Online Deliberation | Day 2
9th February | 3-5 pm

MG DEVASAHAYAM

He is a Former Civil Servant and People-First (Chairman). Chairman, Coordination Committee, Peoples' Commission on Public Sector and Public Services

ADMIRAL LAXMINARAYAN RAMDAS

He served as the Chief of Naval Staff of the Indian Navy. He has been a vocal champion of democratic rights and people's movements.

CR BIJOY

He examines resource conflicts and governance issues. He is part of the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, a national coalition of Adivasi and forest dwellers' organisations

MANISH CHANDI

He works in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands on the interface between communities and the natural environment.

Moderated by

AMITANSHU VERMA

Centre for Financial Accountability



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Introduction

The crisis at Joshimath yet again demonstrated the perils of mindless development that engenders the fragile ecology and livelihoods in the hills. But such mindlessness today extends from the mountains to the seas. Despite the rhetoric of "green" and "sustainable", the government is bent upon pumping money into mega projects with no accountability regarding its risks in terms of its impacts on the delicate environment and people. One such mega project being the ₹75,000 crore Great Nicobar development plan

This includes four crucial projects - an International Container Transshipment Terminal, Greenfield International Airport, a power plant and a township. The project is being spearheaded by Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation (ANIIDCO), under a vision plan conceived by the NITI Aayog. The Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change has recommended the grant of environmental and Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) clearance for the project and that will lead to the diversion of 15 percent of its forest area and the felling of 8.52 lakh (852,000) trees in phases. The Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary was denotified as a wildlife sanctuary by the government to give environmental clearance for the proposed port project. Various such concerns have been raised by environmentalists about the project which has not bothered about the future of the local and indigenous inhabitants of the island.

There is an urgent need for public debate about the impact of such a project and also about the model of such unsustainable development that is being funded with big money with hardly any accountability and safeguard. Already in January 2023, the Shyama Prasad Mookerjee Port, Kolkata, on behalf of Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Limited (ANIIDCO), has put out an expression of interest inviting "interests and suggestions from organizations or consortium of organizations having relevant technical expertise, financial capability, operational experience required for development, operation, maintenance and profitable growth of the proposed project". This, while a recent report by Indian Express reveals that the clearance for the entire project came from the Forest Advisory Committee five months after the proposal was sent to it without it finding any mention in the minutes of the 26 times it met in between.

It is with this purpose that the People First and the Centre for Financial Accountability together organized a two-day deliberation on [8th](#) and [9th](#) February 2023 titled **Understanding the Great Nicobar Development Plan: Development or Derangement?** Here in this report, we put together the takeaways from the deliberation. Section I gives an overview of the said advantages of such a project as highlighted in the EIA report. In Section II we provide the detailed presentation of Prof. Pankaj Sekhsaria who takes us through the scope and depth of the crisis in the island. In Section III we take you through some of the talking points that emerged in the course of the deliberations.



Section I

Justifications put forth for the Great Nicobar development Plan

Lucrative Trade route: The Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) report for the project states that the Great Nicobar Island lies adjacent to the Western entrance to the Malacca Strait, a major Indian Ocean chokepoint. And its southern tip, Indira Point is only about 25-40 km from the major international sea route which carries about 20-25% of global sea trade and 35% of world oil supplies. This strategic location, it says provides great opportunities in terms of tapping into the flow of trade.

Due to geographical and logistic constraints, deep water berths in the ports along the East & West Coasts of India have not been developed for berthing large intercontinental vessels of drafts over 15 m. The present major Transshipment hubs in South Asia at Colombo and Singapore provide deep water ports for main line vessels carrying cargoes for smaller ports in the region. Feeder vessels presently call Singapore and Colombo for loading cargoes bound for smaller ports in the Bay of Bengal, Andaman and the Arabian Sea. The result is that India is losing substantial revenue in terms of facilities and higher rate of landings. It has also been observed that other countries like Myanmar, Foreign powers and Sri Lanka are gearing up to develop deep water facilities for taking major share of trade by developing suitable harbour facilities. From the foregoing, it is quite evident that India should move towards setting up dedicated deep-water berths for primarily Transshipment activities in its waters thereby generating revenue.

From the EIA Report

Geo-political significance: The EIA report also stresses the geo-political significance of having a stronger presence there given the counter foreign consolidation in motion in the crucial Indian Ocean Region by way of diplomacy and military footprint with adjacent states. Similarly, as foreign as contributed infrastructure and increased economic activity with African states, many chose to support foreign powers in international bodies. Investments in local state in the region and port creation has been in motion which necessitates India's presence in the region.

