

NICOBARESE TRIBE IN TRANSITION: BETWEEN PRIMITIVE AND MODERN

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Abstract

The term Nicobarese refers to the dominant tribes of the Nicobar Islands. On each island, the people have specific names, but together they are the Nicobarese. The Nicobarese may not have been the first people to live in the islands. The Nicobarese language is part of the Austroasiatic language family. Most of the people of the islands are of the Christian religion. Nicobarese are the foremost developed tribe of Andaman and Nicobar Islands as compared to the other tribal of these islands. Nicobarese was facing transition phase in which neither they were primitive nor they were modern and this theme was exploring by author through holistic Anthropological perspectives.

Keywords: Nicobarese Tribe Primitive Modern Little Andaman

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Introduction:

The words 'Andaman' and 'Nicobar' are taken from the Malay language. Andaman and Nicobar Islands comprise of 572 islands of which 32 are inhabited. Earlier, pre-Tsunami, 38 of them were inhabited but after the Tsunami, two islands viz., Trinket and Bambuka were evacuated. The term Nicobarese describes the dominant tribal peoples of the Nicobar Islands, an island group located in the Bay of Bengal. Although the inhabitants of each island have their own specific name, the Nicobarese refer to themselves as "Holchu," meaning "friend." The people are of Mongoloid stock from mainland Southeast Asia, possibly originating in Burma (Myanmar). The date of their arrival is uncertain. The islands are mentioned in 11th century inscriptions from South India as Nakkavaram, the "Land of the Naked," suggesting that people were present by that time. The Nicobarese were probably not the first inhabitants of the islands. When they arrived, they came into conflict with peoples of Malay descent who were already there and forced them into the central.

Background:

As of 2011 Census of India, the population of the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands was 379,944, of which 202,330 (53.25%) were male and 177,614 (46.75) were female. The sex ratio was 878 females per 1,000 males. Only 10% of the population lived in Nicobar islands. The Nicobarese population is of 36,842 in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Though there was a population pressure, 163 families were resettled from the Nicobars to Little Andaman Island in 1973 by the government near Harminder bay of Little Andaman.

Land & People:

Andaman and Nicobar islands, Union Territory of India, is an archipelago of group of islands in the Bay of Bengal. As well as immigrants from mainland India, these islands are home to six primitive tribes, which constitute about 10% of the population. More than 98% of the tribal population is constituted by the Nicobarese — a mongoloid tribe. For administrative purposes, the islands are divided into two districts: Andamans and Nicobars. Car Nicobar is the administrative headquarters for Nicobar district and has the largest size of tribal population in the Andaman and Nicobar islands. Little Andaman island is 120 km south of Port Blair, the capital of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Every Nicobarese village has a village chieftain. These

chieftains and the religious leaders have influence over the population and exercise control in liaison with the chief captain. The people generally practise living together in large joint families called "tuhet". This comprises a principal homestead and large lineage group that resides in the individual houses and huts. Tuhet indicates an extension of a family and is the unit of all social life.

Biological Aspect:

The Nicobarese are physically taller than the andamanese, the men being on an average about 5 feet 4 inches in height and the women in 5 feet. They are fairer, of a yellow -brown complexion that admits of many different shades; with hair that is generally straight and black, but sometimes curly, though never as much as andamanese, with faces broad, with somewhat prominent cheekbones, prognathism of the jaw, exaggerated due to constant betel chewing, and the typical epicanthic fold of the mongoloid. Though they are now fully clothed, tastes are being influenced by Burma and among the young generation by trade with passing ships, their original taste was bare bodied, with the women wearing a Ngong, a thick tassel or girdle of split coconut with one end hanging loose a foot or so at the back- to all appearances like a tail, the reason for the earlier accounts.

