

Great Nicobar Island — A Catastrophe in the Making

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In a move that sparked intense debate and concern, in October 2022, the Ministry of Environment, Forest, and Climate Change (MoEFCC) granted environmental clearance for an ambitious Rs. 72,000 crore development project on Great Nicobar Island (GNI). This initiative, unfolding over the next 30 years in three phases, aims to create a new 'greenfield city' incorporating an International Container Transshipment Terminal (ICTT), a 'greenfield' international airport, a power plant, and a township. While proponents laud the project's potential economic benefits, numerous critics, including environmentalists, scientists, and concerned citizens, have voiced grave reservations about the devastating impact it will have on the island's fragile ecosystem, indigenous tribes, and biodiversity.

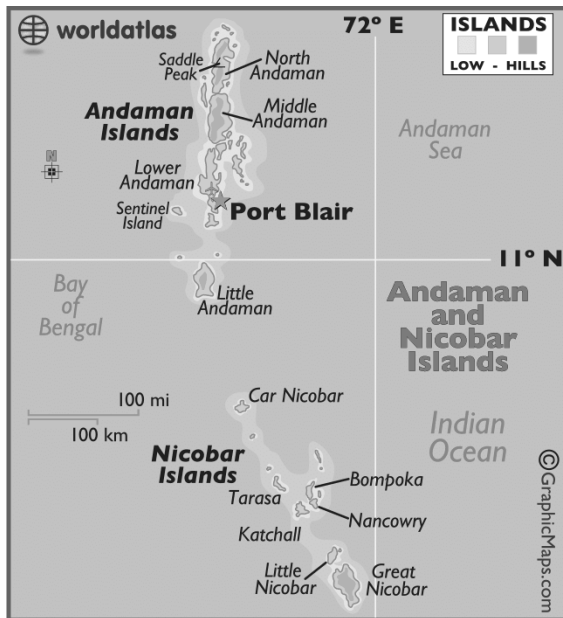
At the heart of the controversy lies the proposed port, a venture to be managed by the Indian Navy. Advocates argue that the port's establishment will bolster Great Nicobar's role in regional and global maritime trade, turning it into a significant player in global cargo trans-shipment. However, this development necessitates the diversion of 130 sq km of forests, potentially leading to the felling of nearly a million trees. Environmentalists have sounded alarm bells, asserting that this massive deforestation will not only disrupt the island's delicate flora and fauna but also escalate runoff and

sediment deposits, endangering the already imperilled coral reefs.

It is learnt that the MoEFCC has given clearance for diversion of 13075 hectares of virgin forests of Greater Nicobar with compensatory afforestation to be carried out in the State of Haryana. It has also this 'brainwave' that this planned wiping out of 13075 acres of rich, evergreen, rain forests teeming with extraordinary flora and fauna species can be compensated with newly planted trees in the dry Aravalli hills of Haryana. The idea that cutting of tropical forests in an island system can be compensated by tree planting in a semi-arid zone 3000 plus kilometres away is preposterous and lacks any ecological basis. It is impossible to generate an entire ecosystem.

Several recent occurrences should have discouraged the government from undertaking such a major environment-destroying project. The first is the decision taken on 19 December 2022 at the Conference of Parties for the Convention for Biological Diversity, at which it was agreed, among other things, to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2030; also, specifically, to protect 30% of the world's lands, inland waters, coastal areas and oceans with emphasis on areas of particular importance for biodiversity and ecosystem functioning and services. This decision which was ratified by nearly 200 countries, including India, specifically mentions 'reducing to near zero the loss of areas of high biodi-

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Map of the Andaman and Nicobar islands

versity importance, including ecosystems of high ecological integrity'. Considering such a commitment, it is incomprehensible how the Indian Government could even consider the loss of such an enormously ecologically vital area like Great Nicobar.

