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Genealogy and Heritage of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands

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Abstract

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands possess a unique blend of geography, culture, and history. Indigenous tribes such as the Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa, and Nicobarese have preserved their languages, customs, and social structures for centuries. Settler communities, including descendants of convicts and migrant populations, have added further layers to the islands' socio-cultural landscape. Genealogical studies of island families provide valuable insights into lineage, inter-family relationships, and socio-economic roles. This research article emphasizes the importance of preserving cultural identity, fostering community cohesion, and supporting research in anthropology, genealogy, and the social sciences. This article explains the history of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Contribution to India's Independence Struggle, Geological and Mythological Perspectives, Indigenous Tribes and their Genealogy and Cultural Heritage, Settler Communities and Migration, Genealogical Documentation, Traditional Attire and Cultural Practices, Social and Cultural Heritage, Ethnic Composition and Population Dynamics.

Key Words: Genealogy, Cultural Heritage, Migration, Anthropology, Identity

Introduction

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, are remarkable for their ecological diversity, strategic location, and complex history. The islands have been home to indigenous populations for millennia, with settlers arriving through various migrations, including convicts and administrative personnel during British rule. Understanding the genealogy of island families provides essential insights into social organization, lineage, and cultural continuity. Genealogical documentation fosters pride, strengthens community cohesion, and creates research opportunities in anthropology and the social sciences.

The history of the Andamans is not merely a tale of pirates and aboriginal communities, nor solely a land of fish, corals, and beaches. It is broader, deeper, and more varied—at once beautiful and terrible—than anything that has been said about it. Diverse historical events have left their mark, serving as reminders of both good and difficult times: of tragedy and hope, atrocity and courage, sacrifice and resilience. Above all, the saga of

sacrifice and martyrdom, beginning with the freedom struggle of 1857 and culminating in independence in 1947, can never be forgotten. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands became part of the Republic of India in 1950 and were declared a Union Territory on 1st November 1956. INS Jarawa was commissioned on 15 February 1964. In 1996, the Reserve Bank of India issued a Rs. 20 note featuring a scenic view of Mount Harriet, the second highest peak in the archipelago. The Andaman and Nicobar Command, the first and only tri-service theatre command in India, was established in October 2001.

History of Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Contribution to India's Independence Struggle

The modern history of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands began in 1790 with the establishment of a British penal colony and naval base at Port Blair (now Sri Vijayapuram) by the East India Company, chosen for its natural, safe harbour. Port Blair was named after Capt. Archibald Blair.

After initially abandoning the Andaman Islands, the British regained control



in the 19th century, marking renewed interest in the region. Following the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, they began using the islands to imprison India's freedom fighters. The notorious Cellular Jail, also known as *Kalapani*, was built in Port Blair to detain political prisoners and those seen as threats to British rule. Construction began in 1906 and was completed the same year.

Life for freedom fighters in the Cellular Jail was marked by extreme hardship and suffering. They were subjected to hard manual labor, including stone cutting, forest clearing, and operating oil mills. Noncompliance with strict rules led to brutal punishments such as flogging and solitary confinement. Physical and mental torture was rampant, resulting in cases of suicide, insanity, illness, and death.

During World War II, the British used the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a refueling base and for secret military constructions. In 1942, they withdrew from Port Blair, and the Japanese soon occupied the islands, building fortifications and planning to use them as a forward base. After the war, the islands returned to British control, which ensured they remained part of India after independence.

Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose established an Indian National Army battalion and visited the Andaman Islands to support the formation of the Provisional Government of Free India. In December 1943, Bose visited Port Blair, raised the tricolour, and renamed Andaman "Shahid Dweep" (Martyr Island) and Nicobar "Swaraj Dweep" (Self-rule Island).

Geological and Mythological Perspectives

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands emerged through intricate geological processes involving tectonic activity and volcanic formations. Local myths and legends complement these scientific accounts, offering cultural perspectives on the islands' origins. Their isolation and strategic location in the Bay of Bengal shaped patterns of human settlement and allowed indigenous communities to maintain distinct cultural practices over centuries. This combination of

geological uniqueness and cultural interpretation forms the foundation for understanding the islands' human history.

"The local myths and legends offer cultural insights into the origins of these islands. The Nicobarese people, for instance, have a rich repository of folktales that reflect their seafaring lifestyle and interactions with the supernatural. Stories of mermaids, spirits dwelling in the ocean, and ancestral beings highlight the Nicobarese's deep connection to the sea and their reverence for the unknown forces that govern their lives." ¹ - Indian Holiday

"These narratives serve as emic perspectives of history, reflecting the Nicobarese people's experiences and rationales for socio-cultural practices. As described in the research by Primus (2017), 'Folktales and legends are often emic narratives of history, mirrors and expressions of people's experiences and also rationales for socio-cultural practices.'" ² -ResearchGate

Indigenous Tribes and Their Genealogy & Cultural Heritage

The major indigenous tribes of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands—the Andamanese, Onge, Jarawa, and Nicobarese—have retained traditional practices including hunting, fishing, and crafting. Their social structures are organized around kinship, clans, and communal rituals, while oral histories and folklore preserve knowledge across generations. Early British contact and the establishment of penal colonies had a profound impact, leading to adaptation, resistance, and sometimes population decline. Anthropological records from this period document tribal life and social organization. Contemporary efforts focus on balancing development with the preservation of traditional languages, attire, and customs, ensuring the survival of these communities' distinct cultural identities.

