

**Lakshadweep and Islands Development Controversy:  
AIPSN Note on World Environment Day: 5 June 2021**

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Ecosystem Restoration has been announced as the [theme](#) for World Environment Day 2021 and for the decade to follow, with focus on 'growing trees, greening cities, rewilding gardens, changing diets, and cleaning up rivers and coasts.' The Indian government has planned numerous events in celebration of this Day and roped in celebrities to spread the message of greening India and living in peace with nature. In a keynote [address](#) to a Conference of Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in 2019, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an increase of India's commitment to restoration of degraded lands from 21 million hectares to 26 million hectares by 2030. This and other similar commitment such as to increase share of renewable energy in electricity generation to 40% of total by 2030, (stepped up further with a new goal of 450 GW of renewable), increasing forest/tree cover to 33% and several sustainable development goals have often been made by the PM and other government leaders to international audiences and in different international Treaties, with the PM in particular repeatedly citing Indian (Hindu) traditional and civilizational values of respect for nature and sustainable lifestyles.

Closer examination [shows](#) these targets to be modest at best, with much concern about many conditions, qualifications and negative impacts related to these targets. Perhaps more importantly, policies and actions of this government in India reveal its international stance to be mostly posturing, and the professed environmental concern to be largely for the sake of image-building. Since coming to power, this government has systematically worked to promote "ease of doing business" and acted consistently in favour of corporate industrial and commercial in extraction of value from nature at the cost of both the ecosystem and local populations, mining, industrial and commercial projects inside forest areas and even infringing upon wildlife sanctuaries especially through the contrived device of "linear projects" have now become commonplace. The transfer of wealth to corporates, achieved through shifting of public natural commons to private hands, has been facilitated by drastic dilution or even reversals of several key environmental regulations.

The earlier piecemeal violations and changes through executive notifications were sought to be regularized through the draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2020. The EIA 2020 [sought](#) to vastly enlarge the types of projects which required only cursory examination or even no clearance at all. It also turns a blind eye to egregious violations of environmental regulations and outright illegal activities. The revised EIA dilutes environmental appraisal norms and reduces the role of public consultations in many sectors, while allowing the central government unlimited authority by reducing requirements for projects of 'strategic importance' the parameters of which remain undefined. Post-facto clearance of projects has been permitted allowing violators to pay a compounding fine rather than face severe consequences for violation of basic environmental safeguards. Following widespread

opposition this Draft is currently in limbo, but many of its provisions are being implemented nonetheless, and it appears that the trend of roll-back of environmental regulations and peoples participation in safeguarding them will continue.

Changes have been brought across various sectors including forests, water resources, coastal areas, land use, mineral resource extraction, industrial safety and hazardous materials. Key amendments have been introduced in the Land Acquisition Act 2015, diluting the earlier Act by increasing exemptions from local consent and social impact assessment. The Coastal Regulations Zone (CRZ) regulations have also been weakened by reducing the exclusion zone from 100m to 50m and other measures that are expected to open up the fragile coastline, already subject to erosion and potential impact of sea-level rise, for industry, real estate and tourism. Experts say this would also be exploited by corporate houses working under the Sagarmala programme of a “garland” of major ports. The draft National Forest Policy of 2018 promotes the interests of forest corporations and private players, and weakens the Forest Rights Act 2006 secured by sustained struggles of forest dwellers and popular movements. Government inaction on aspects like solid waste management, air pollution and river cleanliness worsens local environment impact, greenhouse gas emissions linked to climate change, and people’s health.

Between June 2014 and May 2018, [less than 1%](#) of proposed projects involving clearance have been rejected by the concerned wildlife authority. Issues of environmental damage and linked people’s survival, sustenance and livelihoods come a distant second to business interests, so much so that some have [dubbed](#) the department the ‘Ministry against Environment!’

Not only have these changes been detrimental to the environment and people’s lives and livelihoods, they uniformly suppress people’s rights and seek to reverse many of the major victories of people’s movements in the past few decades. Institutional autonomy, regulatory structures and even judicial oversight are being systematically undermined in the field of environment as much as in other arenas of governance. The National Green Tribunal has been repeatedly attacked and sought to be weakened. The relentless assault continues in different forms and across various theatres.

The latest assault is in the form of the new “Islands Development” programme being steered by Niti Aayog, and the focus of this Note, ironically on World Environment Day. An article specific to the issue by one of the authors follows.

