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Corral and Confine: Colonial Occupation and the Politics of Space in the Andaman Islands

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Introduction

In 1789, when the earliest British colonizers landed on the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal, they saw it as '*terra nullius*', or empty space. The British described bands of 'savages' that were seen 'prowling' and 'dancing' over what they considered a Rousseau-esque landscape, free from societal constraints, private property and law. With the British occupation fully established by 1858, the colonizers saw these incomprehensible savages as objects of 'scientific' curiosity to be observed, captured and tamed for further study. But the larger project of colonial occupation in the Andaman Islands followed a settler-colonial logic that demanded the colonization and settlement of the land, as well as the forced containment, if not 'elimination', of the islands' Indigenous people. The colonial project was sustained in the post-colonial era through the prevailing idea that the Andamans was empty space that had to be filled by 'disciplined natives', as well as mainland India's 'excess populations' who would transform the tropical forest to crop-yielding plantations and farms (Pandya 2013).

While many scholars have told the story of the colonial occupation and settlement of the Andaman Islands (Portman 1888; Temple 1903, 1930; Mathur 1968, 1984; Sen 2010; Anderson, Mazumdar and Pandya 2016), the history of the pre-colonial islands as a 'culture zone' defined by the distinctive livelihoods, languages and cosmologies of hunter-gatherer groups living within a shared island space is often not addressed. These groups, though marked by individual cultural attributes, moved along the north-south axis of the islands and maintained complex relations of communication and exchange between each other. With the expansion of the penal settlement at Port Blair in the southern part of the Andaman Islands, this practice of intra-group relations became

jeopardized and was eroded. Earlier relations of exchange crumbled and hostility between groups within the 'culture zone' intensified. The logic of settler-colonial occupation targeted those very spaces of exchange and communication between the hunter-gatherer groups that had sustained them over centuries. A closer look at the specific points of colonial occupation on the islands, beginning from the southern extremities and moving slowly up to the north via critical nodal points, was meant to restrict intra-band or intra-community movement across both the vertical and horizontal axes of the territory. This spatial logic of corralling various groups among the Andaman Islanders would eventually limit their capacity for resistance and leave them vulnerable to capture and confinement.

This chapter builds on conventional archival records and 'ethno-historical' accounts to draw attention to the spatial logic of settler colonialism and its implications for the Andaman Islanders, for whom the historical experience of colonial occupation presents a process of displacement, replacement and ultimately confinement in 'reserves' created by the post-colonial state (Elwin 1973). It tries to understand how the spatial logic of occupation that worked through the severance of zones of exchange destroyed an entire cultural zone, decimated the bulk of its inhabitants and rendered them irredeemably 'vulnerable'.¹

With its particular historical framing of the nature and implication of colonial occupation at one of the extremities of colonial India, this chapter explores the 'shape' of the colonial occupation of the Andaman Islands, and how the nature of occupation impacted cultural, political or social practices in the local setting. To do so, section one looks at the early colonization and representation of the Andaman Islands as *terra nullius* and the historical circumstances that led to the abandonment of this first incursion. Section two focuses on the re-engagement of the islands and more specifically with the Andamanese as a key to the project of colonization. It tries to tease out from colonial records the strategic decisions that informed the sequence of occupying spaces with the larger intent of corralling and confining the Aborigines as a way to safeguard the nascent penal settlement. Section three then looks at the implications of the transformation of the islands into an 'occupied space' by drawing attention to the ways in which this modality of colonization undermined the diverse relationships of reciprocity, exchange and communication among the Andaman Islanders and rendered them divided, isolated and vulnerable to contact, confinement and the contingencies of acculturation.

Prowlers on an empty land: the view from the shore

Because of their location along the sea routes to Southeast Asia and the South China Sea, the Andaman Islands have had a long history of visitors (Symes 1808; Alexander 1826; Pratt 2008; Vaidik 2010). The British first became interested in the islands in 1789, when the governor general of India, Lord Cornwallis, dispatched Lieutenant Archibald Blair on a survey mission, instructing him to raise the Union flag and to set up a harbour so that ships might be refreshed and refitted there (Blair 1789). Much earlier, however, following an order from the governor and Council of Bengal in 1771, Captain John Ritchie prepared a survey report that presented the first British description of an encounter with the Andaman Islanders (Pandya 1990). Only partially visible at first sight, and almost completely camouflaged by thick vegetation, the shadowy figures in Ritchie's survey were described as 'Cafferries' ('kaffirs'). They seemed to him to be distinct as a race in relation to those in adjacent countries and were reported to be eager only to gather iron in any form. The early survey said little else about the Islanders but indicated the possibility and desirability of further exploration of their lands.

