‘Hiraeth’ is much more than just a word. With no exact English cognate, this welsh word is also difficult to translate into other languages. The Oxford and Merriam-Webster define hiraeth as a “homesickness for a home you cannot return to, or that never was”. I came across this word a couple of years ago. However, it was only in Nicobar, where I studied the post-tsunami sociocultural change among the Nicobarese (2011-2016) that I experienced its true meaning. Set against the backdrop of a discussion that I had with two prominent Nicobarese during my visit to an abandoned island— Trinket, this chapter discusses how the Nicobarese community lost an island to the humanitarian aid. Despite experiencing an existential crisis and a strong nostalgia for the pre-tsunami habitat, the displaced Nicobarese have not reverted to Trinket. This chapter analyzes the reasons and explores if there is any hope for the abandoned island and its former inhabitants. Through the example of Trinket Island, this chapter touches the common issues/problems that the Nicobarese have been facing across the Nicobar Islands.

‘We Did Not Abandon Trinket, We Lost It’

The Nicobar, except for few pockets, is a tribal reserve where the Nicobarese had lived independently with limited cross-cultural contact until the Indian Ocean tsunami (2004) devastated the archipelago. In the aftermath of the catastrophe and the humanitarian response that it warranted, the Nicobarese have experienced a sudden sociocultural rupture. The change is so abrupt that the indigenes, especially the elderly, now find themselves as outsiders in their own islands and feel a strong hiraeth for the pre-tsunami Nicobar— the places, the people, the time and the culture that is irretrievably lost.

This feeling of hiraeth is much stronger among the former inhabitants of Trinket— an island that was abandoned after the tsunami. Trinket (29 sq. km) had a total population of 432 (64 households) spread across four villages— Safed Balu, Trinket, Hockook and Tapiang of which the tsunami perished 91. The surviving Nicobarese were evacuated and rehabilitated on an adjacent island— Kamorta where they received compensations, free rations and amenities such as water, electricity, education, medical care, housing and so on. With the allotment of
permanent “tsunami shelters” to the indigenes at Vikas Nagar village on Kamorta Island, Trinet was abandoned permanently.

A decade after the tsunami, I visited Trinet along with two Nicobarese—Portifier (captain, Vikas Nagar) and Casper James (assistant commissioner, Nancowry). As soon as our boat reached the shores of Trinet, a Nicobarese boy—Derek swiftly rowed his hodi (handmade canoe) towards us. It was raining heavily, we rushed to the nearby settlement where a tall muscular Nicobarese—Jonathan stood holding a ladder that we quickly climbed. Built on 7-8 feet high stilts, Jonathan’s one-room settlement could easily accommodate 15 to 20 people. However, presently, only Jonathan and Derek live in it.

After taking tea, we went turtle hunting. While wading through seawater, I asked Portifier his experience of the tsunami. He pointed from one end of the shore to the other and said that “the people I had known for decades, one morning, I found their corpses strewn on these shores. We piled up and burnt heaps of dead bodies. It was the most unbelievable and painful sight.” A long silence ensued until we reached a lagoon. “It is crocodile-infested”, Portifier cautioned against stepping into it. “Trinet seems a resource-rich island, why did people choose to abandon it?” I probed. “We did not abandon Trinet; we lost it to the humanitarian aid and the excessive control that the administration exercised on us through it. While the tsunami only took away our 91 people, the aid swept the entire community off the island”, replied Portifier.

Despite geographical vulnerabilities, the Nicobarese had evolved as a strong and a self-sustaining society. The indigenes did not have a concept of ‘problem’ as they have never perceived any situation as such. Even the word—‘problem’ is difficult to translate into the Nicobarese dialect. It is for the same reason that despite massive devastation during the tsunami, the indigenes exhibited unparalleled resilience. Instead of staying in relief-camps for long, Portifier, along with other captains, approached the administration for boats/tools so that the community could go back to Trinet and rebuild its habitat. However, the administration put the community in intermediate tin shelters, provided monetary compensations and free rations for five years. Later, permanent shelters were allotted to the indigenes at Vikas Nagar that forestalled their return to Trinet. With minimum livelihood engagement, the indigenes sat idle for years and became sedentary, dependent, consumerist and alcoholic. Due to a sudden change in
lifestyle, the indigenes have also suffered from many new diseases such as diabetes, asthma, obesity and hypertension.

It is only recently when the monetary compensation is exhausted and there is limited livelihood engagement at Kamorta that the Nicobarese have started experiencing “real life”. The community was allotted some land in Kamorta for raising plantations, which, however, it does not find suitable for coconut cultivation. Therefore, with the lack of sustainable livelihood opportunities that traditionally Trinket had provided, the future of the Nicobarese at Vikas Nagar seems uncertain.

‘I Wish If Trinket Was a Canoe’
On our way back to Jonathan’s settlement, Derek showed us the canoe that had drifted to Trinket a couple of weeks back. While inspecting it, Casper looked at Portifier and said, “I think it needs some repair, after which, Derek would be able to use it in shallow water.” “Can we also not fix Trinket like this canoe?” I asked. “I wish if Trinket was a canoe that we could fix so easily”, replied Portifier and elaborated how the post-tsunami dependency and leadership crisis have plagued the entire Nicobarese community. The existing leadership wants the community to retreat to its traditional habitat and be engaged in sustainable livelihood practices. However, a large number of people, especially the youth, who are now addicted to a highly consumerist lifestyle and have become dependent lack such a willpower and initiative.