Better connectivity: The EIA report states that one of the rationale for the project is to improve connectivity with Indian mainland and other global cities. A large greenfield airport, is considered a "pre-requisite" for "opening up the Island for development".

Tap into Tourism: "Pristine virgin beaches for tourism, lush evergreen rainforests, scenic hills and resort type farmlands dot this trekking paradise of India." Such are the justification to "open up" this paradise for tourism. We find lamentation in the report that despite being bigger than Singapore, the island lags behind in population, economic development and infrastructure. Things that can change drastically with a push for tourism. "Tourism development can capitalize on the exceptional tourism assets to attract high-end tourists interested in tropical forests, adventure tourism, beach tourism, water sports as scuba diving and snorkeling, as well as temporarily escaping from the modern world to a remote and beautiful Indian Ocean Island."



Socio-economic growth of local populace: We find a lamentation here as well saying that the presence of indigenous tribes and concerns for their wellbeing has delayed the progress of “development” in the region. It says that “After years of neglect, therefore, the present government is finally making a push to develop the Islands. This will ultimately enhance the socio-economic growth of the local populace and usher in a new era for their all-round development.”

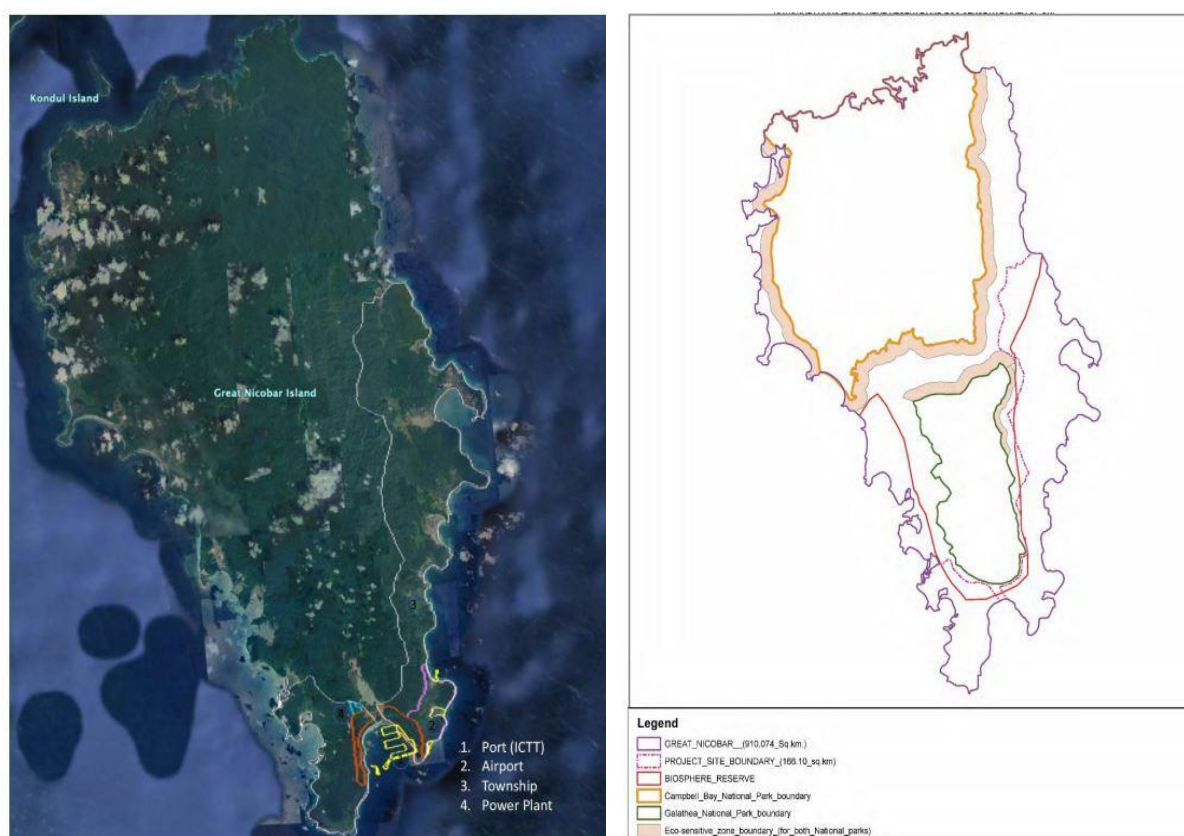


Section II

Critical Appraisal of the Great Nicobar Development Plan: Its scale, scope and implications

(He has been associated with an organisation named Kalpavriksh and they have been tracking the developments with regard to the Great Nicobar Megaproject for the past 2.5 years.)

