

Anthropology Vanishing Tribal Culture -A Case of Great Andamanese Tribe of Andaman Islands

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Abstract

The present paper highlights how the Great Andamanese, who once led the food-foraging way of life, becomes a wage earner, leading a sedentary life, and starts living in Port Blair town. Due to their adoption of the new white-collar job in the different departments of the Andaman Administration, they are coping with the new urban situation, which forced them to adapt to the new cultural background, leaving aside their age-old cultural practices. Out of ten Great Andamanese Language Family dialects, only *Aka- Chari* and *Aka-Jeru* are spoken by the present Great Andamanese. Due to the Tsunami disaster of 2004, the infrastructure at Strait Island was destroyed. So, the tribal people were shifted to a relief camp at Port Blair, where they interacted with outsiders. This frequent interaction led to significant socio-economic changes endorsed among the Andamanese. Their children got admission to school in the town. The long exposure to outside people led to friendship and affairs, which resulted in cross-cultural marriages, as is evident in 13 non-tribal marital alliances as per the survey in March 2019.

Key words: Tribes, Great Andamanese, Bay of Bengal

Introduction

Several cultural traits distinguish a cultural marker from one community to other. These cultural traits enrich a community's uniqueness and differentiate one cultural group from another. Over time, some of these diverse cultural traits have entirely faded; some are in incipient form restricted to a few societies, some are totally transformed, while others have retained the original form and are continuing without much change. In this paper, an attempt has been made to determine how various aspects of the life and culture of the Great Andamanese, a hunter-gatherer tribe – metamorphosed and transformed over time.

The size of Great Andamanese people was reduced from an estimated 3500 (in 1858) to a bare 19 (census 1961) and 75 (2019). With fast declining in number of populations for various reasons, asymmetrical sex ratio and frequent interaction with other cultures have brought transformation from their endogamous, tradition bound, immediate return people with unifying social organization to anexogamous, totally depended on Administration,

delayed return people with profit motive smallest tribe of the world.

Material and Methods

In order to get an updated information of the socio-economic and demographic aspects of the Great Andamanese tribal community and to find out the present status of their age-old traditions, customs, and cultural heritage a study was conducted in the month of March, 2019. It was carried out in the Strait Island as well as at *Adi Basera* -a transit tribal hostelry in Port Blair. In total 21 families were studied with a total population of 75 individuals those included 13 are outsiders (non-Andamanese). It was observed that more than eight families have residence at the Port Blair city. Earlier accounts by the administrators, travellers, and anthropologists provide a better outline of how the isolated tribal community encounters the civilized population and the aftermath. The study examines how the Andamanese are leading their lives and to what extent their cultural beliefs and customs are being transformed by adopting traits of a different culture.

While interacting with the Great Andamanese people, it is experienced that most of their traditional norms and customs transformed due to modernization and urbanization. The tribal people recall the facts by getting confirmed from their fellow human beings with great effort. So much so that they are referring to the names of investigators/researchers who wrote their accounts and left their experiences and memories with them. In due course, the socio-cultural life of the Andamanese started getting incompetent. The quick adoption of alien customs made them disorganized, forgetting their age-old indigenous culture, including their traditional knowledge of building a communal hut, making canoes, bows, and arrows, musical board and rituals related to rites de passage and performing art like dance, music as well as art like scarification of their bodies, etc.

Rehabilitation Programme

The Great Andamanese became a marginalized and vulnerable population on the verge of extinction at the time of independence of India. In 1969, the Andaman Administration, in consultation with the Anthropological Survey of India, rehabilitated Great Andamanese in one place, i.e., Strait Island. With an area of 311 sq. km. Island, 10.79 sq. km of forest land was eventually cleared, and the surviving (23) Great Andamanese, consisting of 10 families, were persuaded to settle there. The administration constructed 10 houses with corrugated tin roofs and cement floors for their residential purposes.

Thus, the residential area of Strait Island is overburdened as there is a posting of thirteen outsiders (5 police personnel, 1 compounder, 2 electricity generator operators, 2 wireless radio signal operators, 1 tribal welfare officer, 2 teachers). It greatly impacted the misappropriation towards exploitation of natural resources in and around the Island and to the tribal people.

The Strait Island, a tribal reserve forest, has been closed to visitors/outside, and entry to this Island requires permission from the district commissioner and secretary Tribal Welfare Directorate.