Socio-cultural Aspect:

Nicobarese is the only tribe who has lived in isolation with its unique traditional tribal ways. Nicobarese dance is performed by Nicobarese who live in the Island of Little Andaman. They are not even remotely influenced by modern civilisation and education. Colourful tribal festivities are still observed in Nicobar Islands . The Nicobarese dance is performed during the "Ossuary Feast or the Pig Festival", which is dedicated to the departed head of the family. The occasion is observed with nightlong dancing in full moon light, under waving coconut palms. The dancers, dressed in coconut fronds, step gracefully in time, to traditional songs. The feast is followed by a pig fight in the morning. The Nicobarese are not taught about their own history or the symbolic representation of their culture. Uprooted from their social context, the knowledge that they receive, and the technology they are exposed to, is far from the experience and socio-cultural milieu of their society. The Nicobarese children are categorised and labelled as intelligent or dull on the basis of knowledge that they are successfully able to cram and reproduce. They are

compared with non-Nicobarese children and also among themselves. Examinations at school have helped the Nicobarese children to develop their own identities. Examinations have helped modern (read disciplinary) society normalize and exercise surveillance on the Nicobarese children as individuals and as a whole.

Nicobarese in Past

Located on the trade routes from India to East Asia, the Andaman and Nicobar island groups have been known from earliest times. The 7th-century Chinese Buddhist monk I-ching, the Arab travelers of the 9th century, and Marco Polo (c. 1254–1324) are among those who mentioned the islands. The name Andaman most likely is derived from the name of the monkey god of Hindu mythology, Hanuman. The name Nicobar probably derives from the Tamil word *nakkavaram* (“land of the naked”). The British first surveyed the Andaman Islands in 1789 in search of a place to establish a penal colony for offenders from British India. Such a colony was established in 1790 but was abandoned just a few years later. In the mid-19th century, concern over native attacks on shipwrecked crews and the need for a penal settlement after the Indian Mutiny (1857–58) led the British to return to the Andamans. In 1858 they founded a new penal colony, named Port Blair. It was during a visit to Port Blair that Lord Mayo, viceroy of India (1869–72), was murdered by a convict in 1872. Meanwhile, the Danish, who had been the claimants of the Nicobar Islands—the ownership of which had since the 17th century shifted variously between France, Denmark, Austria, and Great Britain—relinquished their rights to the territory to the British in 1868. The population of the region, particularly of the Andamans, was greatly changed by the settlement of convicts from the mainland and, beginning in the 1950s, of numerous refugees, especially from East Pakistan (since 1971, Bangladesh). Japanese forces occupied both the Andaman and Nicobar island groups from 1942 to 1945 (during World War II); after the British recaptured the islands, the penal colony in the Andamans was abolished. Administration of the Andamans and Nicobars was passed to India when it gained independence in 1947. The Andaman Cellular Jail, where Indian political prisoners were held, was declared a national monument in 1979.

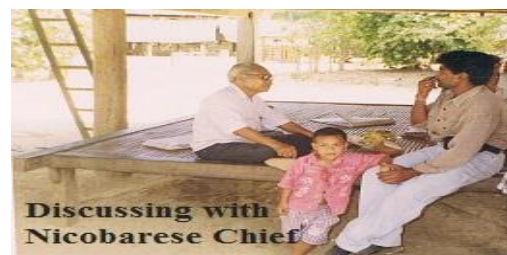
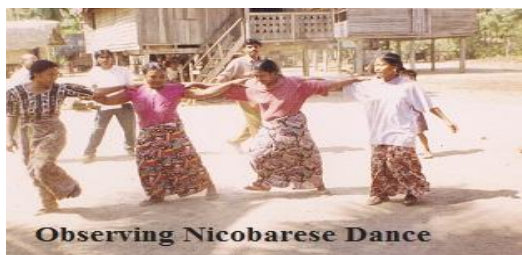
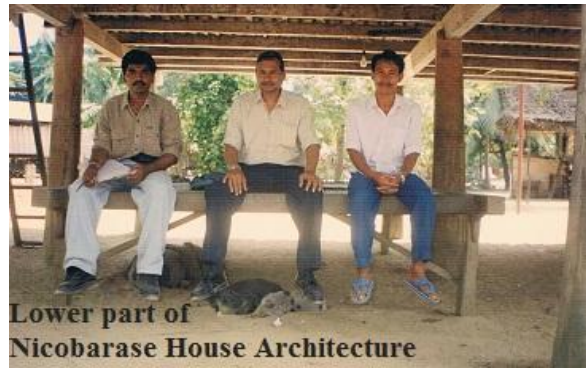
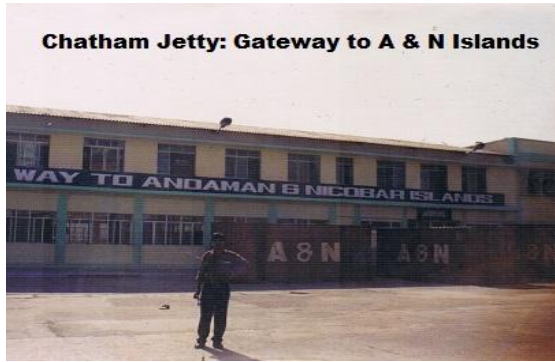
In 2004 the Andaman and Nicobar island groups were struck by a tremendous tsunami that had been generated by an earthquake in the Indian Ocean near Sumatra, Indonesia. The inundation