Prof. Seksharia began with the geographic location and ecological significance of the Great Nicobar island. He also briefed us about the project, issues related to the rush in getting clearances for the project, concerns of indigenous communities etc. In addition to the ecological concerns, he says the island is located at a trijunction of geological, ecological and socio-cultural axes. He emphasized the importance of looking at each of these interjunctions.



Source: Comprehensive environmental impact assessment report

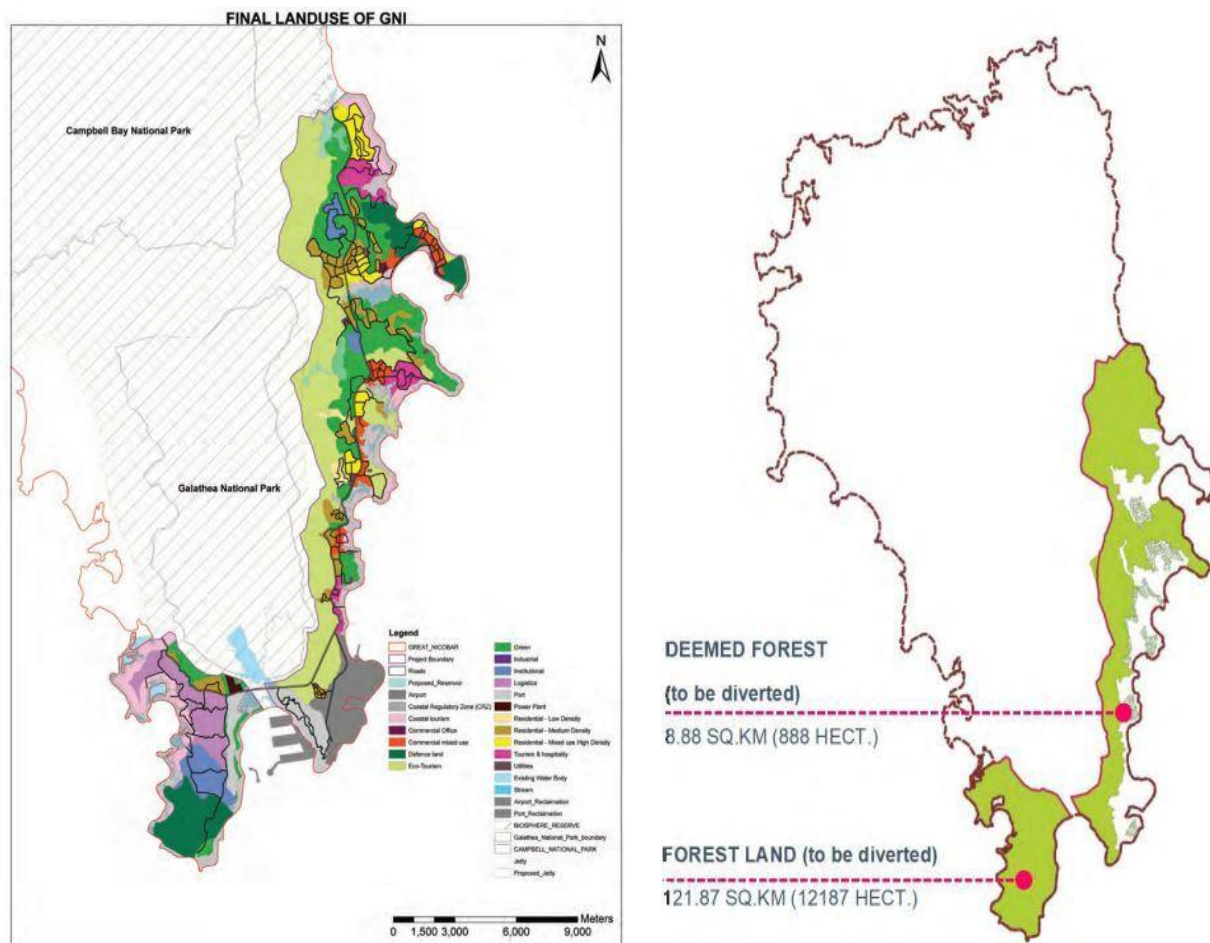
Location & Geography

The Andaman and Nicobar Island group is located far away from mainland India and is part of a biogeographical zone in Southeast Asia. It is a part of the mountain range that comes from Burma in the north to Sumatra in the south forming an arch. The Andaman and The Nicobar Island groups are separated by the 10-degree channel and the Great Nicobar Island is the



southernmost Island located among the Nicobar Island groups. The Great Nicobar Island is also close to the epicentre of the 2004 earthquake and the region is part of the Pacific Ring of Fire. The area marked for the project comes to around 60 square kilometres which is almost 15% of the total area of the Great Nicobar Island.

