

Tribes of Andaman and Nicobar Islands a Comparative Study of Great Andamanese and Nicobarese

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Abstract

Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands have similar tectonic history, geology, climate, soil and natural vegetation, yet the two tribes of both islands differ in their social and cultural practices. At the beginning of the 19th century, the Great Andamanese were the dominant tribe of the Andaman Islands whereas the Nicobarese dominated the Nicobar Islands. Taking these two tribes as the representative of their respective islands, the paper will evaluate the similarities and differences between the tribes of Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands.

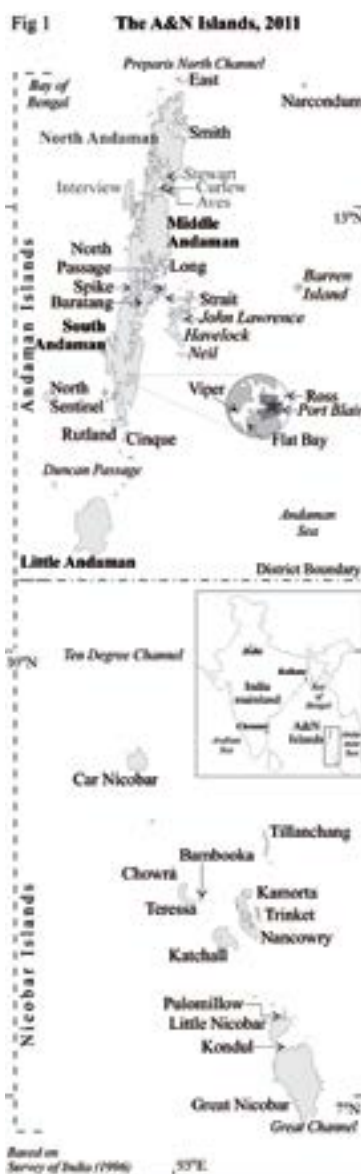
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Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands are two distinct archipelagos of the Bay of Bengal and are separated by the Ten Degree Channel. Both Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands were formed due to the same tectonic process and thus have similar geology, climate, soil and natural vegetation. Before the British colonized these islands in 19th century both Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands were inhabited by tribal population. Even though Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands share similar physical environment, yet the tribes of both islands were distinctly different. Taking Great Andamanese from the Andaman Islands and Nicobarese from Nicobar Islands, the paper assesses the similarities and differences among the two tribes. The paper compares the differences of the physical environment in Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands, and also assesses the similarities and differences among the Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Andaman and Nicobar Islands (A&N Islands) are a union territory of India. They lie towards east of the Indian mainland in the Bay of Bengal (6° to 14° north latitudes and 92° to 94° east longitudes) and the 572 islands of the archipelago appear like emerald beads strewn in the blue sea. The average distance between the A&N Islands and Indian mainland is 1200 kilometres (km). On the west lies the Bay of Bengal that separates it from mainland India and in the east is the Andaman Sea, on the other side of which lies Thailand. The Prepara North Channel on the north and the Great Channel on the south demarcates the boundary between A&N Islands and Myanmar and Indonesia respectively.

A&N Islands consists of two archipelagos, the Andaman Islands and the Nicobar Islands (Fig 1). The two groups are separated by the Ten Degree Channel named so because it lies at the 10° N latitude. Out of the 572 islands, only 38 islands are inhabited. The Andaman archipelago is the larger one and covers an area of 6408 square kilometre that is 78 per cent of the total area of the archipelago. The Nicobar archipelago has an area of 1840 square kilometre that accounts for the remaining 22 per cent. Total population of A&N Islands is 380,581.¹ Of this total Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands account for 90 percent and 10 percent respectively. The administrative headquarter is Port Blair with a population of 0.13 million. The Nicobar District's headquarter is at Car Nicobar.



The population of A&N Islands can be divided into two groups – non-tribal population and the tribal population. The non-tribal population came to A&N Islands, when the British colonized the Andaman Islands in 1858 and later the Nicobar Islands in 1869. The non-tribal population grew rapidly after the Independence in 1947 when the “refugee” families were “resettled” under various schemes from 1947 to 1980. The non-tribal population consists of mainlanders, who were “settled” in A&N Islands over the last 158 years. They account for 92.66% of the total population. The tribal population constitute the remaining 7.34% of the total population.² There are in all six tribes, four in Andaman Islands and two in Nicobar Islands (Table 1).

The Nicobarese, account for 97.2% of the total tribal population of A&N Islands and the rest of the five tribes account for the remaining 2.8%. The tribes of A&N Islands are scheduled tribes.

