

Aju Mukhopadhyay

Karala

India

ajum24@gmail.com

### Tribal Life in Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Jarawa Focussed

#### Abstract

The tribes came to live in Andaman and Nicobar islands some 70000 or more years ago. They possess unique fragments of DNA which show that they remained in isolation from the entire world for at least 20000 years. With short stature, very dark complexion and peppercorn curly hair, they are grouped as Negritos of Africa or are called the Stone Age inhabitants, related to African Pygmies. While Great Andamanese, Onge, Sentinelese and Jarawa are claimed to belong to Negrito origin Nicobarese and Shompen are of Mongoloid origin. Contrary to popular belief that humans originated from the African continent, a recent study suggests that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the South Asian Islands witnessed the genesis of mankind for in situ development of the tribes there, isolated and separated from Africa.

Beginning with the British rule continuing through the Free Indian administration these tribes are regularly persecuted to give up their original culture and to mix up with the mainstream of the modern population.

Remembering them perhaps as our revered first humans we should help them keep their identities, maintain their culture and civilisation. All tribal people live as representatives of another world distinct in their belief and culture.

## Keywords

Tribe, Negrito, Mongoloid, Jarawa

## Andaman and Nicobar: Ecology and Environment

25 million or more years old rainforest with 150 feet tall bullet-wood trees along with other varieties of them created a drippy deep dark canopy over the Andaman and Nicobar islands known as the Andaman archipelago, consisting of 572 islands in an area of 8249 sq. km. Occasional floods, even Tsunami acted as periodic catharsis, serving to nourish the Great Evergreen Rainforests which are the habitats of most ancient hunter-gatherers of the world among other tribes. Dense jungle used to allow the monsoon rains to drip slowly into earth, replenishing the water table, protecting all the living beings in the islands. The islands contain coral reefs, mangroves, tropical forests and coastal ecosystems of great value, diversity and beauty. Of the large number of islands 11 are inhabited.

## Antiquity and other characteristics of the Andaman Tribes

The Andaman tribes came to live there some 60000 or more years ago. They possess unique fragments of DNA which show that they remained in isolation from the entire outside world for at least 20000 years. With short stature, very dark complexion and peppercorn curly hair, they are grouped as Negritos of Africa, they are also called the Stone Age inhabitants, related to African Pygmies. They came, it is presumed, during the ice ages but when the earth warmed up, melting glaciers and raising the sea level, they became stranded there and never thought of leaving again. It may be that they were the first human beings settled in the region, obviously the first humans of Asia. The old concept of Africa being the origin of human birth has been

questioned and revised by modern researchers. Some scholars have reported that Andaman tribes may be the clue and their habitats may be the sites for the birth of first humans.

“Contrary to the popular belief that humans originated from the African continent, a study by an anthropologist from Allahabad University (AU) among others, suggests that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and the South Asian Islands witnessed the genesis of mankind.

“According to Prof Vijoy Shankar Sahay, HOD of the department of Anthropology of AU the twin island groups along with Malaysia, Philippines, Papua and New Guinea, Australia and the Tasmania were among the regions where the earlier mankind evolved and spread to various parts of the world.

“The physical evidence of the four Andaman tribes including Andamanies, Jarawa, Sentinelese and Onge show that the hypothesis propounded by Haeckle that ‘the genesis of human race has to be from a region of tropical country’ stands true. Among these Jarawa and Sentinelese are in the purest form, untouched by the modern amenities and racial mixing, revealed Prof Sahay.

“Detailing about the evidence which strengthens his findings Sahay said, ‘Darwin’s theory about the evolution of mankind had a missing link between ape and man which was solved by Haeckle who named this missing link as ‘Phecanthropus’, ‘the ape man’.

“He further said that a Danish anthropologist, Eugenedubois, found out a fossil at Java Island, skull of which had the cranium capacity (cc) of 800 cc. ‘This was certainly skull of the ‘ape man’ as skull cc of Anthropological ape ranges from 300-600 cc whereas that of human is 1000-1600 cc’, said Sahay.

