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## **ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-281**



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## **NITI Aayog's megacity plan for Little Andaman alarms conservationists**



**The proposed construction of a mega financial-tourist complex on Little Andaman Island will place at risk a fragile ecosystem and result in habitat loss of the vulnerable Onge tribe and rare wildlife**

A plan for the sustainable and holistic development of the 680 sq km, fragile Little Andaman Island in the Andaman and Nicobar group has raised the alarm among conservationists.

The 'Sustainable Development of Little Andaman Island - Vision Document', is the NITI Aayog's proposal to leverage the strategic location and natural features of the island. This, the vision says, will be done by building a new greenfield coastal city there, that will be developed as a free trade zone and will compete with Singapore and Hong Kong.

The proposal is pivoted along three development anchors and zones.

Zone 1 – spread over 102 sq km along the east coast of Little Andaman – will be the financial district and medi city and will include an aerocity, and a tourism and hospital district. Spread over 85 sq km of pristine forest, Zone 2, the leisure zone, will have a film city, a residential district and a tourism SEZ. Zone 3 – on 52 sq km of pristine forest – will be a nature zone, further categorised into three districts: an exclusive forest resort, a nature healing district and a nature retreat, all on the western coast.

There will be ‘underwater’ resorts, casinos, golf courses, convention centres, plug-and-play office complexes, a drone port with fully automated drone delivery system, nature cure institutes and more.

An international airport capable of handling all types of aircraft will be central to this development vision because “all successful case studies and references” studied by the visioning team indicate that an international airport is key for development.

The only jetty on the island will be expanded and a marina will be developed next to the tourist entertainment district. A 100 km greenfield ring road will be constructed parallel to the coastline from east to west and will be supplemented with a mass rapid transit network with stations at regular intervals.

The vision plan is not in the public domain, even though it is said to have been finalised months ago. The comparison with

Singapore, for instance, is one key. It has a map of Little Andaman overlaid on Singapore's, along with the following statistics: "The population density of the Andaman and Nicobar is 47 people per sq km while it's (sic) 7,615 persons per sq km in Singapore. Its per capita income is \$1,789 compared to Singapore's \$55,182."

### **Blocks to development**

There are certain factors, the vision document notes, that could prevent Little Andaman from becoming the new Singapore – factors that are "stopping us from developing these into veritable jewels for the country". These include lack of good connectivity with Indian mainland and global cities, a fragile biodiversity and natural ecosystems and certain Supreme Court notifications that pose an impediment to development. Another key factor is the "presence of indigenous tribes and concerns for their welfare".

There are other concrete obstacles that the vision takes note of: 95% of Little Andaman is covered in forest, a large part of it the pristine evergreen type. Some 640 sq km of the island is Reserve Forest under the Indian Forest Act, and nearly 450 sq km is protected as the Onge Tribal Reserve, creating a unique and rare socio-ecological-historical complex of high importance.

The vision needs 240 sq km (35%) of this land and the solutions suggested are simple and straightforward – de-reserve 32% of the reserved forest and de-notify 138 sq km or 31% of the tribal reserve. And if the tribals become an

impediment, the vision suggests that they “can be relocated to other parts of the island”.

### **Sloppy and inappropriate**

The vision document has maps with no legends or explanations and uses inappropriate photographs plagiarised from the Internet. It talks of conservation of national park/wildlife sanctuary on Little Andaman when none exist here and it has no mention of the geological vulnerability of the place, which was amongst the worst-affected in the earthquake-tsunami combination in 2004. The waves hit Little Andaman so hard that on December 26 the breakwater there was not just breached, it was physically displaced and its orientation changed. Ships could not berth for weeks thereafter.

The plan has no financial details, no budgeting, or inventorisation of forests and ecological wealth and no details of any impact assessment. The nature resort complex proposed at West Bay on the western coast is to have theme resorts, floating/underwater resorts, beach hotels, and high-end residential villas. It is today a secluded and difficult to reach part, one of the most important nesting sites of the globally endangered Giant Leatherback sea turtle which is being studied by the Dakshin Foundation, the Andaman and Nicobar Environment Team and the island administration's Forest Department.

### **Forest dept.'s concerns**

In a note dated September 26, 2020, Divisional Forest Officer, Little Andaman, raised serious concerns about this vision on grounds of ecological fragility, indigenous rights and vulnerability to earthquakes and tsunamis.

The note said such large diversion of forest land would cause obvious environmental loss leading to irreversible damage (more than 2 million trees stand in the forest land sought for these projects), that habitats of various wild animals including endangered sea turtles would be affected, and that the impact could not even be assessed because there was no environment impact assessment report and neither were there any detailed site layout plans for the proposed diversion.

This note of dissent was a minor irritant and was ignored in the plan and vision that seeks to alter the nature of an ancient island bigger than Chennai and Mumbai in area.

The vision document, described by conservationists as a first bullet through the heart of the island, is to be followed by a second one soon. A meeting is to be held under the chairmanship of the Chief Secretary on February 4 to initiate the denotification of the Onge tribal reserve on Little Andaman.