

Empower the guardians of the earth, do not rob them

A unilateral decision to establish three wildlife sanctuaries in the southern Nicobar will deprive the indigenous peoples of their ancestral territories and lifeways

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‘For millennia, these indigenous islanders have sustained themselves, only beginning to rely on external markets following their forced relocation post-tsunami. While they have demonstrated adaptability in this transition, it has not been without challenges. Their desire to return to their traditional homelands, free from the influx of tourists and external influences, is profound’. Photo: Special Arrangement

In the southern expanse of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, off the shores of Little Nicobar, lie seven tiny islands. Classified as “uninhabited” in the government’s records, these

islets are nonetheless integral to the indigenous communities of the region. Two, officially called Meroë and Menchal, are known as Piruii and Pingaeyak, respectively, to the Payuh, the indigenous southern Nicobarese peoples, who hold traditional rights over these and other islets.

For millennia, these historically isolated indigenes have relied on these islands as resource reservoirs for sustenance and protected them. Menchal is revered, used, and protected under the spiritual realm called Pingaeyak (a spirit that is believed to reside on the island), prohibiting the overexploitation of resources or any undue harm to its ecosystem. Similarly, Meroë is believed to be the abode of a legendary islander community. Here, too, spiritual belief systems influence how the islanders use and protect natural resources.

Meroë and Menchal are managed by community elders as guardians and specific individual caretakers. They ensure the protection of the island's resources and sustainability. In today's world, this phenomenon goes by the name of "conservation" and "sustainable use", among other terms and phrases.



‘The southern Nicobarese have spread their territory over the islets and islands, using their canoes and boats to access them frequently. Each island is intricately linked to their traditional ownership and resource management systems, reflecting their deep-rooted connection to the land and sea’. Photo: Special Arrangement

Conservation colonialism

In May 2022, in complete disregard of the indigenous land ownership and management systems, the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) administration issued three public notices, announcing its intention to create three wildlife sanctuaries: a coral sanctuary at Meroë Island, a megapode sanctuary at Menchal Island, and a leatherback turtle sanctuary on Little Nicobar Island.

In mid-July, the A&N administration issued an order asserting that it did not receive any claims or objections from any individual regarding the land and marine areas within the three proposed sanctuaries; that no individual enjoys any rights within the boundaries of the proposed sanctuaries. And, that there will be “restriction on the people of neighbouring area to enter into these islands... in the national interest.”

Approximately 1,200 southern Nicobarese inhabit Patai Takaru (Great Nicobar Island), and Patai t-bhi (Little Nicobar Island), holding traditional rights over both inhabited and ostensibly “uninhabited” islands. Yet, the A&N administration neither consulted nor informed the southern Nicobarese of its plans.

Despite verbal supplications and a letter in August 2022 from the Little & Great Nicobar Tribal Council that expressed the community’s concerns to the A&N administration and the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the A&N administration proceeded to issue official notifications in October 2022, designating the whole of Meroë (2.73 square kilometres, including the surrounding marine area) and Menchal (1.29 sq. km), along with a 13.75 sq. km area (including 6.67 sq. km. of water area within the baseline system) on Little Nicobar (140 sq. km), as wildlife sanctuaries.

Masking an ecological disaster

The selection of Meroë and Menchal Islands as conservation reserves for coral reefs and Megapode birds is arbitrary. Menchal does not have more than a pair or two of the endemic Megapode birds. Similarly, questions arise regarding the actual diversity and abundance of corals on Meroë Island.

Notably, the announcement of wildlife sanctuaries coincided with growing scrutiny and criticism from experts over the denotification of the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary for a

₹72,000-crore mega project on Great Nicobar, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.



‘The Shompen men and women consulted by the sub committee appointed by the NITI Aayog to gather information from the ground up, expressed a resolute desire to reside within their forest habitats undisturbed by outsiders’. Photo: Special Arrangement

Establishing exclusionary conservation areas in a region, which is already a paradise for biodiversity, stems from the fact that the champions of the mega project are aware of the extensive environmental and social damage that the project will entail. It will devastate about eight to 10 lakh evergreen forest trees, smother and gouge out scores of coral reefs found along Galathea Bay, destroy the nesting site for the globally endangered Leatherback sea turtle species, devastate hundreds of nesting mounds of Nicobar Megapodes, and kill as many crocodiles.

Furthermore, it will prevent the indigenous Great Nicobar islanders from returning to their pre-tsunami homeland where they husbanded pigs and chicken, cultivated coconut and betel nut

trees, and lived simple and gregarious lives. Most importantly, it will uproot three or more settlements of the Shompen (a 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group') and permanently destroy their foraging and hunting grounds.

The unilateral decision to establish wildlife sanctuaries disregards the islands' profound significance to the indigenous population. Their ancestral lands are unjustly perceived as "no-man's-land" to appease conservationists, investors, public opinion, and more.

Support earth's guardians

Globally, governments blatantly violate indigenous people's rights by evicting them from their ancestral lands, often under the guise of development, national interest, conservation projects, among others. Approximately 476 million indigenous peoples, constitute about 6% of the global population. Indigenous territories cover roughly 22% of the planet's land surface and harbour 80% of its biodiversity.

Indigenous peoples are the original guardians of our earth. The world must learn from their wisdom. Reason and justice dictate that in southern Nicobar, we should support and empower the islanders to continue to steward their ancestral territories, rather than robbing them of their lands, resources, lifeways, and worldviews.

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