

# GREAT ANDAMANES: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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## 1. INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

### 1.1 The Great Andamanese of Andaman Island

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are situated in the Bay of Bengal and are a part of India administered by the Central Government as a Union Territory. Port Blair, the capital of these islands, is 1235 km from Calcutta and 1191 km from Madras. The islands are connected to the mainland by two-monthly shipping services from Calcutta and Madras. There is also a bi-weekly Indian Airlines flight from Calcutta. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands consist of 225 islands of varying sizes - scattered from north to south. Their total population is 151,133, according to the 1971 census. The Andaman group of 204 islands cover an area of 6682 sq.km and the 21 islands of Nicobar occupy 1645 sq.km. 7462 sq.km of the total is a restricted area and reserved for forests. These islands have tropical climates and average temperatures vary from 23°C to 31°C throughout the year. Average annual rainfall is 123". June is the most rainy month and humidity throughout the year remains as high as 90%. Here I will be discussing the Andaman group of islands only.

The history of the Andaman Islands goes back to the late 9th century descriptions of Arab travellers.<sup>2</sup> Marco Polo (1254-1324) records his impressions of these islanders:

Andaman is a very large island, not governed by a king. The inhabitants are idolaters, and are a most brutish and savage race, having heads, eyes, and teeth resembling those of the canine species. Their dispositions are cruel and every person, not being of their own nation, whom they can lay their hands upon, they kill and eat ...<sup>3</sup>

A new phase in the history of the Andaman Islands begins in 1788 when Lt Blair was sent there to start a free colony. Subsequently the new settlers had several clashes with the natives of the islands.<sup>4</sup> In 1858 the British established a penal colony after the Indian mutiny of 1857. From then onwards convicts were brought from India and Burma. After India gained independence in 1947 new settlers came from different parts of India. The population of the Andaman Islands now consists of:

1. original inhabitants
2. descendants of convicts
3. early free settlers and their descendants
4. new settlers who came after independence

The original inhabitants of the Andaman Islands are classified as negrito, while those of the Nicobar are considered to be mongoloid in origin.<sup>5</sup> The Andaman Islands can be divided into six parts as inhabited by different tribal groups:

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David Bradley, ed. *Papers in South-East Asian linguistics* No.9: *Language policy, language planning and sociolinguistics in South-East Asia*, 185-214. *Pacific Linguistics*, A-67, 1985.

	inhabited by
North Andaman	Great Andamanese
Middle Andaman	Jarawa on the east coast;
South Andaman	Great Andamanese on the west coast
Rutland Island	Jarawa
Sentinel Island	Sentinelese (only on North Sentinel Island; South Sentinel Island is uninhabited)
Little Andaman	Onge

### 1.1.1 Sentinelese, Jarawa and Onge

The Sentinelese are reputed to be very hostile by nature. In the documentary "Man in Search of Man", prepared by the Andaman administration, Sentinelese can be seen from a distance letting off showers of arrows. They are as yet basically untouched by modern civilisation. Very little is known about either their language or culture.

The Jarawa are also considered hostile, but a successful attempt to contact them was made by Indian Government officials in 1976. Since then the administration has been developing friendly relations with a group of about 60 Jarawa at Chotalig Bang on the western coast of Middle Andaman Island.

Contact with the Onge of Little Andaman Island can be traced from the time of M.V. Portman, who established friendly relations with them in 1886. This set a pattern which has continued.

Sentinelese, Jarawa and Onge were in the past considered to belong to one group and to have some similarities in their language and customs. However, this is questionable, since no contact has been made with either the Sentinelese or the majority of the population of Jarawa; both are nomadic and still are reported to attack outsiders. It is obviously essential to establish communication if any serious linguistic work is to be done with the nomadic Jarawa group and with the Sentinelese. In January-February 1977 two Jarawa were brought to Port Blair by the Andaman authorities, and some Great Andamanese and Onge people attempted to converse with them but they were unable to communicate. While it is likely that Onge, Jarawa and Sentinelese may have some linguistic similarities, this is still to be explored, a task which assumed great importance and urgency as the number of speakers of these languages is dwindling rapidly.<sup>6</sup>

### 1.1.2 Great Andamanese

The tribes who live on the North Andaman Island and on the west coast of Middle and South Andaman Island have been given the name Great Andamanese. Previously the Great Andamanese were divided into ten groups:

Akacari	} of North Andaman
Akakora	
Akabo	
Akajeru	
Akakede	} of Middle Andaman
Akakol	
Okojuwai	
Apucikwar	

Akarbale } of South Andaman  
Akabea }

The G.A. (Great Andamanese) have been friendly since the penal settlement was established in these islands. Late 19th and early 20th century anthropological work and published research that has been done under the titles 'Andaman Island' and 'Andaman Islanders' concern the G.A.

Man's and Portman's linguistic works on the G.A. deal with the southern group of Andamanese languages.<sup>7</sup> Their phonological inventories show a similar pattern<sup>8</sup> of labial, alveolar, velar, nasal and semivowel sounds; their alphabets also give a whole range of vowels. They had difficulty in identifying retroflex<sup>9</sup> and voiced sounds, while they do not provide any evidence of /g/, /h/ and the sibilant /š/. My wordlist<sup>10</sup> differs from the vocabulary given by Man and Portman since the southern group of Andamanese was the first to become extinct. My recording of the language of the present G.A. is similar to the examples of the Aka-jeru group of North Andamanese given by Radcliffe-Brown. Radcliffe-Brown's linguistic notes give valuable information, however he also gave a regular pattern of sounds<sup>11</sup> like Man and Portman, and was unable to make a distinction between retroflex and dental sounds.