## Lakshadweep happenings: the big plot

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*(published in [NewsClick.in](https://www.newsclick.in) on 5 June 2021)*

World Environment Day falls on 5 June each year, and the theme for the coming decade has been declared as “Ecological Restoration.” It is indeed a tragedy that this article, written in commemoration of the Day, draws attention to the ecological and human disaster unfolding in the Lakshadweep archipelago in the Arabian Sea, as well as in the Andaman & Nicobar island chain on the eastern flank of peninsular India in the Indian Ocean, in the name of “island development.”

Many articles have appeared in the past week or so, including in this site, on the series of unprecedented, arbitrary and deeply disturbing actions of the recently appointed Administrator of Lakshadweep. Praful Khoda Patel, the first political appointee to this post in the Union Territory, had earlier served as Home Minister in the Narendra Modi-led Gujarat government during the period the previous Minister Amit Shah had to step down due to investigations into an alleged fake encounter case. While the [measures](#) taken by the administrators are by now well-known, they bear brief repetition so as to underline the savagery of the assault on the rights and culture of people of Lakshadweep, seemingly designed to crush any actual or potential opposition to “development” plans being contemplated, and to make clear that the local population of Lakshadweep counts for nothing in the scheme of things.

Some larger and uncomfortable questions remain, particularly regarding the nature of the envisaged “development” plans and the interests behind them, and deserve to be discussed more than has been done hitherto.

**Wholesale assault on the local population** The Administrator has drawn up, and sent to the Home Ministry for approval, a new Lakshadweep Development Authority Regulation 2021 and a whole raft of other draft Regulations on Panchayats, Prevention of Anti-Social Activities (PASA),” and Animal Preservation. Together, these assign unquestionable authority to the Administrator including giving him total eminent domain powers over the territory and people of the Islands, enabling the administration to take-over of any part of the islands in the name of “development activities” including ecologically damaging mining and extraction of mineral resources; to forcibly remove or relocate any islander owning that land, despite the fact that over 95% of islanders belong to Scheduled Tribes whose lands cannot be easily alienated; to by-pass panchayats and other local government bodies; and, amazingly, placing any such actions by the Administrator beyond appeal or judicial review. Customary prohibition in the Muslim-dominated islands has been relaxed. And the mostly Covid-19 free islands now have over 7,000 cases due to the Administrator’s arbitrary relaxation of restrictions hitherto.

The Administrator [claims](#) that all these measures have been taken in pursuit of development of Lakshadweep “along the lines of the Maldives.” His plans, so far unchecked by the Home Ministry under which the UT administration functions, mark out a developmental model which is sought to be imposed on the Lakshadweep group, even if contrary to the express wishes of the local people who are seen as dispensable in their island home viewed purely as real estate. The new and sweeping powers arrogated by the Administrator, and the heavy-handed

repression unleashed by him, reveal an impending blitz of large-scale projects, and are aimed at pre-emptive throttling of local opposition to them and undermining long-term potential for democratic governance and policy-making in the Islands.

These proposals have been rejected in toto by the islanders, but protesters have been arrested and incarcerated without trial using the PASR or “Goonda Act.” Local artisanal fishers have been attacked and their nets, gear and huts destroyed in the name of coastal regulations. Thousands of contract workers have been summarily laid off. Other gratuitous measures have been taken by the Administrator include banning the sale, storage or consumption of beef, integral to the food habits of the overwhelmingly (95%) Muslim population with ST status; removing non-vegetarian food from school meals programmes; and closing down the islands’ only government-run dairy farm and ferrying in milk from Gujarat instead. There is also a clear attempt to de-link Lakshadweep from its historical links with Kerala, with Malayalam being the lingua franca, by diverting supply ships from Beypore Port near Kochi to Mangalore in BJP-ruled Karnataka.

All these measures show that the Administrator is hell-bent not only on stamping out dissent by acting in anticipation of the sweeping powers being approved by an apparently supportive Home Ministry, but also on severely undermining the local culture and way of life, and the democratic roots of local governance and popular mobilization in Lakshadweep.

**Niti Aayog Plans for Islands** These columns had a few months ago discussed the completely non-transparent plans developed and pushed by the Niti Aayog for Island Development not yet available in the public domain, but had then largely focused on the plans for the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. It is now necessary to look at the proposals for the Lakshadweep group.

Following preliminary studies by Niti Aayog itself, the CEO of Niti Aayog made a [presentation](#) to potential investors in August 2018, stating that the Government had accorded “high priority” to the development of the islands and was putting forward concrete and carefully worked out project ideas.

The Government had constituted an Island Development Agency in June 2017, under the Chairmanship of the Union Home Minister, which had mandated Niti Aayog to steer the programme for “Holistic Development of Islands.” Further, in order to ease the path of investors, local Island Development Authorities had been empowered to provide single-window facilitation to projects, with pre-obtained regulatory clearances for land use, environmental impact and so on! It is strange how a body conceived as simply a government think-tank to replace a Planning Commission viewed as a centralized and “socialistic” body with powers even for allocation of plan funds to States, has now been transformed into a centralized project planning and implementation oversight body with quasi-executive powers outside all existing government structures and accountability only to the Home Minister.

