

The gigantic Sagarmala project could put the coastline in peril, says Pankaj Sekhsaria

An estimated 40 lakh people from traditional fishing communities live along the coastline. | Photo Credit: [AP](#)

The 'blue economy' has been an important element in many of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's recent national and international engagements. He placed particular emphasis on the idea in his address at the 103rd Indian Science congress in Mysuru last year and also spoke about it several times in Gujarat last month.

Made popular by Gunter Pauli's 2010 book *Blue Economy — 10 Years, 100 Innovations, 100 Million Jobs*, the idea has become the buzzword today.

Simply put, blue economy is a framework that places the coasts and the oceans at the centre of economic growth, for a development that is substantial, sustainable and inclusive. For a planet that is more blue than brown and green, where the ocean covers 70% of its surface and where water connects people, places and systems, a focus on blue might seem just the right step forward.

The idea has also come centre-stage now in India with the Niti Aayog noting recently that the "development of Blue Economy can serve as a growth catalyst in realizing the vision to become a \$10 trillion economy by 2032." But India is mobilising the idea of the blue economy without being fully true to some of its key fundamental values.

Massive centrepiece

The centrepiece of India's push for the blue economy is the Sagarmala project that includes constructing ports, augmenting coastal infrastructure, developing inland waterways, intensifying fishing, and creating special economic zones and tourism promotion.

The scale of what is being proposed is gigantic. The consolidated Sagarmala project proposes to execute nearly 400 different projects along the coastline at a whopping cost of nearly 8 lakh crore in the next two decades.

While support for the blue economy agenda has been welcomed by a wide range of actors, there has been limited, if any, discussion on the financial viability, the environmental implications and social costs of pushing it. This is set to change now with the compilation of, perhaps, the first consolidated critique for the Indian context.

The Research Collective (TRC), a group of researchers, has put together a report that looks at a number of aspects that have remained unexplored thus far. Titled '*Occupations of the Coast — Blue Economy in India*', it will be released in New Delhi on November 15 at the World Forum of Fisher Peoples' 7th General Assembly.

Homes by the sea

At the heart of the concern is the fact that the coastline is important ecologically, socially and economically. An estimated 40 lakh people from traditional fishing communities live along the coastline and are dependent on near-shore fisheries for their livelihood and survival. The coastline is also an extremely dynamic entity that is made of multiple ecosystems, many of which are rare and threatened.

It is a densely populated zone and vulnerable to storms, tidal surges, floods and the occasional tsunami. Any major intervention should be made only after serious consideration of the multi-faceted implications and a cost-benefit analysis that goes far beyond just numbers and economic evaluation.

And this, the report notes, is precisely what is missing in the way the agenda of the blue economy and Sagarmala is being pushed in India. In the report, Jesu Rethinam and Siddharth Chakravarty map the changes in coastal and marine regulation in the country since 1991 — from the Coastal Regulation Zone (CRZ) notification 1991 to the CRZ notification 2011 to the draft Marine and Coastal Regulation Zone notification of 2017.

They note that while resource-intensive activities carried out mainly by the state and big corporate players have gone from prohibition to regulation to promotion in the last 25 years, the state's engagement with the resource-based communities has moved from engagement to consultation to finally, their alienation now.

The blue economy agenda and the way it's being driven now is only going to exacerbate the situation; it could well be a recipe for considerable environmental damage and hardships for millions along the coastline.

(Disclosure: The writer has contributed a piece on Andaman & Nicobar Islands to the report)

This isn't the first time a charpai has helped rescue a leopard in a well

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