Culturally and linguistically the ten G.A. groups were thought to be close to each other. The population has declined dramatically for the whole of G.A. Population figures of the Andaman negritos for 1900-1979 are as follows:<sup>12</sup>

tribe	1901	1931	1951	1961	1971	1979 <sup>13</sup>
Great Andamanese	625	90	23	19	24	24
Jarawa	468	70	50	500	300	250
Sentinelese	117	50	-	50	100	50
Onge	672	250	150	129	112	94

There are various reasons for the rapid population loss of the Andaman negritos: they learnt vices from the new settlers, namely addiction to opium, tobacco and alcohol. An epidemic of venereal disease spread among the natives which has resulted in reduced fertility and a significant decline in the birth-rate. Contagious diseases brought by the outsiders, like measles, smallpox, mumps and influenza, also killed many of the original inhabitants as they had no immunity. At the time of colonisation of these islands, the natives resented the occupation by the new settlers. A large number of natives, mainly men, were killed in the ensuing clashes. In the Second World War, bombardment by the Japanese resulted in many casualties among the natives, the Jarawa area being affected the most.<sup>14</sup> Settlement of outsiders and the construction of roads destroyed large parts of the forests, which has affected indigenous hunter-gatherer activities.

In the 1960s, the increasing significance of the Indian Ocean resulted in the Government of India focussing greater attention on its islands situated there. Simultaneously, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes Welfare Scheme under the Union Ministry of Home Affairs began to be implemented. The first committee was set up in 1968 to examine the functions and progress of the welfare of the scheduled caste and scheduled tribes.<sup>15</sup> At that time there were 23 survivors of the G.A. race who lived in Port Blair in an abandoned Japanese bunker in appalling conditions. Most of them, including the women, were opium addicts. In order to get supplies of opium and tobacco, the latter travelled to the town and engaged in prostitution. Many had V.D. and tuberculosis. In 1969, persuaded by Indian officials, they were settled on the uninhabited Strait Island. In the initial stages of their settlement there the G.A. still came to Port Blair in search of

opium and tobacco. Later this activity was checked and a feeling of belonging to Strait Island grew among them.

In January 1980 I had an opportunity to visit Strait Island to work on their language. Strait Island is about 30 km north of Port Blair, with an area of approximately 5 sq.km. It is a four-hour journey by boat from Port Blair. The 'Milāle'<sup>16</sup> makes frequent visits to different settlements of natives in turn and supplies them with rations, gifts and a financial allowance of 50 to 250 Rupees per month to each individual. A social worker is stationed on the island in order to help them to adapt to various aspects of community life and to assist them in their education. There is also an autonomous body funded by the Government, the Andaman Ādim Janajāti Vikās Samati, Port Blair, established in 1976 with the aim of safeguarding health and promoting social and economic development.

My stay on Strait Island was limited to three hours and, since I was not allowed to work there, I persuaded five G.A. to come to Port Blair, where there is a 'transit house for the natives' called Ādibaserā (Shelter of Natives). The characteristics and lifestyle of the G.A. described in the available literature seems to have disappeared in general. What remains of their traditional culture may be as little as turtle-hunting and vague recollections of their god, named Bilikhu. Now there are pictures of Hindu gods in their houses. They dress in the tradition of modern mainland Indians, except for some old men who still prefer to wear only shorts. The younger generation of G.A. are very reluctant to talk about their customs and show no interest in traditional life. In their physical appearance they show a significant change from the previous generation. The four infants in the community lack the characteristic features of the negrito. As a typical example of the current mixing of races in the Strait Island settlement, I want to mention a man called Rāñchīvālā (a man from Ranchi, Bihar) - he is married to a G.A. woman who he first met when these people were living in Port Blair. Later Rāñchīvālā got a job on Strait Island looking after the piggery unit. At present the Government is spending substantial amounts of money on the G.A.

Hindi plays the role of lingua franca in the Andaman Islands. The G.A. with whom I spoke were well versed in Hindi and talked to their children in Hindi most of the time. Those of the younger generation with whom I talked were inhibited when it came to saying anything in their own language and were generally uninterested. For my recording of the language I had to rely on the elderly people; one young couple tried their best to cooperate, but their knowledge was very limited. There are only 24 survivors of the ten different G.A. groups and they now form one community. They have difficulty in conversing with each other because of linguistic differences between the ten different groups. Among my informants, one belonged to the Kora and another, named Biye, to the Jeru group, and the young couple had no idea of their origin. I decided to record primarily one language and to rely on one person, Piḱar, who belongs to the Kora group of the G.A.

When I went back in December 1980 I was not allowed to go to Strait Island or Little Andaman but I was given permission to work at the Ādibaserā in Port Blair with the G.A., who were there at the time. I found out that only six young people in their twenties were living there, desperately looking for a way to stay in Port Blair. Eventually they will succeed and will settle down in Port Blair. The G.A. may survive,<sup>17</sup> which is the absolute concern of the Government of India, but it is evident that with the passing away of the older generation, the remaining G.A. will simply be Indians of the Andaman Islands and their language will become extinct.