Scheduled tribes are recognized by the constitution of India as ‘primitive and disadvantaged’ and therefore require special assistance for development. Scheduled tribes and scheduled castes dates back to colonial period. They were referred to as ‘India’s depressed class’ by the British. In 1935, the ‘Government of India Act’ was passed that focused on self-rule in India and the setting up of the national federal system. This class (“depressed class”) got reservation in this system. In 1936 ‘The Government (Scheduled Castes) Order’, contained a list, or schedule, of these castes and tribes. After Independence, the policy was

¹ Census of India, *Primary Census Abstract: Andaman and Nicobar Islands, 2011*, www.censusofindia.gov.in

² Census of India, *Primary Census Abstract - Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribe, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, 2011*, <http://www.censusofindia.gov.in/2011census/PCA/SC-ST/PCA-A11-Appendix/ST-35-PCA-A11-APPENDIX.xlsx>

continued and became an integral part of the Constitution of India. After Independence, the Constituent Assembly gave the President of India and Governors of the states the responsibility to compile a full list of castes and tribes. The listing was made through two orders: The Constitution (Scheduled Castes) Order, 1950 and The Constitution (Scheduled Tribes) Order, 1950. Almost nine years after the Constitution Orders of 1950, i.e. in 1959, the six aboriginal tribes of A&N Islands were listed in the schedule. All the six aboriginal tribes of A&N Islands are also protected by the 'Andaman and Nicobar Islands Protection of Aboriginal Tribe Regulation' was implemented in 1956 whereby entry of any non-tribal (with few exceptions) into the areas inhabited by the specified tribes has been prohibited.

Tribe	Population (in 2011)	Per cent to total tribe population	Per cent to total population of A&N
Tribes of Andaman Islands			
Sentinelese (estimated)	15	0.05	0.00
Onges	101	0.36	0.03
Jarawas	380	1.36	0.10
Great Andamanese	44	0.16	0.01
<i>Tribes of Nicobar Islands</i>			
Shompens	229	0.83	0.06
Nicobarese	27168	97.25	7.14
Total	27937	100	7.34
<i>Based on Census of India¹</i>			

This study is based on secondary sources of data that have been culled out from gazetteers, historical records, studies of the anthropologists and the government records that documented the tribal society. For the information on Great Andamanese, the account is based on the works of Man³, Portman⁴ and Radcliffe-Brown.⁵ The first two were the in-charge of the Great Andamanese while the third is a well known anthropologist. The information on the Nicobarese, the data has been compiled from the Census Report of 1901 and from the works of Justin⁶, a Nicobarese anthropologist of A&N Islands and Singh⁷, who has worked extensively on the Nicobar Islands.

³ E.H. Man, *The Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands*, London, Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, New Delhi, Mittal Publication, 1883, Reprint 2001.

⁴ M.V. Portman, M.V, *A History of Our Relations with the Andamanese* in 2 Volumes, Calcutta, Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, New Delhi, Asian Education Service, 1899, Reprint 1990.

⁵ A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *The Andaman Islanders: A Study in Social Anthropology*, Cambridge, University Press, 1922.

⁶ Anstice Justin, *The Nicobarese*, Calcutta, Seagull Books on behalf of Anthropological Survey of India, 1990.

⁷ Simronjit Singh, *In the Sea of Influence: A World System Perspective of the Nicobar Islands*, Lund, Lund University, 2003.

Physical Environment of Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands: A Comparison

The Andaman Islands and the Nicobar Islands have similar physical environment. But there are minor differences in the physiography, drainage, climate, and vegetation that exert control on the socio-cultural set up of the tribes inhabiting these islands.

Pysiography

Both Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands share same tectonic history. The entire chain of A&N Islands came into existence at the same time as the Himalayas, due to the collision of the Indian Plate with the Eurasian Plate. A&N Islands lie on the Burma micro-plate close to the convergent plate boundary of the Indian Plate and the Eurasian Plate. The A&N Islands represent the highest peaks of an under-water mountain range which is an extension of the Arakan range in Burma in the north and Sumatran Barisan ranges to the south.

Both, Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands are hilly, rugged and undulating. The fold submarine mountain ranges are arranged in a north south axis. There are parallel ridges with deep valleys in between. In these depressions either the sea encroaches and forms a longitudinal bay or these lie as plain stretches. The islands are highest on the east and gradually descend on the west, also, the northern part of the Andaman Island is higher than the southern part and in the Nicobar Islands, southern part, i.e. the Great Nicobar Island is higher than the northern part. The slopes of the hills are moderate to steep and are prone to erosion as the region receives heavy rainfall. The highest point of the island is the Saddle Peak, 731m, in the North Andaman. The coastline of the island is deeply indented and providing the islands with some of the world's finest harbours.