In 1792, Captain Blair and Captain Kyd convinced Lord Cornwallis that the Andaman Islands be included as 'newly acquired subjects of the East India Company'. Kyd attached his report with detailed maps and sketches provided by earlier surveyors, such as Captain Blair and Captain Colebrooke (Colebrooke 1795). His report doubled as both a survey and a travelogue – a document laden with both signs of wonder and the logic of appropriation. Kyd's survey constitutes an important point of entry to understanding the framing of the Andaman Islands as *terra nullius* and its peoples as mere prowlers on the land. Interestingly, Kyd, inspired by the liberal political ideology of his times, proposed to name the islands the 'Rousseau Islands'.

Kyd depicted the Andamanese as 'prowlers' who danced and celebrated the apparent freedom they enjoyed in this 'Voltairean republic'. He sought to assure Lord Cornwallis that the Andamanese could be subjugated to the eventual 'embrace of civilization'. Although they displayed the rudest of habits, ate 'frogs, rats, snakes and yams' and were like 'smelly dwarfs' who stood lowest in the 'scale of modesty', Kyd argued that the Islanders could be brought under control. Their nature was described as having a 'ferment for freedom', as they had no hindrance of any form of 'government or religion and were free of any impositions of inequality or social status' (Kyd 1792).

In light of his own understanding of mainland India, Kyd pointed out that the Andaman Islanders were distinctly free by nature, as they had no 'zamindars to look down upon them or collectors, standing armies penal statutes and executioners, pawn brokers and other vermin' (Kyd 1792). In fact, because they didn't have any noticeable form of 'social government', Kyd regarded the Andaman Islanders as 'sheep' who had been left to take care of themselves and who moved around from place to place. He worried about the danger that came from some 'wolves' – competing colonial powers who were active in the region – who were keen to move in and take care of the sheep. Kyd insisted on the sustained presence of the East India Company in the role of the 'shepherd' who would protect the flock and keep it from straying. In this context, a project of colonization was deemed both desirable and appropriate in that it would both civilize the people and transform the unknown potential of the land.

By 1790, the doctrine of *terra nullius* represented a powerful and pervasive argument for policies advocating for the forcible expropriation of Indigenous land. It also represented a new understanding of the right to ownership of land and, by extension, private property. Although the doctrine owed this specific interpretation to the writings of the English philosopher John Locke in the early seventeenth century, by the eighteenth century, jurists' interpretation was that land had to become property if rights of ownership were to be tied to it. Property ownership entailed that land should have been improved; it should be rendered more efficient as a source of human subsistence rather than left in its natural state (Veracini 2015: 62–6).

Within these frameworks, the Andamanese did not constitute themselves into a 'society' nor were they bound by any rule of law. Because the British thought that there was no land ownership on the islands, the land was 'no one's' and hence open to uncontested acquisition. In the European settler-colonial imagination, the notion of *terra nullius* not only justified the expropriation of foreign land but also a taming and replacing of its people, and its constitution as a space for the accommodation of surplus population. The doctrine of *terra nullius* was integrally linked to imagery of vast stretches of empty, cultivable land that belonged to no one but the pioneer settler who would tame and turn a wasteland into a productive agrarian landscape. In the European judgement, the Andamanese (much like the Australian Aborigines) were thought to be nomadic – not in a pastoral or biblical sense, but as a people who merely prowled about the landscape in search of sustenance (Veracini 2015). The Aborigines belonged to the land, but the land did not belong to them. This made the colonization of the Andamans very different from that of the Indian subcontinent. The Andaman Islands were simply there to

be taken, without the requirement for contract, compensation or even acknowledgment of a people's legitimate presence on the land.

Until 1854, the Andaman Islands remained an occasionally occupied colony, as settlement was not easy due to hazardous conditions, isolation and the unpredictable nature of its Indigenous inhabitants (Temple 1890, 1903, 1930). Indeed, the first attempts at colonizing the islands between 1789 and 1796 ended in disaster. However, the islands' central position on Asian trading routes was a fact that could not be ignored by the East India Company and its ships that occasionally anchored there. During the 1840s and 1850s, however, stories of Andamanese attacks on shipwrecked sailors seemed to push the company to rethink its presence in the islands. Even though Governor General Canning remained sceptical, he organized a survey party under the direction of Bengal Army Surgeon Dr F.J. Mouat to gather further information. During these discussions, the Indian Rebellion of 1857 broke out. The scale and spread of the revolt meant that the British were faced with the impossible task of capturing escaped prisoners and punishing the increasing numbers of rebels and 'mutineers'. By the time Mouat left Calcutta, therefore, he was issued with new instructions: he was to survey the Andaman Islands again not just to reaffirm the possibilities of colonization but to select the best possible site there for establishing a penal colony. At this time, the colonial encounter with the Andamanese and the Andaman Islands began to acquire new levels of complexity.