There are multiple layers of legality involved when we look at the region. There is a national park, wildlife sanctuary, UNESCO biosphere reserve and tribal reserve etc. The pristine evergreen forest is very rich in flora and fauna and there is a lot yet to be discovered. The region is also home to a lot of endemic as well as endangered species making it an ecologically sensitive region.

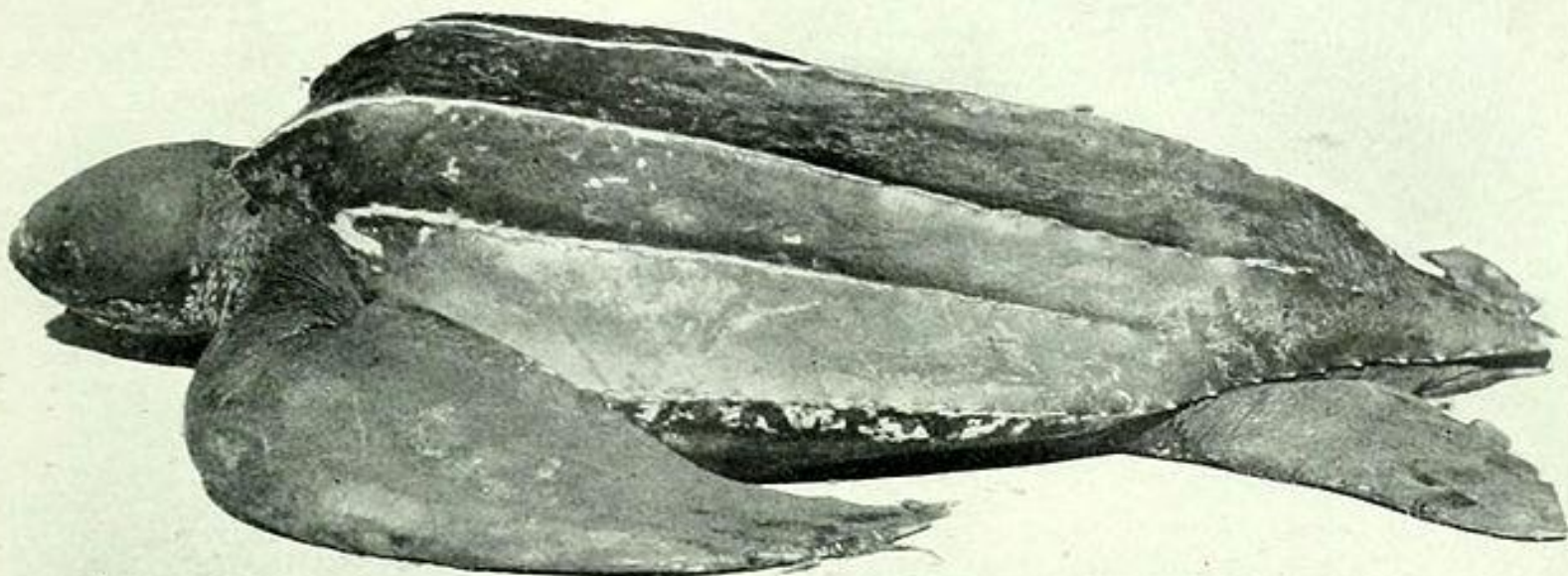


Source: Comprehensive environmental impact assessment report

A mockery of the EIA process

The comprehensive EIA Report Was put out in December 2021 by Vimta Labs Pvt Ltd. But the report poses a lot of issues both in letter and spirit. Some of the many issues are:

1. There are internal contradictions, poor writing and incorrect information. The report is not just poor in language but also reveals the study was not conducted with the seriousness required.
 2. While the Pre Feasibility Report was published in March 2021 Vimta labs conducted a survey on the island from 12 - 18 February which is even before they have been assigned the making of the EIA report.
 3. The Galathea Bay where the port project is proposed is a nesting spot for Giant Leatherback Turtles. Over the years the Bay has seen a consistent number of turtles laying eggs here. Satellite tracking done on the Turtles which nest in the little Andaman Islands has shown that they also visit Galathea Bay and they also travel to regions of Madagascar and to Australia this shows that they are Global travellers and they are the species which can connect the world in a way which we cannot do.
- Another contradicting fact here is that the national Marine turtle Action Plan identified Galathea Bay as a key nesting spot for giant leatherback turtles on 19 January 2021. The report also says that disturbance and loss of nesting on the beaches can happen due to the construction of ports, jetties, resorts, industries etc. While, on the 25th of January 2021, Galathea Bay's wildlife sanctuary status was taken away.
 - The bay also has a 3 km wide opening and the construction of the port will restrict the opening to 300 meters. This will be an obstacle for turtles from entering their nesting spot. Moreover, ships coming in, spillages and other human activities will also be another hindrance for the turtles to enter the bay for nesting.
 - Ironically in an RTI application filed in June 2021, the Wildlife Institute of India also acknowledges that they haven't done any study on leatherback turtles before and hence proves that the denotification was done without substantial shreds of evidence.



