

STORY OF A LEAKING SHIP

Relevant for: World & Indian Geography | Topic: Islands & Coral Reefs, changes therein and in Flora & Fauna and the Effects of such changes

In what can only be considered a prophetic coincidence, the online version of the Port Blair-based newspaper *Andaman Chronicle*, carried, on August 2, two very interesting and instructive news reports related to the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Islands.

One of the reports was about a development that has been in the making for about a couple of years. This was the announcement that the A&N administration and NITI Aayog would be organising an investors' meet in New Delhi on August 10 for tourism projects under a plan called 'holistic development of the islands'. The projects on four islands — Long, Neil, Smith and Aves — are being undertaken as per decisions of the Islands Development Agency (IDA) and the specifics of proposals listed for the investors meet were indeed grand: "Develop 220 rooms Premium Island Resort in 42 hectares land at Long Island, 50 beach tents in 2.75 hectares land at Aves Island, 70 premium tents & tree houses in 25 hectares land at Smith Island and 120 rooms premium beach resort in 9.75 hectares land at Bharatpur, Neil Island."

The projects also include the "setting up of infrastructure for power, water, floating jetty, adventure sports, banqueting and conferences". The ambition and scale can be imagined from the fact that the administration is said to be simultaneously working on readying supporting infrastructure that includes "air strips, jetty, helipads, Roll On/Roll Off (RORO) ferry and roads works". The investors' meet in Delhi was attended by nearly 150 participants, including 40 entrepreneurs from the islands as well. Amitabh Kant, CEO of NITI Aayog, announced at the August 10 meeting that 100 islands in A&N and in the Lakshadweep could be opened up for tourism in the next 12 months.

These announcements have been received with considerable excitement in a section of the island population, given the possible economic and livelihood opportunities. It also plays up the aspirational dimension whereby one dominant narrative is of the islands as a world-class tourism destination, a potential that has so far remained unrealised. And there can also be no space for opposition because the plan is to "provide world class and sustainable tourism infrastructure with low environmental impact and provision for socio-economic involvement of local population" with the projects also conforming to internationally acknowledged benchmarking standards. How can anyone have a problem with something as perfect as this?

Use of the smart language notwithstanding, however, many key questions remain. It's all very well to say everything will be executed right, but how can we be sure that the promises will be delivered upon? How, for instance, will ecological and cultural sensitivity be ensured? Does a capacity really exist to ensure the safeguards when the scale and the ambition is so large? How much will it really benefit the local people and the local economy? And: Is it this that the islands really need?

The answer is visible, perhaps obliquely at first glance, in the second of the two reports in the *Andaman Chronicle*. Titled 'Hole in the Hull of MV Swarajdweep Panics Islanders', it related the horrifying details of a huge leak and of water filling up many feet in a key passenger ship with 343 passengers, including staff, on board. The incident happened in the early morning of August 2 when the ship was on its journey from the islands to Chennai, 40 nautical miles from the island of Car Nicobar. The situation was retrieved only following the intervention of the Coast Guard that sent in a ship from Kamorta and flew in a special team of five divers from Port Blair. The

passengers had to be all evacuated and alternative arrangements were made to send them home to the Nicobars or to Port Blair. The report said: "It was fortunate that the hole was noticed while it was in the safe zone. Had it been in between Port Blair and Chennai, it would have been a major disaster."

Putting the two reports together offers a snapshot of a bizarre reality in these islands — an island set-up that is promising everything from air strips and floating jetties to premium resorts, not to mention ecological sensitivity, global bench marking and overall socio-economic development, is unable to ensure that the local community has a safe and reliable, leave alone comfortable, ship to travel on. And that too in an island system where shipping is, or certainly should be, the lifeline. If such a basic and critical element cannot be ensured, what is the guarantee that the grand plans and promises will not meet the same fate?

The important point to note here is that the cost is being paid by the local communities and the local environment. In its vision for achieving the grand and the ambitious, foundational and fundamental elements are being given the go-by and one cannot but ask whether the huge effort and the substantial human, planning and financial resources being spent for the tourism projects cannot be invested better and more productively?

A truly holistic development plan for an island system should have a robust shipping system as its first building block. What we have instead is a seriously leaking ship that should lead to serious questions about capacities and about priorities.

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