

## Contemporary society of the Andaman Islands and problems of indigenous people

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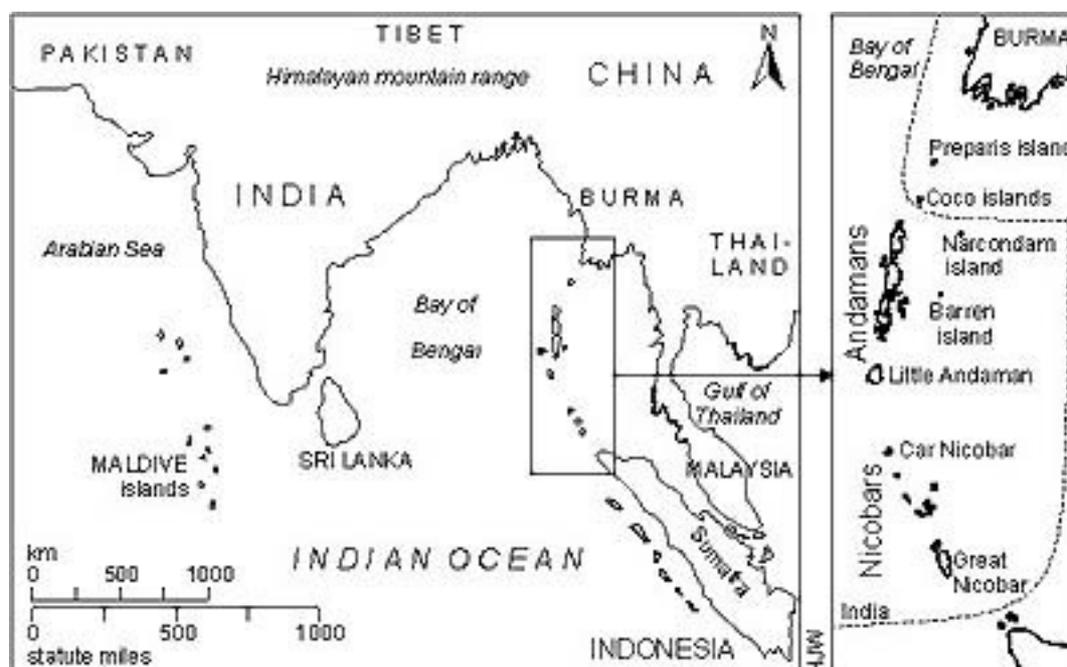
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### Abstract

The society of the Andaman Islands is a melting pot. There are people from India, Bangladesh, Burma and Sri-Lanka. Nowadays they share these lands with indigenous people who appeared here a long time ago. The establishing of contacts took a lot of time and even though now it seems that the golden middle was successfully found question of communication with indigenous people is still remain quite urgent. From one hand indigenous people receive many goods from modern civilization, however, from the other hand modern world brings such problems as new diseases, alcoholism and destroying of traditional cultures. Indigenous people who actively get in touch with modern civilization usually consider their indigenous culture mostly as a hobby or as a mean for attracting tourists, but they won't maintain traditions of life of their ancestors seriously. Another problem is that authorities have no clear imagination of policy toward indigenous people.

**Key words:** The Andaman Islands, Jarawa; Onge; Sentinelese; indigenous people; adaptation

It was only after the gaining of independence on August 15 1947 when the attention of the administration of India was attracted to the multinational and various confessional population of the Andaman Islands.



Pic 1. Map of the Andaman Islands (source: Weber)

Even at those times all people spoke Hindi because Englishmen tried to keep apart people who were from one state or were speaking the same language. It was believed that if they would keep together they would organize a conspiracy easily.

The first group of refugees and emigrants from the East Bengal has arrived to the Andaman Islands before 1949. They have arrived due to the policy of the Indian government connected with the increasing of the islands' population. In most cases these people have found themselves in agriculture and handicrafts. Nowadays there is quite huge community of Tamils-chetty (they are Tamil people who were brought to Burma by Englishmen and after 1948 (the year when Burma gained its' independence) were forced to go away) and people from Sri Lanka.

Multinational population of the islands has caused the appearance of the new social group called Locals. The absence of castes system, religious and social prejudices is typical for that group (Tamta 1994: 109). It can be said that due to this fact population of the Andaman Islands is more liberal and more ready for changes.

