CHAPTER VII : PEOPLE AND ECONOMY

There are two broad categories of people living in Andaman & Nicobar islands at present - aboriginal tribes and the immigrant people from other parts of the country. Prior to 1858 these islands were inhabited solely by six aborigines. It is important to note that the British India Government founded penal settlements at Port Blair in South Andaman island in 1858. The hardened convicts and political prisoners from different parts of the then greater British India were deported to Port Blair Penal Settlement.

Thus people from mainland India and some European people came to settle in these islands as new neighbours to the aborigines which continued till the occupation of these islands by the Japanese Force during World War II (1942).

Following the independence and partition of the country (1947) the Andaman & Nicobar islands were opened primarily for rehabilitation of refugees from the then East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Later people from other states like Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, etc., were also brought with a view to colonise these islands. This includes the rehabilitation of ex-servicemen. As a result of the rehabilitation, colonization scheme of the government and constant development activities there was a spurt in the immigration of people from mainland which ultimately outnumbered the aborigines of the island.

There are six scheduled tribes in Andaman & Nicobar islands belonging to two distinct races, the Mongoloid and the Negrito.
The Nicobarese and the Shompens belong to the Mongoloid race. The Andamanese, The Onges, The Jarwas and the Sentinelese belong to the Negrito race (Fig 7.1).

In Little Andaman Nicobarese settled at Harmindar Bay which was founded as a result of a Government scheme. Based on their own technology they can be grouped under Husbandman who are known as advanced tribes. Based on subsistence technology the Onges, the original inhabitants of Little Andaman are called hunters and gatherers and are called as primitive tribes.

The contact with the outsiders has been a catalyst for the growth and prosperity in case of Nicobarese, while such contacts have been detrimental for the hunters and gatherers (Fig 7.2).

The Andamanese who were the worst affected people following the contact with outsiders were rehabilitated on a small island, i.e. Strait Island.

It was during 1970 the Govt. of India urged the Union Territory administration along with other State Administration to take up special programmes for the welfare of the primitive tribes because of their peculiar and urgent problems. Accordingly, the administration constituted an autonomous organization known as Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) to look after the primitive tribes in 1978. The welfare activities are carried out under the direct supervision of the Administrator of the Union Territory as he is the chairman of the AAJVS.
### Table 7.1
Population of the Onges

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% Change</th>
<th>Decadal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>672</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>- 6.1</td>
<td>- 6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>- 45.2</td>
<td>- 45.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>- 27.7</td>
<td>- 27.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>- 40.0</td>
<td>- 40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1955</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>+ 7.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>- 19.9</td>
<td>- 14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1963</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>+ 2.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1965</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>- 2.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>- 6.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>- 7.4</td>
<td>- 7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>- 1.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>- 4.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>- 7.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>+ 5.2</td>
<td>- 8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>- 3.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>+ 3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>+ 3.1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>- 3.1</td>
<td>- 6.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Based on I.C. Verma Report (89) & Field Survey (92))
History of contact with the Onge-

In 1967 the captain and several crew members of the ship "Assam Valley" who went ashore on Little Andaman were killed. The punitive mission took 70 Onges. Finally after continuous efforts and attempts to control the island, the British established a friendly relationship with the Onges' in 1887 mainly through the efforts of M.V. Portman. The British took interest in the island because of its rich forest resource. The policy of timber extraction is still going on. Deforestation caused many problems to the Onges in terms of demography, subsistence, ecology and culture. They have undergone dramatic changes in their life ever since their contact with the outsiders, and especially after they were 'resettled' in 1976 in two pockets of the island namely Dugong Creek and South Bay.

Their relative isolation partly shielded them from the lethal effects of contact with the settlers, but they succumbed to disease. In 1901 the census estimated their numbers at 672 and in 1931 at 250, and at present 95 (1992) (Table 7.1).

