

NITI AAYOG VISION IGNORES TRIBAL CONCERNS

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

It is almost as if the unique diversity of life just listed suddenly disappeared because of an arbitrary line drawn to allow a slew of high value projects.

This is illustrated in the case of the Giant leatherback turtle and the Nicobar megapode, two charismatic species for whom Great Nicobar is very important. The beaches here, like at the mouth of the river Galathea in South Bay are among the most prominent nesting sites globally of the Giant leatherback. It for this reason that the bay was declared a wildlife sanctuary in 1997, but has now been denotified to allow for the transshipment port.

In his 2007 study of the Nicobar megapode, the globally endangered bird unique to the Nicobars, K. Sivakumar of the Wildlife Institute of India documented 90% of this ground nesting bird's nests to be within a distance of 30 m from the shore. He notes that the existing protected area network in Great Nicobar is not designed for the protection of the megapode and recommends that the entire west and southern coast of Great Nicobar – precisely the area sought for the NITI Aayog proposals – be protected for the megapode and other wildlife like nesting marine turtles. This is also in stark contrast to the current move to create a zero extent ESZ for the Galathea National Park.

Threat to Shompen

Similar concerns exist about the impact on the Shompen community. The proposed project areas are important foraging grounds for this hunter-gatherer nomadic community and the official Shompen Policy of 2015 specifically noted that the welfare and integrity of these people should be given priority “with regard to large-scale development proposals in the future for Great Nicobar Island (such as trans-shipment port/container terminal etc.)”. Now, large forest areas here could become inaccessible and useless for the Shompen.

Available evidence suggests that issues of the geological volatility of these islands are also not being factored in. The December 26, 2004, tender document by WAPCOS Limited for a ‘Traffic Study for Creating Transshipment port at South Bay, Great Nicobar Island’ justifies the port here by noting that “the topography of the island is best suited, which has not been damaged much even by the tsunami on 26.11.2004 (sic)”.

Yet, a 2005 Earthquake Engineering Research Institute (EERI) Special Earthquake Report by a multi-disciplinary team from the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Kanpur, recorded witness accounts of 8-metre-high tsunami waves hitting the Great Nicobar coast on December 26, 2004. “The lighthouse at Indira Point, the southernmost tip of the Great Nicobar Island, which was on high ground before the earthquake,” the report notes, “is now under water, indicating a land subsidence of about 3-4 m.”

Loss of life and property then was limited because the Great Nicobar coast is largely uninhabited. This raises questions over safety of life, property and the investments in this zone and that too without accounting for the complex ecological, social and geological vulnerabilities here. Little, if anything, is also known of the NITI Aayog vision document itself – What is its rationale? What was the process of its creation? Which agencies/individuals were involved? What impact assessments, if any, have been done at all?

Neither the NITI Aayog nor the agencies that are facilitating it with zeal have made this available.

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