



# **Post-tsunami Socio-cultural Changes among the Nicobarese**

An Ethnography of the Nicobarese of  
the Southern Nicobar Islands

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# Post-tsunami Socio-cultural Changes among the Nicobarese: An Ethnography of the Nicobarese of the Southern Nicobar Islands.

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*Dedicated to*

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*“The real political task in a society such as ours is to criticize the workings of institutions that appear to be both neutral and independent, to criticize and attack them in such a manner that the political violence that has always exercised itself obscurely through them will be unmasked, so that one can fight against them.”*

-Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature*





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Andaman and Nicobar islands (ANI) are inhabited by six tribes: the Jarawa, the Sentinelese, the Onge, the Andamanese, the Nicobarese and the Shompen, which are amongst the world's most ancient tribes. Having lived on the islands since time immemorial, the tribes have witnessed scores of natural disasters and have coped well and survived. The current situation of these indigenous people is grave as they have been critically depopulated in the aftermath of their contact with outsiders. All the tribes, excluding the Nicobarese, are on the verge of extinction. The Nicobarese have managed to maintain their population, subsisting on the resources within their possession. A majority of the Nicobarese live in tribal reserves in northern, central and southern Nicobar islands.

The Nicobarese that belong to the southern group are one of the least developed indigenous populations given the infrequent contact with non-tribal population until December 2004, when the islands were struck by the tsunami. The tsunami of 2004 has been the biggest natural disaster in the history of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. It subjected the Nicobarese to several hardships and disabilities including the destruction of property, lives, livelihoods and ecology. Immediately after the tsunami, the Nicobarese of the southern group were evacuated from their habitats and relocated to intermediate shelters at Rajiv Nagar and New Chingeh in close proximity to the non-Nicobarese populations. They spent seven years in temporary shelters before some of them were allotted permanent shelters at Rajiv Nagar and New Chingeh; whereas others were given shelters in tribal reserve areas.

The tsunami of 2004 caused large scale interventions in the area that involved relief drives and the initiation of various welfare and development activities. Apart from shelter, the Nicobarese were provided with free rations, monetary compensations and amenities like water, health and electricity. Eight years have elapsed since, and many welfare activities run by the administration like free ration supply have been discontinued. The Nicobarese, who were once self-sustaining in the pre-tsunami phase, are now displaying signs of utter dependence in the post-tsunami phase.

Many of them have been gripped by consumerism and have lost interest in their indigenous sources of livelihoods. The post-tsunami socio-cultural changes among the Nicobarese are quite evident in the dramatic alteration of their lifestyle; though the reasons for the nature, direction and pattern of these changes have not been thoroughly researched or explored. There are various questions regarding these changes. For instance, what caused these changes? How are these changes perceived by various stakeholders of the southern group of islands, namely, the Nicobarese, the administration and the non-Nicobarese populations? This paper propounds a cohesive argument to address these questions.

The post-tsunami welfare and development processes initiated on the islands seem to have had an immense influence on the Nicobarese. In order to understand the nuances of socio-cultural changes among the Nicobarese, and the issues emanating from the same, this paper problematises the welfare and development interventions. Escobar (2005) argued that development is not the only process that involves improving the material conditions of living, modernisation of productive apparatus and upgrading the living standards. Development is more than that; it is a mechanism through which rationality is learned by introducing specific practices and forms of knowledge. The post-tsunami development has motivated and introduced specific practices and forms of knowledge among the Nicobarese, thus supporting the argument put forth by Escobar (2005). These practices and forms of knowledge could be located and understood through the analysis of the welfare and development work initiated on these islands.

The paper traces the impact of welfare and development on the Nicobarese not only in terms of economic and social domination, but in relation to its influence on cultural meanings and practices. The paper elaborates on how the Nicobarese 'rationality', namely, their sense of a set of institutions, their actions, perception about the world and themselves (which were an integral part of their culture), have been influenced by the post-tsunami development programmes. The paper also reflects on the changes in the Nicobarese subjectivities and the construction of new subjectivities on the lines of symbolic ideology inherent in the welfare and development work that has influenced unprecedented socio-cultural changes among them.



# SECTION I

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The socio-cultural milieu of the Nicobarese was wiped out by the tsunami of December 2004. The degree of destruction warranted immediate intervention. Thus, assistance was offered by numerous outside agencies that intended to readjust the subverted equilibrium of the Nicobarese society. These interventions played a pivotal role in the orchestration of a new socio-cultural milieu that sharply bifurcated the socio-cultural life of the Nicobarese in two phases: pre-tsunami and post-tsunami. The conceptualisation of the research paper can be understood with the help of Figure 1.1

The ‘immediate effects’ of the tsunami were manifested by major alterations in the bio-physical environment of the islands. The natural and built-up environment of the Nicobarese, which formed the base of their cultural and social structure, was badly affected. The topography of the islands was altered, as some islands got submerged and became unfit for living; there were scores of casualties, and houses were devastated. The tsunami also caused the destruction of coconut plantations and the death of pigs, resulting in the depletion of resources and the loss of livelihood. A multitude of such factors, therefore, culminated in a transitory socio-cultural collapse.

These immediate impacts were followed by a series of ‘post-tsunami intervention’ from the government, voluntary and non-government organisations which ensured that the islands were immediately evacuated, relocating the communities at New Chingeh and Rajiv Nagar. The various welfare and development works initiated by the government included intermediate tin shelters<sup>1</sup>, monetary compensations, free rations, household utensils and amenities such as medical, electricity and water supply. At a later stage, employment was generated under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act<sup>2</sup> (MNREGA).

The post-tsunami welfare and development interventions caused a ‘socio-cultural readjustment’ among the Nicobarese. This readjustment could be understood at three levels: individual, intra community and inter community. The present socio-cultural milieu of the Nicobarese is a product and by-product of all these processes identified as ‘immediate impacts’ of the tsunami, ‘post-tsunami intervention’ and ‘socio-cultural readjustment.’

The conceptual map depicts the pre-tsunami and post-tsunami socio-cultural milieus, as the tsunami divided the lives of the Nicobarese into these two phases. Literature contains negligible accounts of the pre-tsunami socio-cultural milieu of the Nicobarese of the southern group. Therefore, a simultaneous and holistic understanding and juxtaposition of pre and post-tsunami milieu was of prime focus during the data collection phase. The juxtaposition of pre and post-tsunami milieus of the Nicobarese unearthed evidence of several socio-cultural changes.

An understanding of the Nicobarese pre-tsunami socio-cultural milieu was constructed by analysing its various components<sup>3</sup>—(1) *Geography and environment*: which included various sub-components such as the pre-tsunami location of the Nicobarese, accessibility to various areas and availability of natural resources. (2) *Subsistence and livelihood* was comprehended by analysing livelihood, livestock, housing patterns and methods of construction, funeral practices, practices pertaining to birth, major illnesses and medical practices, recreation, decorative art and cooking practices. (3) *Social structure* of the Nicobarese was analysed by taking into account the size of the community, settlement patterns, type of family, household composition, ceremonies, marriage/divorce practices, socio-economic stratification,

1 The Nicobarese officially lived in intermediate shelter till 19/01/11, after which they were allotted permanent shelters.

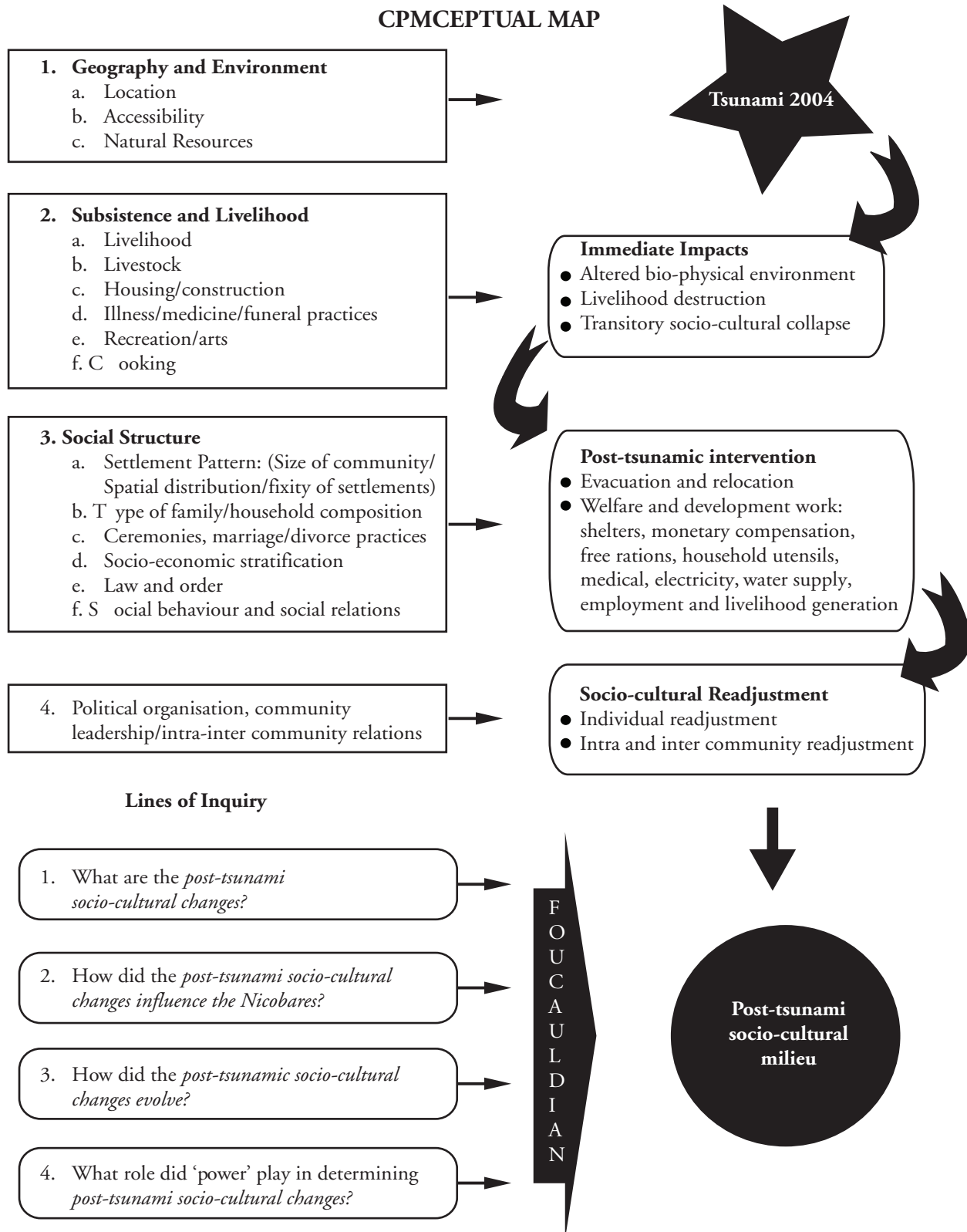
2 The government extended MNREGA to all rural areas of the uncovered districts of the country with effect from 01/04/2008.

3 The components of socio-cultural milieu are based on ‘Checklist for Cultural Universals’ given by George Murdock (1945:124) in Lamn and Schaefer 1999:68 and ‘Summary of Cultural Context Checklist’ devised by Allen Johnson and Orna R. Johnson, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Los Angeles, CA 90024. All these components of socio-cultural milieu served as the preliminary and a priori codes for data collection.

law and order, social behaviour and social relations. (4) *Political organisation* was traced through the analysis of community leadership and intra-inter community relations.

The research paper delineates four major lines of inquiry. (1) What are the post-tsunami socio-cultural changes among the Nicobarese? (2) How did the post-tsunami socio-cultural changes influence the Nicobarese? (3) How did the post-tsunami socio-cultural changes evolve? (4) What role did ‘power’ play in determining these socio-cultural changes? The paper provides a critique of the post-tsunami government welfare and development interventions through a Foucauldian lens.

**FIGURE 1.1:  
CPMCEPTUAL MAP**



## SECTION II

### 2. DISASTERS AND SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES

Culture strengthens the identity of any society and shields it from change (Carter and Beeton, 2004:4). Every society tries to preserve its culture through various means such as art, literature, video recordings, myths and traditions. Social transmission of culture is paramount for human existence because if this transmission of culture stops, then each generation would have to rediscover and reinvent the things their predecessors have already done. Culture of a group or a society is not constant; it changes with the passage of time, sometimes due to intrinsic factors and sometimes due to extrinsic factors (Lamn and Schaefer, 1999:66-7).

Every generation adds to and subtracts from the culture that is passed on to them. There are three main sources of change in culture. (1) Change in natural environment: A sudden change in climate or some other natural phenomenon leads to a change in the social world as well. Societies readjust their culture according to changes in natural environment. (2) Contact with other cultures: cultural contact with those groups or societies which have different languages, technology, symbols, norms and values could be voluntary or involuntary, mutual or one sided and friendly or hostile; contact between two cultures leads to acculturation of cultures. (3) Inventions and discoveries: This can be witnessed on a daily basis as to how inventions and discoveries are changing our culture so rapidly (Gelles and Levine, 1995:102-3).

Any society, whether tribal or modern, is a dynamic entity and change can be caused by intrinsic or extrinsic factors; which may be voluntary or imposed. Internal forces are not solely responsible for change in a society; and change which is internally generated rarely disrupts the established order (Sillitoe, 2000:3). Cultures adapt themselves to meet their needs and make changes accordingly. This adaptation is seen in all the elements of culture such as norms, values, beliefs, language, technology, symbols and sanctions; cultural change usually happens by fits and starts (Lamn and Schaefer, 1999:81).