In the early 1950's the Onge started visiting Port Blair in their canoes to trade for or get hold of tobacco, sugar, etc. The chief commissioner, A.K. Ghosh remarked - "If this continues, they will go the same way as the Andamanese". While the policy of help and conciliation for the tribals is enlightening on one hand, their territorial requirements need to be given more importance. In 1997, 2/3rd of the over 700 sq. km. Onge land on Little Andaman was allotted to settlers and the Forest & Plantation Development Corporation (FPDC).
VARIATION OF ONGE POPULATION
1901 - 1988

% VARIATION

YEARS
The 1966 census report predicts that, "The possibility of preventing their (The Onge) ultimate extinction seems remote". But Robert Alle (1975) disagreed with the pessimism of the census report:
"Personally, I do not accept the census (1966) statement, that the possibility of preventing their ultimate extinction seems remote. As a general rule, hunter-gatherer people have every chance of surviving as hunter-gatherers and of living well, provided:

a) they want to,
b) their entire economic and spiritual territory is conserved,
c) they receive appropriate medical help,
d) their numbers are in equilibrium with their environment,
e) they do not become demoralized, losing faith in their own way of life.

The onges have been settled at Dugong Creek and South Bay in Little Andaman island. They have been provided with the permanent timber houses by the Administration. Coconut plantation has been raised for their benefit. Free ration and clothing have also been provided. A medical officer has been posted in the settlement area. There is a jetty and a helipad at Dugong Creek and as such this settlement is frequented by VIP's and other dignitaries round the year.

The Onges are presented with gifts by the VIP's and the Onges perform tribal dance in the honour of the visiting dignitaries. The Onges are working as labourers in the coconut plantation. As such they get wages in cash. They do not go often for their traditional hunting and gathering activities. It is a sort of vegetative existence.
Onge - The original inhabitants of the island

The experts may suggest measures on some of the bio-cultural aspects of the Onges such as
1) The problem of population decline among the Onges. The possibility of adopting genetic engineering as the population size is small.
2) Loss of meaningful activities in the community as they are dependent on free gifts including rations. The problem of being idle.
3) They are settled before they are accultured for the settled life pattern.
4) Introduction of cash economy among the hunting and food gathering community.
5) Co-existence with the advanced mainstream cultures and freedom from the exploitation by the latter.

The Negrito tribals is part of the forest ecosystem in Little Andaman Island. The Onge populations show such low figures the their long-term survival is doubtful since they are paying the cost of contact with outsiders. Till 1967 the Little Andaman was inhabited by the Onges only. From a strength of about 700 a century ago, cut down by warfare and succumbing to decease, they had dwindling to 129 by 1967. The number is now 95 (1992).

During the last 20 Yrs, these exclusive inhabitants of the island have had to face an influx over 7,000 mainland settlers as well as another Nicobarese descended from the 60 families transferred from
Car Nicobar to Harmander Bay 1973. Shifted from Hut Bay their original hunting and collecting ground, the Onge have now been herded to the tribal settlements at Dugong Creek and South Bay. They are under the tutelage of social workers trying to teach them the three R’s as well as better methods of horticulture and fishing.

According to reputed anthropologists the Onge are becoming more and more dependent and docile instead of continuing as members as a self-reliant and independent society. The psychological impact of being helplessly outnumbered in their own island is becoming destructive.

During discussions with various officials wonder whether there was a design and ulterior motive in the apparently benevolent regrouping of the Onge. The Director of Tribal welfare was clear in his statement (1991) that 668 Sq. Km. in the Little Andaman constituted a tribal reserve. However, the Forest and Plantation Development Corporation records list this area as reserve forest while at the same time restricting the Tribal Reserve to only 52.296 ha. It would seem that by shifting the Onge to Dugong Creek and South Bay, the rest of the island has been opened up for commercial exploitation.

The Andaman and Nicobar (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) regulation of 1956 restricts the entry of non-tribals into the tribal areas. Sale of land in the in tribal territory to non-tribal is forbidden. However, as seems to be the case in the Little Andaman, a subtle shift in nomenclature can alter the status of the tribal lands.
The Administration has put in a lot of efforts for socio-economic developments of this tribes. A plantation of coconut and other fruits has been raised in an area of 70 acres at Dugong Creek and 20 acres at South Bay. The social workers of Dugong Creek raise one fruit garden with Banana, Papaya etc. But the tribal community is not interested in it. They work in the plantation and get the wages. The plantations are for the entire Onge community and in due course they are allowed to retain the traditional character of hunting and gathering & fishing. They love it and are least interested in agriculture.