Corralling and controlling the South Andaman Islands

Individual accounts of colonial administrators in the period of the second settlement – particularly those of F.J. Mouat, the head of the Andaman Commission, and later the colonial officer in charge of the settlement, E.H. Man – bear testimony to the constantly evolving colonial logic that drove the occupation of the Andaman Islands. Firstly, the 'empty space' of the islands had to be 'cleared' of forest so that a penal settlement and colonial quarters could be established. Secondly, the British needed to make sense of the extent of territory occupied by the Aborigines and the trajectory of their movements across the islands and the surrounding archipelago. The first attempts at colonizing the islands in 1789 and the surveys done by Lieutenant Blair made it clear that the islands represented a difficult territory to occupy. This was reaffirmed again in 1858 when Mouat was directed to survey the possibilities of a penal settlement in the region (Mouat 1861, 1863; Portman 1899).

Maurice Vidal Portman, who collected the entire corpus of colonial records from the period between 1858 and the late 1890s, provided a sense of the multiple and often contradictory bodies of knowledge about the Andaman Islands and the Andamanese that informed the colonial project in its first decade. Colonial knowledge of the Andaman Islands was largely structured around marine, botanical and geological surveys undertaken at various points in time by British scientists, such as Dr Rink, Dr Oldham and Dr Prain. Portman's two volume compilation of records, published under the title *A History of our Relations with the Andamanese* (1899), summarizes the key points of interest in the spatial occupation of the islands – its coastline, its harbours, its climate, its forests, its geological formations and soil, and a theory of the origins of its local populations. It summed up the spectrum of information that would inform the colonial engagement with both the terrain and the people of the islands.

The Andaman Islands were notoriously complex in spatial layout. In strictly geographical terms, the islands lay in the Bay of Bengal between the 10th and 14th parallels north, and between the 92nd and 94th meridians east. The islands were divided into Great Andaman and Little Andaman, with the former further subdivided into the North, Middle and South, as well as the outlying islands of Landfall, Interview, Rutland, the North and South Sentinel Islands, and the Labyrinth groups. From north to south, the islands are a 351-kilometre-long chain of 204 islands with a maximum breadth of 30 kilometres. The main chain of the islands – the Great Andaman Islands – feature hills rising to about 730 metres.

Geologists saw the Andamans as a continuation of the Arakan Yoma and the archipelago of the Nicobars and thought it similar to the main body of Sumatra. Landing on any of the Andaman coasts would prove difficult if not for the numerous straits, creeks and excellent harbours there. Portman underscored the significance of the islands' serrated coastline, only to make the point that it allowed a particularly safe haven for ordinary vessels in times of bad weather or when supplies were needed. There was a near consensus on the observation that the islands were the headquarters of Malay pirates, particularly because of the sheltered harbours and the hiding places they provided at all times of year (Portman 1899: 14–5; Tarling 1963).

The first task of colonial marine hydrographers and surveyors was to ascertain the peculiarities of the eastern and western coasts of the islands to determine how much shelter they would provide during the two seasonal monsoons (Ritchie 1787). Once the coastlines were surveyed and the movement of particular vessels along the eastern and western seaboard established, demands for the expansion

of the settlement deeper into the interior started to grow. The new imperative was to demarcate specific areas within which the colonial administrative headquarters and the penal colony could be established in a way that would allow for continuous surveillance. The logistics of setting up the penal settlement were entrusted to Dr. James Walker, whom Mouat appointed in 1858.

Walker's report, cited by Portman (1899: 264–5), provides insights into the enormity of the task that awaited the first group of colonial officers, naval guards and penal labour forces that were dispatched from Calcutta. Immediately on arrival, convicts were set to clear Chatham, but the supply of fresh water was limited. After three months, it was instead decided to clear and settle the area of Ross Island. Walker was evidently intimidated by the enormity of the task that awaited him. He wrote:

The magnitude of the task of clearing the primeval jungle of the Andamans can only be appreciated by those who have witnessed the nature of the vegetation and the difficulty of effecting a clearance. The jungle is so dense and its entanglement by gigantic creepers so complete as to render impassable except along the few pathways used by aborigines. . . . There is great difficulty even during the dry weather in getting brushwood that has been several days felled due to burn and the largest heaps are constantly extinguished at night by the very heavy dews that fall drenching everything exposed.