Besides the refugees and immigrants indigenous people still dwell on the Andaman Islands. The most important issue here is that Indian government still hasn't clear imagination of policy toward indigenous people. The government tries to help indigenous people to survive in the modern world, but the performed policy doesn't match with that goal.

First of all, the story of Jarawa people should be told. For long period of time they were believed to be unfriendly and as a result of it they haven't been studied well yet. However, the present day research indicates that since 1998 Jarawa have started to appear in the nearest villages and towns without arrows and bows that evidently is a sign of their readiness to start communication with the others.

In 1990 regional authorities decided to relocate all Jarawa from jungle to two villages. There they were supposed to live fishing, while hunting and gathering would become their hobbies. At the same time the authors of that project have not thought about influence of modern world, which in many cases can be fatal for indigenous people. It is not only the problem of the Andaman Islands, but of the whole world. It is a well-known fact that it was because of forcible adaptation and settling in so-called Homes that a lot of indigenous people have died.

Due to active campaign against that plan it wasn't realized. In 2004 the authorities have declared new policy towards Jarawa: from now the Jarawa were able to define their future themselves. Moreover, it was decided that influence of the outside world should be reduced to the minimum. Unfortunately, it didn't work in a right way and as a result of it Jarawa have become victims of development. A new attraction known as human safari has appeared.

The policy of forcible adaptation is definitely wrong. As a result of that policy indigenous people lose their sense of self-understanding and being a part of a community, they have to fight on their own with the unfamiliar world.

Also as a result of contacts with newcomers/tourists Jarawa got new diseases, started to have depressions and even commit suicides. Additionally, some of them became alcohol and drug addicted (The Jarawa).

The population of another tribe – Onge is small, but stable – 110 people. They dwell on the Little Andaman Island in the Dugong Creek reservation. According to the official website of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Onge had contacts with modern world and as a result of it they have received clothes, medicine, houses etc. Due to these contacts they had also lost the need to find food on their own by terms of hunting (Bhartiy Manvigyan Sarveksan 2004: 7). Nowadays they even have school, but as B.R. Tamta says they don't like wearing clothes and prefer living in the houses, which they build in a traditional style (Tamta 1994: 141 – 142).

In 1999 the population of the Great Andamanese people was 41 persons (Bhartiy Manvigyan Sarveksan 2004). At present days the administration of the Andaman Islands tries to do its' best to protect and preserve these people. They have been relocated to the small Strait Island (pic. 2)



Pic 2. Geographic location of the Strait Island (source: Strait Island).

There the houses were built and the fields were prepared for the agriculture. However, the Andamanese got used to receive food from the administration. They can still go hunting or

gathering sometimes, but in a lot of cases it is done for fun. The doctor visits them from time to time and social worker is stayed forever.

According to Anvita Abbi most of the Great Andamanese understand Hindi, Bengali and know some English and their mother tongue words, though children under 16 years old don't know the language of their ancestors. The most common language of communicating for the Great Andamanese people is Andamanese version of Hindi (Abbi 2013: xviii-xix).

The Sentinelese people are still not studied anyhow because they intentionally escape any contacts with modern world. They live on the North Sentinel Island (pic. 3).



Pic 3. Geographic location of the North Sentinel Island (source: North Sentinel Island)

Their languages aren't described as well, so now it's completely impossible to say whether Sentinelese are relatives of some ethnic group of Andaman Islands. It is thought that they have been living on these territories for around 60000 years.

From the other hand Sentinelese people indirectly progress step by step all that time, for instance, they have learned to use the metals, which they received from the shipwrecks (The most isolated...). The population of that tribe is not known for sure. There seem to be about 80 or 250 of Sentinelese people. They have survived after the tsunami of 2004. In order to figure that fact out the helicopter was sent to the North Sentinel Island and while it was flying over it the arrows had started to appear. That was evidence that the tribe was alive.

Also it is a well known fact that in 2006 Sentinelese people killed two fishermen who illegally came in Sentinelese waters (Survival comes first...).

All in all, it can be said that the present society of the Andaman Islands consists of the two main groups: Indians (including Locals, people from Sri-Lanka, Bangladesh and Burma) and tribal people. In most of the cases they live peacefully. The only thing that is still left for the consideration is the question of policy toward indigenous people.

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