All the islands of Andaman as well as Nicobar are surrounded by fringing coral reefs. Of India's total 2329.9 sq km of coral reefs, 41.17 percent are in A&N Islands.⁸ The A&N Islands are surrounded by shallow seas and coasts. The tropical climate and dense mangrove networks support the growth of coral reefs around A&N Islands. The coral reefs are of extensive size on the western margin of A&N Islands. This is because the land gradually descends towards the west and provides shallow continental shelves for the growth of coral reefs.⁹

Drainage

The A&N Islands lacks rivers and substantial ground water, even though it receives heavy rainfall for more than 8 months in a year. The drainage of A&N Islands is characterized by several ephemeral streams that originate during the monsoons and dries up in the post-monsoon period. The rivers of A&N Islands are found only on Great Nicobar Island. These are, Alexandra, Dogmar, and Amrit Kaur, Jubilee and Galathea.

⁸ Department of Ocean Development and Space Application Centre, *Coral Reef Maps of India*, Ahmedabad, 1997.

⁹ J.R. Turner, D. Vousden, R. Klaus, C. Suryanarayana, D. Fenner, K. Venkataraman. P.T. Rajan and N.V. Subba Rao, *Coral Reef systems of the Andaman Island, Report of Phase I: Remote Sensing and Rapid Site Assessment Survey, April 2001*, New Delhi,

Thus rainwater and the groundwater are the primary sources of potable water. Even though both Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands have similar physiography and drainage, they have differences in their climates.

Climate

Both Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands are characterized by monsoon climate, yet there are differences in the climate of the two groups of islands. The A&N Islands extend from latitudes 6° N to 14° N over a distance of approximately 890 km. This north-south expanse of A&N Islands has led to different climate in both islands. Andaman Islands have more tropical climate whereas Nicobar Islands have more equatorial climate. The dry and wet seasons are more marked in Andaman Islands while the Nicobar Islands receive rainfall in almost all the 12 months.

Vegetation

The hot and humid climate has given rise to luxurious vegetation in A&N Islands. More than 85 percent of the geographical area of A&N Islands is under forest cover.¹⁰ The islands are covered with forest from the shore to the interiors. The vegetation of the island can be classified as the mangroves, littoral and the non-littoral forests. Fringing the coasts of the islands are the mangroves. According to the Forest Department, the mangrove covers 96,600 ha in A&N Islands. Behind the mangroves, and on the edge of the sandy beaches, are the littoral forests, with long, deeply cracked, white-barked trunk and luxuriant shady crown. The crowns and branches of these forests are turned towards the landward side. This shows that they act as a wind breaker. In this zone pandanus or screw-pine are also found that constitutes the staple diet and is also referred to as 'bread fruit'. The non-littoral forest has three varieties – the deciduous, the semi-evergreen and the tropical evergreen rainforests. The deciduous forests cover the slopes of the hills whereas the semi-evergreen and the tropical evergreen forests are found in the interior of the islands.¹¹ Though the natural vegetation of Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands are similar, yet, there are differences. The vegetation of Andaman Islands is similar to that of Myanmar while the Nicobar Islands' vegetation resembles that of Malaysian peninsula and the Indonesian islands.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there is no remarkable differences in the physical environment of Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands. Yet, socio-culturally both the islands are completely different. These differences are expressed through the cultures of two representative tribes – the Great Andamanese of Andaman Islands and the Nicobarese of the Nicobar Islands. There are reasons as to why only these two tribes out of the six aboriginal tribes of A&N Islands were selected.

Government of India/ United National Development Programme – Global Environmental Facility (GOI/UNEP GEF), Coral Reef Ecosystems of Andaman and Nicobar Islands, 2001.

¹⁰ Directorate of Economics and Statistics, *Basic Statistics 2010-11*, Port Blair, Andaman and Nicobar Administration, 2011.

¹¹ Forest Survey of India, *State of Forest Report 2011*, Dehradun, 2011.

Reasons for Selecting Great Andamanese and Nicobarese

There are six aboriginal tribes in A&N Islands. Out of these six, Great Andamanese and Nicobarese have been selected as the representative tribes of Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands respectively. There are three reasons as to why these tribes were selected.

