

# India's plan for untouched Nicobar isles will be 'death sentence' for isolated tribe

**Exclusive: \$9bn port, airport and military base on Great Nicobar Island will cause 'genocide' of isolated Shompen, academics warn**

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Wed 7 Feb 2024 05.00 GMT

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The Shompen people of Great Nicobar Island will die if they come into contact with outsiders under the 'Hong Kong of India' project, say experts. Photograph: Anthropological Survey of India

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Academics from around the world have urged India to cancel a huge construction project on Great Nicobar Island, warning it would be “a death sentence” for the Shompen hunter-gatherer people who live there.

The \$9bn (£7bn) port project, planned to transform the Indian Ocean island of 8,000 inhabitants into what has been called the “Hong Kong of India”, includes the construction of an international shipping terminal, airport, power plant, military base and industrial park. It will also develop tourism.

In an open letter to the Indian president, Droupadi Murmu, published on Wednesday, 39 scholars from from 13 countries have warned: “If the project goes ahead, even in a limited form, we believe it will be a death sentence for the Shompen, tantamount to the international crime of genocide.”



Between 100 and 400 Shompen live on Great Nicobar, a thickly forested 900 sq km (350 sq mile) island, about 800 miles east of Chennai in India and only 93 miles north-west of Aceh, on the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

The Shompen rely on the rainforest for their existence and have little contact with the outside world. Isolated for so long, the academics believe they could die from disease if they come into contact with outsiders.

There is little mention in the government’s plans of what will happen to the Shompen and the Nicobarese people, who also live on the island, other than to state that Indigenous people can be relocated “if required”. The Nicobarese are less isolated than the Shompen and considered less vulnerable.

Last year, 70 former government officials and ambassadors wrote to the president saying the project would “virtually destroy the unique ecology of this island and the habitat of vulnerable tribal groups”.



A Shompen boy. The project would destroy much of the forest the Indigenous people rely on and leave them vulnerable to disease, say rights groups. Photograph: Anthropological Survey of India

The government sees the project as vital for security and defence, given the island's strategic location in the Indian Ocean, countering China's growing

presence in the region. Great Nicobar, along with the Andaman Islands, is on one of the world's busiest sea routes.

The cabinet is expected to approve the project in the coming months and construction of the port in Galathea Bay could begin before the end of 2024. The port would have the capacity to handle 16m shipping containers a year and could be operational by 2028. The Ministry of Environment has already given approval for 850,000 trees to be felled on the island.

Sarbananda Sonowal, minister for ports, shipping and waterways, told Indian media: “This project will be a major landmark in developing India to become a self-assured and self-reliant nation and will support the economic development of the country.”

The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes, an Indian constitutional body, said it was not consulted about the project, which it said would “adversely impact the lives of the local tribals”, according to media reports.

Environmentalists have also expressed concerns about the impact on biodiversity and ecology. Great Nicobar is home to several endemic species, including long-tailed macaques, treeshrews and scops owls. Galathea is a nesting area for leatherback sea turtles.

Petitions filed by the Conservation Action Trust, a Mumbai environmental organisation, to the National Green Tribunal, the statutory body that handles environmental disputes, were rejected in April. “The tribunal order said that it would not interfere with the clearances and that any issues and doubts had been taken care of by the ministries,” said Debi Goenka, founder of the trust.

Arjun Munda, tribal affairs minister, said: “Each aspect of this project was looked at very seriously by various ministries ... the project will be executed with utmost precautions to maintain the sanctity of the place and its people.”

Munda added: “There are teams from various ministries who are on the ground just to ensure the success of this project without disturbing its rich biodiversity and its people.”



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Mark Levene, emeritus fellow in history at Southampton University, a signatory to the letter, said: “We would not write if we were not being entirely realistic about what the consequences of this proposed project would be for the Shompen, however advanced or not the development of the project.”

A spokesperson for human rights group Survival International said: “The Shompen are nomadic and have clearly defined territories. Four of their semi-permanent settlements are set to be directly devastated by the project, along with their southern hunting and foraging territories.

“The Shompen will undoubtedly try to move away from the area destroyed, but there will be little space for them to go. To avoid a genocide, this deadly mega-project must be scrapped.”

The Indian government has been approached for comment.