Moreover, to facilitate the execution of welfare measures as an autonomous body, *Andaman AdimJanjati Vikas Samiti* (AAJVS) was set up as a registered society with 100 percent funding from the Govt of India, under the Chairmanship of the Administrator (LG) of A & N Islands in 1976. The idea in the formation of AAJVS is to check the disintegration of the way of life of primitive tribes of the A & N Islands by protecting them and promoting their social and economic development. AAJVS proves to be instrumental to the Great Andamanese in making them self-sufficient to a great extent in extending various development measures and rehabilitating in settling down the roaming Andamanese by implementing a well-planned program.

Since 1970 they have been looked after entirely by the Andaman Administration. Still, it is observed that a few elder people, addicted to alcoholic drinks, are found begging and waddling on the street or lying in the street of Port Blair. In the earlier days, they were found to live in a dilapidated Japanese bunker when they visited Port Blair. To facilitate their stay at Port Blair, the Andaman Administration constructed a transit community hall (house) named *Adibasera*. Realizing the consequences of the interface with outsiders and the legacy of addiction to intoxication, it is high time to decide to screen motivational visuals, their cultural performances of by gone days through LED screens in order to make them ethnocentric, sensitizing & honouring their rich cultural traditions and make them realized their potentialities and especially their heroic patriotism against the British, which they experienced during Battle of Aberdeen in 1859.

Demographic profile

| Tribal community | Population | Sources |
|------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------|
| | 3500 | 1858 (estimate) |
| | Battle of Aberdeen | May, 1859 |
| | Outbreak of measles, pox | During 1877 |
| | 2000 | 1888 |
| | 625 | 1901 Census |
| | 456 | 1911 Census |
| Great Andamanese | 209 | 1921 Census |
| | (Pure breed) 74 +16 (half-breed) | 1931 Census |
| | 23 | 1951 Census |
| | 19 | 1961 Census |
| | 21 | 1971 Census |
| | 23 (M14+F9) | 1977 Census by AnSI |
| | 57 (M30+F27) | 2012 Census by AAJVS |
| | 75 (M41+F34) | 2019 Census by AnSI |

The reasons behind the depopulation of the Great Andamanese are many. The colonial history of tribal encounters provided detailed information about the population’s declination. Again, when friendship was ensured after the Battle of Aberdeen and several other rivalry incidences, close physical contact led to the spread of new diseases, which caused death and destruction on a large scale. Syphilis was introduced among the tribes of South Andaman in about 1870 and is responsible for a considerable increase in the death rate. In March 1877, an epidemic of measles broke out among the Andamanese. The Andamanese never reported syphilis because (as Portman: 1990 reported) convicts prevented them from telling it. Even the Andamanese did not want to disclose it as they never liked being hospitalized. Save and except, inter-tribal clashes contribute to a great extent to the declining population of Great Andamanese.

The constant low birth rate is a fundamental demographic reason for the decrease in population. The fertility of the Andamanese is very poor. The delayed appearance of fertility in Andamanese women is probably

connected with a general biological condition fostered by vagina acidity content harmful to spermatozoa. It decreases with age. (Mann,1976).

Considering the present situation of the tribe, it would not be possible to encourage them to stick to their hunting-gathering pursuits as sources of livelihood, nor be it easy to switch to other pursuits like horticulturists or cultivators. Instead, they should be encouraged to fashion their traditional crafts or to make handicrafts like model baskets, canoes, bows, and turtles which can be marketed through their society. The womenfolk should be encouraged to excel in making shell ornaments, bead ornaments, hand-made cloth bags, tattooing, and decoration as a mark of beautification. The children should be encouraged to draw colourful paintings and greeting cards to train in water sports.

The city dwellers of Andamanese slowly adapted to leading urban life as quite a large number (30) of members of the Andamanese community are engaged in white-collar jobs leaving their age-old practice of hunting and gathering. Nevertheless, they still feel the lack of

inclusiveness among themselves as they have been given residential quarters in different areas of Port Blair city. Their children are now getting admission to different English medium schools but need to get the sympathy of the teachers and other boarding students as expected. As part of the acculturation process, they have picked up new cultural traits, and few traditional socio-cultural practices have been dropped.

Due to the Tsunami disaster of 2004, the infrastructure at Strait Island was destroyed, and so the tribal people were shifted to a relief camp at Port Blair, where they interacted with outsiders. This frequent interaction led to significant socio-economic changes endorsed among the Andamanese. After renovating their houses and repairing other infrastructure, they were sent back to Strait Island, but their children stayed at Port Blair with their fellow tribes as they got admission to school there.

The long exposure to outside people led to friendship and affairs, which resulted in marriages, as is evident in 13 marital alliances as per the survey in March 2019.