Sometimes disasters play an imperative role in shaping the socio-cultural milieu of a society. While answering the question, 'Do natural disasters lead to social and cultural changes?', social anthropologist Susanna M. Hoffman answered, 'No, but also decidedly, Yes.' Susanna said 'no' because people are capable of resisting the outside pressure that could cause social and cultural changes. People, during disasters, cling to ingrained habits and traditions; hence, disasters actually serve to reinforce the existing culture and attitude in society. The affirmative aspect of the answer relates to the fact that cultures are not static and they are always changing. Natural disasters are like natural experiments which show the reaction of society to sudden changes; disasters lead to chaos which changes everything in society. There are various social and cultural changes which are visible once the dust after a disaster has settled. Some of the prominent things that become visible after disasters are class divisions, alliances, priorities of authority and ideologies (Svensen 2009:86).

Prince (1920) and Sorokin (1942) said that disasters have the capacity to produce significant changes in social life, structure and culture of communities and societies. This could be understood by two positions. (1) Disasters contribute to social change by accelerating trends that were already in place, way before the occurrence of disaster. (2) Disasters have few effects beyond the immediate disruption during post impact period and temporary dislocations which extend into the short-term recovery period. The first position is mainly exemplified by the works of Bates and his associates, Bates and others (1963), Bates (1982), Bates and Peacock (1993). The second position is represented by Rossi and his colleagues, Rossi and others (1983), Wright and others, Friesema (1979) (Nigg and Tierney, 1993:1-2).

Disasters have both direct and indirect roles to play. While functioning directly, a disaster prepares the groundwork for social change by weakening the social immobility of society, stimulating the fluidity of custom and forcing environmental favorability for change. While functioning indirectly, a disaster sets in motion the factors which determine the nature of social change, for example, release of morale and spirit, play of imitation, socialisation of institutions, stimulus of leaders and lookers-on (Prince, 1920:145).

## SECTION III

### 3 THE POLITICS OF POST-DISASTER SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES

The social and cultural changes induced by disasters occur because disasters create an atmosphere that the changes are acceptable in the society. Once the government and other aid agencies intervene in a disaster affected area, they are unlikely to withdraw quickly. The changes that these interventions bring range from changes in building styles, methods and material of construction, patterns of land ownership and tenure, economic and livelihood activities to migration, urbanisation, land invasions and so on. Disasters also bring structural changes in the leadership of the community. The necessity of dealing with disasters leads to the birth of new organisations; new leaders emerge in order to replace the one who died or those who were found to be incompetent when dealing with the disaster (Cuny, 1983:12).

The multitude of events after disasters can lead to changes in attitude and promote new ways of viewing oneself and society which advance cultural and social changes (Svensen, 2009:87). Powerful communities have always been concerned about the culture of other communities. They have always deemed it a necessity to police the culture of those who do not have political power. In order to maintain status quo and eliminate the risk of political unrest the politically powerful communities have been continuously shaping the culture of others through direct intervention or patronage (Storey 2008:17). The idea of sameness among various cultures might be oppressive for various cultural communities and this establishes the hegemony of cultural majority over cultural minority (Mahajan, 2003:15-25).

Disasters could also lead to important social and cultural changes by destroying the ability of a community to fulfill its needs and make new adjustments and arrangements. Most of the non-anthropological disaster research has portrayed traditional indigenous societies as being vulnerable to disasters given their inability to cope with them effectively. Therefore, modern societies have intervened and imposed various transformations on traditional societies. These transformations have increased the potential of disasters to alter the structure of indigenous or traditional societies. Sometimes, the changes imposed are so harmful that they result in total destruction of local societies. Much social and cultural changes take place during the reconstruction phase (Oliver-Smith, 1996:308-13). Anthropological research carried across the world have proved that contact and technology offered by Europeans to indigenous populations have caused cultural change among them (Reyhner and Singh, 2010:3).

There are many significant changes in societies which are the result of pressure from the outside. Questions pertaining to speed of such change and the locus of control of such change are critical for a holistic understanding of the nature of the change caused. When people have freedom to make decisions about what to choose from neighbouring cultures and what to reject, the resulting changes are rarely disruptive (Sillitoe, 2000:4).

The power of knowledge could become authority, which would be taken as a sub-set of power. One account offers three versions: political authority, 'offering a co-ordination solution to a Hobbesian state of nature, or a lack of shared values'; authoritative institutions, 'reflecting the common beliefs, values, traditions and practices of members of society'; the third view argues that 'although social order is imposed by force, it derives its permanence and stability through techniques of legitimation, ideology, hegemony, mobilisation of bias, false consensus, and so on, which secure the willing compliance of citizens through the manipulation of their beliefs' (Philip, 1992 cited in Kogan, 2005:3). Those sections or classes in the society which dominate economically and politically also enjoy paramount ideological and symbolic power. They enjoy the power to set principles for change processes in multicultural societies and establishment of inclusion policies for newcomers and minorities under the auspices of state, through democratic decisions (Brochmann, 2003:2).

Disasters cause both physical and psychological damage to the victims. The victims and survivors of disasters might experience another level of disaster through the very aid which was intended to help them. Aid is sometimes provided in a manner that actually impedes recovery and leads to further hardships and marginalisation of the already marginalised community (Cuny,1983:3). Consequently, social disruption and loss of orientation takes place, when one society moves into another's territory, forcing it to change till it eventually changes dramatically. In the past, powerful and technologically advanced societies dominated the less powerful societies evidencing the aforementioned trend of forced change. The intrusion of industrial societies has caused serious implications for non-industrial societies. This change is associated with economic development in the Third World; technical changes, whether coercively or voluntarily adopted, have social consequences. Hasty technological changes disrupt the functioning of people who are caught in them. They are left confused and bewildered, but they try to make sense of everything that is happening to them (Sillitoe, 2000:4-6).

All socio-cultural artifacts have values, biases, messages and meanings attached to them. There is no social artifact that does not contain a prejudicial representation of the gender, race, sexuality, class and various social groupings and categories. Culture in contemporary societies constitutes a set of stories, discourses, images and various cultural forms and practices which generate identities, meanings and political effects (Durham and Kellner, 2004:6). Social communities enter into new relationships within their social context and with their environment during disasters. This new relationship has an impact on the pace of social and cultural change in these communities. In order to cope with the disaster, the communities are forced to readjust past structures, conventions and practices to changed circumstances. The impact of the disaster may invoke conservative resistance to new social alternatives which are the result of the disaster and its aftermath. The short term changes in social organisation and longer term adaptations in structure involve both the future well being of the community as well as the trauma of impact. Disasters provide an understanding about the nature of various socio-cultural adaptations, social relations and ideological constructions (Oliver-Smith,1998:236-37).

Resettlement and relocation of people after a disaster is a common practice pursued by governments. Research has emphasised the significance of 'place' in construction of identities, encoding and contextualisation of time and history. 'Place' has an important role to play in the politics of interpersonal, community and intercultural relations. People have an attachment to the place they live; removal of people from their place is profoundly traumatic to them (Oliver-Smith, 1996:308). The culture of a community is directly linked with its identity. Identity is a social construct and there could be changes in the identity of groups, societies or nations, but these changes in identities have their costs as well. This cost could be in terms of social changes that occur due to reordering of the surrounding networks or psychological disturbances and disturbances involved in reordering of memory (Winch, 1958 cited in Preston,1997:5).

### **3.1 Empirical Studies on Disasters and Socio-Cultural Changes**

Major disaster studies have given an account of prominent social, psychological, economical, political, spatial changes after disasters; and their influence on the populations who were affected by disaster. Bates and others (1963) found that there was a formalisation of social relations and non-contractual relations were replaced by contractual relations in the communities affected by *Hurricane Audrey*. Dyer and others(1992) and Picou and others (1992) studied the Alaskan villages affected by the *Exxon Valdez oil spill* and found that the disaster had transformed social interaction and culture. The *Managua earthquake* of 1972 led to the overthrow of Somoza regime by Sandinista. The inability of the Somoza regime to deal with the disaster situation, flared discontentment among the masses, which toppled the regime. Olson (1979) observed the sensitisation of the public after the blowout of an oil well off the coast of Santa Barbara (Nigg and Tierney, 1993:4-8).

Drabek and Quarantelli (1967) have found that it has become common to fix blame for disaster losses. Erikson (1976) concluded that fixing of blame after the *Buffalo Creek Flood* resulted in the loss of feeling of community. Fowlkes and Miller (1982), in their study of *Love Canal contamination* found that



an important impact of the episode was distrust and skepticism towards the government. Goldsteen and Schorr (1991) contended that after the *Three Mile Island* accident, residents of the nearby township found themselves powerless to impact decision making and hence lost their faith in democracy (ibid:14-7).

Disaster could result in both negative and positive economic change. Dacy and Kunreuther (1969:168) found that economically, the *Ita disaster* turned out to be a blessing. Hirose (1982) found that the 1977 *Mt. Use* volcanic eruption devastated the tourist based economies of the communities. Naidu (1989) observed that the aid given to the region during the 1977 *Andhra Pradesh cyclone* helped the households economically and indebtedness among farm labourers and fishermen declined due to relief assistance. Geipel (1991), in his study of *Friuli earthquake* found that the damage compensation, government reconstruction funds, and low interest loans in the disaster affected region resulted in modernisation of manufacturing plants (ibid: 6-8).

Disasters have imperative social and political impacts that underscore prevailing social struggles in a society and highlight inherent inequities in a political system. The tropical cyclone in East Pakistan in 1970, which killed half a million people, had a severe political impact on West Pakistan. The failure of the Pakistan government to respond to this crisis flared sentiments of revolt among the East Pakistan masses. Using disaster as a rallying point, a major political movement originated in East Pakistan and culminated with the creation of Bangladesh (Cuny, 1983:54).

Relief and reconstruction work carried by relief agencies in the aftermath of *Guatemalan Earthquake* (1976) led to social change among the Indians. This led to a demand for structural changes which posed a threat to the existing oligarchs ruling Guatemala. Relief workers were warned and threatened by the military that they were being watched. Four years after the earthquake, Guatemala witnessed a civil war. Thus community leadership is jeopardised during disasters because of the death of experienced leaders and the appointment of new and sometimes inexperienced leaders can seriously impact rescue operations. Disasters also lead to the disruption of formal organisations and this disruption results in the breakdown of clear lines of authority. Damage to critical facilities and lifelines is common in disasters. Transportation and communication is seriously jettisoned (ibid: 55-6).

Bates studied the *Guatemala earthquake* of 1976. The study focused on understanding the relationship between disasters and social change on the one hand and the evaluation of the reconstruction programme on the other. Bates observed that people are open to change provided they get alternatives. There was a widespread change in the patterns of houses after the earthquake and this new pattern reduced their vulnerability to earthquakes. Bates observed that the speed of recovery of people varied from household to household and it was dependent on the kind of aid that was provided to them. The families which received no aid often recovered faster vis-à-vis those who were provided aid. Temporary housing that was provided to the victims seemed to impede recovery efforts. Earthquake recovery programmes created increased structural complexity and had impacts on the existent stratification system within the victim communities. Those communities which were integrated into the national economic and political structure recovered faster (Dynes, 1988:106-7).

Disasters have a serious impact on land values. Land values generally decline after the eruption of a volcano, increase after an earthquake and vary in case of cyclonic storms. Beach property usually declines in value and sites that provide safe shelter become expensive. Small farmers can barely survive economically after a cyclone. For example: After the *cyclone in Andhra Pradesh* in 1977, a high proportion of marginal farmers were compelled to sell their land as they could not afford to reinstall a new irrigation system and rehabilitate their land (Cuny, 1983:48-52).

Wolensky (1984) found that *Hurricane Agnes* in Wilkes-Barre, PA, led to the reorganisation of the power structure of the local government. Hoover and Bates (1985) observed a change in the division of labour in seven communities after the 1976 *Guatemala earthquake*. Disasters lead to several legal and political changes. Behler (1987) studied a town affected by the *Three Mile Island* nuclear accident and found that the residents became politically proactive after the disaster. Additionally, the power

structure became more pluralistic. Walsh (1988), Flynn and Chalmers (1980), Goldstein and Schorr (1991) also found the same pattern of political mobilisation of communities after disasters (ibid: 8-13).

Bolin (1993) observed that the relocation of communities has negative consequences. Whereas Perry and Mushkatel (1984) suggest that this relocation could be successful if adequate measures are taken to minimise disruption. Bolin (1982) found that the housing arrangements after disaster have an important impact on the social interaction patterns and it directly influences the harmony and conflict level in a community (Nigg and Tierney, 1993:8-10).

Research conducted on *Aitape town<sup>4</sup> tsunami* (1988) found that once people from disaster areas were settled in new locations, the donor organisations were pressurising decision makers to make decisions quickly so that they could go ahead with their projects like water supply, housing and schools. After 24 months the situation in new settlements grew grave and soon there were regular incidents of petty crimes and anti-social behaviour. Due to the interventions of outsiders in the socio-cultural sphere of these communities, people lost their independence, resilience, and became jealous. They experienced dramatic alteration in their lifestyle, being habituated to living in a coastal region, inland settlements did not appeal to them (Davis, 2002:28-39).