“When we closely study the physical appearance of Sentinelese and Jarawa tribes we find that the skin of these tribes are totally hairless and smooth that too in such an

inhospitable ecology’, said Sahay, ‘This suggests that the tribes of Andaman and Nicobar region are the offspring of early human race’, he added.”<sup>1</sup>

Apart from the above interview in Times of India, the result was obtained by a research group of scientists that the tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands evolved in situ there independent of the African varieties.

“The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are inhabited by six indigenous tribal populations. Our previous work (1) suggested that Andamanese “Negritos” have closer affinities with Asian than with African populations and that the Nicobarese have close genetic affinities to South East Asians. In a parallel study by Endicott *et al.* (2), which also suggested Asian affinities for the mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) lineages of the Andamanese, analyses of museum specimens related the two major lineage groups on the islands with haplogroups M2 and M4, which are found commonly throughout India (3-5). Analysis of a hypervariable sequence (HVS-I) motif indicated a link with Papuan populations (1). These links, however, relied on nucleotide positions in the control region of mtDNA that are known to be hypervariable. To clarify the phylogenetic position of the mtDNA lineages of the Andaman Islanders, we analyzed the complete mtDNA sequence of five Onge, five Great Andamanese, and five Nicobarese individuals.

“Analysis of the Onge and Great Andamanese complete mtDNA sequences revealed the existence of two previously uncharacterized clades, which we named M31 and M32 (Fig. 1). Analysis of the complete mtDNA sequences shows that none of the coding region mutations defining these two haplogroups overlaps with the known Indian or East Asian mtDNA haplogroups (1-5). In our survey of 6500 mtDNA sequences from mainland India, none of the M lineages carried the coding region mutations specific to M31 and M32 (6). Furthermore, none of

the haplogroup M complete sequences reported so far share any of the mutations that define M31 and M32, suggesting that these two haplogroups are likely to have evolved in situ on these islands. . . .

“Our data indicate that two ancient maternal lineages, M31 and M32 in the Onge and the Great Andamanese, have evolved in the Andaman Islands independently from other South and Southeast Asian populations. These lineages have likely been isolated since the initial penetration of the northern coastal areas of the Indian Ocean by anatomically modern humans, in their out-of-Africa migration ~50 to 70 thousand years ago. In contrast, the Nicobarese show a close genetic relation with populations in Southeast Asia, suggesting their recent arrival from the east during the past 18 thousand years.” (Reconstructing the Origin of Andaman Islanders) 2

Descendants of their forefathers are the present islanders divided into four main tribal groups: The Great Andamanese, Onge of Little Andaman, Jarawa and Sentinelese. Two more may be added, Nicobarese and Shompens to name the six groups. Their language may be the last representative of the languages belonging to Neolithic times in South East Asia which are in a very critical condition in the sense that the latest generations of the tribes are not well conversant with their Mother Tongue and their oldest surviving members are succumbing to death, one after the other.

In Vanishing Voices of the Great Andamanese (VOGA) we get:

“The Andamanese represent the last survivors of the pre-Neolithic population of Southeast Asia. Genetic research (Thangaraj et al, 2005) indicates that the Andamanese tribes are the remnants of the first migration from Africa that took place 70,000 years ago.” 3

And,

“The Present Great Andamanese is a mixed language of four different but mutually intelligible varieties of the recently discovered the sixth language family India. Hence it can be called Mixed Great Andamanese [MGA]. The Great Andamanese family was represented by ten different languages which are extinct now and remain only in the form of MGA which has drawn its sources from Sare, Jeru, Khora and Bo languages of the North Andaman. The last speakers of Khora and Bo were lost to us in the last two years.”<sup>3</sup>

Professor Anvita Abbi, Chairperson, Centre For Linguistics School of language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India, reported on 8.11.2009 that the last speaker of the Khora variety of the Great Andamanese language Boro Sr. (it is not spelt Burrow as the administration informs us) is no more. She is survived by three sons and one daughter and no one among them speaks the variety she did. It is another great loss to the diversity of civilization of the country.<sup>4</sup>

