The Andaman Islanders

The aboriginal inhabitants of a stretch of islands near India offer a fascinating glimpse into the way of life of traditional hunter-gatherers. But how long will this window to our past remain open?

by Sita Venkateswar

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The indigenous people who inhabit the lush, verdant rain forests of the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal have made the islands their home for at least the past 2,000 years. Over the centuries, the Andaman Islanders have been a subject of both fascination and dread, often being portrayed as brutish cannibals. The 13th-century explorer Marco Polo, for instance, recorded in accounts of his travels a story he heard of the “dog-headed” inhabitants of the islands. More recently, in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of Four*, an Andaman Islander appears as a villain, complete with “murderous darts” and a “face [that] was enough to give a man a sleepless night.”

DECADES OF COLONIALISM have nearly wiped out the culture of the Great Andamanese people, one of four indigenous societies of the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal. By the 1890s the group felt the influence of British occupation: despite the traditional body decorations shown in a photograph from the time (*opposite page*), the islanders had discovered not only British pipes but also deadly diseases, such as syphilis and measles. Today only about 40 Great Andamanese remain. An older woman in the community, Boro, shown below at the right, finishes an evening of fishing as two young boys arrive on the beach to greet her.

These creative flights of fancy aside, the history and culture of the Andamanese continue to intrigue visitors to the islands, as well as anthropologists such as myself. Between 450 and 500 indigenous people still live on the islands, the last representatives of the dwindling population of Negrito people in south Asia. The Andaman Islanders followed the traditional way of life of these people—one of seminomadic hunter-gatherer-fishers—well into the 19th century, when British colonists arrived and began to take over the islands.

Despite intrusions, however, some islanders have managed to hold on to many of their traditional customs. Indeed, even now, one group remains extraordinarily isolated and hostile to

any outsiders, defending its territory with potentially deadly force. But the influence of occupation, first British and now Indian, has taken its toll. The number of Andaman Islanders has dropped precipitously over the past two centuries, down from an estimated average of 5,000 islanders living throughout the archipelago in the middle of the 19th century.

MADHUSREE MUKERJEE

The Andaman Islands

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MADHUSREE MUKERJEE; MAPS BY LAURIE GRACE

ANDAMAN ISLANDERS now consist of four tribes: the Great Andamanese, Jarawa, Onge and Sentinelese. Great Andamanese, such as the three boys shown above, typically have both Andamanese, Indian and Karen Burmese heritage. Today the group, which originally occupied North, Middle and South Andaman, has been moved to tiny Strait Island (map) by the Indian government. The Jarawa people have remained much more isolated, only sporadically venturing out from the dense forests set aside for them on South and Middle Andaman. Three young Jarawa men are shown wearing decorations and jewelry (near right). The Onge now inhabit coastal areas of Little Andaman. This Onge mother and child, shown at the far right, display the traditional practice of painting faces and bodies with white clay. Members of the Sentinelese group are rarely seen. They live on North Sentinel Island, which they vigorously defend from invasion.

At present, only four tribes live on the islands—the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarawa and the Sentinelese. Yet scholars believe that at one time, some 12 distinct linguistic and separate territorial groups inhabited the islands. Time is running out for the last representatives of aboriginal Andamanese culture. In hopes of learning more about the islanders—their past, present and future—I spent some 18 months on the islands between 1989 and 1993, living primarily with members of the Onge tribe.

Paleolithic Pasts

The origins of the Andaman Islanders remain enshrouded in speculation. Current evidence—most recently, excavations by Zarine Cooper of Deccan College in India—supports the theory of a long, continuous occupation of the islands for at least the past 2,200 years. Some scholars believe the ancestors of today's indigenous groups reached the islands some 35,000 years ago. The Andamanese people's small stature and distinctive hair type, in association with their very dark skin, indicate that they are racially separate

from the mainland Indian population as well as from the aboriginal population on neighboring Nicobar Islands.

Lidio Cipriani, director of the Port Blair office of the Anthropological Survey of India during the early 1950s, and, more recently, Vishvajit Pandya of Victoria University in New Zealand have suggested that the Andaman Islanders may be related to another Negrito group, the Semang of southeast Asia. And some new, though still tentative, genetic data suggest that the Andaman Islanders may be descendants of the first humans to migrate out of Africa some 100,000 years ago, reaching the islands between 35,000 and 40,000 years ago [see "Out of Africa, into Asia," by Madhusree Mukerjee; *SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN*, News and Analysis, January].

Two possible routes for the Andamanese's arrival in the islands have been offered. During the ice ages 40,000 years ago, when sea levels were significantly lower, people could have both walked and crossed the shallow seas in their dugout canoes either from Sumatra by way of the Nicobar Islands or from the Malay and Burmese coasts.

