

## The vanishing aborigines of the Andaman and Nicobar islands

The Andaman and Nicobar islands have been the home of 14 aboriginal tribes: 12 tribes of negritto origin, being the early inhabitants of the Andaman islands and 2 mongoloid tribes, viz. the Nicobarese and Shompens inhabiting the Nicobars. It is widely accepted by anthropologists and historians that the negritto aborigines represent one of the primitive stocks of *Homo sapiens* that migrated on to these islands during prehistory<sup>1</sup>. Currently, representatives of this ancient stock do not exist anywhere else in Asia. The inhabitants of the Nicobar islands on the other hand are mongoloid, whose ancestry has been traced to Malay and Burmese<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly, the Shompens on the Great Nicobar island, a forest-dwelling tribe believed to have emerged from the same stock as that of the Nicobarese, clearly show evidence of mixing of Malay, Negritto and Dravidian races<sup>3</sup>. How and when exactly these aborigines reached the islands is still unclear. Further, whether there was any sympatry amongst the negritto and mongoloid aborigines in the past is also not known. However, what is known is that in recent history, as revealed since the writings of Ptolemy, a Roman geographer of the 2nd century AD, the 2 races have remained isolated from each other in the Andaman and Nicobar islands separated by the vast ten degree channel<sup>1</sup>.

Whereas there are certain similarities in the primitive culture of the inhabitants of the islands such as semi-nomadism, a few striking differences within and between the races can be of interest to human ecologists and biogeographers. The tribes on both the Andamans and Nicobars (except the Jarawas) continue to make and use boats for transport. The Jarawas however, neither make nor use boats. Instead, they use primitive rafts<sup>4</sup>. It is said that the Andamanese use names of flowers as maiden names for girls in their community<sup>1</sup>. Interestingly, in the Nicobarese vocabulary, there is no word that refers to flowers<sup>2</sup>. A third curious aspect is the range of an endemic lizard *Phelsuma andamanense* that is coincident with that of the negrittos and possibly a commensal<sup>5</sup>. Except the single species in the Andamans, the genus is restricted in range to South Africa and the Indian Ocean islands off the African coast<sup>6</sup>. Even in

Africa, the genus has spread along the east coast aided by humans<sup>7</sup>.

The primary concern is nevertheless the recent extinction of certain tribes, decline in the numbers of others, and the continued hostility of certain tribes to all alien humans. Although these issues have been discussed considerably, they still call for some scientific reasoning. To begin with, it must be mentioned that the Nicobarese are not to be considered aborigines anymore as they are civilized and amount to 12% of the entire human population of the Andaman and Nicobar islands<sup>8</sup>. Historically, the Nicobarese have been in contact with the outside world by way of trade. Descriptions of the aboriginal Nicobarese are available since the 2nd century AD. The Nicobarese had established trade links with the Chinese (700 AD), Arabs (800 AD) and Dravidian-Cholas (1000 AD). There are reports of Christian missionaries visiting the Nicobar islands since the 17th century<sup>2</sup>. More than two hundred years of French, Danish, Austrian and British influence has left over 90% of the population christianised. Even the nearly 200 Shompens who live isolated in the forest of the Great Nicobar island are now approachable responding to the humanitarian treatment extended by the government.

The negritto Andamanese have on the contrary resisted all attempts to 'civilize' them since 1790 when the first British settlement was established in Port Blair<sup>1</sup>. The British attributed the hostile attitude of these aborigines to the constant harassment by Malay pirates who had from time to time indulged in taking away Andamanese men, women and children as slaves to their country. Whatever the reason for aborigine hostility be, British attempts to colonize the Andamans and the subsequent establishment of the penal settlement (1858-1945) was the first devastating influence on these tribes. Besides direct killing of aborigines by British officers and soldiers, there were indirect destructive influences as well. Significant amongst these was the inception of the 'Andaman Homes' in 1863 wherein the British captured and kept aborigines, fed them and trained them to do agriculture, etc. The captives who were maintained in these homes unfor-

tunately contracted a variety of contagious diseases including syphilis and measles from their ex-convict caretakers<sup>1</sup>. Records indicate high infant mortality both in the Andaman Homes and forests (infected captives managed to escape spreading the diseases). By 1880, the entire coast was deserted due to death of the aborigines. It is mentioned that at the end of the 19th century the Andamanese were just a sick remnant race<sup>1</sup>.

Estimates of Andamanese aborigines in 1858 had put the total population at 4800 distributed amongst 12 tribes, viz. *Chariar*, *Kora*, *Toba*, *Yere*, *Kede*, *Juwai*, *Kol*, *Bojigyab*, *Bea*, *Balawa*, *Onge* and *Jarawa*. *Kol* and *Chariar* were the least numerous (100 individuals each). *Yere* and *Onge* numbered 700 each and the *Jarawa* 600. However, by 1921 the tribe *Kol* had disappeared. There is no mention of *Bea* and *Juwai* in 1931. By 1951 the total population of Andamanese aborigines was put at a mere 233 - *Onge*, 150; *Jarawa*, 50 and *Kede*, 33 after the Japanese invasion and bombing during the World War II (between 1942 and 1945) had taken its toll<sup>1</sup>.