Dress Pattern

The great Andamanese wore nothing except their leaf and shell ornaments prior to contact with the British. This is true and is found described in some of the accounts written by the British administration and travellers. In the year 1872, George Edward Dobson, a British army surgeon, wrote in an anthropological journal when he and his team arrived at an Andaman home....” they were welcomed by a local chief’s wife, who quickly put on a government-supplied frock; very soon afterward, perceiving that no ladies were in our boat, she got rid of that unnecessary encumbrance and presented herself in nature’s garb, adorned by a single leaf, a greater tied below one knee, and a necklace composed of the finger and toe bones of her ancestors” (Dobson, 1875).

In the 1970s, women generally were found to wear petticoats and blouses; men were found to wear shorts or *lungis* with vests and shirts. Girls wear frocks, boys wear shorts, trousers, shirts, and vests. They do not grow their hair long and sometimes shave their head with a razor blade instead of the sharp edges of a shell (in the

past). Nowadays, boys and girls go to the barber to get their stylish hair cut while they travel to Port Blair.

Ornaments

The belt of rope and the necklet of strings worn by men are considered to have a utilitarian value among the Great Andamanese. The belt is a plain piece of rope ornamented with the yellow skin of a species of *Dendrobium*. It is a receptacle in which they carry adze, roots, and arrows. The string necklet is simply a length of a thin string tied around the neck. It serves as a means of carrying a knife or skewer. The necklet also serves as a means of carrying bees’-wax, which is in constant use by them, a small ball of the wax being attached to one of the ends of the string of which the necklet is made.

Brown (1922) cited that “ as a rule, in everyday life, the men wear only a belt, or a belt and necklace. The European officer required those natives who visited the settlement of Port Blair to wear a strip of cloth over the genitals. It has become the rule to wear such a loin cloth whenever they are about a European. This, however, is a modern custom, and in former times the men went freely with no coverings.....” Common costumes on ceremonial occasions consist of a belt, necklace, bracelet, garters of meeting, and Dentalium shell.

Ornamentation of Body with Clay and Pigment

Among the great Andamanese, three different substances are used for painting the body. These are i) a common clay (grey or yellow or pink) called *odu* in *Aka-Jeru*, ii) a fine white pipe-clay called *tol* or *tol-odu* in *Aka-Jeru*, which is rare than the common clay, iii) a red pigment made of mixing burnt oxide of iron with animal fat or vegetable oil called *keyip* in *Aka-Jeru*. The common clay is used during the mourning period by close relatives smear themselves, during initiation ceremonies, and for decoration by the male dance performer when the women used to make it. The painting of the body with red paint is practiced when a man or woman falls ill. For cold and cough, the chest and neck are painted. The red and white clay is applied to the dead person’s body in the snake pattern and the dancer on ceremonial occasions at the end of the mourning period. Fine white clay is used to decorate differently on different occasions. The most common

practice is decorating the body with a snake pattern from the wife to her husband. This practice of decorating or painting the body has disappeared with development.

Scarification

In the past, men and women sacrificed their bodies with flint or glass flakes, which they used to collect from the seashore. It was associated with their belief that the blood flowing from scarification possessed less strength and could not protect them from diseases. Chakraborty (1990) cited, “ some of their old members have scarification marks in the form of lines on their back, chests, thighs, and arms. They still believe in the virtues of scarification, though the practice is out of vogue “.

Turtle Eating ceremony

It is their tradition that when a boy attains the age of puberty, or a girl experiences her first menses, they must abstain for some time from eating the flesh of a particular variety of turtle called *cokbi*. This abstinence lasts only for a period and ends with a ceremony. The termination of abstinence is called the *cokbe-jio-be*, i.e., the turtle-eating ceremony. *Rosa Baithna* (seat while fasting) replaced the term *cokbe-jio-be* and became famous when an outsider Muslim male married an Andamanese woman.

Ethno-Architecture

The traditional shelter of the Great Andamanese, which they used to build in the forest, is now wholly vanished as they were given (by Andaman Administration) constructed houses with cemented floors and wooden walls, the roof of which is made of corrugated tin sheets. The architectural design they used to construct was the communal hut, consisting of large numbers of sleeping platforms and a fireplace. The hut is built on the ground, and the construction method and materials used are not unlike those of the Jarawa or the Onge. The roof was thatched with cane leaves and came down to the ground so that sidewalls were not needed. “Previously, the camp consisted of a settlement where they lived in several huts arranged in a semi-circle, with an open space in the centre for communal dances, feasts, etc. The traditional huts are no longer there” (Chakraborty, 1990). It is also observed

that the tribal people engage outsiders as masons to repair their built houses or annex their houses with kitchens or cemented floors in front of the houses.