First, these tribes accounted for the maximum population of their respective islands. When the British colonized Andaman Islands they encountered the tribes on different islands, but these tribes were similar in appearance and used similar weapons and utensils. The British named them as Great Andamanese, as they inhabited the entire Andaman Islands.¹² Once “friendly” relations were established with the Great Andamanese, the British realized that there was another tribe. The Great Andamanese called this tribe as “jarawas”, meaning ‘the other’ as per the Great Andamanese language.¹³ With time the British identified four tribes that inhabited the Andaman Islands before colonization. These were: Great Andamanese, Jarawas, Onges and Sentinelese. As per the British estimates, in 1858 Great Andamanese numbered 8000 while the remaining three together did not exceed 600.¹⁴ Similarly, in Nicobar Islands, the Nicobarese accounted for 95 percent of the total population, while Shompens were only 5 percent.¹⁵

Second, both these tribes were widespread. The Great Andamanese were widespread and could be found on most of the Andaman Islands. In contrast, the Jarawas were restricted to interior of South Andaman Island and Rutland Island. Again, the Onges occupied only the Little Andaman Islands whereas the Sentinelese confined to the North Sentinel Island. Similarly, the Nicobarese spread far and wide to all the Nicobar Islands, such as Car Nicobar, Chowra, Kamorta, Nancowry, Katchall, Trinket, Pulomillow, Kondul, Little Nicobar and Great Nicobar while the Shompens limited to the interior of the Great Nicobar Island only.

Third, among all the tribes these two tribes came in direct contact with the colonizers, the British. In Andaman Islands, Great Andamanese were hostile to the colonization and attacked the British settlement often. But gradually “friendly” relations were established. However, the remaining three tribes, i.e. the Jarawas, Onges and the Sentinelese remained “hostile” to the British and did not interact with them. Similarly, in Nicobar Islands, British maintained “cordial” relation with the Nicobarese. The Shompens were shy and thus hid from the British. Their contact with the British was limited. Moreover, the very name Great Andamanese and Nicobarese puts across the essence that these were the most representative of the tribes of Andaman Islands and Nicobar Islands respectively.

¹² The British divided Andaman Islands in two groups separated by the Duncan Passage – Great Andaman and Little Andaman. Great Andaman Islands included the large islands of North Andaman, Middle Andaman and South Andaman. The tribes inhabiting these islands and the neighbouring islands were named as Great Andamanese by the British.

¹³ Kiran Dhingra, *The Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Twentieth Century: A Gazetteer*, New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2005.

¹⁴ M.V. Portman, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Census of India (1901), *Andaman and Nicobar Islands: General Notes*, New Delhi, Government of India.

The Great Andamanese

Great Andamanese belong to the race of Negritos. They are dark (almost charcoal black) in colour with peppercorn hairs. They are broad skulled, broad faced with prominent cheek-bones. They have large eyes ranging from brown to dark brown in colour and have sharp vision. They are short statured (average height for men is 4 ft 9 in and that of women is 4 ft 5 in) but have well-built bodies: "In appearance, ..., the Andamanese men, and the young women, are not unpleasing, some indeed are distinctly good-looking and have fine, well-shaped noses, thin lips, small mouths, even white teeth, bright sparkling eyes, and very well shaped figures".¹⁶ Describing the Andamanese, Weber says "Andamanese look tiny but elegantly proportioned".¹⁷

Cipriani established that the Great Andamanese share commonality with the Aetas of Philippines and Semangs of Malaysia.¹⁸ According to Radcliffe-Brown the Great Andamanese came to Andaman Islands through Burma by land or by sea.¹⁹ There probably was a land connection between Burma and Andaman Islands during the last ice-age. Another possibility is that they might have been drifted by the north east monsoons to the Island, and since they had no means to go back, they remained here and spread to the entire Islands. Therefore the probable route taken by the Great Andamanese was that from Philippines they moved west into Indonesia, Malaysia to Myanmar and then to Andaman Islands. He concluded that the Great Andamanese arrived at the shores of Little Andaman first. Later moved north into the Great Andaman Islands and spread to different parts. But these two groups did not have any contacts with each other and evolved into two distinct groups with different language, hunting equipment, crafts and canoes, customs and rituals.

The Nicobarese

The Nicobarese belong to Mongoloid race. They have yellowish to reddish brown complexion. The forehead is well formed, the lips are normal and the ears of medium size, the eyes are obliquely set, the nose wide and flat, the cheekbone prominent, the face somewhat flat and the mouth large.²⁰ They are well built and sturdy looking people. The average height of Nicobarese men is 5 ft 4 in while women are 5 ft. The mongoloid features indicate that they had come to the Nicobar Islands from Burma, Sumatra or Indo-China. Later DNA research traces the Nicobarese to the East Asian Families.²¹ Study of the Nicobarese language too confirmed their association with the South-East Asia. Their language belongs to the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic family.

¹⁶ M.V. Portman, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ G. Weber, *The Andamanese*, www.andaman.org, 2008.

¹⁸ L. Cipriani, "On the origin of the Andamanese", in the *Census of India, 1951*, Appendix E, Vol. 17 (1): 66-71, New Delhi, Government of India, 1955.