Besides the supposed Negritos there are two tribes of Mongoloid origin; Nicobarese and Shompen. Those belonging to the Mongoloid origin are two tribes: The Shompens, who live in the Great Nicobar Island are a semi-nomadic people. They wander in their forest and coastal habitat in search of fruits and games. There are two territorial groups among the Shompens; the habitat of Shompens is the Great Nicobar which is the largest among the Nicobar group of Islands. The Shompens have two divisions, the smaller division being known as Mawa Shompens. They inhabit areas very close to the coastal region along the river valleys. They are very shy. They are quite intimate with the Nicobarese and of the major group of Shompens. The hostile Shompens are living in Alexendra and Galathia river areas and also on the east coast of the area in the interior of the island. In the past, frequent attacks are believed to have been made on the Mawa Shompens by the hostile Shompens. But then such hostility has been stopped. It is

probably because they have been largely reduced by diseases and they are physically very weak. With the establishment of the settlement of Campbell Bay in Great Nicobar Shompens have been visiting the settlers and they are gradually shaking off their shyness and indifferent attitude towards the civilised people. 5

### Tribal Trait

The islanders were not cannibals but they killed who landed on their soil or tried to steal their original possessions. Roaming in small groups from shore to forest, their men hunting turtles, pigs, monitor lizards and fishes with spears, bows and arrows, collecting honey and their women gathering tubers, fruits, clams and catching fishes in nets; they lived naked in the lap of nature up to almost the recent time. Some of them still live so for they are not complex enough to wear dresses other than apparels to protect their skin and keep their bodies guarded. They had a complex mythology, as if living with the spirits, which acted on them and on nature.

Anthropologists have found that their botanical, zoological and medicinal knowledge is phenomenal. Their relationship with nature is symbiotic. They conserve nature and environment. They controlled population too. Their faiths and behaviour were so tuned to nature that they survived for millennia whereas many island cultures like the Easter Island died out in time. When outsiders first came upon them, they were surprised to find their shining bodies, white teeth, robust health and physical prowess, if not felled by their arrows.

### Modern History of the Tribal Land

Within half a century of British occupation and establishment of penal colony for the rebels in 1858, the population of the aboriginals reduced from 8000 to 600 due mainly to their coming in contact with the civilised people who carried different germs, themselves being immune from them but contaminating the pristine lives. Densely populated agricultural societies are the

breeding grounds of different killer germs which were unknown to these islanders. Besides death by disease they were killed by the colonizers in good numbers. Gradually the Free Government of India too offered almost similar treatment to the original residents of the islands; though not by killing but by trying to tame them by bringing them into the mainstream of their civilised society through series of expeditions, as if they became the civilised people's burden though it is true that all the civilised Governments, societies and people who came in touch with them were highly uncivilised in their impure unnatural state.

After the Indian independence in 1947 with the division of the country and huge influx of refugees, the Andaman group of islands became flooded with settlers from the mainland, numbering more than five lakhs, whereas the original forest dwellers were reduced to less than 500.

Presently there are four groups of aboriginals, supposed to be mainly of Negrito origin or related to it, who live in different islands occupying different parts of them: the Great Andamanese, of Mongoloid variety numbering about 45 live in Strait Island after they perished in large numbers while living in major portion of the western coast of South Andaman. Onge, numbering about 100, live in Little Andaman or Hut Bay Island and Dugong Creek. They too suffered setback; 600 in 1911 reduced to the present position. Jarawa, numbering about 250, live in the Middle and South Andaman, moving mainly from south to north and east to west after their rivals, the Great Andamanese, evacuated the area by death. The Sentinelese live in the North Sentinel Island.

For the first time 60 Shompens of the Great Nicobarese Island voted in the Lok Sabha election in April, 2014. Shompens had a population of 229 in the last census. For obvious

reasons it has never been possible to arrive at the exact population and demographic relationship of the A & N Tribe.

