Marmugoa Port Dredging Project

What is the issue?

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- Dredging to deepen the estuarine natural harbour of Mormuga, Goa was started in early 2016.
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- The massiveness of the projects threatened the environment and fishing in the region, triggering public outrage.
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- Subsepuently ‘National Green Tribunal’ gave its verdict that barred further work in September 2016, which was later upheld by the Supreme Court.
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What was the need of a deep navigational channel?

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- Mormugao Port, a major port under the Ministry of Shipping has a 14 m draft canal depth.
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- It imports 12 million tonnes of coal annually and aims to raise this figure to 51 million tonnes by 2030.
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- So deepening the shipping channel to a depth of 19.5m is necessary to to facilitate the entry of ‘capesize vessals’.
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- Currently, only private ports have depths of 18 m or more, and a deeper draft is the first step towards port expansion.
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- The overall EXIM (export-import) boost due to better transport economics is being touted as a net-positive.
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What was the method proposed to deepen?

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- Capital dredging was being done.
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- It involves tearing up the seabed and extracting its sediments to create greater depth.
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- This is different from maintenance dredging in which there is no sediment extraction.
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- About 15 million cubic metres of Seabed was to be dredged, and an 18 km-long navigational channel was to be deepened.
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- Some 65% of the work had been completed by September 2016.
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Why was the project opposed?

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- There was no clarity on whether a geomorphological study of the shipping channel undertaken.
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- The study on the ‘benthic activity’ of the deep ocean ecology in the region wasn’t brought out.
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- As there is a risk of sediment erosion form the estuaries into the trenches created by dredging, these aspects needs further study.
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- The approval of the Expert Appraisal Committee (EAC) was not taken.
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- Concerns flagged by ‘Goa Coastal zone Management Authorities’ were ignored.
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- ‘Ministry of Environment’ bypassed the mandatory public hearing before project commencement.
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- It was feared that aquatic life, sea bed ecosystem and livelihoods of fishermen would be affected.
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- Also, it was felt that subsequent infrastructure upgrades like roads, increased traffic and store houses needed scrutiny.
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What was the Tribunal's verdict?

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- NGT passed its final order in spetember 2016, accusing the port authorities of several irregularities and banned further work.
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- It noted that mandatory provisions were treated as mere formalities as work had commenced even before Environmental Clearance was sought.
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- Authorities were held responsibly for irreversiblily damaging the environment and geomorphology of the sea-bead.
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- The MoEF's decision to bypass public consultation was labelled arbitrary and a violation of norms.
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- The tribunal stressed that policy or administrative decisions cannot bypass or subvert statutory provisions of existing acts.
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- The importance of transparency and accountability in public administration was highlighted.
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What is the situation now?

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- A committee has been appointed by by the tribunal to monitor maintenance dredging at the port.
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- Following the NGT order, the public hearing finally took place in March 2017.
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- The Tribunal is now hearing a matter related to the restoration of the seabed and new set of recommendations is expected.

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Source: The Indian Express

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