# 'INACCURACIES, PROCEDURAL VIOLATIONS' IN GREAT NICOBAR EIA REPORT

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Conservation, Sustainable Development, and EIA

Ecologists have been raising concerns about the Great Nicobar Island project for over a year.File photo

The details of the recently released draft environment impact assessment (EIA) report for the mega development project in the Great Nicobar Island have raised serious questions related to submission of incorrect or incomplete information, scientific inaccuracy and failure to follow appropriate procedure. A public hearing to discuss the report has been scheduled for Thursday at Campbell Bay, the administrative headquarters.

The matter is related to the NITI Aayog-piloted Rs. 72,000-crore integrated project in Great Nicobar that includes construction of a mega port, an airport complex, a township spread over 130 sq. km of pristine forest and a solar and gas-based power plant. Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation Ltd. (ANIIDCO) is the project proponent.

The pre-feasibility report for the project was prepared in March 2021 by the Gurugram-based consultant AECOM India Pvt. Ltd. A committee of the Ministry of Environment Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) issued terms of reference (ToR) to prepare the EIA report in May 2021.

Concerns raised

Ecologists and researchers have been raising concerns about this project for over a year ("NITI Aayog vision for Great Nicobar ignores tribal, ecological concerns", *The Hindu* , March 21, 2021), and the recent draft EIA has not been able to allay those fears. Concerns begin with the role of the Hyderabad-based Vimta Labs Ltd. hired for conducting the EIA.

While the ToR for preparing the EIA was finalised only in May 2021, the report itself lists many instances of Vimta staff being in the field and conducting studies as early as December 2020.

How is it possible that Vimta knew the details of the projects and the needs of the EIA months before the contract was awarded and even the project details were finalised? This could have only been through the project proponent or the DPR consultant and appears a violation of the ToR, which had stated that the DPR consultant should be independent of the EIA consultant.

"The consultants appointed to carry out the draft EIA have only one empanelled expert on ecology and biodiversity in its team — and it is not clear what his area of expertise is. It is also clear that several of the ToRs have not been complied with, as admitted in the draft EIA Report itself," says Debi Goenka, veteran environmental campaigner and executive trustee of the Conservation Action Trust. He also points out that the rapid assessment study carried out by the Wildlife Institute of India and the baseline survey by the Zoological Survey of India (ZSI), both appended as annexures, too were commissioned before the issue of the ToR.

'Incomplete data'

There are also serious issues of of scientific accuracy and integrity where the data presented is concerned. Large parts of Section 3.9, which is on ecology and biodiversity, have in-text

citations but no references. Tables with lists of plants and animals found in the island are incomplete and with no sources provided. The information in other places is internally inconsistent and/or incorrect. The area of the island is mentioned in one place as 1,045 sq. km, while it is 910 sq. km (the current official figure) in another.

The executive summary mentions that the Galathea port area does not record any coral reefs, whereas the ZSI study appended to the EIA, reports a coral reef spread over 116 hectares in Galathea Bay.

Chapter 3 similarly says 330 species of fauna are recorded in the island, while the same ZSI study puts the number at more than double at 695.

Institutional callousness

The EIA says in another place no migratory birds have been reported from Great Nicobar, whereas it is well known that these islands are located along two globally significant bird flyways and more than 40 species of migratory birds have been recorded from Great Nicobar

The callousness continues in the approach of the statutory authorities. The EIA report was expected to have details of the project proponent's environment policy such as its standard operating process, procedures for highlighting violation of environmental and forest norms and for ensuring compliance with environmental clearance conditions.

All that the project proponent, ANIIDCO, has said in response is that no such policy exists and that they undertake to comply with all laws of the country related to the environment, forests and coastal regulation zone. A statutorily mandated set of requirements is being given the go-by, raising further questions on the validity of the EIA. Equally illustrative is the undertaking issued by the Directorate of Tribal Welfare, the agency tasked with the primary job of securing the rights of the indigenous people on the islands.

It first assures that "the right of the tribal shall be well protected and taken care of" and then goes on to conclude that "whenever any exemption from the existing regulations/policies/law of the land are required to be provided for the execution of the project, this Directorate will seek required exemptions(s) from the competent authority to that effect".

'Tick box exercise'

"Can there be bigger evidence that this EIA has been approached less as a document to ask important questions and more as an exercise in merely facilitating clearances and ensuring that the project goes ahead," asks a senior tribal researcher who did not wish to be named. Environmental lawyer Sreeja Chakraborty says, "It is evident that there are serious procedural lapses, lack of transparency and a lack of any seriousness in this EIA process. The EIA has been reduced to a mere 'tick box' exercise and inspires no confidence at all."

(*Pankaj Sekhsaria has been researching issues of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for over two decades. He is also author of five books on the islands)*

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