

## Andaman Islanders

### Profile

There are four distinct indigenous peoples living in the Andaman Islands: Andamanese, Onges, Jarawa and Sentinelese. The Andaman Islands are a chain of over 500 islands, twenty-seven of which are inhabited, in the Bay of Bengal. Although they are closer to the South-East Asian archipelago, the islands, along with the Nicobar Islands to the south, are an Indian Union Territory, under the jurisdiction of the Home Ministry in New Delhi.

Of a total population of 180,000 on the islands in the 1990s, indigenous people of the four ethnic groups now numbered just a few hundred. Like other indigenous peoples in India, indigenous Andaman Islanders are classed as scheduled tribes and enjoy special protection under the Indian constitution. (See Adivasis)

### Historical context

Little is known about the history and development of the indigenous peoples of the Andamans, since they are small groups of hunter-gatherers, have no written language and have fallen drastically in numbers over the last two centuries. Although the islands were previously known to outsiders, the first attempts to colonize them came from the British at the end of the eighteenth century although these were soon abandoned. The islands were again colonized in the aftermath of the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857 when a penal colony and jail were established on South Andaman, which over the years housed both political and other prisoners. In addition, people from the Indian mainland, especially from East Bengal/Bangladesh, have settled in the islands.

They have suffered a long, and probably irreversible, decline in numbers. The Andamanese have suffered most drastically. In 1858, when the penal settlement was started, there were 4,800 of them; in 1901, 625; in 1930, 90; and in 1988, only 28. Initial casualties came from warfare with the colonizers, later ones from diseases such as pneumonia, measles and syphilis. Survivors have been resettled by the administration on the 603-hectare Strait Island.

The Jarawa were the next group to face land colonization. At first, in desperation, they moved away from the settlements, but later they began to attack them. The British retaliated and organized punitive expeditions. The Jarawa today number about 300 and live on the 742 square kilometre Jarawa reserve in South and Middle Andaman islands.

The Onge of the remote Little Andaman islands were the next to be contacted by outsiders in 1867 when they killed eight sailors. In retaliation a punitive mission took seventy Onge lives, about 10 per cent of the total population. Although friendly relations were established in 1887, the Onges were infected by disease and their numbers declined from 670 in 1901 to 250 in 1930 and to about 100 in 2006.

The exact numbers of the Sentinelese Islanders remains unknown but they probably number 50-150.

Outsiders who have attempted contact have been met by flights of arrows and the official policy is to leave the Sentinelese alone.

The odds against their survival as viable peoples are overwhelming. The main threat comes from development of the islands by large-scale settlement and deforestation. The islanders, especially the Jarawa, have resisted those who encroach on their reserve, as happened when several road-building crew died in 1976 and two settlers died in 1985. Some attempts have been made to contact these Jarawa with gifts, and sometimes these have been successful, but anthropologists have warned that such contact is intrinsically harmful and will only result in the destruction of the few indigenous people who still survive. Proposals by the Indian Government to give the Andaman and Nicobar Islands the status of a free port and to encourage tourism and communications development might be the final blow for the original Andaman Islanders.

## **Current issues**

The Andaman islands have been earmarked for promoting tourism by the Indian government. The claim to the North Sentinel island by the Indian government was formalized in 1970, when a surveying party landed at an isolated spot and paced a stone tablet proclaiming the island as part of the country. It may be noted that the Sentinelese are still not aware as to the implications or the existence of the proclamation. Though various 'contact expeditions' have been attempted since 1981, there have not been any significant contact established till the late 1990s. The contact programmes have since been discontinued after a series of hostile encounters resulting in several deaths in similar programmes with the Jarawa people in South and Middle Andaman islands. The present governmental policy is to maintain minimal contact with the tribes and try and protect them from land encroachment and illegal intrusions. The aim is also to restrict contact between the tribes and the settlers [from the Indian mainland]. One of the key reasons is that there has been a significant reduction in tribal numbers-it is believed that there are now only around 900 of them, belonging to five tribes, alive in the archipelago. The 'friendly contact' policy of the Indian government which led to the tribals being left exposed to various diseases from which they had no immunity has been stated to be a key reason in recent times for the rapidly decreasing numbers of the tribes. For example, the Great Andamanese have been one of the worst sufferers with their numbers reaching an alarming low of 36 from 5,000 a century ago. It is a similar story with the Onges, who have been taught to eat Indian food and speak Hindi. They number only about 98 people. The Sentinelese tribe numbers are thought to be between 250 and 300 people. Fortunately, their habitat in North Sentinel island, west of Port Blair, is more inaccessible.

A second big area of concern is the construction of the trunk road linking various islands in the archipelago. The Andamans' chief secretary in 2005, D.S. Negi, wrote in his book that the construction of the trunk road was 'an act of monumental folly'. The road has been kept open to facilitate movement between the islands by settlers despite a Supreme Court order asking it to be shut down. There is now an increasing sense of desperation amongst sociologists, environmentalists, anthropologists and rights activists to save the tribes from what seems like imminent extinction. The Indian government's policy of 'friendly contact' has now come under fire for being a policy of 'internal colonialism'. It is therefore extremely important for the Indian government to understand that the tourism potential of the Andamans needs to be reviewed and balanced carefully with the lives and existence of the hidden tribes like the Great Andamanese, the Onges, the Jarawas and the Sentinelese.

Another major and on-going concern is the recovery from the devastating Tsunami - measuring 9 on the Richter Scale-which struck South-East Asia on 26 December 2004. The Andaman Islanders faced considerable loss of life and disruption to their traditional mode of living. During 2005-2006, the Indian government remained reluctant to admit the level of damage or to allow international access to islands because of strategic military bases in Nicobar Islands. The recovery and rehabilitation of the Andaman

Islanders in the post-Tsunami remains the greatest challenge for the Indian government.