Portman 1899

Notwithstanding these difficulties, Walker devised a plan to cut through the interior to fetch basic supplies for the settlement. So great was the fear of the Andamanese that no attempt was made to explore the creeks running off the harbour. A supply of thatching leaves for the barracks was ultimately obtained from Moulmein, where they were known to be available in large quantities in the creeks (Portman 1899: 260–70). In spite of the initial difficulty in approaching the creeks and the interior, Dr Walker pushed on with the settling the area with great energy. Bamboo and thatching leaves from the jungle were cut and brought in by convicts, who then made huts for themselves. At the end of the rainy season, Dr Walker sank wells at the upper end of the harbour and arranged for the occupation of the mainland at that site. Following the arrival of a second troop of naval guards from Madras, Walker pushed deeper into the interior and sent a division of 421 convicts to the neck of land between Port Blair and Port Mouat. He considered this a strategic decision: even as Ross Island was cleared and settlements were established in the area, it was thought that the main task was to control the area around Port Blair and the northern limits of South Andaman.

Following these actions, Walker directed his men to settle in sixteen villages on the Port Blair side of the neck. A similar division was sent to settle on the Port Mouat side. He considered that intermediate villages might also be necessary to strengthen the whole as a frontier against the local Indigenous population. However, Portman was quick to note that the government of India's response was cautious. In a letter to Walker (Portman 1899: 270), he wrote:

To prevent collisions between savages and convicts you have selected the southernmost part of the Great Andaman bounded on the north by Port Mouat and the intermediate neck of land about 2 miles in breadth. On this neck you propose to construct entrenchments, fortlets or stockades and establish a mill cordon with a local corps of Madrasis. It might be beneficial to the settlement from a sanitary point of view to cut a broad vista through the jungle from Port Blair to Port Mouat and it might have the effect of inducing the savages to keep to the north of the line thus laid down. But if any attempt is made to drive them from the southern part of the Island by force the Hon'ble Government will object. A more prudent measure after occupying the Islands in Port Blair would be to clear the mainland gradually and uniformly from the south shore of the Bay establishing advanced posts near the edge of the jungle and leaving only cultivation and dwellings of the colonists in the rear.

During the strategic dilemmas that faced the administration in the Andamans, an incident took place that changed the course of British relations with the Indigenous Andamanese and radically disrupted the complex network of inter-tribal relations that had sustained hunter-gatherer life in the region for thousands of years. Although historical records for this period are scarce and unverifiable, what is left to us of the Battle of Aberdeen – the first recorded organized conflict between the British and the Andaman Islanders – is a court deposition of the event by the chief instigator of the 'rebellion', a runaway convict named Dudhnath Tiwari. Tiwari was one of many convicts that tried to escape confinement in the penal barracks at Ross Island by making their way to Port Blair and moving in rough, handmade canoes towards the many sheltered creeks (Pandya 1997). Most of these unfortunate adventures either led to drowning or capture. In early 1859, Dudhnath Tiwari was captured by a group of Andamanese near the McPherson's Straits north of Port Blair. Instead of killing him, the group provided shelter and a home to Tiwari for several months, accepted him as one of their own and even let him marry two women from among them. Grateful to them for their affection and hospitality, Tiwari advised them to organize a calibrated attack on the colonial military officers that guarded the frontiers of the settlement.

When the Andamanese troops gathered for a fight, he abandoned them and returned to the British.

The details of the ensuing conflict, which occurred the next morning, are unclear. While colonial records dismissed it as a skirmish with little or no casualties, nationalist memory looks at the Battle of Aberdeen as the first struggle for independence on the Andaman Islands that was led by its Indigenous inhabitants. Nevertheless, whatever the outcome of the Battle of Aberdeen, it was clear to the authorities that there was a need for a more concerted policy towards the Andamanese, a policy that would be driven by gestures of 'friendliness' but informed by a well thought out occupation of critical areas of the island space that would 'contain' the local population and help expand and protect the settlement (Pandya 1997, 2014).