Questionable claims being made in the EIA about Leatherback Turtle

- ◆ For 8 to 10 years after the destruction of the major breeding grounds during the Tsunami of 2004, leatherbacks didn't return to use the erstwhile breeding grounds. They are slowly returning to the new grounds and also using new areas. This shows that they are resilient and can adapt to changes.
- ◆ WII which is entrusted with the responsibility of developing mitigation, remediation and alternate plans for conservation of Leatherback breeding grounds.
- ◆ There will be no erosion on the beach especially on the western flank of the bay where the leatherback turtles breed. As per the model results there will be sedimentation of around 0.04m/yr on the western beach. Therefore, the beach is likely to be widened over long period giving more space for breeding to the turtles.
- ◆ In accordance with the denotification proposal, the Wildlife Institute of India (WII) and the Nicobar Development Authority are exploring workable alternative to ensure that the turtles are not subject to any stress owing to the proposed integrated development.
- ◆ The ZSI mentioned in their report that sea turtles are global species and they are known to nest on the sandy beaches in the close proximity to existing and operational coastal facilities globally. Several ports and jetties exist on the eastern and western coast of India and despite of these coastal facilities, sea turtles continue to nest in close proximity to the establishments. Here are some examples of existence of major Ports and sea turtle nesting habitats along the east coast of India.

