

Ethnic Identity of the Indigenous Tribes in Great Nicobar Island

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ABSTRACT The present paper is aimed at understanding the indigenous tribes of the Great Nicobar Island in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It focuses on the geographical distribution of resources and the retention of strong ethnic differentiation among the islanders. The utilisation of the non-overlapping resources leads to more or less specific utilisation of microenvironments within the Great Nicobar Island. The extensive utilisation of resources largely rests on the diversity of species within the microenvironments and cultural perception of indigenous groups

PROLOGUE

We are presenting this paper in the aftermath of the tragic December 2004 Tsunami tragedy. Much has happened in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, especially in the Nicobar Islands: numerous lives had been lost and livelihoods of many families have been completely altered¹. We wish to state that the coastal villages of *Nicobarese* of Great Nicobar Island faced a huge catastrophe²? we acknowledge that the present situation on the Great Nicobar would have been significantly altered specially in the coastal areas. But we are not in a position to assess all the dimensions of change which the Tsunami caused³. At the same time we are encouraged to present this paper as an original ethnographic description and further we feel that the central thesis of the paper is worth considering for future comparative studies. Our field study was done prior to the occurrence of Tsunami.

INTRODUCTION

Biodiversity as an operational aspect for conservation has been gaining strength (Kottak, 1999) in recent times, while original implication of biodiversity rested largely on a quantities enumeration of species in a given environment. But in recent times, the studies of biodiversity have

focused on the understanding of distribution and variability of species, which presents us a more integrated view of a given environment. When the study of human–environment relationship as an approach is used, the emphasis lies on the food web and the cultural recognition of the diverse species by the indigenous people. Thus the relationship between ‘operational’ and ‘cognized’ (Wolf 1999) models of the environment can be seen as (operational) biodiversity and diverse species (cognized). Therefore, the complexity of culture also gives us sufficient clues as to the recognition and the ‘indigenous knowledge’ (Posey 1998) of species and the diversity.

The concept of micro-environment (Nietzschmann 1973) within a given environment enhances our understanding of the variability of the resources. A deeper analysis of these resources and the associated cultural practices required to harness them presents us with specific knowledge of ecological adaptation for that particular environment. The aspect of ethnicity in recent times has not received adequate attention from an ecological perspective: which in fact rests on the geographical diversity (Cashdan 2001). The reasons for such lacunae are largely due to theoretical reconsideration of ecologically based anthropological studies (Biersack 1999). A focused and careful study of habitat diversity i.e. biodiversity and microenvironment can give a deeper understanding of the ethnic variability which overtime retains ethnic identity.

GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND

Great Nicobar Island that is the largest island in the Nicobar group of Islands is also the south-

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ern most region of India. It lies between 6°45' and 7°15' North latitudes and 93°37' and 93°56' East longitudes. This island is about 1045 sq. km. in area. The island has tropical monsoon climate with an average annual rainfall of 372 cm. The climate is humid because it rains throughout the year. The vegetation of the island is broadly divided into Evergreen hill forest, Littoral forest and Mangroves vegetation. For biodiversity and as well as for the majority of endangered species of both flora and fauna the Great Nicobar Island ranks high in the Archipelago (Bhaskar and Rao 1992).

Terminalia bialata; *Terminalia manii*; *Carrarium Euphyllum*; *Eliocarpus Gangestus*; *Pandanus sp.* are found throughout Great Nicobar Island. Wild mangoes, cane and bamboo also grows on this island. *Sus Nicobarensis*; *Macaca fascicularis umbrosa*; *Mus Cadivora aenea Insularis*; *Haematronis Cheela Kolossi*; *Megapodiuus Nicobarensis Abbotti* are a few unique fauna of this island. Monitor lizard, python and non-venomous snakes are also found in this island. The fish varieties around the island are: Rainbows fish (*Thalassona sp*) Black shark (*Carchorius melanopterus*) Parrot fish (*Callyodon octodon*) Trigger fish (*Balistrpus unsulatus*) Butterfly fish (*Chaelodon leneatus*) Coral fish (*Abudejduf septern fasciatus*) and Smelt (*Sellago sihama*).

It is considered that the local groups i.e. *Nicobarese* and *Shompen* (*Forest* and *Coastal*) are the original indigenous groups. The origin and the time of migration of these groups is a matter of conjecture as no scientific and archaeological evidence is available at present. However, the *Nicobarese* are genetically closely related to Cambodian populations as revealed by recent DNA studies (Prasad et al. 2001). The ethnic identity of these groups is strongly maintained which can be explained as an aspect of utilisation of a specific or a combination of microenvironments leading to the exploitation of varied resources (wide and diverse species). In fact it can be argued that the cultural differentiation is mainly based on the use of different technology which in turn is a function of the resources differentiation.