Contrary to the common misconception

INDIGENOUS POPULATION

	1901	1951	1998
GREAT ANDAMANES	625	23	39
ONGE	672*	150*	100*
JARAWA	468*	50*	250*
SENTINELESE	117*	50*	100*

*ESTIMATED

BELT PATTERNS BY LAURIE GRACE; SOURCE: THE JARAWA, BY JAVANTA SARKAR

tion, the Andamanese are not and never were cannibals. The probable origin of this myth is the islanders' former practice of cutting up the dead bodies of their enemies and throwing the pieces into a fire. Outside observers apparently assumed this act was a preamble to a cannibalistic feast. But scholars now know that the bodies were never consumed and that this practice was simply a precautionary measure for dispersing harmful spirits. In contrast, the islanders bury the bodies of their kin under the communal huts to keep their spirits close to the surviving family members.

People often describe the Andaman Islanders as a Stone Age culture, but it is inaccurate to portray them as having been utterly isolated until the appearance of the British. Even before the arrival of the colonial powers, the islanders had been forcibly drawn into the slave-trading networks of south and southeast Asia. Many of the slaves were supplied to the rajah of Kedah, who then sent them to the king of Siam as part of his tribute. There is even some evidence that Andamanese slaves reached the courts of France. In addition, as island dwellers, the Andaman people have always incorporated into their culture the varied objects washed ashore or introduced by assorted visitors through the centuries.

During my research visits to the Andaman Islands, I spent most of my time with the Onge tribe. Roughly 100 Onge now live on Little Andaman Island [see map on opposite page] in two permanent settlements: Dugong Creek, in the north, and South Bay, at the south-

ern tip of the island. The rest of the island is inhabited by ethnically distinct immigrants from India. By piecing together details obtained from diverse sources—tales from the Onge themselves and my own observations, as well as earlier research by Cipriani, by Badal Basu of the Anthropological Survey of India and by Pandya—I have been able to assemble a patchwork of information about aspects of the Onge way of life and about many typical Andamanese traditions.

Daily Life

Over the course of my numerous interviews with approximately 30 Onge women, men and children, previously unknown details emerged about their life in the forest. I conducted these discussions in Onge; some of the most informative accounts came from three men, Bada Raju, Totanange and Tilai. I have integrated these details into the composite account that follows:

"During the dry season, they [ancestral or other Onge] would get *bulundange* [jackfruit], and store it. They would fill up *tole* [big baskets] with fruit, cover them with leaves, tie them up and hide them in the forest. So when there is a lot of rain there is food. They would also hunt, and bring back pork, and when that finished, they ate *bulundange*. There was no tea then, they would only drink water. They would store a lot of dry wood, because once it gets wet it is very difficult to get wood.

That's why during *Torale* [the dry season] all the wood is obtained and stored. Then before the rain begins, the big *tokabe* [communal hut] is built, and during the rains it is very comfortable inside.

"In the past, there was no wage work, we had all the time to build our houses, get pork, eat pork rich in fat. They didn't have any utensils, they would make *bucu* [clay pots] ... to cook the pork. Then when *Kwalokange* [the southeast monsoon] starts, the boars become thin, and they are not tasty. In the creeks in the forest there is so much fish, we would get fish and *nana* [prawn].

"There was no iron then, we would use the wood from the areca trees ... but we would get iron from the sea, when it washed ashore. And use the resin from the forest to sharpen the metal. Otherwise, we used the wood from the forest. We would make *dange* [dugout canoes] using a different wood, but when it was taken to the water it sank, so we knew this wood was no good. So we tried a different wood, took it to the water and saw, yes, it stayed afloat. So, that's what we used afterwards. That's how we learned things.

"In the old days, there was no nylon rope, the fiber used to kill turtles now. We would get into the water and crowd the turtle, we used the incense from the forest, make a torch with *kuendeve* [dried rattan leaves] and light it with the incense, as we crowded around the turtle. We were a lot of Onge then, and that's how

DOMESTIC LIFE for some Andaman Islanders reflects historic customs; for others, the modern world prevails. An Onge woman prepares rice (supplied by the Indian government) for her family's midday meal in a traditional Onge home located in South Bay, Little Andaman Island (*above*). On Strait Island, Golat, a young man who is Great Andamanese, watches a cricket match on the television in the schoolhouse with two boys from the community (*right*).

we would hem in the turtle. We didn't harpoon the turtle then, we only used arrows to hunt boar.

"And that's how we caught dugong as well. We would wait for low tide and then go to hunt turtle and dugong at night. Not when the tide is high—then we would drown. Then when that was done, we would go to the forest again, and get more incense, and light it, and go search for boar.