A K Pandey, who teaches anthropology at Mahatama Gandhi Government College in the Islands, differed from the Government official. “The population of the Jarawas, Sentinelese and Shompens can only be estimated. They are still hostile to outsiders,” says Pandey. Pandey, who has extensively researched the tribes and is in contact with different groups of tribes, says, “Nicobarese tribe came in contact with outsiders and developed and settled in towns and cities. It was assessed that nearly 250 Nicobarese people died in the Tsunami, but not a single person from the other tribes is reported to have died.” 6

Massive burning of trees to clear the ground for cultivation and housing, extracting timber from the forests for export and other domestic uses like road making and urbanisation robbed the archipelago of its natural resources and forest wealth; ruin is the word very appropriate here. Now the rain runs from the denuded hill sides resulting in depletion of water table and reducing the productivity of the land and the runoff smothers surrounding coral belt with silt. Corals serve as nurseries for many oceanic species including varieties of fishes. Besides man-made destruction, 2004 Tsunami too destroyed much of coral resources of the Andamans. It must be said here that though good loss of lives and property was reported from the region during the last Tsunami, none of the aboriginals suffered loss of life, so tuned are they to the nature. Recent satellite pictures show that the only part of Jarawa reserve has the pristine forest the end of which will compel the settlers back to the mainland. If the jarawas vanish their land too will not remain sustainable for the civilised people to live.

We have a lesson from history: When Tikal ruler of Mayan Civilisation, Jasaw Chan K’awiil, who ruled in the eighth century AD, won over his oldest rivals, he began rebuilding his city.

Temple was a symbol of their prosperity. He began building huge temples with timber from trees, even 200 years old. The massive hacking down of logwood did upset the ecological balance- “When you clear all the forests, it changes the hydrological cycle. With no trees, you lose water retention in the soil or aquifers so the ground dries up and then there is less transpiration, so therefore less rainfall as well,” a learned botanist with abiding interest in ancient civilisation opined. There were three droughts between 810 and 910 AD resulting in crop failure, mal-nutrition, disease and competition for resources causing warfare of different scales; a socio-political upheaval. The ultimate result was that the huge excavation at the Mayan site in Guatemala, Mexico, led to discovery of massive death due to disease, mal-nutrition and hunger. It has been observed that the Mayan civilization was ruined due mainly to absence of wood.

In our country roads through forests, poaching, deforesting, tourism and battles between the rebels and ruling armed raiders are reducing the original inhabitants and trees. More than half of Indian forests have gone since 1973 and with it the animals and men that protect and nourish the forest. Massive root system in forest conserves water. Most of our rivers are born in forests and hills.

Not only in Andamans, if the situation continues we shall meet with the ruin everywhere.

Jarawa

The Great Andamanese, specially its Aka-Bea tribe, known as hostile Andamanese, always have bitter hostility with jarawas. They named them Jarawa or Jangil, meaning strangers. Jarawas call themselves, wrote George Weber, Ya-eng-nga. Eng-nga means human beings. Onge tribe call themselves En-nge. Jarawas and Onges have some affinities. Further explanations from different sources are:

At one time Jarawas were more numerous and powerful than they are now,

living in the southern and western part of Port Blair and much of the neighbouring interior of the south Andaman, said Aka-Bea-da. As soon as the British had a contact with them in 1790, they withdrew from Port Blair area. They are very sensitive to their territory and no sooner than others visit or occupy their areas they shift to the other places. A nomadic tribe, they move in bands of 40, 50 people in temporary huts but construct permanent ones where they remain for longer period. Besides hunting and gathering fruits, nuts and roots, throughout the summer they collect non-perishable food like honey. Smearing a paste of leaves on their bodies to repel bees, they collect honey and keep it in curved wooden barrels buried underground.

They are an ever fighter tribe. In 1872 the Jarawas had gone on attack by raiding the settlements at Port Blair. The year marks the beginning of what the British called the Jarawa War which actually continued till 1997 after which they gradually stepped into the net of the allurers, the Government agents.

The latest great assault on them has been the construction of the Great Andaman Trunk Road through the heart of the Jarawa reserve. When the Government of India began constructing the GAT Road in 1970s Jarawas vehemently resisted; kidnapping, harassing and wounding the construction workers and others. Later, as detailed in an article published in January 2010 by Tony Perrottet, whenever the tourists approached their reserve by bus, a trio of women, naked except fringes of red string around their wastes, stood on their path protesting and left after being abused by the bus people, to be followed by some others in a similar way after some time. Gradually they became weaker fighting with greater mechanical force of the Government and established institutes which stepped into their nets committing various vices. Earlier, up to 1997, they resisted landing on their soil or approaching them by outsiders, killing them by arrows which the Sentinelese still do for which no one so far has been able to tame them.