Kleinfeld (2007) observed that the response to the tsunami and humanitarian aid in Sri Lanka were severely affected by the conflict between government and the rebels of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Both used the language of humanitarian space in order to reinforce their claims on territories and the people. The Sri Lankan government and the LTTE used the tsunami as an event to reinforce their political projects and control resources that were made available by the larger global humanitarian community. The international response community therefore tried to distance itself from both the government and the LTTE. The Government reacted by issuing a statement on 27 March 2005 in a government owned newspaper '*Silumina*' that 'NGOs Have Taken Nine Out of the Ten Billion Foreign Aid'. The message through this statement was clear that the money which should have come to government had been siphoned by NGOs (Hilhorst and Jansen, 2010:1128-9).

The Government also accused the NGOs for playing a conspiratorial role and promoting Western interests. The Sri Lankan Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs said in *Asian Tribune* of April 2005 that hundreds of NGOs have entered Sri Lanka post-tsunami; and their sudden growth in numbers is a cause of concern. These organisations were accused of having their own political agenda of being too servile to their neo-colonialist masters. The criticism and political lobbying against INGOs and NGOs led to peoples' discontentment with their work, it became a general perception that INGOs did nothing for the people (ibid: 1129-30).

Stirrat (2006) observed that there was severe competition among humanitarian agencies in Sri Lanka. It was interesting to witness that agencies that usually competed for funds now competed for programmes, people, territory and staff. Research conducted by Gaasbeek (2005) brought to light, interesting findings about how local staff of the organizations were pressurised by the headquarters to ensure space for them. A representative of an organisation received a sudden phone call from his superiors to make a proposal for US\$6 million within a week. There were many organisations which were already working in Sri Lanka due to the ongoing conflict. Many NGO staff members who were working in Sri Lanka for years clashed with headquarters because of high pressure and wrong decisions that were imposed on them. Gaasbeek observed that an aid worker had to resign because he refused to distribute high energy biscuits as there was no malnutrition among people. In many instances, resident staff that had a better knowledge of the context were sidelined by the strangers as the latter were experts in humanitarian emergencies. International organisations overwhelmed Sri Lanka and local organisations found it difficult to get an entry into the humanitarian space. Gaasbeek also observed that there were certain NGIs (non-Government Individuals) who came to help the victims with relief material. NGOs were dissatisfied as they considered these individuals amateur and non-professional. The other and implicit reason for their dissatisfaction was the encroachment of humanitarian space (ibid: 1130-2).

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4 North coast of Papua New Guinea

Disaster research has concluded that post-disaster socio-cultural changes are not necessarily the spontaneous corollaries of disasters. These changes are guided by numerous factors, agents and agencies. Disasters are taken as an opportunity to orchestrate socio-cultural, economic and political order which suits the interests of hegemonic forces or maintains status quo. Post-disaster changes, which seem to have an apolitical aftermath, have layered meanings and purposes which reflect numerous political and ideological interests.

## SECTION IV

### 4 FOUCAULDIAN CONCEPTUALISATION OF POWER-KNOWLEDGE AND ITS TECHNIQUES

The main concepts of Foucault—discourse, power and subject are geared towards what he called the *'ontology of the present'*. While the focus of Foucault shifts from discourse to power and subject, the broad philosophical question of 'Who are we?' or 'Who are we today?' remains. Foucault's approaches to aspects of ourselves can be framed as a set of questions: 'Who are we in terms of our knowledges of ourselves?' 'Who are we in terms of the ways we are produced in political processes?' 'Who are we in terms of our relations with ourselves and the ethical forms we generate for governing these?' (Mchoul and Wandy, 2002: VIII:X).

Foucault argued that study of power must not be restricted to the analysis of institutional roles or class dynamics. Mechanisms of power should rather be searched in their capillary forms<sup>5</sup> where power emerges before it becomes coordinated and colonised into institutional domination or oppressive class relations. 'Power must be investigated where it forms its most basic relations, namely, its relations with knowledge' (Thiele, 1986:2).

Foucault located power outside conscious or intentional decision. Instead of asking 'who is in power?' Foucault asked how power installs itself and produces effects. Foucault did not focus on the bearer of power, but on the field of power. Foucault believed that power could be understood in terms of the techniques through which power is exercised. All the forms of power that exist in society: economic, legal, administrative, military, political and so forth, rely on certain techniques or methods of application, and draw authority by referring to scientific truths (Mchoul and Wandy, 2002:21-80).

Power cannot be captured and understood in a systematic set of related concepts which are conceived before the application of power, it should rather be analysed in its operations and effects (Foucault, 1984b:82 cited in Nash, 2000:20). Foucault argued that power can be understood in terms of an *'analytics of power'* for power is identified in the instances of its exercise. Foucault considered that power is productive and instead of a single political centre, it is exercised from innumerable points. Foucault was interested in analysing power in social practices, at points when it produced effects, as a fluid, invisible, reversible 'microphysics' of power (Nash, 2000:20).

Foucault was not interested in inquiries like 'what is power and where does it come from?' The questions which Foucault posed were, 'How is it exercised; by what means?' 'What are the effects of exercise of power?' Foucault did not conceive power as a possession or the property of a state, dominant class or sovereign, but as a strategy. Foucault believed that the manifestations of domination associated with power are not the result of appropriation and deployment by a subject, but a result of 'manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, and functionings'. A relation of power does not necessarily impose prohibition upon the powerless, rather it invests them, is transmitted by and through them. Foucault conceptualised power not as an institution or a structure, but as a 'complex strategical situation', as a 'multiplicity of force relations', simultaneously 'intentional' yet 'nonsubjective' (Smart, 1985:70).

The sense in which Foucault deemed power productive is through knowledge. Knowledge, particularly of social sciences, is closely associated with the production of docile bodies and subjected minds. Foucault used the term *'Discourses'* for these systems of quasi-scientific knowledge. Foucault argued that 'knowledge as discourse is not knowledge of the real world as it exists prior to that knowledge'. Discourses represent themselves as representing the objective reality, they construct and make real, the objects of knowledge that they represent. 'Knowledge is distinguished from other ways of apprehending the world and is considered to be knowledge of the objective world because it is supported by the practices of power.' It involves the statements which are given in institutional sites where knowledge is

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5 The specificities of power

gained in accordance to certain rules and procedures, by speakers who have established their authority and are authored to utter what is considered as truth in that context (Nash, 2000:21).

Foucauldian analysis of knowledge is constitutive and implicated in power. It parts its ways from the official view which social sciences have about them as neutral, disinterested and contributing to the progress of human being (Nash, 2000:21). Foucault argued that knowledge and truth are strategically shaped, arranged and organised by the exercise of power (O'Farrell, 2005:87). While referring to the relationship between power and knowledge, Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* (1977):

'We should admit...that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (Foucault, 1977:27).

Foucault called the contemporary society a disciplined society and the mechanisms of power in it as disciplinary power. Foucault wrote in *Discipline and Punish*:

'Our society is one not of spectacle, but of surveillance; under the surface of images, one invests bodies in depth; behind the great abstraction of exchange, there continues the meticulous, concrete training of useful forces; the circuits of communication are the supports of an accumulation and a centralization of knowledge; the play of signs defines the anchorages of power; it is not that the beautiful totality of the individual is amputated, repressed, altered by our social order, it is rather that the individual is carefully fabricated within it, according to a whole technique of forces and bodies' (Foucault, 1977:217).

Concepts of '*disciplinary power*<sup>6</sup>' and '*disciplinary society*' are popular and widely disseminated concepts of Foucault (O'Farrell 2005:102). Foucault believed that power was confined to 'general mechanisms' of domination in Feudal society. Power was mainly sovereignty and it had 'little hold on detail'. A new mechanism of power was developed in the classical age when power got endowed with 'highly specific procedural techniques' and new instruments and apparatuses. This new type of power was a disciplinary domination which, unlike sovereign power, was concentrated on 'human bodies and their operations' and modern man was under continuous surveillance. In order to understand this power, Foucault advocated for '*an ascending analysis of power*', power in its local or regional form at points where power becomes capillary (Merquior, 1985:113).

Foucault researched how people, throughout history, have created knowledge which has been an instrument in shaping the experience of being human. In order to understand this phenomenon, Foucault focused on what he called 'three modes of objectification': *scientific classification*, *dividing practices* and *subjectification*. These three modes of objectification are related to processes linked with the social construction and modification of human beings, so that they could acquire 'certain attitudes' about themselves and their society. Scientific classification and dividing practices are modes that are concerned with how people are classified, disciplined and normalised by the social processes over which people have little direct control (Markula and Pringle, 2006:24).

Knowledge is a crucial component of power. One of the basic features of disciplinary power is that power and knowledge are exercised in mutually reinforcing ways. Foucault (1977) coupled these terms as *power-knowledge* and emphasised their co-investment. This inseparability of power and knowledge leads to novel modes of control in which the innovation of intricate disciplinary technologies and growth of human science knowledge are linked. Unlike the body in sovereign era, the focus of disciplinary society is on the souls and minds. The targets are treated not through pain, rather through the means of signs and representations (Hook, 2007:12-3).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault stressed that it is not the prison alone which exercises the '*power of normalization*', this power is also exercised by our social mechanisms for obtaining knowledge, comfort

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6 'Foucault (1981:191) defined discipline as a 'technology' which is aimed at: how to keep someone under surveillance, how to control his [sic] conduct, his [sic] behavior, his [sic] aptitudes, how to improve his [sic] performance, multiply his [sic] capacities, how to put him [sic] where he [sic] is most useful: that is discipline in my sense' (O'Farrell 2005:102).

and health. Foucault said that 'the fabrication of the disciplinary individual' is not solely the work of institutions of repression, marginalisation and rejection. The study of prisons by Foucault reflected on the social power at large and a reconsideration of our concept of power (Merquior, 1985:106).

Foucault argued that modern societies used the mechanism of surveillance which he describes as '*Panopticism*<sup>7</sup> that does not require any weapons, material and physical violence. An inspecting gaze is enough for people under supervision, and each person feeling its weight will end up interiorising to the point of observing her/himself. All people in a '*panopticon*' exercise this surveillance over and against themselves. It is about taking the very will of people to do wrong and hence preventing them from wrongdoings. Foucault believed that it is this principle of '*panopticon*' which modern society has adopted. These '*panopticon*' mechanisms could be found at schools, prisons, airports and at other public and institutional spaces (O'Farrell, 2005:104).

Foucault said that *normalization* is another technique of disciplinary societies for controlling deviance. Contemporary society has replaced the society which punished infringement of law. Contemporary society rehabilitates and normalizes the abnormal and diseased individuals. The legal system, with the help of so called experts including social workers, psychiatrists and educators determine the normality and abnormality of individuals. It also defined the identity of individuals on the basis of their deviations from what is normality and norm. Foucault conceived power as a way of changing the conduct of people and defines it as 'a mode of action upon the actions of others' (ibid: 99-104).

While explaining this power, Foucault gives an example of what power means in the Tanner lectures:

'A man who is chained up and beaten is subject to force being exerted over him, but if he can be induced to speak, when his ultimate recourse could have been to hold his tongue preferring death, then he has been caused to behave in a certain way. His freedom has been subjected to power ... There is no power without potential refusal or revolt' (Foucault, 1981b:324 cited in O'Farrell, 2005:100).

Foucault gave the notion of '*governmentality*' for the analysis of bureaucracies, social institutions and professional practices. Unlike the classic empiricist project of letting the facts speak for themselves by demonstrating a self-evident truth, Foucault's empirical data, instead of supporting existing systems, actually undermined them. The knowledge Foucault collected shows the arbitrariness and limitations of existing systems and disciplines of knowledge. While introducing the concept of '*subjugated knowledge*', Foucault argued that the kind of knowledge which is gathered by institutions is usually strategically and carefully selected and it is based on the subjugation and elimination of other knowledges. By understanding and unearthing all the rejected and subjugated knowledges by these institutionalised disciplinary systems and examining the historical reasons for acceptance of some knowledge and rejection of other, Foucault challenged the notion that knowledge proceeds by the systematic accumulation of self-evidently 'true' 'facts'. Foucault demonstrated that knowledge is accumulated and organised politically and strategically (ibid: 86-7).

#### 4.1 Spatiality, Subjectivity and Politics

The interwoven complexity of *Spatiality-Historicity-Sociality* has brought not only paramount change in the way we conceive space but has also led to profound revisions in the ways we study history and society (Soja, 1994:3). The view that space plays a key role in informing practices of subjectivity and power has received much theoretical substantiation. Soja's (1989, 1996) notion of '*Spatiality*', Bourdieu's (1988) '*Habitus*', Fanon's (1986) '*Manichean Divisions of Colonial Space*' and Foucault's (1997) conceptualisation of '*Heterotopia*<sup>8</sup>' explore and explain the intersections between power, dis-

7 Coined by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1790s. 'It was based on the architectural principle of a ring shaped building with cells grouped around a central tower. An observer in the tower could see into each of the cells, but because of a system of louvers, the occupants of the cells could not see into the central tower. This meant that people in the cells, whether they were mad, prisoners; workers or school children eventually modified their behaviour to act as though they were being watched all the time. The idea was widely adopted at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a highly efficient model of social regulation and control' (O'Farrell 2005:104).