The first attempt to recast the relationship between the colonial administration and the Andamanese was the British creation of the 'Andaman Homes' by the chaplain of Port Blair, Reverend Corbyn (Ball 1874, 1879). The idea of the Andaman Homes was to hold captive Andamanese in these spaces with the allurement of gifts, and to 'civilize' them in the habits of the colonizers by teaching them English, elementary numeracy and the arts of cultivation and craft. The first of these homes was set up in 1863 on Ross Island. The home was established as a small house in which a number of captured Andamanese were brought under the watch of a guard of native convicts. Within months, such homes were replicated as 'stations' in sixteen different sites across the South Andamans. Both administrative records and secondary literature on the homes suggest that despite their generic name, these institutions were fluid in structure, organization and purpose. Some were temporary while others endured over several months. The largest of such homes was located in Haddo in the South Andamans. In the view of J.N. Homfray, the longest serving officer in charge of the Andamanese, 'the lazy, quarrelsome and dishonest residents of the homes around Port Blair ought to take to agriculture and supply their wants by their own labour' (Wintle 2013: 25). Homfray's 'civilizing mission' was meant to contain, sedentarize and tame groups of captured Andamanese and hold them up as exemplars to their kinsmen who would then be encouraged to move to the 'homes' voluntarily to discover the wonders of civilization, embrace the habits of work and discipline, and finally abandon their nomadic way of life.

According to some scholars, the Andaman Homes were often deemed by colonial officers to provide a stable, familiar context for inter-tribal communication and marriage and thus operate as a site for a peaceful, non-conflictual 'transformation and homogenization' of the Indigenous people from

the second half of the nineteenth century. On closer inspection, however, it becomes increasingly evident that the homes, far from being safe havens, were spaces marked by coercion, violence and death from disease and contact (Wintle 2013: 26).

Though much has been written on the culturally devastating impact of the homes on the Andamanese by colonial officers like Portman, little attention has been devoted to the strategic considerations that went into the selection of specific locations for the homes in the first decade of the penal settlement. It is important to pose a number of questions at this point. First, what drove the first relocation of the homes from Ross Island to Port Blair? Second, in what ways did Dudhnath Tiwari's 'insider' information of the specific campsites, trails and movements of the Andamanese on the north-south axis of the islands influence the creation of more such homes as 'bridgeheads' in the forest interior? We use the term 'bridgehead' here advisedly. Although the term in military parlance has several meanings and nuances, a colloquial understanding of a 'bridgehead' usually refers to a 'strong position secured by an army inside enemy territory from which to advance or attack further'. A bridgehead could also refer to an actual fortification protecting the advanced position seized in 'hostile' territory (Marshall 1988).

Reverend Corbyn's tenure as 'father of the Andaman Homes' abruptly ended after the surprise attack on and killing of a colonial officer by one of the so-called 'friendly' Andamanese reared in the Andaman Homes. Corbyn's successor, Jeremiah Nelson Homfray, decided to shift the homes to Port Blair and to secure the outer periphery of the convict settlements there. Securing and controlling the area around Port Blair was thought critical to help protect the settlement from more 'savage attacks'. The intent was to cut off the trails of movement of the Andamanese and block their entry to the settlement at Port Blair. For this, Homfray directed that the Andaman Homes be located further away and spread across the islands. The plan was to establish friendly relations with the groups on the west coast from as far as Interview Island and to deploy them as interlocutors and scouts. Port Mouat was strategic not only from the point of establishing friendly relations with the Aborigines but also for capturing runaway convicts who would reach the area and put out to sea on rafts (Portman 1899: 526). From Port Mouat, the next move of the Andaman Homes was further up to Port Campbell in the Middle Andamans. At the end of 1867, four years after the first Andaman Home was set up by Reverend Corbyn, and almost a decade since the islands were occupied as a penal settlement in 1858, a report by Colonel Ford proudly stated their 'influence on the Andamanese was most satisfactory' (Portman 1899: 526–7).

From Port Blair to Port Campbell, twelve different Andamanese 'septs' were identified, and friendly relationships established with them.² Colonial officers proclaimed that they had befriended groups who were previously hostile to Reverend Corbyn, such as those groups living on Interview Island. The new strategy of friendship resulted in the successful inclusion of the Rutland Islanders, Labrynth Islanders and groups in the eastern archipelago within a colonial sphere of influence. Although colonial officers in charge of the homes were not able to classify these groups linguistically or culturally until the 1890s, they were aware of the fact that there were different social relations that existed between the groups who occupied different spaces along the north-south and east-west axes of the islands, particularly along the ridge that separated the two halves of the Middle Andamans.