left thousands of people dead and many more displaced. The lower-lying Nicobars were most severely affected, with significant portions of some of those islands submerged by the tidal wave.

Nicobarese in Present

The present scenario from tracing the history as per records, the beginning there were only a few people who inhabited the island of Car Nicobar and all of them lived in the first village. They divided the island among themselves, from the forest in the interior portion of the sea close to the shore where the principal fishing to be had and the island continued in the possession of their families ever. Right to the land passes on patrilineally with the eldest son becoming the landholder when the father dies but with the access to its resources open to every member. With the land generally goes the responsibility to look after and take care of the rest of the family, which therefore defines not just the nuclear family of the eldest son nor either the nuclear family of the father but the families of his father's brothers and his grandfathers brother's, along with all the members that each has acquired down the line. The entire family comprises a tuhet. Land is not divided amongst the various sons and members but tradition permits a Nicobarese of the tuhet or even outside, to approach a landlord and request permission to use by rights to a portion of land, which if landlord is not using or planning to use to himself, tradition persuades him to give; and such land then continues in the possession of the user till the crop is harvested.

It is easy to imagine how a Nicobarese village must have grown. As the family grew in size, from living together under the main pati tuhet, boys and girls who got married would have built themselves smaller huts in the vicinity of the tuhet to raise their own families, even as they continued to be part of the family taliko and cook together, contributing the produce from their own area to the kitchen or being to that extent to a deduction from the produce from landlord's garden. It was appreciable how a such system built up a community spirit, security for the old orphaned and widowed, protection against destitution, and an acceptance of the benign authority of the tuhet head that have prevailed even to this day.



Nicobarase Future Prospects

The traditional Nicobarase culture seemed to be fast disappearing, victim of humanitarian aid and native opportunism. The economic changes were most startling. Free rations, cash compensation payments, and cash-for-work programs had undermined the old subsistence economy. With food on the table and government checks in the bank, there was no urgent need to fish, dig gardens, raise pigs, or plant coconuts. There are only a quarter of the coconut and cashew saplings that the government had provided free of cost had been planted. The Nicobarase seemed uninterested in doing the work, even though they would be paid for it.

Unaccustomed to handling money, many Nicobarese turned their checkbooks over to immigrant traders who were happy to sell them a wide range of consumer goods at inflated prices: cellphones, motor bikes, designer clothes, Bollywood films, ceiling fans, whiskey and rum. When the government froze Nicobarese bank accounts in an attempt to put an end to the buying spree, Indian moneylenders offered loans against future prospects. The Nicobarese had entered the global market flush with cash.