8 Heterotopia is a differential space which is significantly related to the places which surround it, but it is also fundamentally different from them. Heterotopia has the power of 'juxtaposing in a single real place, different spaces and locations that are incompatible.' The analysis of heterotopia yields a variety of paradoxes and contradictions 'that are not necessarily overt, initially evident' (Hook, 2007:182).

course and space. These perspectives help us theorize the relationship between subjectivity and management of space, and the management of space with the broader ordering of a given social milieu. The demarcation of a place also means the demarcation of appropriate practice, behaviour and a specific order of materiality. The functionality and identity of a place are tied with the forms of social practice and types of knowledge it creates. Hence, space plays an important role in the critical analysis of power (Hook, 2007:178-9).

Foucault proposed the project of *heterotopology*, which focused on the analysis of '*heterotopias*', that is, 'other space'- spaces of alternate social ordering. Foucault argued that '*heterotopia*' has a system of opening and closing, which simultaneously isolates them and makes them penetrable. One cannot access '*heterotopias*' by will alone; access to '*heterotopia*' is subject to a variety of rite of exchange or form of submission (Hook, 2007:183). '*Heterotopia*' has majorly two forms: deviance and crisis. Foucault (1997) argued that '*heterotopia of deviation*' are places which are occupied by people who exhibit behaviour that deviates from average or current standards of society: prisons, asylums, psychiatric clinics and so on. '*Heterotopia of crisis*' are those spaces which are generally recognised as privileged or forbidden places that are reserved for societies or individuals in a state of upheaval, breakdown or difficulty. Hence, '*heterotopia*' is a place which is able to 'transcend its basic social function and to subvert or mirror the typical kinds of social intercourse of a society' (ibid: 183-4).

Place is constituted by cultural practices and by sedimented social structures. Human bodies, place and environment integrate with each other; places gather thoughts, things and memories in particular configurations. Identities, personal or cultural, are bound up with place and the emplacement of all cultural practices stems from the fact that bodies carry cultures into places (Escobar, 2001:143). Soja (1989) believes that space and its organisation, meaning and functioning is a product of social translation, transformation and experience. Spatiality could be operationalised as socially constructed and socially-practiced space; a space, which is intertwined with socio-political and historical relations of power-knowledge (ibid: 180).

The cultural politics of difference arises predominantly from the 'workings of power in society and on space in their simultaneously perceived, conceived and lived worlds.' Power and cultural politics, which is a corollary of the working of power is contextualised like all social relations in the social production of social space. Michel Foucault argued that the links between power, knowledge, space and cultural politics could be both enabling and oppressive (Soja, 1994:86). Foucault identified various techniques and principles that facilitate the operation of disciplinary power; organisation of space is one of them (O'Farrell, 2005:103).

'The multi-sidedness of power and its relation to a cultural politics of difference and identity is often simplified in hegemonic and counter-hegemonic categories'(Gramsci, 1971). Hegemonic power is wielded by those who are in authority. They do not just manipulate the naively given differences between social groups and individuals, but as a key strategy, they also produce and reproduce these differences in order to maintain and create spatial and social divisions which are beneficial to maintain their authority. These social divisions of 'We and They' are dichotomously spatialised and enclosed in the imposed territoriality of ghettos, apartheid, barrios, colonies, reservations, metropolises, citadels and so on, which emanate from center-periphery relations (Soja, 1994:87). Colonisation, resistance and creativity produce subjectivities. It is this newly produced subjectivity that makes people perceive, live and define their lives. Cultural practices, meanings and social relations among communities are altered through the transformation of subjectivity; it has enormous consequences on communities, as the very basis of their aspirations and character of their possible desires is also changed (Escobar, 2005:167-8).

## SECTION V

### 5 PRE-TSUNAMI SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU OF THE NICOBARESE

#### 5.1 Literature Review

While tracing the studies conducted in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, Singh (2003) wrote that the first study conducted on these islands dated back to 1790 in a descriptive colonial ethnographic study. From 1869, the geography, pre-history and languages of these islands were studied through ethnography. Some well-known works on these islands include: F.J. Mout (1863), *Adventure and Researches among the Andaman Islanders*; M.V. Portman (1889), *History of our Relations with Andamanese*, Vols. 1 and 2 (1933); E.H. Man, *The Nicobar Islands and their People, Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands* (1932) and *Andaman Nicobar Gazetteer* (1908); A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1922), *Andaman Islanders* (1922). Out of the six prominent works of pre-independence period that Singh listed, only two were pertaining to the Nicobarese. Most of the works, except *Andaman Islanders*, were ethnocentric and solely an interesting description of the exotic.

Singh (2003) also observed that Indian anthropologists started conducting research on the islands only after independence. The earlier monographs on the Nicobarese were written by colonial administrators: E.H. Man's (1932) *The Nicobar Islands and Their People* and Whitehead's 1924 account of Nicobarese of Car Nicobar Islands. K.K. Mathur (1967) wrote a short account on the Nicobarese culture and N.K. Shyam Choudhari (1977) conducted an anthropological analysis of the Nicobarese social structure which was based on fieldwork in Car Nicobar. The first most comprehensive study of the Nicobarese society and culture, *The Nicobarese* that covered important islands from north to south was carried out by Justin (1990).

While reviewing literature for the research, the author found that there was a dearth of literature on the Nicobarese in general, and on the Nicobarese of the southern group of islands in particular. Although there is a sudden increase in literature<sup>9</sup> in the recent years, post-tsunami literature on the Nicobarese has many gaps. The author came across a lot of literature that was written by administrators and staff members<sup>10</sup> who worked in the islands during the tsunami. The objectivity of this literature is not entirely irrefutable. Most of the studies were conducted in few pockets of Nicobar Islands and the observations made were generalised for all the Nicobarese. Although certain research articles and books were par excellence, there was no reference to the distinction between the pre-tsunami or post-tsunami socio-cultural milieu. The literature written in the pre-independence epoch is both obsolete and ethnocentric and failed to give an account of immediate pre-tsunami milieu of the Nicobarese.

The author reviewed the studies on the pre-tsunami Nicobarese milieu conducted by Mathur (1967); Kloss (1971); Dilwali and Kaul (1989); Justin<sup>11</sup> (1990) and Singh (2003, 2006, 2009). As these studies provided an account of the community during the post-independence and pre-tsunami epoch, they helped in understanding the traditional idiosyncrasies of the Nicobarese, which are now lost. The selected literature was written by experts<sup>12</sup> and the accounts were anthropological and not romanticised. There was hardly any literature that gave an exhaustive account of the social and cultural life of the Nicobarese in the post-tsunami phase<sup>13</sup>. The post-tsunami literature reviewed comprised the works of:

9 Majority of which is grey literature.

10 There are many articles and books which are written by doctors, journalists, senior administrators and voluntary organisations.

11 Anstice Justin is a Nicobarese from the island of Car Nicobar and presently serving at the Anthropological Survey of India, Port Blair. His book *The Nicobarese* is the only available literature on the Nicobarese which has given a holistic and emic perspective on the Nicobarese covering the Northern, Central and Southern Nicobar islands.

12 Anthropologists and researchers who spent a lot of time in the Nicobars.

13 Singh (2009) studied central Nicobar; Barik, Biswas, Das (2007) wrote a research article on Demographic Study in Southern Group of Nicobar Islands and Barik and others(2007) wrote an article on the Impact of the tsunami on the Shompen and their surroundings.



Singh (2006, 2009); Prasad and Sahani (2007); Barik and others(2007); Barik, Biswas, Das (2007) Sinha Roy and Datta Chaudhuri (2007).

## 5.2 The Nicobarese History and Geography

The Nicobar islands are located in the south-east part of Bay of Bengal between 6° to 10° N latitude and between 92° to 94° E longitude. There are twenty two islands and only twelve are inhabited by humans. The islands are divided as Northern, Central and Southern groups. Car Nicobar, which is 143 miles from Port Blair constitutes the North Nicobar Islands. The Central group of islands is formed by Chowra, Teresa, Bompuka, Katchal, Kamorta, Nancowry and Trinket. The Southern group comprise the islands of Pulo Milo, Little Nicobar, Kondul, Great Nicobar and so on. The Nicobars stretch over 36 miles, with an aggregate land area of 635 sq miles (Justin, 1990:1). The islands have been divided into six divisions<sup>14</sup> on the basis of cultural and linguistic features of the Nicobarese (Sinha Roy and Datta Chaudhuri, 2007:45).

The Nicobar islands are mentioned in the travelogues of Ptolemy<sup>15</sup>, Fa Hien<sup>16</sup>, I-T'sing<sup>17</sup>, Marco Polo<sup>18</sup>, and Flair Oderic<sup>19</sup>. The writings of I-T'sing confirm that these islands were known as *Lo-Jan-Kuo*<sup>20</sup>. An inscription dated 1059 A.D. indicates that some of Nicobar islands were a part of the Chola King of Tanjore's empire. As per the accounts of the Cholas, the islands were used as a base shelter station for war purposes and for keeping control over the territories of Malaysia. Some scholars believe that these islands were the land of Hanuman<sup>21</sup> (Justin 1990:10-1).

The Nicobarese and Shompen are tribes which inhabit the numerous islands. Ethnically, they belong to same genetic stock. However, some anthropologists think that the Shompen are Malays, whereas the Nicobarese belong to the Mangoloid race (Dilwali and Kaul, 1989:21).

The Nicobarese is a generic term used for the indigenous people<sup>22</sup> of the Nicobar islands. There are many communities which have been residing in the Nicobar islands and each community has a territorial identity and a local name. The communities inhabiting Nicobar islands identify themselves as *Tarik*<sup>23</sup>, *Som-Tehiong*<sup>24</sup>, *Som-poi*<sup>25</sup>, *Som-Onhet*<sup>26</sup>, *Som-Payuh*<sup>27</sup>, *Som-long*<sup>28</sup> and each Nicobar island has its own indigenous name<sup>29</sup>. According to Barbe (1846) the Nicobarese belong to the same race that formerly lived on the shores of Sumatra. Whitehead (1924) wrote that R.C. Temple described the Nicobarese as immigrants who migrated to the islands from India<sup>30</sup> before the Christian era. Boden Kloss believed that Burmese, Malays and other foreigners frequently visited Car Nicobar, Katchal, Teresa, Nancowry, Kondul and Great Nicobar and so on. These people, who were later stranded, incorporated themselves with the people living on these islands (Justin, 1990:131).

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14 (1) Car Nicobar, (2) Chowra, (3) Teresa and Bompuka, (4) Katchal, Nancowry and Trinket, (5) Little Nicobar, Kondul, Pulomilo and Great Nicobar, (6) Shompen area of Great Nicobar.

15 2nd century

16 Chinese traveller in 6th century.

17 Chinese Buddhist monk and an envoy to Thailand in early 7th century.

18 13th century.

19 Early 14th century.

20 Land of the naked people.

21 The monkey God in Hindu mythology.

22 Excluding Shompens.

23 Native of Car Nicobar Island.

24 Native of Teresa Island.

25 Native of Chowra.

26 Native of Nancowry

27 Native of Katchal

28 Native of Great Nicobar

29 Justin (1990) mentioned the native names of Nicobar islands as: Car Nicobar (Pu), Chowra (Sane nyo), Teresa (Luroo), Bompuka (Pohat), Katchal (Tihnyu), Kamorta (Kalat or Kinlaha), Nancowry (Muot), Trinket (Laful), Pulomilo (Piheun), Little Nicobar (Panjang or Ong or Tokuo-no Long), Kondul (Lamongshe), Great Nicobar (To Kirong Long)

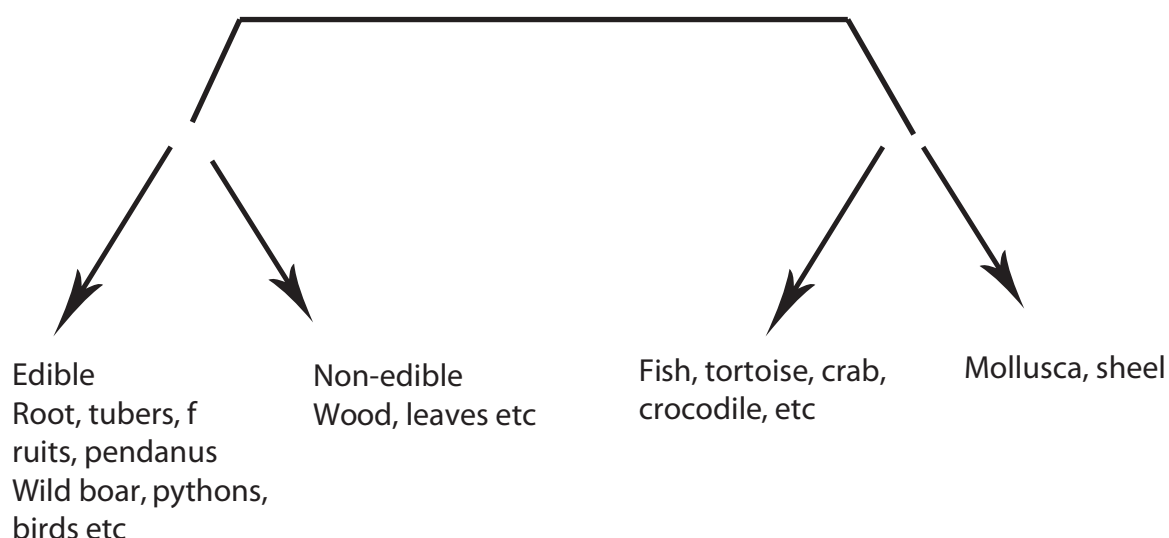
30 Area now occupied by Burmese, Talainy, Shans and Malays.

