

Greenfield Project of Andamans



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Greenfield Projects of the Andamans: Boon or Bane

Without existing constraints, Greenfield projects today are seen as faster development models fostering economic growth, infrastructure development and strategic advancements. These projects, which are built on previously undeveloped land, offer unique advantages, especially in terms of flexibility, innovation, and long-term planning. The plan for a Greenfield project in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was first initiated by the NITI Aayog in 2017. The Plan aimed to promote sustainable development in the region focussing on tourism, infrastructure and investment while maintaining ecological balance. The project included developing an international airport at Greater Nicobar, a trans-shipment port and several other infrastructure developments to boost economic growth and connectivity in the region which would boost tourism to a great extent. However, such a project in the pristine Andaman and its islands is fraught with issues like environmental degradation, displacement of local communities and geopolitical sensitivities.

Located about 1300 kilometres southeast of the Indian mainland in the Bay of Bengal, Andaman and Nicobar Islands give India a strong presence in the region. These islands provide unique natural and biodiversity resources and are of immense strategic importance. Cut off from the mainland, the region has maintained its uniqueness and there has been little development in terms of modern infrastructure and industry. Since the region has huge potential in terms of resources and location, Government of India has planned for its comprehensive development involving infrastructure construction like ports, airports, industrial zones and urban spaces thereby enhancing the region's strategic, economic and tourism potential while balancing environmental and ecological concerns. Some of the significant developmen-

tal projects include a Trans-shipment Port at Great Nicobar Island, Greenfield airport at the Great Nicobar, tourism infrastructure and smart cities, holistic development of Little Andaman, renewable energy projects, defence infrastructure, connectivity enhancements and a Nicobar Industrial Zone.

Although these projects aim at giving significant push to capitalize on region's strategic and economic potential, the challenge remains in balancing the need for infrastructure development with the preservation of the island's unique ecological heritage and rights of the indigenous communities. Serious concerns have been raised on issues like environmental degradation and displacement of indigenous communities. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are ecologically sensitive zone, and are home to rich biodiversity including many endemic species of flora and fauna. Developmental projects would lead to large-scale deforestation and habitat destruction, adverse impact on marine life which would ultimately lead to climate change and coastal erosion. The Islands are home to several indigenous tribes some of which are among the last remaining uncontacted tribes in the world like the Sentinelese. Projects of such magnitude would adversely impact the livelihood patterns of Nicobarese and other tribes who largely depend on natural resources of the islands for their sustenance like fishing and subsistence farming. Increased migration, tourism and infrastructure would also dilute the cultural heritage of indigenous tribes undermining their way of life. At the same time, there are serious concerns with regard to geopolitical sensitivity and security as the islands are very close to major international sea routes. Government of India has advocated for the development of the islands to enhance their utility for defence and trade especially due to growing interference of

China in the Indian Ocean. Although enhancement of naval and air power are seen as imperative to counter China's growing influence and activities in the Indian Ocean, militarization of the region will lead to ecological imbalances. At the same time it is important to note that India is signatory to several international environmental accords and extensive development in sensitive zones could raise concerns about compliance with these agreements.

In a nutshell, it is essential that economic growth of the region be pursued in order to keep pace with the process of development. Improved connectivity through ports, airports and roads, no doubt, would boost tourism, enhance trade and provide better access to healthcare and education for the inhabitants of the region. In this regard the Government of India has been emphasising the need for 'sustainable development' in the islands in order to balance environmental concerns with national security and economic growth. On the other hand, the environmentalists are sceptical about large-scale projects and instead suggest for smaller, community-driven eco-friendly projects. They also point out that Environmental Impact Assessments of these projects have not been taken up thoroughly and comprehensively and have thus approached appropriate courts for their review and necessary amendments. The controversy over Greenfield projects in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is a complex issue which seeks to strike a balance between economic and strategic interests with the need for environmental conservation and the protection of indigenous communities. It is a double-edged challenge for the existence of the indigenous people - their land, culture and autonomy. (Dr Niraj Kumar Singh is Associate Professor of History and Dr Ina Goel is Assistant Professor of Anthropology)

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