"The Nicobarese culture is thoroughly an oral tradition expressed in folk performances like folk songs and folktales." – *The Islands and Tribes of Andaman and Nicobar"³- Prakash Books, 2006.

Onges



The Onge tribe is one of the indigenous groups inhabiting the Andaman Islands, India. They are believed to be one of the oldest surviving tribes in the world, with a history dating back thousands of years. Traditionally hunter-gatherers, they have a deep connection with their environment, relying on the forest and sea for sustenance. Their lifestyle and culture are closely intertwined with nature, emphasizing harmony and respect for their surroundings. Despite facing numerous challenges such as encroachment on their land and diseases, efforts are made to preserve their unique way of life, ensuring the survival of this ancient tribe for generations to come.

Onges of Little Andaman and their boat

The Onges are a Negrito tribe of Little Andaman, known for their canoe-building skills. Their canoes, called *dane*, feature a hull with an outrigger supported by multiple booms.

Jarawa Tribes



JARAWA TRIBE: A glimpse of Andaman's heritage at the Naval Marine Museum captured during my Andaman's visit

The Jarawas are an indigenous tribe of the Andaman Islands in India. They live in parts of South and Middle Andaman, with an estimated population of about 250–400 individuals. Traditionally hunter-gatherers, they have a deep connection with their land and depend on the forest for sustenance. The Jarawas maintain a semi-nomadic lifestyle, moving within their territory in small groups. Since the 1990s, contact between the Jarawas and outsiders has grown more frequent.

By the 2000s, some members began visiting nearby settlements, where they trade, interact with tourists, receive medical aid, and even send their children to school. Despite facing threats such as encroachment and disease, efforts continue to protect their way of life and preserve their cultural heritage. Like other indigenous tribes in the Andamans, the Jarawas struggle to balance tradition with modern influences.

Shompens



The Shompens are one of the indigenous tribes inhabiting the Andaman Islands, India, particularly on Great Nicobar Island. They are one of the least understood tribes due to their remote location and limited contact with outsiders. Traditionally, the Shompens are hunter-gatherers, relying on the abundant resources of the forests and coastal

areas for their livelihood. They have a distinct culture, language, and social structure, which remain largely undocumented. Like other indigenous tribes in the region, the Shompens face challenges such as encroachment on their land and preserving their unique way of life amidst modern influences. Efforts are underway to respect their autonomy and protect their cultural heritage.



Great Andamanese

The vanishing Great Andamanese tribe is settled at Strait Island, which is about 46 km away from Port Blair and has an area of 60 ha. The present population of 43 are the remnants of ten clans of the once-flourishing aborigines who inhabited the South & Middle Andaman and were the first to be befriended. Mass mortality occurred among them soon after contact with civilized man through influenza, smallpox, measles, and sexually transmitted infectious diseases. Today they are considered perhaps the weakest ethnic group.

Nicobarese



The Nicobarese are one of the main indigenous tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, residing predominantly in the Nicobar group of islands. They have a rich cultural

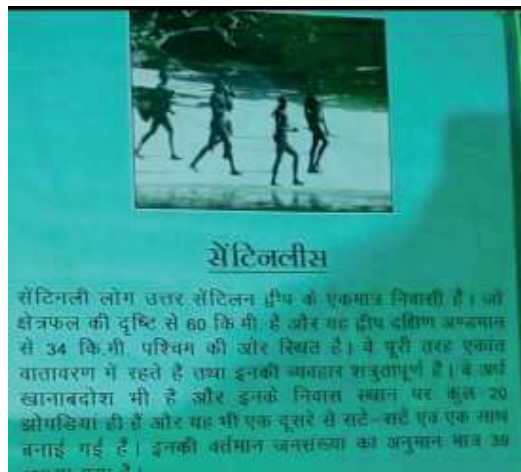
heritage, with traditions deeply rooted in their relationship with the land and sea. Historically, the Nicobarese have been skilled seafarers and agriculturists, cultivating crops like coconut, banana, and betel nut. Their society is organized into matrilineal clans, and they have their distinct language and customs. Despite facing challenges like natural disasters and modernization, the Nicobarese strive to preserve their cultural identity and maintain their close-knit communities on the islands.

