

All India Peoples Science Network

Lakshadweep and Controversial Islands Development Plan: (World Environment Day, 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'. Tragically, however, a central concern in India these days is the ecological and human disaster unfolding in the Lakshadweep archipelago in the Arabian Sea, as well as in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands chain on the eastern flank of peninsular India in the Indian Ocean, all in the name of 'island development.'

In a keynote address to a Conference of Parties to the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in 2019, the Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi, announced an increase of India's commitment to [restoration](#) of degraded lands from 21 million hectares to 26 million hectares by 2030. India's Nationally Determined Commitments (NDC) under the Paris Agreement on climate change pledges to reduce emissions intensity of GDP by 33-35% by 2030, increase share of renewable energy in electricity generation to 40% of total by 2030 (stepped up further since then with a new goal of 450 GW of renewables compared to 175 GW earlier). These and other similar commitments have often been made by the PM and other government leaders to international audiences and in different international Treaties. These promises are made while repeatedly citing Indian (Hindu) traditional and civilizational values of respect for nature and sustainable lifestyles.

Closer examination shows some of these targets to be modest at best, and many concerns persist on the conditions, qualifications and negative impacts related to these targets, as discussed further below. Perhaps more importantly, policies and actions of this government in India reveal its international stance to be mostly posturing, and the professed environmental concerns to be largely for the sake of image-building. Domestically, in sharp contrast, this government has systematically worked to promote 'ease of doing business' and consistently acted in favour of corporate industrial and commercial interests 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 corporations through shifting of natural public commons to private hands, has been facilitated by drastic dilution or reversal of several key environmental regulations.

Framing the Context: Changing Environmental Regulations

Earlier violations and piecemeal regulatory changes through executive notifications have been sought to be regularized through the draft Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) Notification 2020. Draft EIA 2020 sought to vastly enlarge the categories of projects which require only cursory regulatory examination or even avoid regulatory clearance all-together. It severely dilutes environmental appraisal norms and reduces, or even completely omits, the

role of public consultations in many sectors, while allowing the central government unlimited authority by reducing clearance requirements for projects of 'strategic importance' the parameters of which remain undefined. Draft EIA 2020 also turns a blind eye to egregious violations of environmental regulations and outright illegal activities by permitting post-facto environmental clearance of impermissible projects after simply paying a small compounding fine. 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 people's participation in safeguarding them will continue.

Regulatory changes have also been brought about 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) rules 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 impact of sea-level rise, for industry, real estate and tourism. Experts say this would also be exploited by corporate houses including under the Sagarmala programme which envisions a 'garland' of major ports. The draft National Forest Policy of 2018 promotes the interests of forestry corporations and private players, and weakens the Forest Rights Act 2006 secured by prolonged and sustained struggles of forest dwellers and other popular movements. Between June 2014 and May 2018, less than 1% of proposed projects seeking clearance have been rejected by the [wildlife authority](#). In the government's scheme of things, 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 concerned department the 'Ministry against Environment!' Government inaction on aspects like solid waste management, air pollution and river cleanliness continue to worsen local environments and adversely impact people's health.

Government Inaction on Climate Change

The Government's response to the challenges of climate change follows a similar dual path, a seemingly strong posture abroad including in the international negotiations, and contrasting weak actions domestically. To put things in perspective, while India's NDC compares favourably with hitherto low-ambition emission cuts promised by developed countries especially the US, these targets have been [rated](#) by the well-reputed Climate Tracker as 'moderate' and compatible with the 2 degrees C goal. Perhaps more seriously, India continues to pursue an externally-driven climate policy driven mainly by foreign policy considerations. Domestic action to adapt or build resilience to serious climate impacts in India, which is [considered](#) among the most affected regions of the world, is scarce. This is in sharp contrast to the stance of most developing countries, especially the least developed countries (LDCs) and the Small Island Developing States (SIDS) who have approached climate change and international negotiations based on the severe impacts they are experiencing and the existential challenge posed by these impacts.