¹⁹ A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *op. cit.*

²⁰ *Imperial Gazetteer of India: Provincial Series - Andaman and Nicobar Islands*, Calcutta, Office of Superintendent of Government Printing, 1909.

²¹ Kiran Dhingra, *op. cit.*

Therefore it has been proposed that they might have moved across Andaman Sea from Burma or might have come in from Indonesia.²² Based on the legends and the customs of the Nicobarese it has been concluded that they arrived first on the shores of the Chowra Island. From here they moved, north, east and south direction and came to inhabit all the islands south of the Ten Degree Channel.

Social and Cultural Practices of Great Andamanese and Nicobarese: A Comparison

The social and cultural practices are the responses of people to their physical environments that with time become the characteristics of that society. Both Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese share many commonalities, yet the two tribes are distinctly different from each other.

Similarities between Great Andamanese and Nicobarese

Before the colonization, there were three predominant similarities between the Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese. First, both Great Andamanese and Nicobarese lived their lives mostly in relative isolation, i.e., though they were “sighted” and their existence was known, their interaction with the outside world was limited. Some Nicobarese did interact with the trading ships; large part remained aloof from any contacts. They were constrained by the limited resources that the islands had. Therefore in order to preserve these resources, both Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese developed extensive mechanisms to sustainably utilize the resources. For example, both Great Andamanese and Nicobarese had communal ownership of the land. Among the Great Andamanese, each of the sub-tribes had their areas for hunting and gathering demarcated. This was also the case amongst the Nicobarese. They too commonly owned the land for coconut cultivation and hunting pigs.

Second similarity between Great Andamanese and Nicobarese was the prevalence of large joint families. Among the Great Andamanese, the smallest group was that of a nuclear family. But this family did not exist in isolation. Several families formed the joint family known as the “*sept*” and *septs* together formed a tribe. Some tribes only had one *sept*, but the average number of *septs* per tribe was three. The *septs* of one tribe shared common hunting ground in which the areas for each tribe were demarcated. Cooking was also done communally. *Septs* were self-sufficient units. Similar to *septs*, the Nicobarese have “*tuhets*”.

A *tuhet* is an extreme form of joint family. It does not adhere to the definition of a joint family given by the sociology books, i.e., they do not live under one roof nor eat from the same kitchen, but they are related by birth or by marriage. Within a village each *tuhet* has their areas demarcated. A *tuhet* is the basic economically functional unit of the Nicobarese society. The land and part of the sea where fishing is carried is owned jointly by the *tuhet*. The land is not divided between the families, but rights to use the

²² Ibid.

land were given. It is looked after by all the members of the *tuhets* and the returns too are equally shared. For social occasions, and other financial needs, the *tuhets* acts as a single unit. Every village is an accumulation of several *tuhets* or families. The number of families and *tuhets* in a village is equal. In Car Nicobar Islands, number of *tuhets* in villages ranges from 10 to 41. On an average a village are 20 *tuhets*.²³ Number of people in a *tuhets* also varies. The size of a *tuhets* varies from two families to 30 families. In case if a *tuhets* is too large, it also divides in itself.

The third similarity is the prevalent custom of “adoption” amongst both the Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese. For maintaining and strengthening the bond between the *septs* (in case of Great Andamanese) and *tuhets* (in case of Nicobarese), the system of adoption was followed. It was different from the ‘orphan adoption’ where the child was adopted when parents of the child were dead. This adoption took place when the parents were living. There is a custom by which children of over seven or eight were adopted by a married couple belonging to a local group other than that of the parents. For the Great Andamanese, Man claimed that ‘it was far to find a person who had not been adopted.’²⁴ Adoption was considered a sign of friendship and a compliment for a married man to ask another for a child, and rarely was this request denied’. Among the Nicobarese, every couple has a number of their own children and an adopted son or daughter. The adopted child lives with the *tuhets* and becomes part of the *tuhets* he stays with and has all the rights to access the resources of the *tuhets*.

Differences between Great Andamanese and Nicobarese

Apart from the racial difference amongst the Great Andamanese and Nicobarese, they are distinctly different in five ways.

First, the Great Andamanese were hunter gatherers while the Nicobarese were horticulturalists. The Great Andamanese engaged themselves in collecting food like roots, fruits and honey. They went to sea or creeks for fishing and they hunted wild animals in the forest. The equipments to hunt and gather were made out of wood, stone and iron that were looted from the stranded ships.