The Nicobarese

The *Nicobarese* of the Great Nicobar Island, like other *Nicobarese* of the Archipelago are set-

tled horticulturists and marine fishermen, while the *Shompen* are foragers (Patnaik 2006: 116-129; Reddy et al. 1987: 31-46). The differentiation within the *Shompen* as *Forest Shompen* and *Coastal Shompen* has been shown to exist on the basis of ecological analysis (Patnaik et al. 1986). According to an anthropological field census in 1993 the Great Nicobar Island had a *Nicobarese* population of 271 and *Shompen* were about 214 individuals. The livelihood of the *Nicobarese* presents a harmonious relationship between marine eco-system and the coastal beach forests. The *Nicobarese* of this island are settled only on the west coast of the island, they live in settlements which are situated within the sight of the sea shore. Some of the north-west settlements are quite isolated and are very sparsely populated. Pulobhavi is the largest settlement. Chingenh is situated almost at the southern tip of the island and close to the mouth of the River Galathea. Pulobed is the north-western most settlement of *Nicobarese* on this island.

The *Nicobarese* social organization in the Great Nicobar Island consists of a closely woven kinship network: a comprehensive genealogy shows that all the inhabited settlements are inter-linked with a depth of four generations. Very few women have moved in after marriage from other islands. The socio-political office of 'captainship' exists but is not so well established as in Car Nicobar Island. For example in the settlement of Kopenheat there is only one inhabited hut and the institution of 'captains' is hardly developed basically due to the low level of population. The 'captain' of Pulobhavi is generally considered as the chief all *Nicobarese* of Great Nicobar Island. Like other *Nicobarese* of the Archipelago they are all converted to Christianity but still do believe in certain rituals of ancestor worship and keep totems.

The staple food of the *Nicobarese* is the pandanus fruit, which is boiled into a paste before consumption. Along with this they supplement their diet with a variety of marine products, ranging from octopus (known as *koe*) to multiple varieties of fish. Sea turtles (*Eretmochelys sp.*) and their eggs are also consumed. The fishing technology is well developed, they have variety of fishing spears which they use in the shallow coral bedded sea fronts where the waters are clear and fish are visible, they also use fish nets. The outrigger canoes are large and capable of venturing into deep sea, but generally they use it for

short trips along the coast to visit other settlements or nearby islands such as Pulo Milo and also Kondul on the Northern tip of the Great Nicobar Island. Pulo Milo is an important island as these *Nicobarese* has marital relations with the local residents. The important factor is the use of *pandanus sp.* which grows on the beach front and the stilted; roots of this tree are able to withstand the tidal variation and the increased salinity in high tides. The process of preparing pandanus paste is laborious and involves lengthy boiling sessions at the hearth. The women mainly concentrate on this task but men also share in this work.

The *Nicobarese* live in large stilted huts, which are, raised about 10 ft above ground level, these huts are well built and last over generations. The hearth is situated inside the hut on wooden flooring. The area under the hearth is lined with a mixture of lime and earth to protect it from burning through. The entrance to the hut is through a ladder which is attached to a rope and is retractable. These fairly large huts are constructed on individual plots where a few coconut and areca nuts trees are planted. They keep pigs, for their own consumption. Nowadays, *Nicobarese* of the Great Nicobar Island are relatively modernized to a large extent. They consume various food products imported to the island. Rice and wheat are some of the other staple foods being consumed at present. The cash of the purchase of these commodities is generated by the sale of dry coconut (*kopra*). Sometimes pigs and certain rare marine fish products are also sold or exchanged. The *Nicobarese* do enter the interior forest of this island but they do not venture more than a couple of kilometres inland.

Coastal and Forest Shompen

The *Shompen* are two distinct sections, these groups are geographically separated groups, for the present paper, we would first focus on the differences of resource utilisation between the *Forest Shompen* and the west-coast *Nicobarese*. This is because there exists some contact between these two groups which is minimal and the transactions are very cautiously undertaken. The *Coastal Shompen* are geographically isolated from both these groups and are found only on the east coast of this Island. The *Forest Shompen* barter honey with *Nicobarese* for iron

implements such as machetes and sometimes for iron scrap, which is essential for making spear tips and smaller knives. Nowadays they also exchange honey for mill cloth.

The *Forest Shompen* live in the interior of this island beyond the beach forest zone and utilize varied forest zones, which can be categorized as microenvironments. Their social organization is based on bands, they live along the fresh water rivers in temporary campsites which are generally situated on high river banks and are about 50 to 100 metres away. For drinking water they depend on hill springs. The staple food of *Forest Shompen* like that *Nicobarese* is also pandanus fruit but the preferred fruit is from the species of pandanus is *Pandanus leram*, which gives a yellow paste after processing. The preparation involves of boiling the trimmed cones of the pandanus fruit for 5 to 8 hours (depending on the state of ripeness of the fruit) and then the removal of fibrous material within the paste before consumption. The paste is made on daily basis, only heavy rain may interrupt. The paste is at times preserved for a short time when it is packed in large green leaves in the form of rounded balls. These balls of pandanus paste are easily carried outside the campsites if required.