With worsening polar ice melt and sea-level rise, India's coastal areas with over 170 million people are expected to be seriously impacted by coastal erosion, sea-water ingress and extensive permanent coastal submergence due to sea-level rise added to high tides and storm surges. The think tank Climate Central has projected that [36 million people](#) could be affected in India in the near term, with the portal also providing extremely interesting data as well as dramatic interactive maps based on latest satellite data showing extensive inundation, particularly of densely populated urban agglomerations around Kochi, Mumbai and Surat on the west coast, and Chennai, Puri and Kolkata in the east. All these impacts are being worsened by rapid construction and other economic activities on or near the coast, and degradation of natural protective barriers such as mangroves.

There is an imminent threat for Lakshadweep and Andaman & Nicobar, with experts predicting that many of the islands may become [uninhabitable by 2100](#) because of sea-level rise due to climate change. Yet, government action on any of these issues is insubstantial. Programmes initiated such as the Technology Missions under the UPA Government's National Action Plan on Climate Change in 2008-10 have been allowed to drift and fade away, being under-funded and lacking political support especially under the present Government. Even serious scientific studies of climate impacts have not yet seen the light of the day, with one major study expected to release its report only in the next year or so. Adaptation actions mostly fall under jurisdiction of State governments which are starved of funds and lack the necessary knowledge and capabilities required, calling for the Central government to take the initiative and the major burden. It needs emphasis that adaptation programmes are cost intensive, and the later the actions are undertaken, the [more expensive](#) they will become. This is a monumental problem facing the present and future generations of the Indian people. In this scenario, it is surprising that the main policy being discussed in the case of Lakshadweep is not on building protection against climate disasters, but instead on real estate development in the islands.

Recent Developments in Lakshadweep

The recently appointed Administrator of Lakshadweep, Praful Khoda Patel (he is the first political appointee to this post in the Union Territory and had earlier served as Home Minister in the Narendra Modi-led Gujarat government), 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. This also allows forcible removal or relocation of any islander owning that land, despite the fact that over 95% of islanders belong to Scheduled Tribes whose lands cannot be easily alienated by earlier laws; to by-pass panchayats and other local government bodies; and, amazingly, placing any such actions by the Administrator beyond appeal or

judicial review. The recent control asserted by the administrator extends beyond the environmental realm, with measures like relaxation of customary alcohol prohibition in the Muslim-dominated islands and even arbitrary reduction of Covid-19 related restrictions.

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 people irrespective of their desires or interests. As a pre-emptive measure, the changes proposed allow for throttling of local opposition. In addition, measures 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 by diverting supply ships from Beypore Port near Kochi to Mangalore in BJP-ruled Karnataka. Despite Malayalam being the lingua franca in Lakshadweep, recent news reports claim an attempt by the administration to shift its legal jurisdiction from the Kerala High Court to Karnataka High Court.

Widespread opposition by the locals has been met with heavy handed repression by the administration. 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. The local people and their culture are seen as obstacles to be eliminated, while their island home is viewed as real estate and for its potential to generate wealth for the ruling state government. From the measures taken, the administrator seems hell-bent not only on stamping out dissent but also undermining the democratic roots of local governance and popular mobilization in Lakshadweep.

The Controversial Islands Development Plan

The recent proposals of this administrator cannot be seen in vacuum or as the actions of an individual alone, and applicable only in the case of Lakshwadeep. The larger and uncomfortable questions remain, particularly regarding the nature of the envisaged ‘development’ plans in the islands and the interests behind them. In June 2017 itself, the Indian Government had constituted an Island Development Agency under the Chairmanship of the Union Home Minister, which had mandated Niti Aayog to steer the programme for ‘Holistic Development of Islands.’ Important to note is how a body introduced by the government as ‘just’ a think-tank to replace the earlier supposedly authoritarian Planning Commission, is essentially acting as a centralized project planning and implementation oversight body with quasi-executive powers and outside all existing government structures, with accountability only to the home minister. Following preliminary studies, 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 for the same. In order to further ease the path of investors, local Island Development Authorities were empowered to provide single-window facilitation to projects, with pre-obtained regulatory clearances for land use, environmental impact and so on!