Currently, the human population on the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar islands is over 200,000. Of these the Nicobarese alone amount to 12% (26,000)<sup>8</sup>. The five extant aboriginal tribes, viz. the Shompens, Onges, Sentinelese, Jarawas and Great Andamanese together number less than a 1000. The rest are ex-army settlers, traders from Tamil Nadu, labourers from Ranchi, settlers from Bangladesh, government officials and defense personnel. The rapidly increasing population of immigrants has put considerable pressure on the islands for agriculture and development. External pressure on the islands for international tourism is slowly transforming Port Blair into a 'fun fare'.

Extraction of timber has also had a major impact on the islands. A government-run saw mill at Chatham, incidentally one of the largest in Asia, and another 30 wood-based industries on the islands together demand 189,200 cubic meter wood per annum<sup>9</sup>. The result of such activities is that the aborigines have been displaced from their original habitat and thrust into a series of small tribal reserves<sup>10</sup> (Table 1).

## SCIENTIFIC CORRESPONDENCE

Table 1. Density and distribution of aborigines on the Andaman and Nicobar islands

Locality	Reserve area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Tribe	Approximate population
Great Nicobar	119	Shompen	200
Little Andaman	252	Onge	98
Sentinel	60	Sentinelese	250
Strait island	0.60	Great Andamanese	36
West Coast of Middle and South Andaman	640	Jarawa	200

Source: Anon<sup>8</sup> and Pande *et al.*<sup>10</sup>.

Of these aborigines, the Great Andamanese are already perishing—Strait island is not their original habitat. They were translocated<sup>8</sup> there in 1968. The Onges and Shompen have accepted the government aid and are now in friendly terms and contact with it accepting medical care, food and clothing. The Jarawas and Sentinelese largely continue to be hostile—the Jarawas being the worst in this regard.

The word *Jarawa* means the 'other people' in the Andamanese language. This tribe of hunter-gatherers is entirely dependent on the forest for its livelihood. Jarawas do not cultivate. They are known to have been hostile towards the other tribes of the Andamans. *Jarawa*-immigrant conflicts have largely been where and when the latter destroyed forests or wandered into their hunting territories<sup>4,8</sup>. Although old records do not always distinguish between the Jarawas and the other Andamanese tribes, they do mention the British having employed aborigines in clearing forests for the settlers<sup>1</sup>. Such a forced act would have been really demeaning to those natives who looked unto forests as their habitat.

The Andaman Trunk Road connecting Port Blair with Diglipur has not only destroyed forests, but also severely restricted the movement of the Jarawas, limiting their territory to the western side<sup>10</sup>. The Jarawas are known to move eastwards in summer when there is shortage of freshwater along the west coast (the rivers in the South and Middle Andamans drain eastwards). Moreover, strictly being hunter-gatherers, they need more space to track the shifting mosaic of natural animal and plant food. The current design of reserves is therefore

faulty as it inhibits their natural movements.

The aborigine-immigrant conflicts in the Andamans are not different from that we experience in our wildlife reserves between elephants, tigers or lions and humans. The present, rather 'humane' and exclusively anthropological approach to manage the aborigines is certainly not the best. Having existed on these islands as 'top carnivores' without competition from any large predator except possibly the crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*) the aborigines are bound to be hostile to all intruders. The conservation of these tribes in a near-pristine state, if at all we wish to, thus becomes an issue of 'wildlife management'. The Andamanese aborigines have specialized food habits too. Attempts to make them cultivate were not very successful, at least in the past<sup>1</sup>. That the Jarawas have not taken to hunting the introduced spotted deer (*Axis axis*)<sup>4</sup> is in itself an indication of their rigid food habits.

For developing an effective management strategy of the still hostile Andamanese, we need to understand the factors which limited their past distribution. We need to know their prehistory. It is time that we undertook archaeological and palaeontological studies in areas where these aborigines lived in the past. Studies of the shell-middens in the adjacent Malay peninsula and Sumatra have revealed a lot about the prehistory of the Indonesian aborigines<sup>11</sup>. Shell-middens have been discovered in the Andamans as well<sup>1</sup>. Further, during a recent visit, I saw extensive grasslands on the hills of certain islands in the Nicobar. Considering the low elevation of these hills and the high rainfall (3000 mm per year) in the

islands, it is quite probable that the grasslands are results of some past human activity that is not recorded in history. My submission therefore is that we put to best use the ecological, anthropological, archaeological and palaeontological expertise that is currently available in India and devise a rather holistic management strategy together for both the aborigine and other forms of the islands' biodiversity. If carefully done, the entire set of islands can prove to be the best example of the Man and Biosphere concept anywhere in the world.

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R. J. RANJIT DANIELS

*M. S. Swaminathan Research Foundation,  
3rd Cross Street,  
Taramani Institutional Area,  
Madras 600 113, India*