The all-too-palpable change in the climate of India – unbelievably hot temperatures in summer, erratic rainfall, repeated cyclones, mild winters in most of the country but sharp falls in temperature in the north, should also have sent alarm signals to the Government. The changes in climate throughout the country and all over the world have made it apparent to even the casual observer that a warmer world is here to stay; and that urgent measures need to be taken by the government and the people to keep the increase in temperatures to a minimum. Stopping the denudation of existing forests, especially rich, virgin rainforests and adding to the existing forest cover are obviously the major steps needed.

The subsidence of land in Joshimath was

a glaring indication of the damage that unthinking and erratic development can do to the country. Destroying the forests and the ecology of Great Nicobar to set up container terminals and airports would be a mistake of the same order. The frequent prevalence of undersea quakes that occur in the oceans of that region and the resultant subsidence of land in the islands is also a major risk.

The GNI lies between the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea in a tectonically sensitive zone. Researchers and NGOs from across the country have raised several concerns relating to the tectonic volatility and disaster vulnerability of the islands, which have experienced nearly 444 earthquakes in the past 10 years. The tribal communities, who were displaced in the 2004 Tsunami, are still recovering from its impact.

Great Nicobar Island, the largest and southernmost of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, is a sanctuary of biodiversity, featuring tropical wet evergreen forests, majestic mountain ranges, and picturesque coastal plains. It is home to 14 species of mammals, 71 species of birds, 26 species of reptiles, 10 species of amphibians, and 113 species of fish, some of which are on the brink of extinction. The island's significance is further underscored by the presence of the leatherback sea turtle, a flagship species that symbolizes the region's rich marine life. The potential impact of the proposed development project on these species and their habitats has raised grave concerns among environmental experts.

Beyond ecological concerns, the project poses a severe threat to the indigenous inhabitants of Great Nicobar, including the Shompen and Nicobarese tribes. The Shompen, a hunter-gatherer community, depend on the island's forests and marine

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resources for sustenance. The Nicobarese, who once inhabited the West coast, faced relocation after the 2004 tsunami. Currently residing in a tribal reserve, their way of life hangs precariously in the balance. The proposed denotification of 84 sq km of this reserve further compounds the threat to these vulnerable communities.

Moreover, the loss of mangroves due to the project poses a grave risk to coastal areas. Mangroves act as natural barriers, shielding the land from erosion and storm surges. Their destruction could render the island susceptible to natural disasters, leaving both the environment and the inhabitants at the mercy of harsh weather conditions.

While the government claims to have a conservation plan for the leatherback turtle and promises to explore coral reef translocations, critics remain sceptical. The relocation of reefs, while feasible, is an intricate process, and its success in preserving the existing marine ecosystem is uncertain. Moreover, the proposed green cover and open spaces, constituting 15% of the development area, are viewed by many as inadequate to mitigate the project's extensive environmental impact.

The urgency underlying the project, driven by so-called national security concerns and economic aspirations, has polarized opinions. While some argue for the imperatives of progress and strategic advantage, others lament the potential irreparable damage to Great Nicobar's unique biodiversity and the marginalized tribal communities that call this island home.

The development project for Great Nicobar Island epitomizes the ongoing struggle between development ambitions and environmental preservation. Or, as some may put it, between unbridled corporate greed and saving mother Earth. In such sensitive

projects, it is imperative that decision-makers tread cautiously, weighing short-term gains against the long-term ecological and social costs. The fact that they have not is witnessed by the prospect of Great Nicobar teetering on a precipice, torn between progress and the preservation of its natural heritage and the rights of its indigenous inhabitants.

It is the need of the hour that environmentalists, scientists, and people from all walks of life, who have real and serious questions about the devastating impact this ill-advised project will have on the Great Nicobar Island's fragile ecosystem, indigenous tribes, and biodiversity, not remain quiet. They should not be restricted to be bystanders, watching the disaster unfolding from afar. They should raise the voices, come together and act to do everything possible to try avert this catastrophic assault on nature. Look around the country, and the truth is that what is happening is not an exception but the rule. □

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