More studies and information on the proposed projects are available in a May 2019 ‘think’ report by Niti Aayog staffers titled ‘[Transforming the Islands through creativity and innovation](#)’. Tourism related projects are central to the plans for Lakshadweep, unabashedly modelled after the Maldives. Plans for the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are even more 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. The Maldives is a group of larger islands with a high-end tourism model, with few links to the bulk of the island population although adding hugely to the Maldivian GDP. Even there, the strains of the current tourism-based model of development are showing both on local ecosystems especially on the coral reefs, the very lifeline of the archipelago, and in adverse socio-economic impacts.

The feasibility and desirability of the replication of these international models, both in Lakshadweep (a group of 36 small islands comprises just 10 inhabited islands, 17 uninhabited islands, 4 newly formed islets and 5 submerged reefs) and the contrasting Andaman and Nicobar group (consisting of 576 relatively larger islands of which only 38 are inhabited) is not examined. Instead, the Niti Aayog studies bemoan the stagnation of international tourists at 15,000 in A&N and 500-odd in Lakshadweep in contrast with 1.5 million foreign tourists hosted by the Maldives annually. The potential of integrating island tourism with tourism in mainland India, whereby a wider set of attraction can be offered to international tourists, simultaneously promoting forms of environmentally friendly tourism and involving the local population in more sustainable tourism models are left explored. Rather, further studies by the Niti Aayog in association with international agencies, project feasibility of huge tourist inflows of 5,000-10,000 persons per day in the A&N islands which would be around 1.5 million per year in each of several islands, unimaginably, more than half the current 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, along with huge cost to the local ecology due to deforestation, change of land use patterns and disposal of the enormous quantities of wastes generated. With a large mainland back-up in India, the local population of the islands become virtually irrelevant.

Consequences of the Envisaged ‘Development’ Model

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.

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. One of the [proposed projects](#), in Little Andamans envisions a full-size airport and aerocity, expanded tourism centres, convention centres, and hospitals or ‘medicity’, a leisure district spread with a tourism SEZ and ‘nature’ retreats, and a development of a new 100 km east-west coastal ring road and a mass transit system. The total area of the island is only around 737 sq. kms – about the size of Mumbai or Hyderabad, of which 95% or about 700 sq. km is reserve forest. Of this, about 450 sq. km is designated as the Onge Reserve, home to this highly endangered early aboriginal tribe of whom there are only 100 or so persons left. This Project calls for clearing about 224 sq. km or 32% of the reserve forest with around two million trees and de-notifying 135 sq. km or about 30% of the Onge Reserve. But all this may not matter to Niti Aayog planners and their supporters in the Union Government. Even [reported opposition](#) from the forest department has met with little response from the government. The Union Environment Ministry has granted environmental clearance in the Andamans, coolly noting that the Onges, for instance, can simply be relocated elsewhere. Clearly, in this model of island development, the environment matters little and the local population matters even less.

In the three years since the Island Development plans were advanced, including the recent Little Andamans ‘super’ project dangling all kinds of inducements to the corporate sector, reports say that [investors are yet to come forward](#), possibly due to the risks, challenges and viability doubts. But, irrespective of the actual tourist impact in these islands, the government in charge stands to make huge profits from land rents and prospective corporate deals.

As the Union Government grows more authoritarian and asserts greater authority especially in the Union Territories, environmental regulatory systems are being either captured or strangulated, and local populations are simply ignored or crushed in the name of development. National and internationally committed environmental goals like the forestry targets appear unrealistic in the face of systematic encroachment upon forest areas as discussed above, which cannot be offset by increasing ‘green cover’ outside forests, for instance along highways, since a group of trees however large simply cannot perform the same ecological services as a forest. The forests of Andaman cannot be compensated by afforestation in mainland India and neither can the lives of the indigenous peoples. Across India, not only have many of the recent 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 hard won regulations resulting from 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. Even the National Green Tribunal has been repeatedly attacked and sought to be weakened in several ways. While rarely compromising in the face of opposition by peoples movements, civil society organizations and experts, the relentless assault continues in

different forms and across various theatres. This situation calls for urgent and large coalitions across the country to resist the grandiose so-called “development” plans of the current ruling dispensation.

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