The Nicobarese on the other hand are horticulturalists. The economy of the Nicobarese depends on harvesting coconuts and raising pigs. Besides coconut, the Nicobarese grew pandauns, yam, tapioca, sweet potato, banana, papaya and other vegetables. In the pre-colonial period, they were also engaged in trading with the vessels which halted to refill the supply of food and water. Coconut, raw and dried (copra) and areca-nut were traded for clothes, iron, rice, tobacco, knife, crockery, pottery, glass ware, silver and white metal ornaments, sugar, camphor, wooden boxes, and other necessary items. Sometimes the edible bird’s nest, split cane, beetle nuts, trepan, ambergris and tortoise

²³ Punam Tripathi, *Vulnerability and Response to Disasters in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands*, Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Geography, Delhi, University of Delhi, 2014.

²⁴ E. H. Man, *op. cit.*

shell were also traded.²⁵ Coconuts were used as means of exchange. The costs of the items were fixed in terms of number of coconuts. The foreign traders had to give the article in advance and then recover the value from the trees. The traders themselves had to bring down the nuts, and make copra and take it away. The Nicobarese only kept the tally.²⁶

Second, the Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese differed in their way of living. Great Andamanese were nomads while the Nicobarese were settled in permanent villages. There was a distinction among the Great Andamanese on the basis of the place of residence. There were the *aryoto* or the coast dwellers and the *erem-taga* or the forest dwellers.²⁷ Being the occupants of coasts, the *aryotos* were more dependent on the sea as compared to the forests while for the *erem-tagas* the forest was the main source of food. The *aryotos* were expert swimmers and divers and the *erem-tagas* were better at hunting and collecting forest produce. The *aryotos* were more mobile than the *erem-tagas* as they lived on the coast, and had to shift their residence with the changing wind patterns. The *erem-tagas* too moved once the resources of their hunting grounds depleted. In contrast to the Great Andamanese, the Nicobarese lived in permanent villages on the coasts of the islands.

The Nicobarese lived in permanent villages located very close to the sea coast. The villages could be seen from far. It was surrounded by groves of coconut trees. The villages of the Nicobar Islands had linear pattern and each of the village had a definite layout. Sea was an integral part of Nicobarese life and therefore the villages were located near it. Sea was the source of food and was the only means of travel between villages and islands. The village consisted of some similar looking houses.

The third difference between the Great Andamanese and Nicobarese was in the house types. Though the houses constructed by the Great Andamanese were well adapted to the environment, they were rudimentary, while the houses of Nicobarese were elaborate and sturdy.

Great Andamanese made three types of encampments and their houses varied accordingly. These encampments were: permanent, temporary and hunting. Permanent encampment was the headquarter of the tribe. They lived here for larger part of the year and would shift to temporary shelter for the remaining time. Hunting camps were constructed during the hunting expeditions when they had to spend sometime within the forests. Both the coast dwellers (*aryoto*) and the forest dwellers (*erem-taga*) had these three types of encampments. The permanent encampments of coast dwellers had the communal huts and that of the forest dwellers had village with different huts. There were three primary reasons for this difference. First, the forest dwellers were less mobile than the coast-dwellers and therefore settled in villages. Second, the small huts of the

²⁵ Kiran Dhingra, *op. cit.*

²⁶ *Imperial Gazetteer of India: Provincial Series - Andaman and Nicobar Islands, op. cit.*

²⁷ M.V. Portman, *op. cit.*

erem-taga villages were not sturdy for the strong sea-winds. Thus, *aryoto* preferred the communal huts as it offered more protection from prevailing winds. Third, shifting location was more tedious for the *erem-taga* than the *aryoto* because the forest dwellers had to carry their belongings over land by walking as there was no means of carrying things otherwise. The coast dwellers used the canoe for transporting their belongings.²⁸ All these factors led to the construction of two types of permanent encampments – villages by forest dwellers and communal huts by coast dwellers. The dwelling units of Great Andamanese did not have any walls. Four poles made of hardwood were dug deep in the earth. Two of these were taller and formed the front of the hut while two short poles were put at the back. Then frame made of finely cut pieces of the wood was placed in a slanting position. On this frame screens of palm leaves, woven into mats, were placed. The design of the hut made it resistant to earthquakes and storms. The mat-roofs of palm-leaves provided protection from the heavy rains. The *aryotos* had larger version of these huts known as communal huts. The huts of the temporary encampments and the hunting encampments were similar in principle, but were less durable than the huts of the permanent encampments

The huts of the Nicobarese were strikingly different from the huts of the Great Andamanese. The huts of the Nicobarese were constructed on raised platforms which was 6 to 7 feet above the ground. The stilts on which the platform rested was made from wood of coconut palm, jackfruit and other hard woods as these are not affected by vermin and termites. These woods lasted for 25 to 30 years before needing a replacement. The floor was made from split bamboos which rested on the platform of timber. For the walls, first planks were raised and then they were covered with thatch from outside. The *lallang grass* or *dhani pati* was used for the thatch. These are abundant and are found near the estuaries where fresh water meets the sea. For the roof too, the same thatch was used. The grass from the roof covered the walls too. Kloss thus described the Nicobarese huts:

village of bee-hive huts on posts. Without windows or visible entrance, the interior is reached by a neatly – made ladder of bamboo, or notched pole, through a trapdoor in the floor, which works on hinges.²⁹