In January 2019, Government [announced](#) that “final Site Potential Development Reports” have been prepared for 4 islands in Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) namely Smith, Ross, Long and Aves Islands, and 5 islands in the Lakshadweep group namely Minicoy, Bangaram, Thinnakara, Cheriya and Suheli Islands. A new airport at Minicoy has now been initiated along with Maldives-style

water-villa projects in Minicoy, Suheli and Kadmat in the Lakshadweep group, as [confirmed](#) by the Administrator.

Niti Aayog also conducted further studies towards detailed projects, with some details contained in a May 2019 “think” [report](#) by Niti Aayog staffers titled “Transforming the Islands through creativity and innovation.”

It should be clarified that the projects in the Lakshadweep group are mainly tourism related. After all, the group of 36 small islands comprises just 10 inhabited islands, 17 uninhabited islands, 4 newly formed islets and 5 submerged reefs. By contrast, the A&N group consists of 576 relatively larger islands of which only 38 are inhabited, some with only extremely isolated and almost non-contacted tribes. Plans for the A&N islands are extremely ambitious and fanciful including several airports, container trans-shipment ports, a new greenfield city to act as a financial hub “on the lines of Singapore and Hong Kong,” with strategic value given proximity to the Malacca straits.

**New Lakshadweep model**      The dream for Lakshadweep although less ambitious is unabashedly modeled after the Maldives, however inappropriate for Lakshadweep, or for the A&N islands, for a host of reasons beyond the scope of this short piece.

Briefly, the Maldives are a group of larger islands with a high-end tourism model in with few links to the bulk of the island population although adding hugely to the Maldivian GDP. After a few short decades of this model of tourism, the strains are already showing on local ecosystems especially on the coral reefs, the very lifeline of the archipelago. A shift in fishing to large-scale trawlers has already wreaked havoc and has recently been banned. Small home-based tourist facilities have started cropping up in the main population centres, exposing the artificial and superficial super-imposition of the extant tourism model.

The Niti Aayog studies bemoans the fact that while domestic tourists have risen substantially in both the A&N and Lakshadweep islands, almost 400,000 and 10,000 annually respectively, foreign tourist arrivals have stagnated at around 15,000 in A&N and 500-odd in the latter, despite great demand for water sports, game fishing and cruises. In contrast, the Maldives host over 1.5 million foreign tourists annually. The point is, however, that mainland India offers a much wider set of attractions to international tourists, and could do much better in terms of hotel and transportation infrastructure to attract a wider range of tourist categories including for eco-tourism also involving the local population in more sustainable tourism models as in Kerala. Expansion of these mainland efforts in both quantitative and qualitative terms would also organically link up with island tourism with mutual benefit.

Niti Aayog also conducted further studies along with international agencies to assess the carrying capacity of islands identified for major projects. Without getting into methodological details, these studies projected potentially huge tourist inflows just of 5,000-10,000 persons per day in the A&N islands or around 1.5 million per year in each of several islands i.e., unimaginably, more than half the foreign tourist arrivals in the whole of mainland India! Other Niti Aayog studies [apparently](#) also confirm such high carrying capacity estimates.

This level can only be realized if all resources are ferried from the mainland, at huge cost to the local ecology due to deforestation, change of land use and

disposal of the enormous quantities of wastes generated. With a large mainland back-up in India, the local population becomes virtually irrelevant. Lakshadweep is already suffering from severe coastal erosion, and experts predict that some islands may become uninhabitable due to sea level rise related to climate change. Various other negative ecological impacts are also [predicted](#) by experts such as coral reefs bleaching, damage to fish habitat and breeding grounds etc. But all this may not matter to Niti Aayog planners and their supporters in the Union Government.

The Environmental Impact Assessment of Projects in the Little Andaman island records the enormous ecological risks to pristine local forests, mangroves, marine life and endangered species such as Leather-backed Turtles, not to mention the endangered Onge tribe. Yet the Union Environment Ministry has casually ignored all these, and has granted environmental clearance, coolly noting that the Onges can simply be relocated elsewhere. Clearly, in this model of island development, the environment matters little and the local population matters even less.

Threats to Lakshadweep and its people from these so-called “holistic island development” plans, are clear. In months to come, one may well see influential corporate descending on the Lakshadweep islands on the backs of a crushed local population, backed to the hilt by the UT administration with regulatory systems captured or strangled.