“The Nicobarese culture is thoroughly an oral tradition expressed in folk performances like folk songs and folktales.”⁴ – Roychowdhury, *Folk Tales of Nicobar*, 2002

Sentinelese

The Sentinelese are the sole inhabitants of North Sentinel Island, which covers an area of about 60 sq. km and lies 34 km west of South Andaman. They live in complete isolation, maintaining a hostile stance toward outsiders. Semi-nomadic in lifestyle, their settlement consists of roughly 20 small huts clustered together. Their current population is estimated at around 39 individuals.

North Sentinel Island, a tiny speck in the Indian Ocean, is inhabited by a reclusive tribe that has had almost no contact with the modern world. Situated on the fringes of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, it gained international attention in 2018 when a young American missionary attempted to visit the



island and was killed by bow-and-arrow-wielding islanders. Described by Survival International as “the most isolated people in the world,” the Sentinelese are not the only reclusive tribe to survive into the twenty-first century, but they are the only one with an entire island to themselves.

The Andaman archipelago was once home to several such isolated tribes, until the establishment of a British penal colony in the mid-nineteenth century marked the beginning of a tragic history between indigenous groups and colonizers. The Sentinelese, however, have remained—and continue to remain—fiercely independent.



Tribal arrow

“Even after generations of frequent contact with British colonizers and Indian settlers, both Onge and the Jarawa refer to outsiders as *Ineny*, a term deriving from *ineny-lau*, the spirits who come from the sea. In the traditional Andamanese understanding, the spirit world is inseparable from the mortal world: humans and animals, natives and strangers, the living and the dead, all inhabit a shared space.”⁵ – *Frontline*

Traditional and Present Lifestyle

Traditionally hunter-gatherers, they lived on fish, dugong, turtle, turtle eggs, roots, tubers, etc. Now, along with some continued hunting and gathering, they also use modern food items, grow vegetables, keep poultry, and eat rice, dal, chapati, etc. Government provisions also supply rations, housing, and clothes.

Settler Communities and Migration

Settler communities have played a significant role in shaping the islands’ demographic and cultural landscape. Descendants of convicts, referred to as “Andaman Indians,” arrived during British rule and established long-term settlements, contributing to the islands’ socio-economic development. The “floating population,” comprising temporary residents involved in administration, trade, and services, maintains strong cultural, linguistic, and regional connections to the Indian mainland. These groups influence social dynamics while preserving aspects of their original identities.

Interaction between settlers and indigenous populations varies, with integration occurring in shared areas while cultural and linguistic practices from mainland regions are maintained.

Genealogical Documentation

Genealogical records play a crucial role in tracing family lineages, establishing inter-family relationships, and understanding socio-economic roles. Modern research utilizes this data in anthropology, counseling, and genetic studies. Documentation of genealogical information fosters community cohesion, cultural pride, and continuity. However, historical records are often scattered, and systematic efforts are required to collect, preserve, and organize these records across generations to ensure their accessibility for future research.

Traditional Attire and Cultural Practices



The traditional attire of indigenous tribes varies according to environmental conditions and cultural identity. Minimal clothing, often made from natural materials such as bark, leaves, or woven fibers, was historically worn for both practical and ceremonial purposes. Men and women decorated themselves with beads, ornaments, and body paint, reflecting artistic creativity and social status. Colonial influence and missionary activity introduced new fabrics and clothing styles, but many communities continue to wear traditional attire during rituals, festivals, and daily life, reinforcing their cultural identity and preserving continuity across generations.

“Despite all stressors, some of their myths, folktales, and spiritual beliefs remain; efforts have been made to document their oral traditions, songs, and languages. For example, some stories were collected, songs recorded, and translations undertaken to preserve what remains.”⁶ - Pravasi Indians Magazine

Social and Cultural Heritage

Oral histories, songs, and rituals play a pivotal role in preserving tribal knowledge and heritage. Festivals and ceremonies mark seasonal changes, life events, and community gatherings, reinforcing social cohesion. Language preservation is central to maintaining these traditions, as indigenous languages transmit oral histories and cultural knowledge. These cultural practices are critical to the islands' heritage and serve as a living record of past generations.

Ethnic Composition and Population Dynamics

The islands' population reflects a blend of indigenous communities, descendants of convicts, and temporary migrants from mainland India. "Andaman Indians," descendants of convicts, claim historical precedence in the islands and have played a central role in shaping local society. The floating population, though temporary, brings diverse cultural practices and influences social and economic interactions. Social networks within these populations often follow regional, linguistic, and religious ties, reinforcing cultural identity even in a new environment. Interaction among different groups facilitates cultural exchange while maintaining traditional norms and practices.

Conclusion

The heritage of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands reflects resilience, adaptation, and continuity. Indigenous tribes have maintained traditional lifestyles despite external influences, while settlers and migrants have enriched the islands' diversity. Systematic genealogical documentation strengthens familial connections, instills pride, and supports research. Preservation of cultural

practices, traditions, and languages is vital to sustaining the islands' unique identity. Future efforts must balance modernization with cultural conservation to ensure that the rich heritage of the Andaman Islands endures for generations to come.

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