Every village of Nicobar Island had five types of houses – *El panam*, *Pati Yong Niyo*, *Pati Kupah*, *Ma Pati Tuhet* and *Taliko*. The *El panam* was the communal house and was the largest structure of any Nicobarese village. It was used for village gatherings and on special occasions such as the pig fighting, canoe racing or weddings. It also acted as the guest house. Outsiders visiting the village for the first time were taken to this and after acquaintance was established, only then were they taken into the village. The *Pati Yong Niyo* was the birth-house and was built exclusively for childbirth since childbirth is an unclean process and therefore should be carried out away from the village. The

²⁸ A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, *op. cit.*

²⁹ Boden Kloss, *In the Andaman and Nicobars: The Narrative of a Cruise in the Schooner "Terrapin," with Notices of the Islands, their Fauna, Ethnology, etc.* London, John Murray Press, 1903.

third type of house was the *Pati Kupah*, the death house. This was the mortuary house where after the death of a person, the body was kept for the last rites. This house was located close to the burial ground. The fourth type of house is the *Ma Pati Tuhet*. This was the house for the residence of the *tuhet*. The fifth type is the *Taliko* where the *tuhet* cooked its food. It had a raised platform on which cooking was done. The raised platform protected the food from contamination due to dust and crawling insects. Thus the huts of Nicobarese were more elaborate and detailed than the huts of Great Andamanese.

The fourth significant difference between the Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese was in their relation with the tribes on other islands. The Great Andamanese maintained friendly relation with neighbouring tribes while they were hostile to the distant tribes. Even the language of the distant sub-tribes was unintelligible to one another.³⁰ Therefore there was no inter-mixing among the sub-tribes of the Great Andamanese. The tribes did not leave their islands to establish contact with the tribes on other islands. On this Portman the in-charge of the Andamanese, remarked:

the [Great] Andamanese are on friendly relations with each other as follows - most friendly within their families; friendly within their *septs*; fairly friendly within their tribes; on terms of courtesy with the members of other tribes of the same group, if known; hostile to the tribes within their own group whom they do not know, and to all other Andamanese, and to all strangers.³¹

This was in complete contrast to the relationship among the Nicobarese. There is a language continuum among the Nicobarese inhabiting all islands. This indicates that friendly relation existed among the Nicobarese of different islands. A custom had evolved among the Nicobar Islands where one island became dependent on the other whereby one traded its "speciality" with the other island. For example, Car Nicobar Island was rich in coconuts, while Katchall Island and Nancowry Island had beetle-nuts as well as items that they traded with the ships that halted in the harbour. The Teresa Island supplied water and clay for pot making while the Great Nicobar Island provided the wood to make the canoes. Chowra enjoyed a special place. Though not rich in any natural resource, the islanders of Chowra were experts in making pots for cooking and storing water and the canoes. Thus, the Chowra islanders traded the pots and the canoes for drinking water, coconut, beetle-nut, pigs and other items. It was believed by the Nicobarese that canoes made on any other island would capsize while anything cooked in pots other than the ones made in Chowra would lead to sickness and may be death. Thus, strong ties developed between the Nicobarese of all islands, so much so that each islander had a "brother" on different islands that supported each other's families in times of need. Marriages also took place between different Nicobar Islands.

The fifth most important difference between the Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese was in their relation with the "non-islanders". The Great Andamanese

³⁰ M.V. Portman, *op. cit.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

believed that all strangers are “devils” and thus attacked who-so-ever landed on their islands. They were extremely hostile to people of different race. There were numerous incidents when the Great Andamanese attacked the ships that took shelter in the harbour to protect them from rough weather or to refill the water supply. Portman also explains the reason of this extreme hostility:

... a pleasant, good-humoured, and gentle race, they were driven to desperation by the ill-treatment they received from strangers, and acquired in self-defence a cruelty and ferocity originally foreign to their natures.³²

In fact, before the colonization, the Malaysians did capture the Great Andamanese and traded them as slaves in the court of the king of Malaysia.³³