Jangils living in Rutland Island, lying just off the south coast of Southern Great Andaman, were not the Jarawas exactly. Researchers have found that they were more akin to Sentinelese or Onges than Jarawas. They perhaps occupied the main south Andaman before the coming of the Aka-Bea tribe and gradually left for Rutland, a dry sandy island with bushy jungle. Jangil also has a similar meaning as Jarawa. By 1920 the British expedition team found no human beings in Rutland Island. By 1931 they were completely perished.

After the gradual destruction of most of the Great Andaman tribes, Jarawas occupying middle and southern Andaman, spread to occupy the place of the former tribes towards the western shore. Jarawa has been classified as the Ongan branch of the Andamanese language. The Government policy has been to define the language code of the Jarawas.

#### Policy on Jarawa Tribe

After long deliberations by expert committees, as advised by the Calcutta High Court, the Government of India formulated the policy for the welfare of the Jarawas in 2004.

A policy of maximum autonomy to the Jarawas with minimum and regulated intervention was adopted. No attempts to bring them to the mainstream society against their conscious will or no attempts would be made to rehabilitate them in separate islands / locations. The quality of intervention with Jarawas would be managed with care and sensitivity. No exploitation of natural resources within the Jarawa reserve by any non-tribal including Government agencies would be allowed. Provisions of A&N Islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation, 1956 would be enforced more effectively. It provided many other Dos and Do Nots.

It was decided that the traditional knowledge of Jarawas including ethno-medicine should all be preserved and documented. The Jarawas should not be provided food which is alien to their normal dietary habits. Traffic on Andaman Trunk Road would be regulated strictly, limiting the

traffic to the essential purposes of public transport; supplies and emergency evacuation of patients to ensure that it is an innocent and harmless passage and not a source of trouble to Jarawas. In 2008 the Tourism Department of the Andaman and Nicobar Inland Administration issued fresh warnings towards maintenance of law and order and rules towards the Jarawas. In spite of orders, rules and measures formulated they are being flouted by most of the people who matter, it is said, due mainly to indulgence and lack of discipline by the local administration.

The Andaman Trunk Road is the greatest menace of all. 500 tourists are carried through the reserve daily who intrude in Jarawa reserve, exchange commodities, take their photos and some even sexually exploit the Jarawa women, it has been reported. Indian Travel company, Barefoot, established a Resort near the jarawa reserve to cash on the deteriorating situation for fun and earning money. All interactions are taking place and autochthons are regularly coming out in the bazaar, hospital and other areas of the settlers. About the Andaman Trunk Road Gopalkrishna Gandhi, a former administrator, diplomat and Governor wrote in an article,

“Before we begin to teach the Jarawa the value of roads that bring into their forest air diesel fumes, chips, gutka and film songs, and the word ‘lo’, may we not want to learn from them their word for ‘na’? And why a road can intrude rather than help? . . . It is to rob the Jarawa of choice and change their lives for all time. It is to do something a republic is not meant to do, certainly not the Republic of India.”<sup>7</sup>

The Jarawas being extremely sensitive to outsiders suffered from epidemics of measles, influenza and tuberculosis, as the other tribes, as soon they came in contact with them. Poachers are killing their games and stealing their food like honey. They are surrounding the islands, harvesting corals, even destroying them in the process.

The number of original islanders in Andaman and Nicobar islands where Shompen and Nicobarese are the main dwellers have been so flooded by the mainlanders that their presence is one or less than that to hundred of the outsiders.

Among all disturbing fetures there are some encouraging points to note on the way despite the negative actions taken by some self interested groups of people. The population of Jarawa community has shown slight improvement; it is now between 300 and 350. There has been further research on their language by an enthusiast researcher, as Manash Pratim Gohain reports:

“Despite bureaucratic hurdles and financial hardships, a JNU student became the first student to complete a PhD on the Jarawa tribe of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. . .