"We were a lot of Onge then, we were not afraid of *Tommany* [a spirit of the night], and we would go into the forest at night. We had no fear then. At that time there were Onge everywhere, many *bera* [a territorial grouping] all over. There were so many of us then. The boars would go to sleep at night, and that's when we would hunt them. It was so easy then. We would come back during the day and go look for the boar we hunted the previous night. Then we would take it back with us, smoke it and cook it. And that's how we

lived. We didn't have clothes then, we would wear bark from the forest. The girls would make them with *kuendeve*. Those are some of the things we would do."

Like many other indigenous groups, the Onge perceive themselves as inhabiting an interconnected universe, peopled with spirits that include their ancestors—the *Onkoboykwo*—who play an active role in everyday life. The Onge share this universe with various other spirits, the *tomya*, who make their presence known by blowing in as winds from different directions, thereby marking and naming each season.

Food fuels the cycle of life and death for the Onge. For example, new life is conceived when women eat foods in which the *Onkoboykwo* reside. These ancestor spirits, who otherwise dwell in a realm similar to the Onge's world, have no teeth and cannot chew food. Hence they enter various foods to satisfy their hunger. Thus, when women eat foods containing the spirits, the *Onko-*

boykwo become Onge; after death the Onge are again transformed into the *Onkoboykwo*. Food also creates the basis for certain social interactions. Important bonds develop between a child and all the women who nursed the infant, as well as between the child and the man or woman who procured the food that impregnated the mother.

This description emphasizes the deep and symbolic significance embodied in the foods consumed by the Onge—a significance that reflects the Onge's hunting-and-gathering way of life as well as their relationship to the environment. This connection with nature is particularly strong, dictating where the Onge tribes live during the year and what they eat. With the onset of the hot, dry season (usually in March and April), for instance, Onge families move from the coastline, where they had been hunting turtles, into the interior of the forest to collect *tanja*, or honey. This relocation marks the beginning of the season of *Torale*, when the spirits vacate the islands. Families from one *bera* collect in the large, beehive-shaped communal hut where the ancestral bones are buried.

The arrival of the spirit *Dare* in the forest, riding on the back of the southwest monsoon (typically in June), signals the end of *Torale* and the time to leave the interior of the forest for shelters by the creeks and mangrove forests. Here the Onge can find crabs, fish and mangrove fruit. Once the spirit *Dare* leaves in September, the Onge move back to the forests and feast on boar until the approach of the spirit *Kwalokange* and the southeast monsoon in October. At

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this time, the Onge return to the coast and begin hunting for dugong. They believe that the spirit *Kwalokange* consumes the remaining boar within the forest, leaving just a small amount for the next spirit, *Mekange*, the northeast wind. The appearance of *Mekange* from November to February indicates that the Onge should resume hunting turtles. The seasonal cycle is complete.

Everything I have described about the customs and beliefs of the Onge relates back to their traditional way of life, one that was shared to a large extent with the other peoples of the islands. This traditional culture has been in decline for almost a century and a half, however, since the beginning of colonial rule over the islands.

The Colonial Era

The British government established a permanent penal colony on the islands in 1858, the first time relatively accurate descriptions of the islands or their inhabitants were written. That year marked the start of a continuous history of colonization. When the first English colonists arrived, the local inhabitants made their homes through most of the some 200 islands that make up the Andamans. Contact with the British brought about the so-called pacification of various groups of the Great Andamanese tribe as well as of some coastal populations of Onge.

Of course, "pacification" is a misnomer—the military used the word to denote the often violent silencing of resistance from local populations. As Carmel Schrire of Rutgers University has written in her book *Digging through Darkness: Chronicles of an Archaeologist* (University Press of Virginia, 1995), although "the opinions and feelings of the dispossessed" seldom become known, "it is not that they were silent.... It is simply that they went unrecorded." As a result, most of our knowledge of this era comes from the reports of those confrontations as chronicled by the colonists.

The British arrival brought first bloodshed and then disease and dispossession to local populations across the

North, Middle and South Andaman Islands. In 1901, when the British undertook the first census in the Indian subcontinent, officials counted 625 Great Andamanese and estimated numbers for the other three tribes: 672 Onge, 468 Jarawa and 117 Sentinelese. After a brief Japanese occupation of the Andaman Islands during World War II, India took control of the region in 1947.

The subsequent Indian style of governing was also colonial in its nature, at least as it pertained to the islanders. The change from the British to the Indian regime amounted to no more than a transfer of power, with little to differentiate the two. The Indian government, like its predecessor, attempted to shoulder "the white man's burden" of assisting native populations. Disease and other forces continued to take their toll, however. By 1951, when independent India conducted its first census, the number of Great Andamanese had fallen to a mere 23. Estimates for the other tribes were also low—150 Onge, 50 Jarawa and 50 Sentinelese.