Religion

Once they firmly believe in animism, they start telling themselves to follow the Hindu Religion. It is fascinating to note that Great Andamanese started participating in ‘*Shivratri*’ festival in a grand way as it is noticed that a *Shiv* temple is built by outsiders who are followers of the Hindu religion. They still believe in the existence of supernatural beings like *Biliku* whom they worship to eliminate various natural disasters like sea storms and other climatic changes that make navigation difficult. They have a supernatural belief that a *Saitan* (dead soul) is a malevolent spirit. The wrath of *Saitan* leads to various ill health. The Andamanese have great faith in *Puluga* an Anthropomorphic deity whom they believe descends from Heaven and lives on the top of Saddle Peak, the highest mountain, and is responsible for all things happenings in this world.

Vanishing Andamanese Language

Andamanese language family consists of 10 dialects of 10 distinct local groups or septs. The ten local groups are *Aka-Khora*, *Aka-Chari*, *Aka-jero*, *Aka-bo*, *Aka-kede*, *Aka-Jowai*, *Aka-Puchikar*, *Aka-Koi*, *Aka-Bale*, and *Aka-Bea*. Out of 10 dialects of the Andamanese language family, only *Aka-Chari*, and *Aka-Jero* are spoken by the present Great Andamanese population. There are no living representatives of the other eight local groups. Most of the Andamanese now generally speak the *Jero* dialect. The younger generation does not know their original dialect. They communicate in Hindi with outsiders. The school going children prefer English to Hindi as a medium of instruction and communication.

Educational attainment

Children below School who do not even enroll their name in the school are seven in number. Five individuals are illiterate and cannot read and write their names. Twenty-eight individuals have passed eight standards. Twenty-three individuals successfully passed the X standard, and

7 passed the XII standard. Their School going tendency and admission to the English medium School are quite encouraging. They prefer (to learn and listen) to English as a medium of instruction. Two Andamanese children enrolled in the pre-nursery kinder garden school. As a result of their education, a few younger students start developing their interest in knowing about their past culture and to write their ethnography.

Marriage

Marital relation was permitted between a couple belonging to the same local group or with one from another tribe. They mainly follow the rule of monogamy. Widow remarriage is also not uncommon. Marriage was prohibited between siblings, and consanguineal relatives, who are regarded as brothers and sisters. Marriage with distant cousins, however, was allowed. The marital relation among the Great Andamanese with the other communities like Bengali Hindu, Nicobarese Hindu, Punjabi Hindu, Local Muslims, Marathi Hindu, Local Ranchi, *Bhantus* of Andaman becomes very alarming. The outsiders, like govt officials posted in the Strait Island for tenure and casual laborers working for construction work, are involved in close interaction and opt to marry Andamanese mostly with a hidden agenda of getting government facilities admissible to the scheduled tribes. Out of 13 spouses, five are males who married Andamanese girls as brides, and eight are females who married Andamanese boys as a groom. Another reason to marry outsiders is the scarcity of marriageable couples due to their constant depopulation.

An observation of a few marriage alliances reveals that the Great Andamanese can now not maintain the traditional regulations because of the constant decrease in population. As per their old rules for property inheritance, the youngest daughter inherits the deceased property. The youngest daughter is preferred to a son or sons, and the youngest son to other sons in the absence of any daughter. These traditional rules are no longer in their society.

Sources of Livelihood

A total of 30 literate Andamanese were appointed in Govt. departments like constable, home guard in police,

a peon in education, ANM, midwife (*Aaya*) in health, a watchman in electricity, shipping, forest, veterinary compounder, dresser in animal husbandry, pump operator in PWD and *janjati sevak* and daily rated *majdur* (labour) in AAJVS with the mandate that they could be deployed at Strait Island itself. But it is seen that except 2 to 3 individuals, all are employed at various offices in and around Port Blair. These employees were given Govt. quarters and resided with other Govt. employees at Port Blair Town. The Government Service has been instrumental in interaction with outsiders resulting in a further social impact on the scheduled tribes. The once economically self-sufficient group is now entirely dependent on the Andaman Administration.