While anthropologists believe that the Nicobar islands have been visited by travellers since time immemorial, the first documented visits were recorded by the Chinese pilgrims around the seventh century. These islands later came under the control of the Danes and Austrians during the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, and then under British control in the second half of 18<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, there was an occasional bartering of goods between the British<sup>31</sup> and the Nicobarese. Copra production was introduced to the community at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and half a century later, the barter system was replaced by monetary exchange. The Japanese occupied these islands for a short duration<sup>32</sup> during the Second World War and the islands became a part of India after India gained independence in 1947 (Singh, 2006:52).

Even before the British occupation of islands, many Muslim traders from Lakshwadeep islands in the Arabian Sea frequented these parts. Later on, many Muslims from Gujarat and Surat also came to the Nicobar islands. The Muslim Nicobarese are thus the descendants of Muslim traders who frequently divorced and remarried the Nicobarese women; some of the traders also kept them as concubines and converted them to Islam (Justin, 1990:12).

While explaining the geography and bio-diversity of the Nicobar islands, Justin (1990) wrote that the islands are close to the Equator and have a tropical climate which is hot and wet throughout the year. December, January and February are the coolest months, whereas the hottest period is from March to April. Soil in these islands varies from sandy in coastal plains to loamy or marshy in the interior. All these islands have abundance of coconut trees<sup>33</sup>. Unlike Car Nicobar, which has sparse forests, Teressa, Katchal, Little Nicobar and Great Nicobar have dense forests. Fauna in these islands is limited. Monkeys are found only on Great Nicobar and Katchal. Except for Car Nicobar, wild boar is found on all the other islands. Cattle were introduced to the islands by missionaries and now people have been domesticating cows, goats, oxen and so on. Kingfishers of varied colours: sun birds, sparrows, pigeons, owls and parrots are also seen. Various snakes including pythons of 15 to 17 ft are found on a few of the islands. Centipedes, rats, frogs, snails, grasshoppers, beetles, crickets and cockroaches are common. Crocodiles, octopus, lobster, turbo and sea crab are frequently spotted (ibid: 3-4).

**FIGURE 5.3A**  
**PROCUREMENT OF RESOURCES<sup>34</sup>**



31 During British period, the islands become popular for cheap coconut. Many traders frequented the islands and procured coconuts by bartering them with the goods desired by the Nicobarese.  
 32 1942-1945.  
 33 Which were later devastated during tsunami in 2004.  
 34 Based on the data given by Sinha Roy and Datta Chaudhuri (2007:45-7)

### 5.3 Livelihood, Subsistence and Housing

Forests and sea are an integral part of the Nicobarese life and this is evidenced in their culture. The traditional economy of the community has sustained, flourished and developed on resources available in the ecological setting of these islands. The traditional economy could be broadly categorised as horticulture, herding, coconut plantation, hunting and fishing. Roots, tubers and coconuts<sup>35</sup> are grown, and cattle, pigs,<sup>36</sup> and chicken are reared. Fishing is carried out by using their traditional dugout canoes and harpoons. With regard to employment, a considerable number of Nicobarese<sup>37</sup> have been serving as government servants and working in private organisations (Sinha Roy and Datta Chaudhuri, 2007:45-7).

Nicobarese houses are built on stilts—about 2 to 2.5 meters off the ground. The house is thatched with a grass called *afove* and has only one room. The dome of the house is about seven meters from the floor. A small opening in the floor-boards with an attached ladder functions as a door. Overhead beams provide space for storage. Cooking is done in earthen pots procured from Chowra.<sup>38</sup> On auspicious occasions, the inhabitants of Chowra have to procure clay from the island of Terressa for making pots (Dilwali and Kaul, 1989:22).

Winds direct most of the activities performed by the Nicobarese. They play a significant role in determining the time for making canoes, driving spirits out of the village, honouring ancestors, marking the end of the mourning period after the death of a person and invoking spirits of abundance. The Nicobar islands have two seasons. The southeast winds bring heavy rains in the islands between May and September, whereas the Northeast winds bring a relatively dry season from October. This is a time for canoe building, house repairs and celebration of rituals and festivals (Singh, 2006:90).

### 5.4 Language

Justin (1990) noted that the Nicobarese speak different languages, but most of them can converse in or understand Car Nicobarese. However, some Nicobarese from the central and southern groups do not understand Nicobarese. There are six dialects spoken in Nicobar which include dialects spoken by: the Car Nicobarese; the communities of Chowra; the Nicobarese of Terressa and Bompuka; the Nicobarese of Katchal, Kamorta, Nancowry and Trinket; the Nicobarese of Pulo Milo, Kondul and Little Nicobar; and the Nicobarese of the western coast of Great Nicobar. The Car Nicobarese have adopted a version of the roman script introduced by Whitehead and Bishop John Richardson. The Car Nicobarese script has become the *lingua franca* of the Nicobarese and is used in Chowra, Terressa, Katchal, Kamorta, Little Nicobar, Nancowry, Kondul and Great Nicobar.

### 5.5 Socio-Cultural Structure

#### 5.5.1 Social Structure

Justin (1990) wrote that the *Tuhet*<sup>39</sup> is the integral social unit among the Nicobarese. As the number of family members increase in a *tuhet*, some members separate to form another *tuhet* and call themselves *mirooto* or *kinem* of the same *tuhet*. This *tuhet* practice of the Car Nicobarese has also influenced people in Chowra and Katchal. The significance of a *tuhet* lies in the socioeconomic integration of its members wherein all available resources are possessed by the *tuhet*. A *tuhet* is responsible for the conduct of its members. There are some differences in religious and territorial practices from northern to central to southern Nicobar. The Nicobarese society is well-knit with no discrimination on the basis of class, creed or sex.

35 Major source of income for the Nicobarese in the pre-tsunami phase.

36 Prominent livestock among the Nicobarese in the pre-tsunami phase.

37 Predominantly from Car Nicobar Island.

38 Pots from Chowra are sanctified.

39 Lineage, a large joint family

### **5.5.2 Property Rights and Social Norms**

Property is inherited by both sexes and divided equally among the heirs (Kloss, 1971:231). Justin (1990) described that there are no hard and fast rules for inheritance and property rights among the Nicobarese. All the members of a *tuhet*, both males and females, have equal rights over the *tuhet's* property. The property of a *tuhet* remains under the control of the family head. Inter-family links are strong and can be witnessed on occasions like marriages, naming ceremonies, festivals and deaths. Gift exchange is a common practice among the tribes of Nicobar islands. Pigs and other local products are usually given as gifts. There are no barriers or any norms that restrict interaction among various religious groups or people across the islands. Women enjoy the same status as their counterparts. They participate in horticultural activities and have access to social, political, economic and religious activities.

Although Muslim women are not allowed to visit the mosque, animist and Christian women are not denied access to places of worship. Women are accorded more respect when compared to women in the Nicobarese communities of Kamorta and Nancowry. In Nancowry, it is mandatory for a husband to wash the polluted clothes of his wife after the delivery of a child.

### **5.5.3 Leadership**

The appointment of the village headman and his deputy is a recent development. The headman is responsible for maintaining social order in the Nicobarese society. He does not command obedience or enforce any laws/rules/regulations and is primarily concerned with persuading people to maintain order. However, the people obey the headman and pay the fines imposed by him. Opinions of people are generally taken into consideration while deciding who to appoint as the headman. (Kloss, 1971:241).

### **5.5.4 Social Relations**

Intra and inter village relations are very cordial. If some households are not able to subsist on available resources, they borrow resources from other households (*tuhets*). Borrowed items can be returned later at the borrower's convenience, or when the one who lent the resources really requires them. Relationships between villages are so strong that if people from one village come to another for assistance, they are either given plantation land or are adopted by affluent members of the village or *tuhet* (Prasad and Sahani, 2007:80-1).

There is no class struggle among the Nicobarese and cooperative movements like the cooperative coconut plantations are quite successful. The spirit of harmony and cooperation is seen in every aspect of the Nicobarese ethos, especially during festivities, canoe races, pig fights, feasts, swimming, fishing and wrestling. Feasts and religious festivals constitute an integral part of Nicobarese life (Dilwali and Kaul, 1989:22).

### **5.5.5 Marriage and Divorce Practices**

Kloss (1971) gave a detailed account of marriage practices among the Nicobarese. He mentioned that there are few bindings on the marriage parties. Males and females live as couples, enjoy the same social status, and can separate at their will. The usual reasons of separation are illness, absence of children, old age and other reasons that may be significant enough to terminate a marriage alliance. Termination of alliance is the personal choice of the partners and there are no ceremonies for the same. Younger children would go with the more influential of the parents. If the children are older, they exercise their choice. Adultery is punished with a fine of pigs decided by the elders, and a girl can have any number of lovers she wishes to before marriage.

Courtship among the Nicobarese is characterised by nocturnal visits. When a man wants to marry a girl, he contacts the family and starts assisting her in daily chores. He sleeps in the same house at night, and seeks the girl. The girl may resist and sometimes the chest and face of a male are covered with abrasions and blood. This continues for several nights until the girl accepts him as her husband. Some-

times the girl makes courtship less easy by changing her sleeping-hut every night. The man employs small children as spies, who keep him updated about the sleeping hut of that girl. A man who wishes to escape marriage after courtship is fined by the community (Kloss, 1971:238-40).

Justin (1990) who conducted a study two decades after Kloss (1971) described that a majority of marriages among the Nicobarese are negotiated by the Mothers' Union and church members. In case of pre-marital pregnancy or unwanted elopement, couples are generally referred to the Registrar for a civil marriage. The age of marriage prescribed by different religious groups among the Nicobarese is 22 years for men and 18 years for women. Bride-price<sup>40</sup> is a practice prevalent among the Nicobarese of Chowra and Teresa, but this is not practiced by other Nicobarese communities. Divorce was common in the past, but was subsequently discouraged by traditional councils and thus became a rare phenomenon permitted only in few cases like adultery.

Kloss (1971) mentioned that adultery is punishable. Justin (1990) also described that monogamy is a social norm in the Nicobarese society and marriage is not permitted among consanguineous kin.<sup>41</sup> Both patrilocal and matrilineal rules of residence are observed in the Nicobarese society. The place of residence is selected on the basis of convenience of both parties and the consent of both the male and female is sought. Remarriage is permitted in the Nicobarese culture and inter-religious and inter-island marriages are quite common. The name of the biological father is used as an identity for the members of a nuclear family, whereas the name of the *tuhet* is used for the members of a large joint family.

## 5.6 Myths and Legends about Origin of the Nicobarese

There are many myths among the Nicobarese about their origin, which vary from island to island. The Car Nicobarese believe that a man along with a pet bitch arrived at the islands from some unknown country and settled in Car Nicobar. The man espoused the bitch and a son was born. When the son grew up, he concealed his mother by covering her with a *ngong*<sup>42</sup>, killed his father and took his mother as his wife. The Nicobarese thus believe that they are the progeny of these parents<sup>43</sup> (Kloss, 1971:229-300).

While describing another version of the legend, Kloss (1971) mentioned that the father was a dog and the mother was a woman<sup>44</sup>. Some natives view that the first stranger who came to these islands saw something moving on sand. Those moving ant size small people were cared for by this stranger until they attained their normal size and this led to the origin of the Nicobarese.

Justin (1990), while describing other versions of the legends among the Nicobarese said that some of the Car Nicobarese believe that they are the progeny of Burmese ancestors, who were exiled from the Tenasserim coast of Burma after a violent revolution. The version detailed by Kloss (1971) about the origin of the Car Nicobarese is somewhat similar to Justin's narrative about the inhabitants of Teresa who believe that the island was initially inhabited by a woman who used to have sex with a dog, but bore no children. This woman met a man who had no idea about sexual intercourse and encountered another man<sup>45</sup> later, who copulated with her. The woman taught the technique of copulation to the first man and resultantly she conceived again and again and thus the Teresa island was populated.

Singh (2006) narrated that people of Chowra believe there were four people who were drifting on a wooden raft from an unknown land. These people landed on the east cost of the island and established their settlements. Justin (1990) described the legend associated with the Nicobarese of the *Dring*<sup>46</sup> Vil-

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40 In kind.

41 Marriage is permissible between couples belonging to any *tuhet* or family, if they are not consanguineously related for at least two generations.

42 A type of petticoat made of coco-palm leaves.

43 The *ta-chokla*- a two-horned head dress worn by all males, is symbolic of their mother's ears. The end of the loincloth that dangles behind it symbolizes the tail of their mother. The piece of cotton that is reaching up to women's knees, it is the symbol of *ngong* petticoat that their mother wore.

44 The natives who subscribe to this legend believe that they are the progeny of a dog and therefore respect dogs ; they treat their dogs very kindly and never beat them.

45 A non-Nicobarese.

46 Also called Daring.

lage of Kamorta island through the narratives of Chowrites<sup>47</sup>. Chowrites believe that while bathing in the sea, some of the inhabitants of Chowra were swept south-east by a strong current. They reached *olloi* bay at *Dring*, a remote village on the west coast of Kamorta island. The current was perpetually depopulating Chowra and in order to check the current, a colossal rock was placed in the sea with the help of *chabiok*<sup>48</sup>. That is how Chowrites believe Kamorta was peopled.

