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Cover: Mixed media illustration of a Blue bird and Sunbird. © Lakshmi Niranjana.



## All eyes on the island A book review of *The Great Nicobar Betrayal*

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I tried to stifle a yawn as my monotonic Physics teacher read out the formula of displacement from her notes.

$$\text{Thrust force} = p \times v \times g$$

“Where  $p$  is the density of the liquid,  $V$  is the volume of liquid displaced and  $g$  is the acceleration due to gravity.” I wrote it down in my notebook and tried assigning a mnemonic to commit it to memory.

As the seasons changed and my interest in environmental matters grew stronger, I learnt a new formula for displacement that involved different terms.

Displacement was now the sum total of a Transshipment port, an International Airport, a Power plant, and a Township; all coming together as the Great Nicobar mega project.

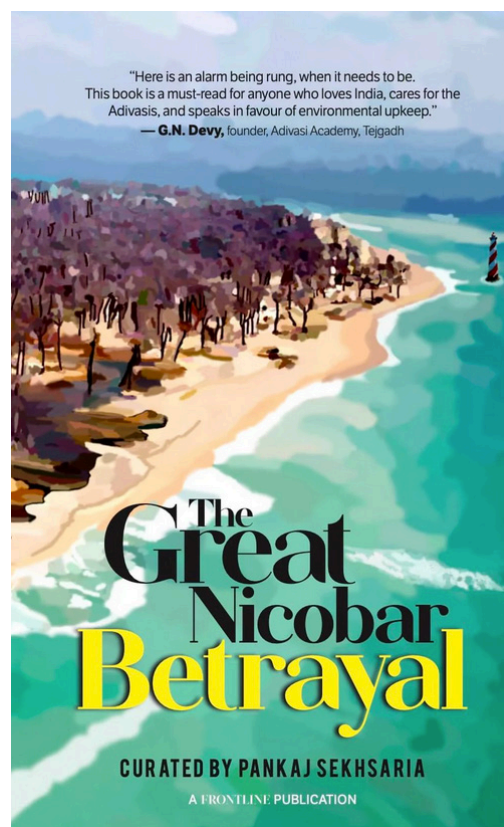
This is one formula that needs to be committed to public memory.

On Google Maps, one has to zoom in at least thrice for a clear view of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Tucked away in a remote corner of our planet, a few regions of the Indian archipelago are still home to pristine natural ecosystems due to the sea barrier and island conditions that limit mass entry and proliferation. The biodiversity that these islands hold is like no other. Its flora and fauna have deeply complex relationships with the island tribes and is one of the rarest places on Earth where there is an instinctive respect and understanding between humans, wildlife, and forests.

However, a series of decisions taken in mainland India threaten to throw this sacred connection off the course. The proposed site of the mega project in Great Nicobar sits on a zone that is prone to earthquakes, tsunamis and worst of all, apathy.

For those keen on understanding the effects of capitalism on natural ecosystems, *The Great Nicobar Betrayal* is a great place to start. It is a timely book of curated articles on the repercussions of the Great

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Nicobar mega project, weaved together masterfully by Pankaj Sekhsaria. The book explores multiple viewpoints of the project's impact from researchers, journalists, ecologists, and scientists. The story comes together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle to give the reader a full view of the havoc that is about to be inflicted on the island.

The Government of India through NITI Aayog had proposed the mega project in 2021 in a scale that appears humungous for the mainland itself. The project envisions port connectivity, infrastructural development, and employment opportunities for the inhabitants of the Great Nicobar Island, the last land mass in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. The project is priced at INR 72,000 crores with grand plans that would require around 130 sq.km of primary forests to be cleared.

It seems like the apocalypse is not a single event; it is a string of careless verdicts like these. Pankaj Sekhsaria introduces the islands, the project and throws light on the absurdities of the environmental assessments, convenient legal loopholes and criminal leniencies in forest and land clearances procured.

Most earthquakes originate in the margins of Great Nicobar. *'Following building codes is one thing but going ahead and building on a fault line is reckless'*, the authors, Janki Andharia, V Ramesh and Ravinder Dhiman point out.

To the sane, this is a risky proposition and the fault lines are not just wobbly tectonic plates.

A planned influx of around 3,50,000 people to an island that strains to meet demands of 8,000 people is sure to drive local tribals to extinction. Marooned on an island of worry, the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group – the Shompens and other tribes like the Nicobarese are left to fend for themselves. Manish Chandi shares snippets of his interactions with tribal leaders and families that have been displaced post the tsunami. Some tribal members lament that they have been lied to about the scope of the project and the damage from it is expected to be worse.

The articles in the book have been arranged in a such a way that they help the reader understand the linkages between them. For example, the irrationality

of compensatory afforestation in Haryana is mentioned in the earlier chapters by Sekhsaria with some authors like Ishika Ramakrishna driving the point home through further explanation. The outlined areas for forest diversion to the mainland include habitats of the Nicobar Long-Tailed Macaque and many other endemic species like the Nicobar Treeshrew. The forests themselves date back to the Pleistocene period and reducing them to a safari park in mainland India would be deplorable.

The frustrations of the authors are evident in the words that are peppered throughout their articles. Words like *absurdity, monumental folly, flawed judgment, economic peril, misadventure, lethal, disastrous, marginalised, misunderstood* and their variations feature across the book.

I tried to pick holes in the presentation of the book however this subject aligned with my confirmation bias on the predictability of decisions taken by people who wield power. Once this bias was recognised and kept aside, I felt that more stories on displaced tribal communities could have made the book more impactful to the uninitiated and moved them closer to the epicentre of the issue since displacement is fairly relatable. The concerns on ecological damage could have followed once a strong case on the irreversible loss of ancestral land was set. Each chapter could have also had their associated image for quicker visualization instead of placing them all towards the end of the book.

The format in which the book is presented with various angles to the issue seems like an ideal blueprint for understanding the total effects of infrastructural projects, mostly built with taxpayer money. **The Great Nicobar Betrayal** should find a good audience amongst those holding the slightest interest in environmentalism and one can positively hope that the book will bring the required focus to the issue of displacement of Great Nicobar's natural ecosystems and their custodians – the Shompens and Nicobarese.

Lastly, the timing of the book release is commendable. It works like an out-of-breath town crier arriving in the crowded places of our minds and city spaces to inform us of the happenings in our beloved archipelago.

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