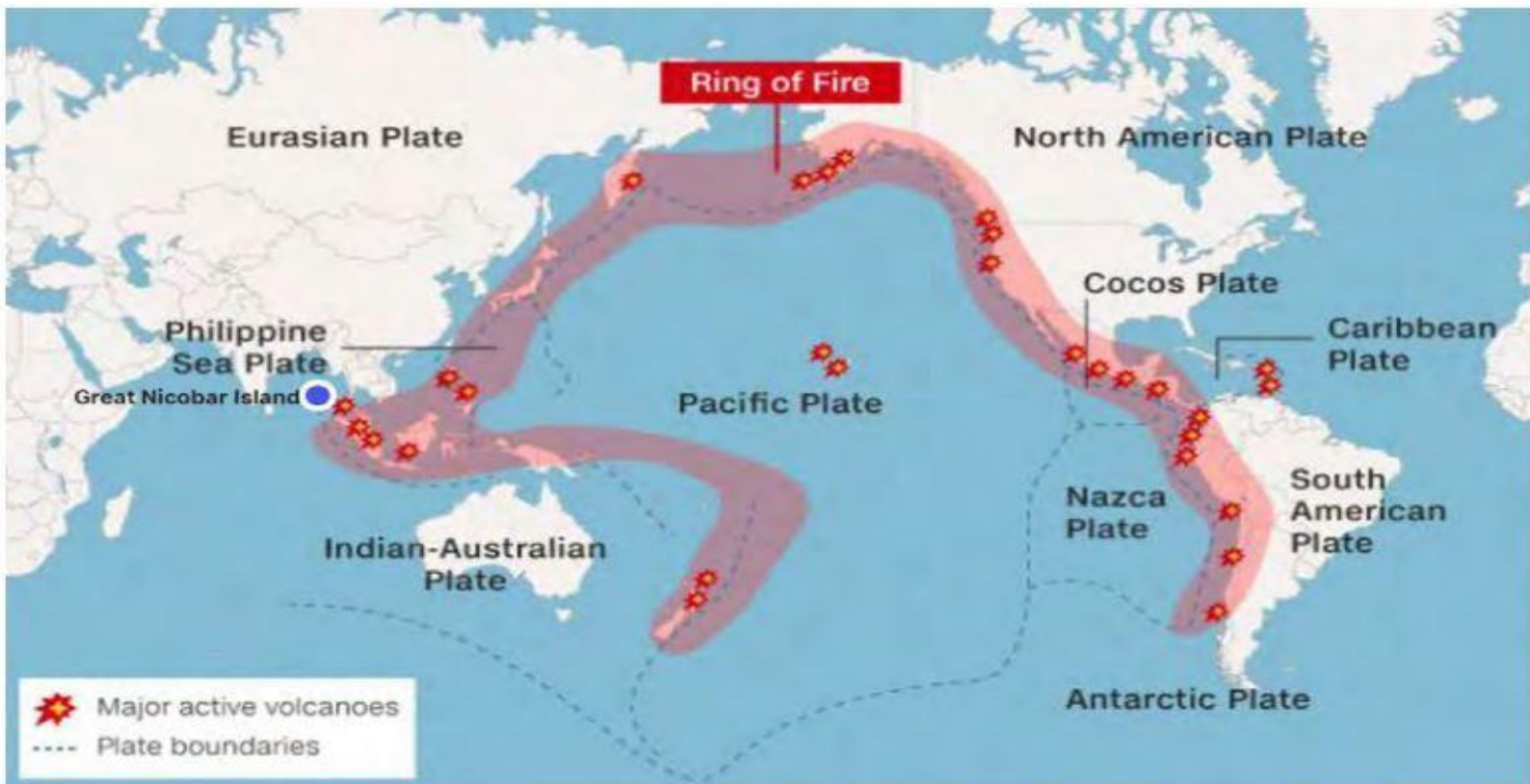
From the EIA report

Indigenous Communities concerns

- The note written by the Director of Tribal Welfare A&N on 12 August 2021 to ANIIDCO said that it will provide any exemptions from the existing provisions/regulations/policies/laws of the land when required to be provided for execution of the project. This shows the apathy and lack of concern that the government and administration have when it comes to the rights of the indigenous communities.
- When an RTI was filed about what will happen to the tribal communities with the implementation of the project all three authorities NITI Aayog, MoTA and MHA were playing the ball around proving that there is no clear plan for the future of these tribal groups if the project is implemented.
- In the draft EIA report, it says the island's population will increase to 6.5 lakhs in 30 years and the final report says it will be 3.5 lacks which makes the criteria for choosing these numbers ambiguous. Keeping this aside, the rapid increase in population will bring changes in the socio-cultural atmosphere of the island which can disturb the indigenous population.



- The mitigation measures given stating “The forest and tribal area should be guarded and even barricaded with barbed wire if necessary to ensure that there is no interaction with the tribals during the construction phase” clearly shows the lack of sensitivity about the concerns.



Source: Comprehensive environmental impact assessment report

Disaster Vulnerability

- What happened in A&N in 2004 was the consequence of an earthquake. The Andaman island had a permanent uplift of 5 feet and the Nicobar islands saw permanent subsidence of 15 feet. This shifted the island's geography completely and has also led to the coming of a coral system above water. The region is highly prone to earthquakes and is also part of the Pacific Ring of Fire and an earthquake per week occurs on average in the A&N islands.
- The lighthouse at Indira Point being in the water after the 2004 Tsunami itself shows the permanent subsidence and further proves the region is disaster-prone. The 2019 WAPCOS Traffic study for creating a transshipment port says that “the topography of the island is best suited which has not been damaged much even by the tsunami on 26/11/2004”. This statement is clear ignorance of the destruction caused by the Tsunami even if we choose to ignore the wrong date of the Tsunami given.
- In another RTI in May 2021 NITI Aayog says they don't have a vision document for the development of the A&N.