On the contrary, the Nicobarese not only welcomed the “non-islanders” they maintained trade relationships which also led to matrimonial alliances in many cases. The Nicobar Islands lie close to the Strait of Malacca, one of the busiest trading routes of the world, since it connects the Indian Ocean with the Pacific Ocean. Several Arab trading ships took refuge in the Nicobar Island, especially in the Katchall, Kamorta and Nancowry Islands. This exposed the Nicobarese to the outsider. The Muslim population, though very small, is a result of the influence of the Arab traders in Nicobar Islands. Nicobarese were also more welcoming towards the colonizers. France, Austria and Denmark tried to establish colony in Nicobar Islands (Table 2). They never met with any hostility by the Nicobarese. It was because of the climate, high sickness rate and exorbitant cost of maintaining the colony, that the colonies were closed each time. This difference in the approach to the “non-islanders” led to the near extinction of the Great Andamanese and the increase in the population of Nicobarese. Before British occupied the A&N Islands in 1858, Great Andamanese numbered close to 8000 while Nicobarese were close to 6000. As per the Census of India, there are only 44 Great Andamanese while Nicobarese number 27,168.³⁴

Country	No. of attempts	Beginning year	Closing year	Islands occupied	Duration of stay (in years)
France	4	1711	1715	Nicobar	3½
		1742	1742	Nicobar	<1
		1836	1836	Nicobar	<1
		1842	1842	Teressa and Kamorta Islands	<1
Austria	2	1778	1778	Nicobar	<1

³² M.V. Portman, *op. cit.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Census of India (2011), *Figures at Glance: Provisional Population Totals*, http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data_files/ani/PPT_Press_Release_Final.pdf, accessed in June 2011.

Country	No. of attempts	Beginning year	Closing year	Islands occupied	Duration of stay (in years)
		1868	1868	Nicobar	<1
Denmark	4	1756	1757	Great Nicobar and Kamorta	1
		1768	1787	Nancowry	9
		1784	1787	Nancowry	3
		1845	1869	Great Nicobar and Little Nicobar	29*
England	1	1789	1796	South Andaman and North Andaman	7
*this was sporadic - there was no continuous presence					
<i>Based on Singh² and Dhingra³</i>					

The Great Andamanese came in contact only with the British, yet their population has been almost wiped out. After the “contact” with the British, the epidemic of syphilis killed the Great Andamanese population. The Great Andamanese resisted the British encroachment on their islands and retaliated. Therefore, the British used force in order to “civilize” the Great Andamanese and take control over their land. This coercion by the British was one of the reasons for the vulnerability to the several epidemics of the late 19th century among the Great Andamanese. On the other hand, the Nicobarese entered into a bargain and trading relations with the colonizers. The Nicobarese continued with their traditional life and were never intimidated by the colonizers. Thus, even though they came in contact with many foreign influences, and have adopted Christianity, yet were able to preserve their identity and have grown in number.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the preceding discussion that both Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese shared similarities and had apparent differences. The root cause of the similarity was the scarcity of resources, while the location of the islands played a key role in creating the dissimilarities. The system of communal ownership of land and living in large joint families as well as practicing adoption were efforts of the tribe to judiciously use the limited resources. Thus the primary resource, i.e. land, belonged to everyone and this discouraged hoarding. Similarly the food was shared by the joint family. This ensured that there was no over exploitation of the limited resources and the practice also curbed wastage. Adoption was a unique method to have friendly relationship with other tribes for peaceful existence. A child is always precious to a family and the families willingly gave them up to the neighbouring tribes. Thus a mutual agreement existed among the tribes that one would not attack the other as post adoption they become one family. This is one instance where adoption was used as a method of peace keeping.

Some of the differences among the Great Andamanese and the Nicobarese have also emerged due to the scarcity of resources. For, example, the Great Andamanese followed a nomadic life based on hunting-gathering in order to replenish the depleted resources. Again, since the Nicobar Islands are smaller in comparison to the Andaman Islands, the Nicobarese could not live a nomadic life as that would have led to complete exhaustion of the resources. Therefore they preferred to rear coconuts and pigs and live in permanent villages. The small size also led to the interdependence of the islands of the Nicobar archipelago. None of the islands was self-sufficient and hence maintained relation with each other.

The location of the islands played an important role in their dealing with the non-islanders. Andaman Islands lie in seclusion where as the Nicobar Islands are on the trade route. The proximity to Malacca Strait ensured that the Nicobarese were familiar with the trading vessels. These trading ships became the supply of exotic items for the Nicobarese, especially rice, tobacco and clothes. Thus Nicobarese were friendly with the trading ships. Though Great Andamanese and Nicobarese were similar in many respects, yet this one difference, their dealing with the non-islanders, became crucial in determining their fate.³⁵

³⁵ I am indebted to Prof. Anu Kapur, of the Department of Geography, Delhi School of Economics, University of Delhi (for her encouragement, guidance, support and love) in writing this paper.