However, notwithstanding these deep gaps in the colonizers' cultural understanding of the Andamanese, the officers in charge of the Andaman Homes noted confidently that not only were they able to 'engineer' new ties of friendship between warring groups, but that they also initiated new forms of barter between the groups of the north and south who met each other at the homes in Port Campbell and Port Mouat. The reality of the impact of the Andaman Homes on the Andamanese, however, was far from what was written in the colonial records (Pandya 1990). The corralling of the South Andamans and the befriending of various groups on differential terms resulted in the creation of invidious hierarchies and competitiveness among local communities, particularly around colonial systems of patronage and gift-giving that the British established in the homes. The occupation of specific creeks and straits that connected the South, Middle and North Andamans, as well as the arbitrary constraints that were put on the movement of groups from the north and south, radically disrupted long established relations of sharing and exchange. By the end of the first decade of the second colonization of the Andaman Islands, therefore, the spatial and social relations that had bound hunter-gatherer life over centuries were redrawn along deeply contentious lines. It could be argued that by overlooking the islands' cultural diversity and imposing restrictions on the traditional movements across space, British colonizers altered the contours of Indigenous cartography and inscribed the spatial logic of occupation on the islands. In view of the fact that colonial archival records rarely reflect on the patterns of spatial movement of the Andamanese or examine the implications of the disruption of such movements by the logic of colonial occupation, the next section of this chapter follows a close analysis of the ethnological record, together with colonial language and material cultural studies of the Andamanese, to reinforce the argument that if

the movement of the tribes across space was altered or blocked by the strategies of colonial occupation, it would invariably cause a structural breakdown in an established pattern of human relations in the Andaman Islands.

The breaching of the north-south axis

The fact that there was a tradition of movement and exchange among speakers of the different Andamanese dialects was documented in much detail by M.V. Portman.³ Unlike E.H. Man, Portman moved in a wider space, and he realized that the Andamanese at the Andaman Homes spoke in distinct dialects while also maintaining a differentiated identity. Portman's ability to identify the different dialects within these groups helped him command the local Andamanese and gather data more effectively.

Portman's insights led to the assumption in the Andaman Homes that all Andamanese were part of a monolithic cultural identity. Portman's meticulous photographic work negated this earlier colonial administrative assumption. Portman's linguistic, photographic and ethnographic observations asserted that in each group, women cut the men's hair in a specific style to perpetuate a group's distinct identity. In this reading, the Islanders had a distinctive pattern of hair as well as designs of clay paint on their bodies to assert their regional and linguistic differentiation, particularly within the confined geographical space of the Andaman Homes.

Distinct linguistic and identity markers found across the islands underwent fusion and erosion due to confinement at the homes. New social relations emerged because of the restricted movements of the Andamanese. Islanders who were relatively hostile and who lived further away from the areas cleared through 'punitive expeditions' were regularly captured and brought into the homes to be disciplined and 'tamed'. It was at these homes that new social relations were forged and marriage alliances across traditional tribal territories were negotiated. Conversely, the homes that facilitated new opportunities for intimacy also triggered the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

As the colonizers restricted the movement of Islanders within the island space, the Andamanese invariably found themselves displaced or replaced. For hunter-gatherer communities, arbitrary confinement or displacement blocked the areas of traditional resource gathering such as the coastline, mangroves and forest. Traditionally, all groups moved from place to place in relation to the shifting monsoon winds along the east-west axis. On the other hand, as

movement was blocked by the growth of colonial settlements, there were also severe limitations on the flow of resources and commodities along the north-south axis.

But why was movement essential for the diverse groups of Andaman Islanders? In what ways did the trajectories of the British occupation of the islands and the corralling and confinement of particular groups play out in the lived experience of the Andaman Islanders? The Andamanese groups were divided into 'bands' and identified as 'pig-hunters' residing in the forest interior or as 'turtle-hunters' residing on the coast. During the wet season, the turtle-hunters would come to stay in the forest with the pig-hunters. In the dry season, the pig-hunters would move to the coast. Wherever they were located on the longitudinal island, the community depended on the shifts of the northwest and southeast monsoon, as this would influence their movement on the east-west axis.

This seasonally-determined movement from interior forest via the creeks to the coastline is still prevalent among different Andamanese groups. In the context of the cultural practice of moving across the islands in accordance with meteorological conditions, the established conventions of exchange facilitated by a mutual understanding of linguistic and customary cues meant that the exchange of red clay and iron was extremely significant. This contributed to a collective consciousness among the Andaman Islanders about the extent of their forest space and generated deep resentment within the community when the space of their movement continued to be constrained.