Changes in Food Habit

Food habits of Andamanese have changed with the occupational shift as most of the family heads are employed in different departments of Andaman administration. Now AAJVS provides them with commodities like Rice- 9 kg, Pulse- 250 gm, Spices- 50gm, Oil- 1Litre, Wheat flour- 4 kg., Sugar- 700gm, Ghee-100 gm, Soap- 2 (washing), Soap- 2 (bathing) to everyone per month. These readily available food items make them less laborious and inactive as the hunting games by chasing behind them and sea fishing and harpooning turtles in the sea, which earlier was a regular practice and only sources of their livelihood.

From time immemorial, they have preferred to live near the coastal area and depend on the sea as a source of their livelihood. Sea is the natural source of tortoise, dugong, cucumber, Octopus, sea shell (Bivalves), and different types of fish. To the Andamanese, nutritious food for pregnant women is turtle meat and coconut water with its kernel (*malai*). Cold food is strictly prohibited during pregnancy. Turtle meat is considered a nutritious food and gives more strength.

They have a habit of taking three meals a day. Morning-Tea (6.00 AM), Lunch- 12.00 PM (fish & Rice), Dinner- 9.00 PM (crab & Rice). They collect honey from the forest. Two types of honey: *Maro* (collected from a hive found in a tree trunk) and *Tumel* (collected from a hive found on a tree branch). They offer food to their dead

soul (*Aatma*) before they start eating. They hunt pigs, barking deer, and wild goats for their livelihood. Pigs are available on North Passage Island. They catch fish and crabs from the sea. Lobsters and prawns are also collected from the sea, which they generally exchange with the Burmese with other consumable items. They even own their fishing boat from the Burmese, who are experts in making a durable country boat.

In the last one or two decades, their food habits have undergone tremendous changes. From pork, fish, turtle, and honey, they were obliged to turn to wheat, Rice, sugar, spices, and vegetable oils. The sudden changes resulted in specific problems. Due to their changing food habit, sedentary lifestyle, and new settlement in Port Blair town, they are found obese, overweight, and more anaemic in comparison to NFHS data, and some of them suffer from hypertension.

Health Care

With the establishment of a sub-centre on Strait Island and due to the administering of allopathic medicine to the Andamanese, they forget their age-old practice of ethnomedicine. It is suggested that the local herbs and plants, which they have been using for centuries, should be tested pharmacologically and clinically. If these herbs are proven to be capable of meeting the challenge of various diseases, they should be continued because the tribal people have developed more faith in their indigenous medication system. Earlier, the medicine man of the Andamanese tribal groups, known as *okojumu* or *akachaphan*, used to prescribe medicinal plants/herbs and knew how to treat various ailments. Nowadays, they hardly use herbs as medicine; instead, they take medicines from the Auxiliary Nursing Midwifery (ANM) person appointed in the sub-centre exclusively for this tribal group. Before establishing a sub-centre in Strait Island, they used to visit the dispensary at Long Island or consume medicines from the hospital at Port Blair - the capital town of South Andaman District.

Games and amusement

During the Golden jubilee celebration of the strait island rehabilitation year in 2020, the young Andamanese

are encouraged to showcase their traditional games and perform the traditional dance with a unique sounding musical board (*Buamoh*) by the staff of AAJVS, Andaman Administration. They have forgotten their bygone days, and the traditional games and their cultural performances with traditional dress and attire are being reminded after pursuing with great effort by the officials/staff.

Dass (1988) cited that the Andamanese were very fond of games like Blind-man's bluff, leap-frog and Hide and Seek and spent time and used to take great delight doing mock hunts (pig and turtle), mock burials and ghost-hunts, etc. Friendly matches were often arranged in swinging, throwing, skimming, shooting, and wrestling.

Conclusions

Culture and lifestyles of the Great Andamanese tribe are threatened today by cultural homogenization due to globalization, tourism, migration, the degradation of the environment, industrialization, and development demands. The decline of their population has been a cause of justifiable concern. Their number has become very small. They must survive, and their culture must be preserved and helped to develop at all costs; there should not be any cultural imposition to revive their culture.

The present study reveals various scopes to encourage the Great Andamanese to lead their style of living by respecting their culture and offering felt-need support. Over the years, various developmental measures have been initiated by the Andaman administration through the nodal agency, i.e., AAJVS. They must be encouraged to develop willpower with constant altruistic dialogue and a thorough understanding of their embryonic inner urge. The time has come to adopt the philanthropic approach as a strategy for development and gaining their confidence into account. They should be given priority to lead their lives without much interference and allowed their private lives to sustain and not near the other imposed administrative welfare measures. There is an urgent need to formulate a tribal policy that can provide a space to nurture their hope and dream in a very amicable way.

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