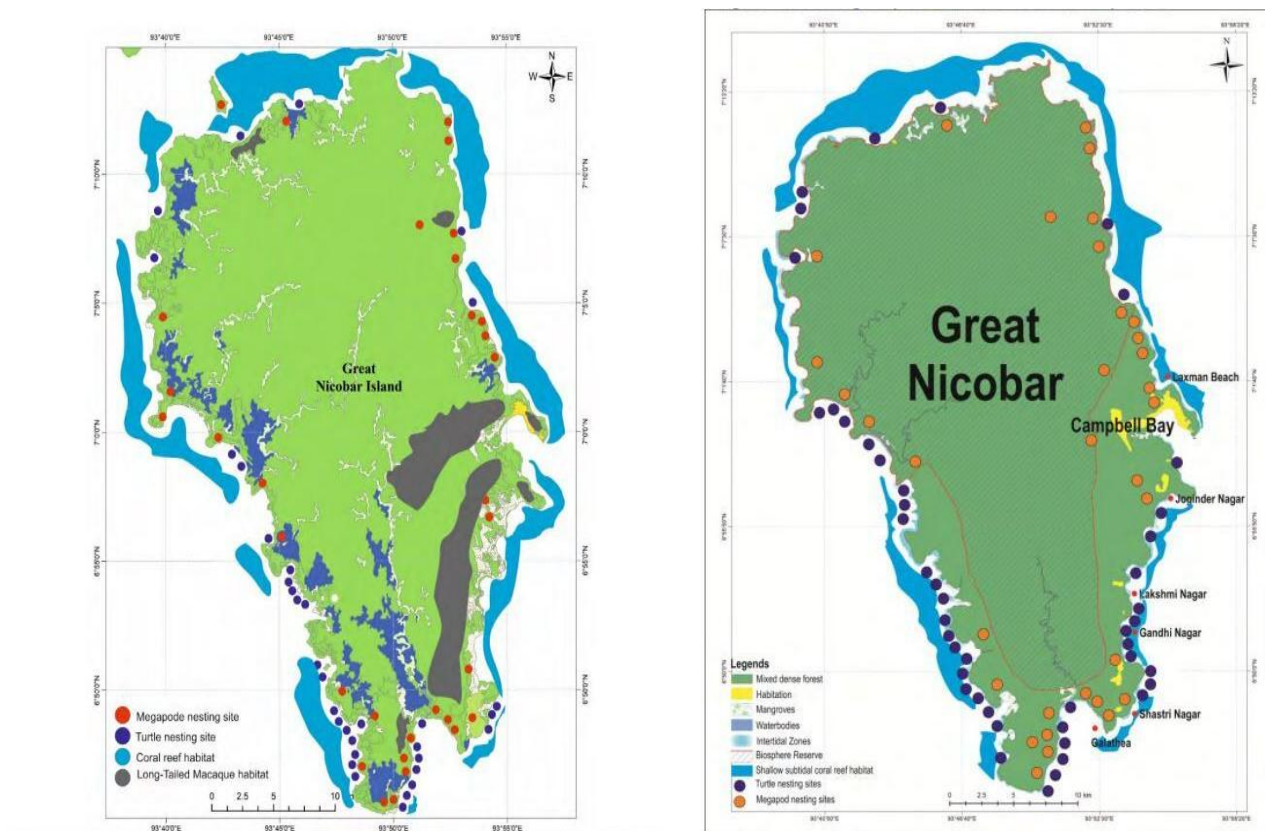
*Indira Point, before and after
2004 tsunami*



The GNI suffered severely during the 2004 tsunami. The Sumatra earthquake (Mw 9.3) of 26 December 2004 was one of the most important earthquakes from the point of view of plate tectonics. This event occurred along the plate boundary marked by the subduction zone between the Indian Plate and the Burmese Plate (a part of the Eurasian Plate). The southern portion of the GNI seems to have subsided by about 3 m, as supported by changes in the natural water levels. The entire Megapode Wildlife Sanctuary was submerged due to the submergence and does not exist anymore. The sanctuary was de-notified through notification date 25 January 2021. The eastern coast also, the sea has advanced to the coast by about 200-500 m, depending on the topography. This sudden 'land drowning' (due to tectonic subsidence), coupled with the tsunami, altered the structure of mangrove forests. As per the study by WII, the mangrove covers in the Nicobar Islands declined by around 97 percent, which is higher than the earlier estimation.

From the EIA Report





Other discrepancies

- The November 2022 final environmental clearance given by MoEFCC says “Trees with nesting holes of endemic owls to be identified and geo-tagged with the help from SACON. Such trees shall be safeguarded as far as possible. This condition in itself is trivial and identifying those from a million trees to be cut is not an easy job.
- The CM of Haryana on a trip to Sharjah along with the Minister of the environment in September 2019 tweeted about a jungle safari park project in Gurugram and later the CM said the money for the project will come from the forest clearance in Great Nicobar. This is coming much before the environmental clearance is granted and this shows everything was decided and the clearance process happened just for the sake of it.
- The island's location being disaster prone itself can be the biggest threat to the project even if all other factors are kept aside. The 72,000 crore investment can anytime be washed away by a tsunami or an earthquake. This increases the risk vulnerability of the investment itself.
- ANIIDCO, the project proponent doesn't have any expertise in tourism being appointed to execute a large-scale project also puts the motives behind the project in shade.
- Moreover, everything happening within 2 years in a hurry also makes us question the motives.



GNI harbours a range of ecosystems, including tropical wet evergreen forests, mountain ranges reaching a height of nearly 650 m (Mt. Thullier) above sea level, and coastal plains. The island is noted for its rich biodiversity. It houses 650 species of angiosperms, ferns, gymnosperms, bryophytes and lichens among others. The tract is rich in plant diversity and fosters a number of rare and endemic species, including *Cyathea albisetacea* (tree fern) and *Phalaenopsis speciosa* (orchid). A total of 14 species of mammals, 71 species of birds, 26 species of reptiles, 10 species of amphibians, and 113 species of fish have been reported. The region also harbours a large number of endemic and endangered species of fauna. To date, 11 species of mammals, 32 species of birds, 7 species of reptiles and 4 species of amphibians have been found to be endemic. Of these, the well-known Crab-eating Macaque, Nicobar Tree Shrew, Dugong, Nicobar Megapode, Serpent Eagle, salt water crocodile, marine turtles and Reticulated Python are endemic and/or endangered.