While describing the legend associated with the Nicobarese of Katchal, Singh (2006) wrote that people of Katchal believe themselves to be the progeny of a couple who came to Nicobar on a raft from China. This couple had a daughter. Later, when she attained maturity, her father copulated with her and this led to the population of Katchal island. Justin (1990), however, explained multiple versions about the origin of the inhabitants of Katchal. He narrated the legend associated with the inhabitants of West Bay Katchal, who believe that Katchal island was once flooded and everything was submerged except a tall tree *kam pong*<sup>49</sup>. Some worms rescued themselves by climbing this tree and the present population of Katchal evolved from these worms. The second version of the legend related to the Nicobarese inhabiting the eastern coast of Katchal is that the inhabitants of Kapanga village believe themselves to be the progeny of migrants from Pulo Bay<sup>50</sup>. The third version of the legend explained that there are some inhabitants who trace their origins to Teressa island. Some inhabitants consider trading voyagers, fishermen and mariners like the Malays and the Chinese to be their ancestors.

Justin (1990) argued that there are reasons to believe many versions of the legends associated with the origin of the Nicobarese. He also argued that the origin of the Central Nicobarese is an amalgamation of alien blood. Many foreigners who belonged to Sumatra, China and Malaysia took shelter on Nancowry island and some of them never returned as their vessels were damaged. Kloss (1971) also narrated the myth regarding coconut trees in Nicobar islands. However, Kloss did not mention any particular region or group of the Nicobarese who narrated the myth. He generalised that the Nicobarese believe that at one time there was scarcity of water in the islands, and a man produced water from his elbow by dint of magic. People beheaded him because they considered him to be a devil man or a wizard. A tree then sprang up from the spot where the head of this dead man fell. The tree grew and started bearing fruits resembling the head of the beheaded man and the people were scared to taste the fruit until an old man ate them. The coconut rejuvenated that old man and thereafter the Nicobarese started using the coconut.

While explaining why the Nicobarese do not kill among themselves, Kloss (1971) explained that there was a time when they used to kill each other for any offence: serious or simple. Consequently, their numbers dwindled and the elders convened a meeting to prohibit human killing. Instead of killing a person, they could destroy the possessions such as canoes, kill pigs, burn houses of the man. This method has been followed since then, only in extreme cases do the Nicobarese commit murder.

After reading the various versions of the myths and legends described by Kloss (1971), Justin (1990) and Singh (2006), the author found that the literature made no reference to the legends associated with the origins of the Nicobarese inhabiting the southern group of the islands. While Justin also expressed that the inhabitants of the southern group have a vague idea about their origin and migration, he briefly discussed that the inhabitants of Kondul trace their origin to *Laful*<sup>51</sup>. The Nicobarese of Kondul were perturbed by the raids of the Shompen and consequently migrated to the adjacent island of Kondul in the North. As per the accounts given by Justin (1990) the Nicobarese of Kondul, Little Nicobar and Pulo Milo are believed to be the descendents of the Nicobarese who migrated from Laful.

## 5.7 Rituals, Ceremonies, Medicinal Practices and Names

Justin (1990) described many traditional pre-delivery rituals and restrictions such as diet, rest and refraining from hard work, which were binding on both father and expectant mother. In Car Nicobar, the parturient

47 The Nicobarese inhabiting Chowra.

48 A strand of coconut leaf.

49 A tree of soft wood.

50 Located at the west cost of adjacent island Kamorta.

51 A place at the North-east end of Great Nicobar which is inhabited by the Shompen tribe.

mother is smeared with the blood of a pig, which is believed to keep the mother and the unborn baby in good health. In central Nicobar, killing a bat and catching an octopus is believed to delay the birth of a child. In southern Nicobar (especially in Little Nicobar), a pregnant woman has to carry specific herbs like cane palm leaves and a heart-shaped wooden plank in order to prevent evil spirits entering her womb.

Dilwali and Kaul (1989) wrote that a doctor and a priest were traditionally the two important people in the Nicobarese community. The witch-doctor, who played the role of both priest and doctor on these islands used to be an integral part during delivery, but now the Nicobarese lifestyle has undergone considerable change. Most of the women now go to hospitals.

Coughs, colic, fever, rheumatism, inflamed eyes and sores are common ailments among the Nicobarese. Syphilis was introduced into the community by outsiders. Itching and a mild form of elephantiasis have also been observed in some communities. Castor-oil, Eno fruit salt, camphor, turpentine and quinine are the major features of the Nicobarese-pharmacopoeia<sup>52</sup> (Kloss 1971:235). Dilwali and Kaul (1989) also found that the Nicobarese who used to earlier christen their children with native names are now using Christian and Indian names, which sometimes sound funny<sup>53</sup>.

## 5.8 Decorative Art and Ornaments

The Nicobarese were unaware of the art of weaving cloth and wore a *ngong*<sup>54</sup> before the introduction of garments by foreign traders. Some Nicobarese made cloth from tree bark (Kloss, 1971:252). They bartered cloth for betel nut, rattan, cane, megapode eggs, edible bird's nests and coconut. Women wear silver ornaments like chains, ear-rings, bangles, ear-studs and so on around their shins, calves, ankles and knees. Traditional silver ornaments are not worn very frequently apart from times when there are special ceremonies. Rings are made from turtle shells decorated with stones of various types or shiny plastic. Nowadays, many Nicobarese wear gold jewellery as well (Justin, 1990:18).

## 5.9 Magic, Sorcery and Religion

Kloss (1971) described the practice of magic and sorcery among the Nicobarese. He explained that the Nicobarese neither believed in any supreme being nor did they have any conception of life after death. They believed in evil spirits (considered to be the ghosts of the wicked) who could be kept away by exorcisms and offerings. These evil spirits are called *Siyas* in the Northern island and are believed to cause misfortune and disease. Malaria, which is not very uncommon among the Nicobarese, is attributed to demonic agencies. The Nicobarese use various objects like figures of animals, men and women to scare devils. They have no temples, but there are *Shamans* or priest doctors who are known as *tamiluanas* and *menluanas*; they are believed to have the power to communicate with spirits. These priests conduct ceremonies, drive out evil spirits and cure diseases.

It is possible that all these practices evolved after contact with outsiders, and the incorrect interpretation of the teachings of numerous missionaries who have frequented these parts. All these practices do not necessarily indicate that the Nicobarese are religious; they merely indicate the degraded survival of the religious paraphernalia of Jesuit missionaries. This argument could be supported with the fact that superstition thrived more at places where missionaries established themselves—Car Nicobar and Nancowry Harbour (Kloss 1971:230-4). A majority of the Nicobarese have embraced Christianity, and some have embraced Islam, the rest are animist. While the central group of the Nicobar islands have a few Muslims, there are none in the southern group (Justin, 1990:12).

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52 The medicines used by the Nicobarese during colic is Eno fruit salt mixed with water and little powder of turpentine and camphor, given twice a day. A little quinine is added to the same mixture for fever. Jasmine oil and sandalwood are aphrodisiacs held in great repute, which are purchased from Burmese traders at very high prices in small quantities. Faith is the basic medicine for diseases. The Nicobarese strongly believe that the devil causes illness, which cannot be cured by medicines, but solely by *tamiluanas* (Kloss 1971:235).

53 There are children named Kingfisher, Yes Please, Scarecrow, Tin Opener or His Majesty.

54 Coconut leaf petticoat.

Many festivals are celebrated among the Nicobarese like canoe race, pig festival, All Souls' Day, Christmas, Stick festival, and so on (Kloss, 1971:235).

### 5.10 Influence of Outsiders on the Socio-cultural life of the Nicobarese

The influence of the missionaries brought many changes among the Nicobarese. (Kloss, 1971). Studies conducted by Mathur (1967) elaborate on changes in religious beliefs that defined the course of development and triggered various changes in their socio-cultural fabric. While tracing the history of conversion among the Nicobarese, Mathur wrote that owing to the isolated location of the Nicobarese, contact with outsiders was initially limited. The large scale conversion to Christianity started after the colonisation of Nicobar islands by the British. This process of change gathered momentum after India attained its sovereignty.

With the spread of Christianity and education, many old practices and beliefs in spirit worship and witchdoctors waned. Many practices like 'Devil Murder'<sup>55</sup> were discontinued. Until the outbreak of the Second World War, barring a few Christian converts, a majority of the Nicobarese followed traditional customs. After independence, the communities in Car Nicobar perceived the need for social change among themselves.<sup>56</sup> They consequently became more open to new ideas and cultures. In order to check the exploitation of the aborigines, the Andaman and Nicobar islands (Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation was passed in 1956. The government also encouraged a cooperative movement in the Nicobar islands by forming cooperative societies in various villages of Car Nicobar and at several places in other islands, thus causing varied changes in the material and immaterial culture of the Nicobarese (Mathur 1967:5-7).

### 5.11 Tribal and Non-Tribal Relations

The islands are a part of the tribal reserve territory with the exception of certain pockets. Exposure to the outsiders can be traced to the pre-colonial period. Burmese traders and traders from Little Andaman and other parts have been residing in these parts for several years. There were also many government employees and defence personnel stationed on the islands. Most of the outsiders left these islands after the tsunami and only a few opted to stay. On being asked about their views of outsiders, most of the Nicobarese were reluctant to allow outsiders for trading purposes, but were ready to welcome government officials and defence personnel (Prasad and Sahani, 2007:81).

The reasons given by the Car Nicobarese for their reluctance to allow the entry of outsiders are both economic and socio-cultural. For instance, there is a scarcity of resources and space as outsiders have intruded in the Car Nicobarese territory through marriage. Those who were married to the Car Nicobarese women also got rights to their resources and *tuhet* land. As the land has been reduced, the communities expressed that in case of matrimonial alliance between outsiders and the Nicobarese, the outsiders will not be welcome to stay and share community resources. The person married to the outsider would be asked to leave the *tuhet* and stay outside Car Nicobar. The outsiders were also found guilty of looting and plundering after the tsunami which rarely occurred in the Nicobar islands<sup>57</sup>. The Nicobarese also reported that the mainlanders have introduced a lot of harmful practices to the detriment of the Nicobarese traditions and culture. Indian made Foreign Liquor (IMFL), adultery and consumerism, and so on have made inroads into the Nicobarese community. The Nicobarese also feel exploited by the trade practices of the outsiders (ibid: 82).

55 The practice of killing a person, who was considered a menace to the society.

56 The Japanese occupied Andaman and Nicobar islands including Car Nicobar during 1942 to 1945 and brought the greatest turmoil in the lives of the Nicobarese. The Japanese inflicted atrocities on the Nicobarese, enslaved the latter and forced them to labour in construction work for the former. The Japanese occupation ended in 1945. Christians were a prime target of the Japanese, and they showed unparalleled resilience under the leadership of John Richardson. Hence, after the war, Christianity and the values preached by it rose in high esteem among the Nicobarese. As a result, almost all Nicobarese of Car Nicobar island gave up their animist beliefs and associated culture, and embraced Christianity.

57 There were certain cases where dead bodies were chopped to remove the jewellery worn. The Nicobarese found this most offensive because dead bodies are deemed sacred in the Nicobarese rituals.



## 5.12 The Tsunami and the Nicobarese Society

The Tsunami virtually destabilized the entire Nicobarese society, destroying human lives, houses, livestock, fertile lands and vegetation. The complete geography of these islands has been altered due to the submergence of land areas. All these changes would naturally create an adverse impact on the cultural identity of the Nicobarese and their continuity (Sinha Roy and Datta Chaudhuri, 2007:62).

The demolition of age old traditions, indigenous knowledge, indigenous natural resources and the deaths of traditional experts have left a void in tribal communities that can never be replenished. The deaths of the elderly who possessed technological knowledge about canoe making, medicine and magico-religious practices, have therefore adversely impacted the tribal societies (Barik and others, 2007:17-9). The Car Nicobarese have lost both culturally significant objects and people. Their livelihood has suffered as kitchen gardens, coconut plantations, places for rearing poultry and pigs were damaged (Prasad and Sahani, 2007:75-8).

A demographic study<sup>58</sup> conducted in the southern group of the Nicobar islands showed that the family composition and its type changed with the death of its members. There has been a sharp increase in the number of broken families from 6.4 percent in the pre-tsunami period to 44.3 percent in the post-tsunami period. The percentage of matrilineally extended type family has declined from 17.9 percent to 9.3 percent. The mixed family type increased from 4.3 per cent to 7.1 percent. The most damage caused to the southern group of the Nicobar islands has been in the economic and cultural spheres, given that more than 40 percent of its populations died in the tsunami. Settlements, especially coastal villages have been completely or partially wiped out and family structures have been transformed completely. More women died during the tsunami and this is evidenced by the decline in the sex ratio from 900 to 801 per 1000 males (Barik and others, 2007:22-41).

## 5.13 The Post-Tsunami Intervention and Its Aftermath

Singh (2009) studied the post-tsunami influence of state intervention among the Nicobarese and found that it has adversely influenced various institutions of the Nicobarese society. Singh observed that monetary compensations have adversely impacted the community. The government announced monetary relief of Rupees 2000 to every family, but when the administration realised that the Nicobarese live in extended families, they split the families in nuclear units. The administration might have done this with good intentions, but the basic unit of the tribal social organisation was ruptured. The package of cash compensation to the next of kin of the person who died or went missing also raised confusion and conflict among the Nicobarese.

It was found that monetary aid packages and the conditions of the Indian legal framework did not match the traditional rules of the Nicobarese society, hence conflicts were inevitable. For instance, marriage is matrilocal among the central Nicobarese and the husband goes to the house of the wife. It is a norm that he has to live there as a slave and thus exercises no right over her wealth or property. According to Indian law, the cheque was issued to the husband, as he was the next of kin. This created considerable confusion among the community. Additionally, the magnitude of cash flow also fueled consumerist behaviour patterns evidenced in a sudden increase in the purchase of DVD players, music systems, junk food, alcohol and mobile phones (Singh, 2009:53).