“On the significance of the research, Abbi said, ‘This is the first and only document on Jarawa language. It is significant as for the first time we came to know of the structure of the language and opened world of looking into Austronesian language family.’ 8

#### Unfriendly Attitude towards the Adivasi People

Deforestation and forest degradation has affected a large proportion of the islands, though they are still one of India's heavily forested territories. Coral reefs have faced serious damage, especially around the increasingly urbanised islands. Considerable portions of the mangroves have also been destroyed. The piracy of indigenous knowledge and biological resources of such indegenous pristine groups by governments, scientific establishments, and corporations, has been going on all over the world.

Indigenous peoples in the islands are also suffering from the imposition of the administration's views on development. Attempts go on to "befriend" the hostile Jarawa and Sentinelese tribes, the eventual aim being to bring them to the "mainstream". The consequent loss of identity, culture, and knowledge appears to be inconsequential to the islands' administrators. And there is

the further benefit of being corrupted by the holy touch of the so called highly evolved mainstream people who are constantly degrading the resources and values of the tribal people and their pristine efflorescence.

In such a dismal condition, it is heartening to note that local communities and sensitive governments have been increasingly raising their voice against this, and demanding that the rights of the originators and conservers of resources and their knowledge be protected by both national and international law. International expression of this is contained in the Convention on Biological Diversity, which explicitly commits every country to respect and maintain local knowledge, promote its application and encourage the equitable sharing of the benefits arising from it. Urgent steps should be taken to conserve the remaining natural habitats of the islanders and to secure the territorial integrity of the tribal groups (especially the Jarawas, Sentinelese, and Shompens of Great Nicobar, and Onges of the Little Andaman Island).

In different states of India and throughout the world the rich industrial tycoons are destroying and driving out the indigenous people from their land, have been annihilating them for years and years for mining and oil extraction, for cultivation and urbanization with the active support and help from the Governments. The original sons of the soils are regularly perishing before our eyes. Operation 'Green Hunt' is an extension of that policy in our country, extremely dangerous for the autochthons.

When the last speaker of one of the ten Great Andamanese languages, 'BO', Boa Sr. died on 26.1.2010, she died with her language as her three sons and one daughter did not know it. It happened similarly with Ururu who witnessed the destruction of the Brazilian Amazon rainforest and genocide of her people when she died leaving only five of them who did not share her heritage and language. With them we lost all records of not only their languages but of that

human group forever. History of those who know to write is not the complete history of man. It is to be noted that loss of tribes and loss of languages are tangible losses to mankind.

The adivasi people of the countries like United States of America and Australia have now become subjects for protection, kept in the show-cases of human museums. We cannot claim that our way and style of living are the only way to live on earth. We are certainly not living a better life by depleting natural resources and destroying everything original for our temporary benefit.

### Conslusion

Variety is life, not uniformity. Remembering that some of the Andaman tribes are perhaps the adi or original human beings on earth we should help them keep their identities, maintain their culture and civilisation as examples before the world. We should not disturb the Andaman Tribal people and all other tribal people of the world who prefer to live in their traditional ways. We must give up the illusory idea that by bringing them into our fold, called mainstream, we really help them especially the Jarawa who still live as representatives of another world, our ancestral civilisation. Tourism is a meagre institution before such grave issues of races and civilisations.

The adoption of the U. N. O's declaration on the rights of the indigenous people in its General Assembly in 2007 and the observation of the General Secretary of the United Nations Organization on the 'International Day of the World's Indigenous People' on 9 August 2009, that scattered in 70 countries, 370 million people throughout the world are the custodians of some of the biologically most diverse areas of the earth, speaking majority of the world's languages, that they are the repository of traditional knowledge and diverse cultural resources which calls for our immediate attention towards their struggle to get proper social justice and equal rights for their livelihood and development.

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### Author's brief bio-note

Aju Mukhopadhyay, a bilingual multiple award winning poet, author and critic, writes on literature, environment, wildlife and other subjects. He has authored 36 books including 10 books of poems and three books of short stories in English. Besides usual poems, he contributes different genres of Japanese short verses to various international journals. His poems and stories have been widely translated and anthologised. His essays and research papers have been published in more than 60 books besides in large numbers of journals and e-zines. He is in the editorial advisory boards of quite some ongoing journals. For his papers on Albert Camus he was awarded Albert Camus Centenary Writer's award.