



Ethnographic Study of the Indigenous Tribes of Andaman Islands: Culture, Identity, and Contemporary Challenges

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Abstract

The Andaman Islands, a part of the Indian Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar, are home to some of the most ancient and isolated tribal communities in the world. These tribes — Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarwa, Sentinalese, Nicobarese, and Shompen — exhibit distinct cultural patterns, survival techniques, and languages. This study presents a comprehensive ethnographic profile of these tribes, highlighting their traditions, identity, and the contemporary pressures threatening their existence.

Keywords

Andaman Tribes, Great Andamanese, Jarwa, Onge, Sentinalese, Nicobarese, Shompen, Indigenous Culture, Isolation, Tribal Identity, Ethnographic Study

(1) Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, are not only known for their pristine beaches and ecological richness but also for being the homeland of some of the oldest tribal communities on Earth. These islands are among the very few places where pre-Neolithic communities still survive, largely in isolation.

There are six recognized tribes in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands:

- In the Andaman Islands: Great Andamanese, Onge, Jarwa, and Sentinalese.
- In the Nicobar Islands: Nicobarese and Shompen.

While the tribes of the Andaman Islands have maintained minimal contact with the outside world, the Nicobarese and Shompen tribes have undergone different degrees of integration. The indigenous groups are protected under the Andaman and Nicobar Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Regulation (ANPATR) of 1956, recognizing their vulnerability and the need to conserve their cultural integrity.

These tribal groups are categorized as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) by the Government of India due to their low population, subsistence-level economy, and limited contact with the outside world. They represent not only human diversity but also rare anthropological and genetic lineages dating back tens of thousands of years.

(2) Objectives of the Study

- To explore the distinct cultural and social systems of the Andaman tribes.
- To study their language, belief systems, and economic activities.
- To understand their interaction with modern society and resulting changes.
- To highlight government policies and efforts for their protection.

(3) Major Tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

- **Present Condition:** Currently settled on Strait Island, largely dependent on government aid, with significant cultural loss.
- **Music & Dance:** Community songs and clapping during celebrations and rituals.
- **Housing:** Made small huts using leaves and bamboo in coastal areas.
- **Dress & Ornaments:** Traditionally used bark cloth; ornaments made from shells, bones, and plant fibers.
- **Food:** Their traditional diet includes roots, tubers, fruits, honey, wild boar, turtles, and fish from the sea.
- **Historical Background:** Once comprised 10 sub-tribes, the Great Andamanese population drastically declined after British colonization due to introduced diseases and loss of territory.

Great Andamanese

- **Current Issues:** Suffer from malnutrition, declining birth rates, and dependency on external supplies.
- **Dress & Body Art:** Minimal clothing; tattooing is common for cultural and symbolic purposes.
- **Food:** Diet includes fish, honey, turtles, pigs, and forest fruits.
- **Beliefs:** They believe in nature spirits and conduct rituals before hunting or during illness.
- **Social Life:** An egalitarian society where all decisions are taken collectively by adults.
- **History:** The Onge are believed to have lived on Little Andaman for over 20,000 years with minimal contact with the outside world.

Onge

- **Threats:** Andaman Trunk Road cuts through their territory, posing intrusion risks despite laws.
- **Art:** Body painting using natural dyes like charcoal and clay.
- **Language:** Purely oral language with no written script, unique to their community.
- **Interaction:** Maintained voluntary isolation; some interactions since 1998 through government outreach.
- **Skills:** Expert in hunting, archery, and survival in dense forests.
- **Migration Pattern:** Move between forest patches in tune with seasonal food availability.

Jarwa

- Legal Protection: Indian government enforces a 5-nautical-mile exclusion zone around North Sentinel Island.
- Lifestyle: Entirely self-sufficient, reject any form of contact; remain unstudied to respect their autonomy.
- Food: Hunter-gatherer diet includes seafood, coconuts, forest fruits, wild pigs, and turtles.
- Housing: Construct temporary huts made of leaves near beaches.
- Defensive Tactics: Use arrows, spears, and vocal warnings to prevent outsider entry.
- Oldest Isolation: Possibly isolated for more than 60,000 years, representing one of the most ancient human populations.

Sentinelese

- Population: Estimated 50–100
- Location: North Sentinel Island
- Language and Culture: Undeciphered; extremely hostile to outsiders
- Lifestyle: Complete isolation; no agriculture, hunter-gatherers
- Status: Entry to the island is banned under Indian law
- Modern Integration: Participate in panchayats; education and Christianity have influenced lifestyle changes.

Nicobarese

- Population: Over 30,000
- Location: Nicobar Islands
- Language: Nicobarese (Austroasiatic language group)
- Religion: Animism, but some converted to Christianity
- Economy: Coconut and betel nut cultivation, fishing
- Integration: More modernized than Andaman tribes; have Panchayats and local governance
- Modern Threats: Road construction and forest exploitation threaten their environment and health.
- Culture: Very private and elusive; avoid all forms of consistent interaction with outsiders.
- Dress: Minimal clothing; use bark, leaves, and beads for decoration and utility.
- Diet: Consume roots, wild fruits, birds, fish, and forest animals like pigs and monitor lizards.
- Housing: Construct leaf-thatched huts deep inside rainforests; highly nomadic lifestyle.
- Language & Communication: Speak a rare, undocumented dialect with some Nicobarese influence.

Shompen

- Population: Approx. 300
- Location: Interior of Great Nicobar Island
- Lifestyle: Nomadic or semi-nomadic forest dwellers
- Language: Unclassified language; not fully documented
- Contact: Limited and cautious; remain semi-isolated
- Culture: Hunting, foraging, honey collection
- Challenges: Health issues, external pressures, and low immunity

(4) Cultural Characteristics

- Family Structure: Mostly nuclear, with strong community bonds
- Marriage Customs: Clan-based or community-defined; mostly endogamous
- Rituals and Beliefs: Nature-worship, animism, ancestral spirits
- Oral Traditions: Songs, folklore, and dance for storytelling
- Material Culture: Use of natural materials like wood, bone, shells for tools and ornaments

(5) Threats to Tribal Life

- Encroachment and Deforestation
- Disease Transmission from Outsiders
- Loss of Language and Identity
- Climate Change and Natural Disasters
- Tourism Pressure and Media Exposure

(6) Government Policies and Protection Measures

- ANPATR, 1956: Protects tribal land and culture
- Restricted Area Permit (RAP): Limits outsider entry
- Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS): Welfare initiatives
- Education and Health Programs: Tailored for semi-integrated tribes
- Zero Contact Policy: Especially for Sentinalese and Jarwa

(7) Methodology

- Approach: Descriptive, ethnographic
- Sources: Government records, anthropological reports, field surveys
- Tools: Secondary data, interviews with experts, document analysis
- Ethical Note: No direct contact or data collection from isolated tribes

(8) Conclusion

The indigenous tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are not only part of India's rich heritage but also a vital link to human prehistory. Their survival depends on how sensitively modern society handles the paradox of conservation versus development. The focus should be on respecting their autonomy, safeguarding their habitat, and preserving their cultural legacy without forced assimilation.

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