The dependency on the market has increased manifold, but capital accumulation is not so visible. There are a few Nicobarese, who have maintained food gardens and grow pineapples, papaya, banana, yam, sugarcane, lemons, oranges and jackfruit (Singh, 2006:56). Most of the resources that the Nicobarese consume are imported by way of aid, trade or subsidy. Over-dependency on aid and new wealthy lifestyles has had significant repercussions on their environment and socio-cultural life. Incidentally, Singh (2009) raised a pertinent question regarding the possibility of sustaining such lifestyles after the compensation money would be spent.

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58 Conducted during January-February, 2005.

Singh (2009) also analysed that the drastic change in the socio-cultural ethos cannot be solely attributed to the damage caused by the tsunami. He argued that the aid industry was responsible for such a shift given that they thrive on disaster, a phenomenon which Naomi Klein (2007) called 'disaster capitalism'. Fear, shock and desperation caused by the tsunami were thus meticulously used by various agencies in order to bring a change that matched their agenda.

As mentioned earlier, there is a paucity of research on the Nicobarese, more specifically on the communities of the southern group. Though the available literature provides a historical view of tribes, it lacks detailed information about the communities. The term Nicobarese is itself a misnomer as this term is often used in a generic sense or is used as a specific reference to the Car Nicobarese. The major lacuna identified after the literature review was that the pre-tsunami and post-tsunami socio-cultural milieu of the Nicobarese of the southern group was not researched in the pre-independence, post-independence and post-tsunami periods. The research of Mathur (1967) and Kloss (1971) gave an account of the Nicobarese society, but these studies were conducted four decades back and there must have been several changes since, given that the last process of change was documented by Mathur (1967) with regard to the advent of the Christian missionaries. The aforementioned studies supplemented by the research conducted by Justin did help in establishing the historical context without which it would have been difficult to understand present day shifts in their socio-cultural context. The review of available literature also brought to light that the juxtaposition of post-tsunami socio-cultural milieu with the milieu projected in these studies will not be useful, given the gaps in data. Fresh data collection was thus carried out in both contexts.

The demographic research conducted by Barik, Biswas and Das (2007) in the southern group of the Nicobar islands found that its inhabitants witnessed maximum loss in terms of economic and cultural capital. As this research was conducted four years ago (2007), there must be certain new socio-cultural changes visible among the communities at present. Barik and others (2007) further reflected on the loss of traditions, knowledge, indigenous experts and resources. These different dimensions helped in identifying various lines of inquiry for the purpose of research. The research conducted by Singh (2009), which reflected on the aftermath of post-tsunami interventions in the context of the analysis of humanitarian aids, helped in framing the foci of the research problem.

## SECTION VI

### 6 THE POST-TSUNAMI SOCIO-CULTURAL CHANGES AMONG THE NICOBARESE

The juxtaposition of pre and post-tsunami spatial location, subsistence, housing, economy, social structure and political organisation among the Nicobarese provided an account of the post-tsunami socio-cultural changes among the Nicobarese of the southern group.

#### 6.1 Spatial Location<sup>59</sup>

The Nicobarese inhabited various places both at Great and Little Nicobar islands in the pre-tsunami period. There were fourteen Nicobarese villages and 2 or 3 small single house hamlets in Great Nicobar Island, which were sparsely populated and destroyed during the tsunami. At present, there are three Nicobarese villages: New Chingenh Basti, Afra Bay and Rajiv Nagar<sup>60</sup>. There were twenty villages in Little Nicobar Island, which have now been reduced to five<sup>61</sup>, post the tsunami. These original habitats of the Nicobarese were devastated during the tsunami and the communities were evacuated and relocated; the Nicobarese of Chingenh were relocated at New Chingenh and the rest to intermediate shelters in Rajiv Nagar. The Nicobarese spent almost seven years in these temporary shelters before they were provided permanent shelters<sup>62</sup> at specific places<sup>63</sup> in Great and Little Nicobar islands.

Some of the former places of residence are currently rendered uninhabitable because of the topographic changes that took place. Though the Nicobarese do not inhabit these islands<sup>64</sup>, they still have their plantations there. The Nicobarese relocated to Rajiv Nagar are living at the most accessible and well connected places. New Chingenh is another place which is accessible through road, though it does not have a metal road. Only a *kacha* unlevelled road leads to New Chingenh, a 30 minute walk from the metal road. The accessibility to permanent shelters at Makachua, Pulo panja, Pulo patia, Puloulo, Pulobha is grossly inadequate. Although a speedboat sails to these islands thrice a week<sup>65</sup>, it is irregular and transportation among these five villages is very difficult with no emergency helicopter facility for the Little Nicobar islands. Accessibility to communities living in Rajiv Nagar has increased, whereas accessibility for those living in other parts is comparatively difficult.

#### 6.2 Subsistence, Housing and Economy

##### 6.2.1 Livelihood

The Nicobarese society was self-sustaining prior to the tsunami, but has now emerged as a dependent society in the post-tsunami phase. Coconut plantations and *copra*<sup>66</sup> production was a major livelihood activity. Coconuts<sup>67</sup> were grown for personal and commercial consumption, whereas jackfruit, banana, malaya potato, pendanus and pineapples were generally grown for household consumption. The money procured by selling copra was used to buy essential commodities. The community's needs were

59 The account of spatial Location is based on the discussions with (and documents shown by) the Chairman of Tribal Council, Great and Little Nicobar Islands. Interaction with Manish Chandi, at a later stage, helped in validating and refining the data mentioned in this section.

60 Inhabitants of Rajiv Nagar have their lands at Gol Tikri (Great Nicobar). Some of these Nicobarese have built their houses in Gol Tikri as well.

61 Makachua, Pulo panja, Pulo patia, Puloulo, Pulobha.

62 Permanent shelters were allotted on 19/02/11.

63 Makachua, Pulo panja, Pulo patia, Puloulo, Pulobha, New Chingenh and Rajiv Nagar.

64 Some of the Nicobarese have built their huts in these islands in order to rest while they work in plantations.

65 Speedboat (Jolly Buoy) sails to these islands every week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Availability of at least five to six passengers for journey to these islands is a prerequisite for sailing. If the required number of passengers do not come, the speed boat does not sail.

66 Copra is the smoke dried meat of coconut.

67 Also a staple diet of pigs in the pre-tsunami phase.

rudimentary and most of them were fulfilled by the available natural resources provided by the ecosystem. The Nicobarese lost their plantations during the tsunami and their livelihood was jeopardised. The new plantations have not yet borne fruit and the production of *copra* has not been resumed. In the pre-tsunami phase, the Nicobarese were both sellers and buyers in the market and exchange between the Nicobarese and the non-Nicobarese was bidirectional. In the post-tsunami phase, however, the exchange in the market has become unidirectional as the Nicobarese are solely buyers.

Fishing and hunting were the other chief activities for subsistence; this has now become sporadic. Since the communities have<sup>68</sup> been rehabilitated far from sea, they now purchase fish from the open markets. The hunting of wild boar has declined as well, particularly among the Nicobarese of Rajiv Nagar and New Chingenh. The main reason for the absence of game hunting is the relocation of the Nicobarese in areas where wild boars are not available. Thus, traditional fishing and game hunting techniques have been declining in the post-tsunami phase.

The accessibility to indigenous resources has also undergone major changes. Only four hectares of land is given to each family rehabilitated at Rajiv Nagar for their plantations, and most of the Nicobarese living at New Chingenh have become landless post the tsunami<sup>69</sup>. There is, however, no delimitation of land for the Nicobarese located at the villages of Maka Chua, Pulo panja, Pulo patia, Puloulo and Pulobha.

The communities have been quite dependant on governmental humanitarian aid<sup>70</sup> for their survival and although lakhs of rupees were given<sup>71</sup> as compensation, most of the money is now depleted. Some of the community members work on their plantations, but majority of them are not engaged in any livelihood activities and have become sedentary. A percentage of the population is engaged in daily wage labour under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which was not a phenomenon in the pre-tsunami period. The unemployment rate has increased among the Nicobarese in the post-tsunami period along with a tremendous increase in their needs.

### **6.2.2 Crops and Agricultural Practices**

Agricultural practices among the Nicobarese were not advanced but were sustainable and eco-friendly. They were non-mechanical and labour intensive wherein the entire family would work in the plantations with no stringent division of labour. Every member of the family contributed according to her/his capacity. There has been no substantial change in agricultural practices in the post-tsunami phase and the Nicobarese are still utilising the same traditional knowledge and practices.

### **6.2.3 Technology**

Pre-tsunami, the Nicobarese enjoyed a simple and traditional lifestyle. Through cultural contact with the non-Nicobarese populations at intermediate shelters, they have now adopted modern and sophisticated technology. There has been a tremendous surge in the purchase of modern gadgets that include washing machines, mobiles, televisions, mixers, DVD players, refrigerators and so on. However, there are no substantial technological modifications in livelihood generating activities such as coconut plantations, fishing or pig rearing.

### **6.2.4 Pets and Livestock**

Pigs and poultry were reared prior to the tsunami; each family used to have twenty five to thirty pigs. The numbers have reduced considerably now. The reasons: unavailability of pigs, lack of coconut

68 The Nicobarese of Rajiv Nagar and New Chingenh.

69 The Nicobarese who are rehabilitated at New Chingenh have not received any land. During the authors interactions with them, they said that even after asking repeatedly, the administration had not allotted land. The Patwari on the contrary stated that the Nicobarese of New Chingenh were not allotted land, as they never asked for it.

70 Ration, shelter and monetary compensations.

71 For death or a missing person, one lakh each from Prime Minister and Lieutenant Governor (LG) Fund, Rs. 2000 per family as LG immediate relief, Rs. 2 lakh per family as plantation loss.

to feed the pigs, lack of space and change in environmental surroundings and a general disinterest<sup>72</sup> among the people.

### **6.2.5 Housing and other Construction Activities**

Housing among the Nicobarese has undergone a complete change. Pre-tsunami, the communities used to live in huts which were built on stilts about 2–2.5 metres off the ground. The traditional Nicobarese huts had one big hall where all the activities were conducted. Now, the shelters, though built on stilts, have multiple rooms. Traditional houses were constructed with local material, whereas these shelters are constructed with wood, iron, tin, concrete and other non-indigenous materials imported from other states. The traditional Nicobarese huts were independent units, whereas the new shelters are two separate units adjoined together. They are also built on stilts, but unlike the traditional huts, these shelters shake and rattle when exposed to wind and rain.

### **6.2.6 Death, Illness, Medicine and Funeral Practices**

The communities have a practical approach towards death. Birth and death are both accepted as natural phenomena and this belief has not changed even after the tsunami. Traditional funeral practices among the Nicobarese have also undergone many changes. The practice of abandoning the house for some time after a death has occurred is not observed so stringently now due to altered housing patterns. Given that they now live in permanent shelters, it is virtually impossible for the bereaved family to leave their house for long. The social support system among the Nicobarese has also altered significantly, and a bereaved family cannot expect to receive the kind of empathy and support they received prior to the tsunami.

The lifestyle of the people has recorded changes and consequently, there has been a rise in lifestyle diseases as well. Given their proximity to nature, the Nicobarese used to eat non-processed food, but now they have acquired a taste for junk food, spice and flavours usually consumed by other communities. As a result, they frequently fall sick and suffer from mild headaches, stomachaches, obesity, indigestion, gastric problems and fatigue.

### **6.2.7 Recreation, Body Adornment and Decorative Art**

Indigenous recreation and decorative art had been an integral part of the Nicobarese culture, but both these practices have waned in the post-tsunami phase. Ceremonies were a major source of recreation (detailed discussion on this subject is provided in section on the post-tsunami structure). Now television<sup>73</sup> has overshadowed all indigenous sources of recreation. Outdoor games like volleyball, cricket, *kabaddi*, *kho-kho* and football were quite popular and although they still play some of these games, the lack of space to play has dramatically reduced the frequency of these activities. Singing and dancing were other indigenous means of recreation, these too have witnessed changes since the communities now sing Hollywood and Tollywood songs instead of folk songs.<sup>74</sup>

The traditional art of house decoration has been replaced by modern art. Houses are decorated with posters of film celebrities and sport stars. The women now wear modern apparel and use cosmetics<sup>75</sup> and most of the youth have tattoos<sup>76</sup>.

72 Although pork was a major component of the Nicobarese diet, due to the increase in the number of other items in their food basket, the significance of the pig has waned in the post-tsunami phase along with the decrease in functions associated with pigs.

73 The Nicobarese are fond of television and they spend a large amount of time watching programmes on television.

74 While celebrating various ceremonies, the Nicobarese play many hindi, tamil and english songs. Although they could barely understand the lyrics, they have developed a liking for the fast beats and their rhythm.

75 All modern cosmetic products like face wash, gel, body lotion etc. are used by both males and females.

76 While the Nicobarese asked me many questions regarding cities in the mainland, a majority of the youth inquired about tattooing in Mumbai. Most of the male adolescents had permanent or temporary tattoos on their body which they design themselves with repeated needle piercing. They developed a liking for tattoos by watching it on television and observing them on Car Nicobarese people.