The fallout of the humanitarian intervention has made the community wary of outsiders/administration. Portifier argued that “so much misinformation has been fed to the community during the past decade that now people do not know what to believe and what not to. Even our own people have started doubting us now.” After the death of elderly, the indigenes feel directionless. The lack of trust in its existing leadership due to the confusion caused after the tsunami has affected the collective decision making process among the Nicobarese. The creation of asset in the form of permanent shelters at Vikas Nagar is also a major factor that discourages the Nicobarese from reverting to Trinket. The community wonders what would happen to the shelters allotted to it at Kamorta if it leaves the island.

Post-tsunami, the Nicobarese cultural singularities— self-sustenance, egalitarianism and harmonious coexistence, which the community had protected
for centuries, are fast vanishing across the Nicobar Islands. The Nicobarese elderly, who commanded respect and exercised control over the community by virtue of their knowledge and skills, feel marginalized in the post-tsunami scenario. Elderly like Gopinath of Trinket, James and Muhoh of Little and Great Nicobar and Mark Paul of Champin are rich repositories of the Nicobarese oral histories, traditional wisdom and skills that they had inherited from their ancestors. However, now they find nobody to pass them on to and fear that with their demise, the centuries-old knowledge and skills concerning hodis, gol ghars (round huts), traditional medicine and island’s microenvironment would also die.

Is There Any Hope?

A recurring question that bothered me throughout was— Now that the long symbiotic relationship between Trinket and its people is snapped, what future do the abandoned island and its former inhabitants have? Post-tsunami, the administration adopted a top-down approach towards rehabilitation and development in Nicobar. The administration chose Kamorta as a construction site over Trinket due to logistic convenience. Consequently, the indigenes lost Trinket that has serious long-term implications on them. The excessive control that the administration exercised over the indigenes through its disaster response has undermined their resilience and disempowered them.

The present situation in the Nicobar demands rebuilding of capabilities and resilience among the Nicobarese through their own active participation. Motivated by this rationality, Casper, who is also the first Nicobarese assistant commissioner from the central and the southern Nicobar, is diligently lobbying with the captains to revive and develop Trinket as a “model Nicobarese Island.” By turning the abandoned Trinket into a model island through the active participation of the community, Casper wants to motivate all the Nicobarese across the Nicobar to unite and revive their dying culture. The AC believes that “people will save Trinket, and in return, Trinket will save them.” However, Portifier sees little hope unless the community forsakes its post-tsunami lifestyle and reunites.

The elderly across the islands are also hopeful that the disoriented indigenes would soon unite under the leadership of a visionary leader and save the dying Nicobarese culture. On being asked, if the elderly see any hope for the community, Mark Paul, who served as a general manager at the Manula Matai Ltd— a
Nicobarese cooperative society that operated in the central and the southern Nicobar (liquidated in 1998), shared that “we have had enough from the outsiders, now our own people are our only hope. People need a visionary leader who could reunite and give direction to the entire community. We are waiting for such a leader to emerge.”

Concluding Remarks
The present situation of the Nicobarese, especially the elderly, in Vikas Nagar and elsewhere is reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's absurdist play ‘Waiting for Godot’, wherein Vladimir and Estragon are seen anxiously waiting for a person— Godot on a barren road by a leafless tree. The protagonists are not sure, if they have ever met Godot, if they are waiting in a right place, or if Godot would ever come. However, they keep on waiting throughout the play. Likewise, utterly disenchanted with their present circumstances, the Nicobarese elderly are anxiously waiting for a leader— a ‘Godot’, who would give direction to the community and revive the “good-old Trinket” or the pre-tsunami Nicobar that exists only in their memory, for which they feel a strong hiraeth. The elderly are not certain, if it would happen in their lifetime, but they surely are hopeful and waiting.

While leaving Nicobar, I looked at the indigenes who had come to see me off at the Kamorta jetty and wondered that during such a grave existential crisis, who would catalyze positive social change within the community? Would it be the existing stalwart leaders like Portifier, Rasheed, Frazer, Ayesha, Cecilia, Nazir and Barnabas? Would it be pro-people administrators like Casper? Or, would it be ordinary but young-proud Nicobarese like Shiva, an eight-year old boy, whom I met at Makachua village in Little Nicobar, and who, as he claimed, would one day hunt down all the menacing crocodiles of Makachua with his lean dogs that he has been taming for years?

From the deck of the moving ship, I kept on staring at Trinket until it disappeared. Casper’s firm statement reverberated in my ears— “people will save Trinket, in return, Trinket will save them”. Trinket does not have any modern amenities and infrastructure— schooling, medical, electricity, clean water, roads, transportation, communication and so on. However, four families have already returned to the island and have started a normal life. I wonder, if Trinket, the underdog island, is the Godot that the Nicobarese elderly have been waiting for?