From the EIA report

Concluding Remarks

- The main issue is being not ready to put the time to conduct proper research to study the feasibility of the project.
- There is no information about who will be building the port.
- When it comes to promises given to settlers for many years we need to look if there is a basis to the promise and will the promises as put to them come true.



Section III

Questions aplenty, answers wanting:

Is a port even viable in the Nicobar?

The shipping industry works in a manner that months before a ship leaves it plans its porting. The industry is not prone to making sudden changes unless there is a huge commercial gain. Considering that there are other transshipment ports in Singapore and these regions, Swathi Seshadri said, the economic gain that the port can make is also to be kept under question. Since it doesn't have the potential to be a cargo unloading port the revenue will completely be depending on refuelling. Swathi leads the Oil , Gas and Petchem research at CFA and has been long associated with issues in the environment, community and development interface.

Mr. MG Devasahayam, a Former Civil Servant and Chairman of People-First, also highlights the question of feasibility of the port. He drew comparisons to the Vizhinjam, Kanyakumari & Enayam projects to get a better perspective on the port project. The first one's construction is going on at a snail's pace amid huge protests, while the latter two didn't see the light of day because of massive protests. Several flaws are being found in the studies done for the feasibility of these ports as well. When a commercial port project is not viable on the mainland, how can it be viable on an ecologically sensitive island like the Great Nicobar is the question that needs to be answered? The Nicobar project can cause destruction to flora and fauna and other ecological damages to a great extent than the other ports considering the geographic vulnerability of the island.

Admiral Laxminarayan Ramdas who served as the Chief of Naval Staff of the Indian Navy, also stressed upon the same. The commercial aspect of the port project doesn't seem appealing because of the numerous ports in the region like Colombo, Sri Lanka etc. Singapore has a very well-established container handling port system and the commercial benefit of a port in the region just for transshipment purposes is very low. This questions the financial sustainability of the huge investment made as well.

Dangers of possible oil and gas exploration

India is also undertaking oil and gas exploration activities in the Andaman basin. This can have extreme impacts on the ecology. The government seems short-sighted on the economic loss. This brings us to the point if not economic gain then what is the vested interest behind the project? The only reason as per Swathi could be defence and security reasons.

Is a security centric approach justified?

Admiral Ramdas said that the Great Nicobar island is the southernmost point of India and can also be seen as the easternmost outpost of the Indian Navy. In his view, the strategic requirements of the island are already being covered well and hence the project through the defense lens is not a necessity. The island is currently not facing any military challenges.



The mirage of democratic decision-making

We have to look at the way forward not just for the Great Nicobar, but for similar projects in general, said CR Bijoy, attempting to draw some general learnings from this. He is part of the Campaign for Survival and Dignity, a national coalition of Adivasi and forest dwellers' organisations. He emphasized the importance of the democratic expression of people's voices in a democracy that needs to be the basis of decision-making. The space for democratic expression is either not present in many laws or not accessible to the public. In the case of any development project, people should be able to point out the institutional mechanism of the government to look into the feasibility of the project at different levels.

After globalisation, he said, crony capitalism has restructured democracy and governance to a great extent even to the point where national sovereignty is being compromised in certain domains. Tuning to the market economy's demands has become the primary objective of the regulator that is the government. Despite so many decades of independence, he said that there is no effective integration of different organs of political democracy. Those who are accountable are not governing, those governing are not accountable is what is happening.

Whose development?

The Singapore idea of development making the Great Nicobar a fancy island was put in front of the island population long back, said Manish Chandi. Little do they know they will be the last to get benefitted out of these so-called developmental projects, he says. Manish Chandi called this as colonialism in the Indian avatar. Manish works in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands on the interface between communities and the natural environment.

From his interactions with the indigenous communities as well as settlers Manish Chandi was of the understanding that no one is against the project in particular. Rather they are against their land being taken away from them for developmental projects which are not coming to them. There is a lot of frustration, he said, among the people on why the government is spending on tourists rather than spending on developmental activities for the population. They want development but not at the cost of their land.

From the general discussions, it emerged that there may be a settler versus tribal narrative emerging. The state would be in the interest of making it tribals vs settlers conflict to use it for their benefits. The state can put forward the project in a way it is appealing to the settlers to gain public support for the project while it might not be beneficial. These are issues, we ought to be mindful of.