They are good crafts-person, specially the Onge women. Efforts are being made to develop their crafts. They also collect foney & tubers from the fruits. A sub centre manned by a M.B.B.S. doctor at Dugong Creek is functioning there to provide medical coverage to the onges.

A 24 KW diesel generator set has been established at Dugong Creek and each family gets light from 6 pm to 6 am free of cost. On 23rd of Jan 1993 the Lt. Governor of Andaman & Nicobar island had inaugurated a 15 KW power plant at Dugong Creek. At South Bay non-conventional solar energy provide some electricity. A multi purpose cooperative society has been formed for Onges at Dugong Creek and they are the share holders of the society. The plantation produced by the Onge’s are marketed through the society. The population of the Onge declined drastically during British rule. However in recent years, though the decline in their population has been controlled, there is no sign of increase of the same. Thus the health related problems of the Onges are being attended by the Medical Department to ensure physical survival (Table 7).
The Nicobarese constitute the predominant group among the scheduled tribes of Andaman & Nicobar of out of the total population of scheduled tribes i.e. 22000 (as per 1981 census). About 400 belong to the 5 primitive tribes while the rest are Nicobarese. They inhabit one village at Little Andaman island (Harmander Bay) which was founded as a result of a government scheme.

Nicobarese are the settled horticulturist. They raise coconut and arecunut plantations apart from roots and tubers on patches. Though they do not cultivate paddy, rice has become the staple food for the Nicobarese.

Nicobarese raise pigs near their house as well as in the forest in the semi-wild form. The Christian missionaries have been predominantly responsible to expose once relatively isolated Nicobari community to the outside world during the British administration. Majority of the Nicobarese are now Christians. Consequently there has been steady transformation of the Nicobarese in their social, religious and economic aspects. The spread of education which was accelerated after independence and the mass media like television has been instrumental in the further transformation of the tribal Nicobarese. There is one school at Harmandar Bay and many young people have joined Govt. College at Port Blair after completing the schooling. Some of the Nicobari male joined in service sector at Hut Bay specially in Forest and Plantation Development Corporation.
With increasing population and limited area of 258.34 hectares they are now encroaching in the forest area. I witnessed one incident during my field survey (1994) at Hut Bay where the Tahsilder (The administrative head of Little Andaman) depicting that the Nicobar planted coconut trees in the revenue land area clearing the forest. They often enter the Onge tribal reserve area at South Bay area and catch turtle, fish, etc. They frequently visit the South Bay in the low tide time because they have to cross one nallah joining with the sea. They are expert fishermen and frequently venture out to the sea with their boat / canoe.

Whereas the Onges at Dugong Creek venture mainly in the Creek in low tide time with bow and arrow. Though both the tribes are equipped with net, hook, etc., they still use their old equipment may be due to their tradition or due to nostalgia.

Settlers

The labour force largely from Chotanagpur plateau area works for Forest Corporation, APWD, and Andaman Harbour works, though a good number of them used to return to mainland, many of them have made the island their home encroaching the forest area. During my field survey in 1994 I saw a three day long smoke which was caused due to the burning of forest area. The administration is aware of these type of incidents.

The most privileged settlers are the refugees from Bangladesh. Each family/household was given 5 acres of land for paddy, 5 acres of hilly
land for tree crops, 1 acre of land to build a homestead. Twelve tons of free royalty timber was given for house construction, five tons for house repair every year, a ton of timber for tools or dingy. Licence to extract liberal quantities of firewood, bamboo, balies, posts, thatching leaves and cane was also given. These privileges still continue in slightly reduced quantities.

The Bangladeshi refugees settled in Little Andaman at Netajinagar, Ramkrishnapur, Vivekanandapur, and Rabindranagar. A good number of Sri Lankan repatriates settled at Rabindranagar. The settlers contain small agricultural plots and cultivate vegetables, spices like clove, black pepper, etc.

There are other groups that have settled in the island. They are mainly from Tamilnadu, Andhra & Kerala. They are mostly in service organizations, carry on commerce or perform specialized jobs.