Dynamics of Transition

Little Andaman is home to two aboriginal tribes of Andaman and Nicobar islands. The Onge tribal area is out of bounds for visitors, but Nicobarese settlement can be visited. Don't expect to find exotic tree houses, coloured natives or bon fire dance rituals here. The Nicobarese have assimilated greatly into mainstream culture and contemporary Indian society. They live in houses provided by the Indian government; they ride motorbikes, wear jeans and T-shirts and live a life similar to any other local on the island. Believed to descend from people from Myanmar or Malaysia, the majority has converted to Christianity. They farm pigs and cultivate bananas and coconuts. They are the only indigenous people of Andaman and Nicobar islands whose numbers are not decreasing. Before the tsunami of 2004, Nicobar islands had a population of 50,000, with this sparsely populated area, the 3,500 lives lost in the tsunami amounted to 7% of the population.

Real Analysis between Primitive and Modern

Traditional societies are technologically primitive. They have little amount of control over nature and environment. These people are practically at the mercy of the nature. Modern or contemporary society enjoys the usage of advanced technology. People have greater knowledge of the various components of nature. In the context of Nicobari neither they totally depended on nature nor they are fully dependent on non tribal contemporary society they are in between them. Traditional societies are comparatively simple. There is less division of labour and specialization. Modern society is characterized by specialization and complex division of labour. In nicobarese there is some extent of division of labour found among them. Traditional societies were basically agrarian societies. The society consisted of small and poor communities, depending on pastoral activities or on subsistence agriculture. Modern societies are large

communities. They are industrialized and have a bigger command over resources. Nicobarese are dependent on sea resources as well as outside world resources.

Traditional societies are predominantly rural. Modern industrial societies are predominantly urban. Nicobarese society are sub-rural and sub-urban mean that there is a rural-urban continuum layer found among them. In traditional societies, the scope for specialization is limited. Each person tends to occupy few social roles. These roles themselves tend to be many-sided. The same person may be directing the agricultural operations, making clothes, building a house, taking part in hunting and fishing and teaching boys the way to do these tasks. In modern industrial societies kinship roles are comparatively less important. There is wider scope for specialization. Each individual has certain roles to be played. The social structure is highly complex. Nicobarese society is a mixture of both these characters. In traditional societies kinship is the dominant institution of the social organization. Though kinship is still very important in modern societies, it is only a little part of the total social organization. In Nicobarese social organisation is neither complex nor simple, it has both the characters.

Traditional societies are typically illiterate. Modern societies are generally literate. The average literacy rate of Andaman and Nicobar is 86.63 percent out of which male are 90.27 percent and females are 82.43 percent literate. The Nicobarese population is of 36,842 in which 12,627 were literate out of which 7,436 are males and 5,191 are females. There is absence of Mass media in the traditional society. Communication takes place by word of mouth. In a modern society mass media like internet, online videos, newspapers, radio and television, etc. becomes vital. Now they are familiar with some extent of mass media and modern media in which it includes mobile phone, television etc. In traditional societies the knowledge and information were shared with few people. In modern society, a large number of people share knowledge through the books, internet, films, etc. A traditional society is culturally uniform. There is diversity between local cultures, but not within them. A modern society is characterized by a variety of sub-cultures. They have their own culture but now days there is a degradation of far old tradition and they are in transition between primitive and modern world.

Conclusion:

Earlier Nicobarese were homogenous group with their old traditional culture as well as identity. Now in the observed scenario they were least homogenous or we can say that they are the admixture of new and old tradition. Their birth, marriage and funeral ceremony are of traditional types but their way of living status is modern using cellphone, wearing jeans and t-shirts, watching television. Now they are assimilated tribe with main land of modern world. It is not dreadful that they should not adapt modern mass media as well as the modern way of life but it should be kept on mind that they should not forget their old age custom and tradition. If their cultural identity is lost then there is no way to save the age old tradition as well as they were the admixture with the non-tribals and no one carry or transmit their cultural identity and lifestyle of the Nicobarese. If this trend will continue then the Nicobarese tribes found only on the text not context.

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