Today, of the nearly 40 people who can claim Great Andamanese heritage, many have recent Indian ancestry as well. Only an estimated 100 Onge, 250 Jarawa and 100 Sentinelese are now alive. The ravages of the earliest and longest duration of contact have been borne by the Great Andamanese, who have been resettled on the small Strait Island; the Indian government arranged this as some measure of reparation for the historical injustices that the people have undergone.

Both the Great Andamanese and the Onge currently lead sedentary lives—instead of hunting and fishing, they have rations allotted to them by the Indian government. The Jarawa and the Sentinelese have survived the colonial era better than the other groups. The Jarawa tribe, living in dense forests, continues to have only limited contact with others, and any contact they do have is on their terms, when they will tolerate it. Members of the Sentinelese

TRADITIONAL ONGE DWELLING (top) at Dugong Creek on Little Andaman Island is more popular among some residents of the settlement than are the wooden houses built for them by the government. In contrast, the Great Andamanese live in government-built houses, such as Boro's home on Strait Island (bottom).

tribe (named after the island they inhabit) rarely, if ever, see outsiders.

Both tribes—particularly the Sentinelese—defend their territorial boundaries with bows and arrows, now reinforced with iron arrowheads. Declaring their intentions of including the Jarawa as "full-fledged citizens of the country," Indian officials are trying to lure the Jarawa into more peaceful interactions with the promise of coconuts, bananas, rice, cloth and pieces of iron.

Romulus Whitaker, a prominent ecologist, has asserted that the most serious threat to the Jarawa today is the increasing encroachment by outsiders into their prime hunting and fishing land. He observes that the Jarawa are willing to undertake considerable risks to obtain

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Jarawa decorative pattern,
used on leaf belts

JARAWA people run to meet a government boat sent to view the aboriginals and to deliver coconuts, bananas, rice, pieces of iron and red cloth. Earlier this century anthropologists began offering red cloth to the Jarawa; the tradition continues to this day.

metal for their arrowheads, including raiding road-building camps, forest camps and farms. As the number and scale of "Jarawa incidents" (which receive media attention only if there are deaths on the Indian side) indicate, the settlers, illegal encroachers and the police have taken it on themselves to launch a miniwar against the Jarawa without formal government approval.

The Sentinelese, however, are assured of a certain degree of security by their occupation of a small, isolated island, access to which remains difficult. They continue to present a militant front to the outside world and until eight years ago had actively thwarted any attempt to reach their island. But in 1991 they accepted some coconuts from a team of Indian anthropologists and administrators. There have been no further developments since then. From the little that has been observed and can be inferred of these people, their way of life and material culture are very similar to those of the other Andaman groups.

In recent years, the term "ethnocide"

has come into prominence to describe the ongoing destruction of many indigenous cultures around the world. The people themselves are not purposely harmed, but they are often sequestered within enclaves where they are rendered dependent on a dominant majority that has taken over their lands, leaving the group without any alternative means for survival. The dominant people then proceed to improve the condition of these "primitives" by destroying all the elements of their "backward" way of life, resulting in the death of a distinct culture.

On the surface, such policies seem to embody a humanitarian desire to help people, but they also reflect the prejudiced assumption that the way of life of indigenous people is inherently inferior and hence must be supplanted by a different and better one. Moreover, these policies presume that the indigenous peoples are incapable of envisioning or planning their own future, and as a result outsiders feel they must step in to assist.

In truth, the assimilation of the islanders into the Indian mainstream has

primarily benefited the colonizers. As the British extended their colony across the North, Middle and South Andaman islands, and plans developed for more commercially profitable uses for land occupied by the Great Andamanese (for lumber, farming and the clearing of forests for roads), the government's policies clearly resolved in favor of moving the islanders into restricted settlements. And after India's independence from the British, the forests of Little Andaman Island, where the Onge live, also became the target of development efforts.

Unfortunately, no matter how policies are framed, for the Andaman Islanders the consequences are a steadily dwindling amount of territory under their control, the gradual destruction of their unique and viable way of life, and the eventual induction of the islanders into the swelling ranks of other dispossessed marginals of mainland Indian society. As David Maybury-Lewis of Cultural Survival notes, "Land and the struggle for it is at the heart of the problem of cultural survival, for the guarantee of their lands is what tribal peoples need most." But because indigenous peoples' claims around the world for land present a challenge to the ruling states' authority, not surprisingly most have met with little success.

Nevertheless, any discussion of international human rights should address indigenous peoples' land claims as well as alternative ways to resolve these disputes. It will be some time before the Andaman Islanders themselves become politically active enough to make a bid to define their own rights. The first step we outsiders must take, then, is at the local level: we must acknowledge that, if they are to survive, the Andaman Islanders can and should be allowed to plan for their own future.

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Further Reading

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