The *Forest Shompen* hunt almost all the small animals such as small rodents, snakes, birds etc. They also plan well-organized hunts of larger animals such as pigs, monkeys, and crocodiles. Crocodile hunting is very rarely undertaken as it involves grouping of almost all the men and grownup boys of a band and is a rather dangerous task, the total effort put in at times may result in just injuring the crocodile and in such case the hunt becomes unproductive. Both men and women gather all sorts of edible leaves and root matter. They also collect insects and larvae. Men and boys also fish using specialized fishing spears along the rivers. The *Forest Shompen* are nomadic in nature but follow a set pattern of moving from one pandanus tree grove to another in a more or less pre-determined fashion based on the yield of the grove. The resource utilisation group which is a band is a mobile group of individuals where in the differentiated tasks within the band are rotated but the women's task centres on the processing the pandanus fruits. The *Forest Shompen* bands are both resource acquisition and consumption units. *Forest Shompen* use a set of micro-environments which

are not overlapping with the ones that *Nicobarese* utilize.

The *Coastal Shompen* are found on the east coast of the Great Nicobar Island. They have no contact either with the *Forest Shompen* or with the west-coast *Nicobarese* of this island. The staple food of the *Coastal Shompen* is pandanus fruit like that of the *Forest Shompen* but they use the fruit of *Pandanus odoratissimus* and *P.tectorius*. Some forest produce consisting of vegetable matter like roots, inner stems of certain wild palm (*Pinanga maii*) known as *komba* is also collected. They also utilize small animals and snakes occasionally. The type of huts is much more elaborate and almost semi-permanent when compared to the *Forest Shompen*. The nomadic movement of the *Coastal Shompen* is limited. They move a few kilometres up and down the creeks depending on the seasons, which bring in change in the general wind flow direction and seasonal changes in the average tidal variation. One of their largest bands of *Coastal Shompen* lives in an area known as Laful in the east coast of Great Nicobar Island. The *Coastal Shompen* depends mainly on fishing in the creeks and also to a substantial extent on fishing in the shallow sea fronts. The fishing technique is different and the design of the fishing spear is also more complex. The spear tip is multi pronged and this allows them to effectively capture a larger variety of fish species, which are present in the estuarine type of microenvironment. This microenvironment has variable salinity of waters in the creeks due to changing tidal action and formation of tide pools; the shallow mouths of these creeks are habitat for a wide range of marine resources.

DISCUSSION

We have presented the resource utilisation patterns of the *Coastal Nicobarese*, *Forest Shompen* and the *Coastal Shompen*. It would be evident that all these groups do utilize separate Eco zones, which are differentiated by their biotic content, the species density is also varied. It could be observed that *Forest Shompen* subsistence is based on a terrestrial Eco-zone regime. The comparatively higher biodiversity is due to the use of more than one microenvironment. The *Coastal Nicobarese* use compatible but diversified microenvironments. The *Nicobarese* resources are based on shore and in marine Eco

zones. This composite utilisation presents them with wide range of exploitable resources. The *Coastal Shompen* appear to use a much specialized microenvironment and further they are geographically isolated from the other two groups seemed to be technologically adapted to the biodiversity of the estuarine microenvironment they utilize. The utilization of the non-overlapping resources leads to more or less specific utilisation of microenvironments with in the Great Nicobar Island. The extensive utilisation of resources largely rests on the diversity of species within the microenvironments and cultural perception of indigenous (Beteille 1998:188) groups: which reinforces the concept of identifiable ethnicity from within and outside.

The biodiversity and the ability to use the resources and the non-overlapping of the microenvironments of these groups make them not to compete for the same resources. The geographical separation of their habitats is another crucial element in sustaining their separate ethnic identity. The conventional definitions of ethnicity based on cultural parameters can be reinforced in the present context with an ecological analysis.

NOTES

- 1 Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata has published a book *Tsunami in South Asia* in 2007 one can get some useful first hand information from this book. Tsunami which hit A & N Islands originated near Sumatra killed nearly 2889 individuals in Nicobar Islands and another 3000 individuals were missing according to AandN Administration. The *Nicobarese* were badly affected by the tsunami and the effect is varied from one island to another island in Nicobar archipelago.
- 2 The Southern group of Nicobar Islands i.e. The Great Nicobar, Little Nicobar, Kondul and Pulo Milo were affected badly owing to close to the epicentre of the earthquake. The missing/dead male individuals are found more (64.26%) than female individuals (58.38%) in the age group of 15-49 years in Southern Nicobar group of islands. (Das B.K., S.S. Barik & S. Biswas 2007: 22-42)
- 3 Mohamed H. Jadwet, President, Andamans Chamber of Commerce and Industry in an interview to the *Business Line* (18 February 2005) says that 'Tsunami destroyed 70% of Nicobar's infrastructure'

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