The demand for iron and red clay often brought members from twelve different groups spread over the islands to meet – directly or indirectly – on the islands of Rutland and Interview, as well as the outer periphery of the present location of Port Blair (Bamboo Flat, Mithkhari and Middle Strait). In fact, Rutland Island and the mangroves around Port Blair were the pivotal points where various groups would come to meet, exchange and return.

The fact that the Islanders moved along the north-south axis to certain fixed points around Port Blair is substantiated by archaeological evidence. Near Port Blair and on Rutland Island, large middens can be found with deposits of charred clamshell and bivalves. There are kitchen-middens in other parts of the island as well, but the ones adjacent to Port Blair contain extraordinarily large deposits of shells, as well as other types of deposits such as animal bones (Dutta 1963; Cooper 2002). This is an indication that these locations were sites of seasonal occupation; they were not locations for the consumption of pigs or turtles.

Archaeological data shows that in the period before the Andamanese groups moved north or south at selective points, they would collect and camp at specific

Figure 6.1 Map of the Andamans, showing the established traditional meeting points for various tribal groups along the north-south axis. Map by the author (with Anirban Duttagupta).

sites and then exchange items. This included iron from the north and red clay from the south. Elders from the Jarawa and Ongee communities have reported that 'shells and molluscs are now a less preferred food item but their ancestors used to consume it as community cook-outs took place, specially because the most delicious were found from Rutland and present day Mithakhari'. These are food items that contemporary Ongees and Jarawas regard as 'collective food', or items that are to be consumed when a number of families gather, making it easy to deploy large number of gatherers during low tides at the creeks and mangroves (Day 1870).

Meetings between large groups that facilitated communal feasts and the exchange of items are now remembered as a pre-colonial tradition. Ongees have a special term for it: '*Ayekanenge*', or 'to go to bring back things'. The idea of undertaking a journey that can also cause confrontations and accidents is a prominent trope in Ongee and Jarawa mythology. The fact that journeys propelled by greed could also bring about misfortune is a lesson that is passed on to children through several myths and songs (Pandya 1993).

The demand and exchange of specific items between the north and south axis of the Andaman Islands is also evident in material cultural practices among various groups. The demand for metal (which was largely found in the northern reaches of the islands at Port Cornwallis) and the demand for red clay (which was found in the south) meant that the groups living at the two extremes of the islands developed techniques of movement and travel with distinctive features. Groups in the extreme south (Ongees), extreme west (Sentinelese) and in the extreme north developed the technique of building outrigger canoes and based their knowledge of navigation on sea currents and wind direction. Other groups occupying the Middle and South Andaman Islands did not depend on canoes to move, as the distances between landmasses was not significant. They would cross the sea either by swimming or by pushing rafts on which could be carried material and even young children. The Sentinelese, being the furthest from the chain of islands and being 'off the grid' of the north-south axis, depended on frequent shipwrecks for metal. Historically, there are Ongee and Jarawa narratives of how iron came from the Sentinelese who, in older times, would undertake the journey to Rutland. The primary source for iron was and continues to be scrap and waste from shipwrecks near the North Sentinel Islands (which are surrounded by rough seas and a densely scattered coral reef).

The free movement of the diverse Andamanese communities along the four cardinal points was necessitated by shifting meteorological conditions and consequent resource availability. These conditions generated distinctions of spoken

language and cultural identity, but the practices of repeated exchange, such as in red clay or iron, ensured that these items acquired common terms of reference among all language groups. Today, only four of the twelve Andamanese groups from colonial times are identifiable as bearing distinct identities. Among the four groups who remain and are confined to reserves, the terms for iron and red clay remain the same. In early colonial times, and among the widely distributed and estimated 10,000 Andamanese, there was one shared root word for each item that offered little variation across contexts: *lohawe* ('from the north') for iron and *alameyeh* ('from the south') for red clay-paint. These two items of exchange exemplified how free flowing community movement fostered relations in a limited space of close proximity. Today, many Jarawa and Ongee elders still use these terms. More significantly, however, they use the terms to describe the cardinal directions of north and south. Implicit in this referential system is the historical movement of communities and relations of exchange that came about because of movement.

