EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Historically, the Nicobarese have lived in isolation in the Nicobar Islands with sporadic cross-cultural contacts. Relying on the traditional knowledge and the resources provided by their ecosystem, the Nicobarese across the islands subsisted independently until the Indian Ocean tsunami struck the Nicobar archipelago on 26 December 2004. The catastrophe subjected the Nicobarese to many hardships and disabilities. On top of destruction of property, livelihoods and livestock, almost one-third of the Nicobarese community perished. It warranted governmental humanitarian interventions in the form of rescue, relief and rehabilitation drives in the islands, post which, the Nicobarese experienced a sudden sociocultural change.

The entire Nicobar archipelago, except for few pockets, is a tribal reserve where the entry of outsiders is strictly prohibited. Due to strict restrictions on research in the Nicobar, the post-tsunami sociocultural change among the indigenes, especially the Nicobarese of the southern Nicobar, has largely remained undocumented. In central Nicobar, there are some serious long-pending land-related issues, which, however, have remained unresearched and undocumented. With a two-pronged focus, this research: (a) unpacked the process of post-tsunami sociocultural change among the Nicobarese in the southern Nicobar Islands, and (b) documented and analysed three land-related issues in the central Nicobar Islands— ‘Land encroachment in central Nicobar’, ‘The Navy-Nicobarese Kamorta Island land conundrum’ and ‘the Katchal Island Sri Lankan Tamil repatriates’ issue’.

This research argues that the post-tsunami intervention in the southern Nicobar was not merely a humanitarian response. It was also a mechanism to teach certain rationality to people through the introduction of specific practices and forms of knowledge. The value-laden response was a product or a by-product of the power and knowledge of the modern society that intended to integrate an isolated indigenous community. The rationality of the post-tsunami humanitarian government was influenced by a specific regime of truth which perceives the Nicobarese as a primordial society with an outmoded cultural base. Therefore, the humanitarian interventions were characterised with maneuvers through which the government sought to change the Nicobarese traditional cultural practices and embody a modern behaviour among them.
In the process of making the Nicobarese as a desirable subject, the indigenes were softly coerced and disciplined. Their subjectivities were shaped through a systematic conduction of their conduct. However, all these maneuvers have drastically ruptured the Nicobarese sociocultural milieu. The repercussions of the post-tsunami humanitarian interventions such as dependency, alcoholism and adoption of a sedentary lifestyle by the community are a result of a mismatch between the intended and the actual subject formation. No doubt, the devastation caused by the tsunami initially subverted the Nicobarese sociocultural milieu. However, the real rupture was done by the very aid which intended to help the Nicobarese. The complex assemblage of varied forces—spatial, legal, administrative, financial, architectural and judgmental characteristics of the post-tsunami humanitarian aid have largely distressed the Nicobarese.

The Nicobarese protracted stay in the intermediate shelters, hefty monetary compensations, lack of focus on the traditional livelihoods, the introduction of MGNREGA scheme (culturally insensitive), allotment of shelters (culturally insensitive) and permanent settlement of the Nicobarese at Campbell Bay are the characteristics of the post-tsunami humanitarian government in the Nicobar Islands. Instead of viewing them as a repercussion of a poorly executed disaster response, these need to be seen as shrewd governmental maneuvers guided by a raison d’état—national security. The same raison d’état is also reflected in the analysis of the three main issues concerning the survival and well-being of the Nicobarese in the central Nicobar, especially the ‘Navy-Nicobarese Kamorta Island land conundrum’ and ‘the Katchal Island Sri Lankan Tamil repatriates’ issue’.

Since 2000, the habitats of the Nicobarese are viewed as one of the most sensitive strategic zones, which led to an exponential increase in defence establishments in the islands. The Nicobar archipelago is an extremely isolated tribal reserve, where the indigenes live independently with limited exposure to the governmental apparatus and the outer world. Since these islands are scattered and isolated, defence surveillance is difficult without the cooperation of the indigenes. A large number of foreign poachers visit the Nicobar Islands to exploit marine resources. They develop contact with the local people and operate clandestinely. Such intrusions in these spaces of immense geopolitical value seriously undermine defence maneuvers.

The Nicobarese modernization and administrative control over them are viewed as significant measures to check poaching, expand military establishments, and secure the remote islands. It is only after the tsunami, when
the community virtually lost everything that the government found an opportunity to shape the Nicobarese as a desirable subject. Therefore, the post-tsunami humanitarian government was characterised by modernisation and infrastructural development agenda that was motivated by a tacit rationality of national security.