We can substantiate that until at least 1910, the Andamanese groups moved through each other's territories. According to Radcliffe-Brown (1922), if the movements were not accompanied by the obligatory exchange of gifts, conflicts would arise between them (Pandya and Mazumdar 2019). The threat of conflict and the tension surrounding a potential disruption in the social structure was managed by distinctive peace-making ceremonies (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 134). While Radcliffe-Brown highlighted the significance of these peace-making ceremonies, earlier colonial ethnographers remained largely silent. The colonial record sustained an implicit denial of conflict between the groups, as well as the fact that most of the Andamanese groups resisted the colonizers (Pandya 2014).

The colonizers long denied that their presence and their occupation of the Andaman Islands disrupted Andamanese social relations, which were founded on ideas about space and movement that had sustained exchange systems for centuries. They also failed to acknowledge that the logic of colonial occupation stopped long-practised migrations and severed social relations that were sustained by exchange, peace-making ceremonies and, more significantly, by practices of child adoption. 'Peace-making' ceremonies were organized to sustain culturally-prescribed inter-group exchange and inter-territorial movement (Radcliffe-Brown 1922: 134, 238). A working *lingua franca* was developed by the Andamanese to minimize friction while moving through different dialect zones. And a well-developed custom of adoption across territories was developed, with 'child adopter' groups not resistant or hostile to the presence of 'child provider' groups who used resources from territories that were not their own. These fictive kinship ties were often fixed even before a child was born (Radcliffe-Brown

1922: 76–7). In contemporary times, Jarawas who move over a large reserve territory have continued the custom of obligatorily sharing a portion of their own resources with groups they meet on a common trail. Such chance meetings are marked by acts of reciprocity where the hosting group will also offer parting gifts to the guest group (Pandya and Mazumdar 2019).

Clearly, then, the logic of colonial occupation that invariably resulted in the severance of the north-south axis of movement disrupted an entire way of being

Figure 6.2 Map of the Andaman Islands showing how, as the British developed Port Blair, the movement of islanders along north-south and east-west axes was blocked. Map by the author (with Anirban Duttagupta).

for the Andamanese. The clearing of forests and the expansion of settlements in key zones of meeting and exchange for the Andamanese ended the long-established practices of exchange, sharing and acts of reciprocity that had sustained the lives of groups living in different reaches of the islands. The Andaman Homes were the primary instruments for corralling and confining the various groups in distinct locations. These added to the final erosion of a culture zone that had been sustained on the islands for millennia.

Conclusion

The enduring logic of settler colonialism in the Andaman Islands continued even after the British were ousted from India in 1947. The penal settlement was disbanded to make way for a new free settlement, with thousands of settlers encouraged to make their homes on the islands. Many of the new settlers were refugees who had fled the riot-torn districts of erstwhile East Pakistan to seek shelter in India. The government of India agreed to settle these people on the islands under various schemes of 'refugee rehabilitation.' Other schemes related to the 'colonization and development' of the islands saw a further expansion of the former penal settlement and an ever-increasing demand for forested land (Shivdasani 1949).

Under this new administrative order, the severely decimated Andamanese groups were identified as 'Primitive Tribal Groups' in need of protection and preservation through legislation. The consequence of the passing of the Protection of Aboriginal Tribes Act of 1956 marked specific areas within the islands as Reserve Territories for the various Aboriginal groups known as Great Andamanese, Jarawas, Ongees and the Sentinelese. The confining of the Andamanese groups within such reserve territories and the restructuring of the lives of the communities through policies of welfare, was the final moment in the spatial logic of the settler-colonial project on the Andaman Islands. The Tribal Reserves marked the categorization of Andamanese lived space as fixed, dead and unmarked. Settler colonialism demanded the marking of closed categorized spaces to naturalize the settler and erase the claims of the Andamanese. Ultimately, the colonial project of corralling and confining the Indigenous people of the Andaman Islands culminated in their final enclosure in a reserve bereft of the sustaining social relations that had nurtured local communities as they moved across the north-south axis of the islands in search of iron and red clay.

Notes

- 1 The government of India constitutionally recognizes some tribal communities as 'Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups' because of their geographical isolation, lack of education, poor health and underdeveloped (or lack of an) agricultural base.
- 2 Up until the 1860s, it was assumed that there were only three language groups found in the basic geographical division of the north, middle and south. With transforming relations between the colonized and the colonizers, multiple dialects were identified.
- 3 Portman's work formed the foundation of a detailed study and reconsideration of an Andamanese vocabulary, as well as a compilation of multiple dictionaries of languages spoken in different parts of the island (Clarke 1875; Ellis 1932; Man 1878, 1901, 1923; Man and Temple 1877; Portman 1881, 1887, 1889; Radcliffe-Brown 1914).

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