### 6.2.8 Food Habits

The traditional food comprised potato, coconut, guava, papaya, fish, pork, chicken and pendanus,. However, the Nicobarese have acquired a taste for fast food<sup>77</sup>. They relish *pani puri*, chow mein, noodles, egg rolls, chapati, rice, *dal* and various vegetables. These changes in food habits are associated with the unavailability of traditional food and the availability of easy-to-cook food in the market.

## 6.3 Social Structure

### 6.3.1 Size of the Community and Settlement Patterns

The casualties during the tsunami decreased the size of the Nicobarese community considerably. Pre-tsunami, the population of the Nicobarese in the southern group was 1,068 and maximum deaths were recorded among the elderly<sup>78</sup>. The settlements located on far flung islands in the pre-tsunami period have been consolidated at particular places which led to an increase in physical proximity between the settlements<sup>79</sup>. The Nicobarese of Rajiv Nagar and New Chingenh feel suffocated in their new compact homes and the permanent shelters in the tribal reserve area are located far from sea, usually at higher altitudes.<sup>80</sup> Many activities associated with space like pig rearing, fishing, hunting and plantations have been adversely affected by the new settlement patterns.

### 6.3.2 Household Composition

Household composition was complex in the pre-tsunami period as the Nicobarese followed the *tuhet* system and lived in extended families. The *tuhet* has been weakened significantly due to the death of its members during the tsunami and the introduction of nuclear families. The Nicobarese who used to live together in the pre-tsunami period now live in nuclear families, as the space in a shelter is sufficient for a single family only.

### 6.3.3 Marriage/Divorce Practices

Divorce practices<sup>81</sup> among the Nicobarese have remained more or less the same and there have been no substantial changes in the marriage practices either<sup>82</sup>. Post marital residence among the Nicobarese was both patrilocal and matrilocal as per the convenience of both parties and this has not undergone any change.

### 6.3.4 Ceremonies

The Nicobarese used to celebrate many ceremonies and rituals in the pre-tsunami period including *hodi making*<sup>83</sup>, *stick fighting*<sup>84</sup>, *pig festival*<sup>85</sup>, *Christmas*, *Easter*, *All Souls' Day*<sup>86</sup>, *New Year*, *canoe race*<sup>87</sup>, *Indepen-*

77 The Nicobarese youth have developed a strong inclination towards fast food, whereas adults and the elderly do not appreciate it much.

78 The Nicobarese have both patrilocal and matrilocal residence after marriage. Many Nicobarese narrated that both the families claimed elderly who survived tsunami, (not because of compensation or any other economic gain; rather because there were very few who were left alive. Elderly are immensely respected among the Nicobarese.

79 There were mixed reactions among the Nicobarese regarding changes in spatiality. Some felt that it has led to cohesion among the Nicobarese, whereas others believe that available resources have become scarce.

80 There have been cases of landslides and trees have fallen on the settlements causing much damage... There were three cases in Makachua, wherein one shelter and a staff quarter of primary school were reduced to rubbles.

81 There need not be very special circumstances for a divorce. I met a Nicobarese whose wife had divorced him recently. On being asked about the reason of divorce, he narrated, "I do not know why, maybe she does not like living here."

82 Marriages are conducted in church by priest.

83 Hodi is the canoe made by digging wood from a log of tree. Hodi making was a ceremony when the Nicobarese would make beautiful canoes.

84 A traditional festival when the Nicobarese would playfully fight with big sticks.

85 A festival celebrated in the memory of ancestors. The Nicobarese from various villages would gather at a particular place and bring pigs with them for a communal feast.

86 Celebrated in the memory of the Nicobarese who have died (usually ancestors)

87 Celebrated by organizing a canoe race where the people compete among themselves.

*dence Day* and *Republic Day*. Traditional ceremonies like *stick fight*, *canoe race* and *pig festival* have not been celebrated since the tsunami. However, the communities will resume the pig festival once they restart pig rearing and related livelihood activities. December 26 is now observed as Mourn Day<sup>88</sup> and people attend mass and pray for the well being of the people who lost their lives during the tsunami.

There has been a considerable change in the manner and the spirit of celebration among the communities. In the post-tsunami period, the devotion and fervor with which each festival was celebrated has now diminished. The Nicobarese expressed that pigs had always been a part and parcel of all their festivals, and lack of pigs and other traditional food products like *tadi*<sup>89</sup>, pandanus and coconut, have curtailed the spirit of festive celebrations. Since indigenous ceremonial items are not available in the post-tsunami period, they have been replaced by items such as biscuits, candies, cake, alcohol, rusk and so on<sup>90</sup>. Moreover, due to the exposure to other cultures and festivals, the Nicobarese have become apathetic towards their own indigenous festivals and ceremonies.

### **6.3.5 Social Stratification**

The tribal social organisation of the Nicobarese community is not complex and stratification is generally based on age. The elderly are highly revered and an adult earns respect with age. Economic status or material possessions were not considered as dominant factors for stratification, as everyone had more or less equal possessions along with unlimited land. The social status of a family depended on a combination of the number of plantations, number of pigs and contributions made during local festivals and feasts. Post-tsunami, an individual's status is determined by economic consideration wherein an individual possessing more material goods and money is considered rich.

### **6.3.6 Law and Order**

The Nicobarese were governed by a set of informal laws and oral codes of conduct acquired through the process of socialisation. Social norms were generally enforced by village captains, elderly members of the community or priests of the church. Post-tsunami, the administration and the non-Nicobarese communities have emerged as the enforcers of social control. The administration, through a series of formal and informal mechanisms have influenced social norms by virtue of the authority it commands; for instance, by prescribing certain conditions in the allotment order of permanent shelters.

As per new conditions stipulated, the Nicobarese cannot make any modifications in the structure of the 'shelters'<sup>91</sup> and they have to maintain their surroundings in the manner prescribed by the administration.<sup>92</sup> The non-Nicobarese populations too play a pivotal role by displaying gestures of acceptance and rejection of certain behaviour patterns of the Nicobarese<sup>93</sup>. Previously disputes were resolved by the elderly and captains of villages. These disputes have escalated post the tsunami as the society is under pressure due to rapid acculturation, changes in spatial location and alcoholism.

## **6.4 Political Organization**

The Tribal Council<sup>94</sup> is the political organisation of the Nicobarese of the southern group. The office bearers in the Tribal Council comprise the Chairman, the Secretary and the Village Captains who are

88 The day they observe in remembrance of their people they lost during tsunami on 26th December, 2004. Candles are lit and a communal feast is held. The ceremony is held at the house of the village captain and all village members attend it. Sometimes it is held at two to three places in a village.

89 Indigenous intoxicant prepared from coconut juice.

90 The Nicobarese of Rajiv Nagar served tea, biscuits, candies, cake, alcohol and rusk after mass on mourn day. They narrated that they never served these items during festivals or ceremonies. It was due to unavailability of traditional ceremonial elements.

91 The Nicobarese are not satisfied with the structures of shelters. They say that the shelters make too much noise during rain and wind. They also feel cramped in shelters.

92 The lifestyle of the Nicobarese is considered unhygienic and the non-Nicobarese say that the former do not keep their surroundings neat and clean.

93 Many food habits among the Nicobarese like raw fish and pork changed owing to the stigmatisation by the non-Nicobarese. The Nicobarese concept of nudity and their self-identity was also compromised to a considerable extent.

94 Great and Little Nicobar island.

democratically elected.<sup>95</sup> There are currently eight villages in Great and Little Nicobar islands and each village elects two captains, the First <sup>96</sup> and the Second Captain<sup>97</sup>. At present, there are sixteen captains in the Tribal council and the Chairman is the head of the council who works in collaboration with the administration. In the pre-tsunami phase, the elderly were chosen as captains by virtue of their knowledge and experience. The captains are now selected on the recommendation of the Assistant Commissioner<sup>98</sup>.

Due to the shift in the leadership pattern, the authority and control of the captains has declined across villages<sup>99</sup>. The death of the elderly during the tsunami has significantly altered the power dynamics. The administration plays a pivotal role in choosing young captains who are literate and can communicate in Hindi. These young captains are not resistant to change as they are less aware about their own customs and rituals.

## 6.5 Conclusion

The juxtaposition of the pre and the post-tsunami socio-cultural milieu of the Nicobarese shows that spatial location of the Nicobarese has been thoroughly altered along with a decrease in the size of the community, with a significant reduction in the old age group. There have been changes in settlement patterns, in addition to the disintegration of joint families and the emergence of nuclear families. Indigenous sources of livelihood destroyed during the tsunami have not been replenished and most of the Nicobarese are surviving on monetary compensations. Wage labour, which is of recent origin, is a harbinger of further change in the Nicobarese socio-cultural milieu. Although the Nicobarese have hastily embraced modern technology in their lifestyle, technology in crop and agricultural practices has not been adopted. Livestock was reduced considerably and no efforts have been made for its revival. The influx of money into the Nicobarese society through compensations triggered consumerism, leading to the obliteration of various indigenous practices. For instance, traditional decorative art has been replaced by modern art and traditional body adornment practices have become redundant. Indigenous food habits have been influenced by the food habits of the non-Nicobarese populations and lifestyle diseases have recorded an increase among the Nicobarese. Television has significantly influenced the community in their social and cultural spheres, particularly with regard to recreational activities.

Although death, conception and marriage practices among the Nicobarese have not undergone any change, traditional funeral practices are affected. Festivals and communal ceremonies have lost their original spirit of celebration, and many traditions are on the verge of extinction. The post-tsunami phase has also replaced the traditional authority of the elderly with bureaucracy. The change ushered into the economic structure of the Nicobarese has adversely impacted the social stratification causing the erosion of various traditions and social norms.

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95 The majority of the office bearers of the present Tribal council were elected in 2003 and no elections were conducted after that. The chairman of the Tribal Council said that the structure of council would be changed, hence fresh elections are not conducted yet.

96 First captain has the maximum power at the village level.

97 Second captain represents the village if the first captain is unavailable.

98 Great and Little Nicobar Islands.

99 Captains of Makachua, Pulobhabi, New Chingenh and the chairman and the secretary of Tribal council narrated their own experiences of decline in their control over villages in addition to the difficulties they encountered.



## SECTION VII

### 7 THE POST-TSUNAMI DEVELOPMENT THROUGH A FOUCAULDIAN LENS

#### 7.1. Socio-Cultural Change: An *A Priori* Project

The evolution of post-tsunami socio-cultural change among the Nicobarese can be understood through the analysis of the welfare and development work in the post-tsunami period and their effects on the socio-cultural meanings and practices. Escobar (2005) argued that development is not only enhancing the material conditions or upgrading the living standard or modernising productive apparatus. It is also a mechanism to introduce specific practices and forms of knowledge. The post-tsunami welfare and development work among the Nicobarese is illustrative of this argument: in the sense that the post-tsunami development was inspired by certain ideology that was a by-product of power and knowledge of the dominant non-Nicobarese society. Socio-cultural changes among the Nicobarese in the post-tsunami phase are a manifestation of ideologies that were inherent in the planning and execution of welfare and development interventions.

Foucault argued that all forms of power rely on certain techniques or methods; application of power could be understood in terms of these techniques through which it is exercised. The power dynamics that played a key role in bringing about change among the Nicobarese could be understood by identifying these techniques and methods of application of power. Foucault said that discipline is a technology that controls the behaviour and conduct of people. The administration has used disciplinary power to mould the subjectivities<sup>100</sup> of the Nicobarese. There were various techniques used by the administration to regulate the behaviour patterns of the people and make them docile individuals so that they could fit into a modern system by adopting the dominant culture of modern society, thus destroying their indigenous identity.

The tsunami was used as an opportunity to bring about certain changes among the Nicobarese by changing their subjectivities. The Nicobarese subjectivity was deconstructed through the systematic creation of heterotopias of deviation<sup>101</sup> which also served as a panopticon,<sup>102</sup> wherein the Nicobarese felt that they were being watched continuously and thus behaved in a way that was in accordance with the norms of modern society. Several changes in the socio-cultural milieu of the Nicobarese have been affected due to the change in their subjectivities.<sup>103</sup> These new subjectivities are not directly imposed on the Nicobarese, but are internalised by them through various processes like the flow of monetary aid, technology, free rations, alcohol, change in recreational activities, and the adoption of sedentary lifestyles, and so on. The Nicobarese negotiated their subjectivities through the contradictions that arose because of the changes in spatiality and the increasing influence<sup>104</sup> of the non-Nicobarese dominant cultural practices.

Intermediate Shelters: Shelters Which Sheltered Too Long

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100 Subjectivity is a concept that refers to the cultural, social, political, and psychological processes that shape and determine who we think we are and how we situate ourselves in the world. Generally, the notion of subjectivity has a number of meanings.

101 Heterotopias of deviation are the places where individuals whose behaviour is deviant and incongruent are placed. Foucault mentioned many places as heterotopias of deviation; for instance asylums, hospitals, cemeteries, prisons and rest homes.

102 Coined by English philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1790s. 'It was based on the architectural principle of a ring shaped building with cells grouped around a central tower. An observer in the tower could see into each of the cells, but because of a system of louvres, the occupants of the cells could not see into the central tower. This meant that people in the cells, whether they were mad, prisoners, workers or school children, eventually modified their behaviour to act as though they were being watched all the time. The idea was widely adopted at the beginning of the nineteenth century as a highly efficient model of social regulation and control' (O'Farrell 2005:104).

103 There are certain Nicobarese who seemed happy with post-tsunami changes. Many of them have changed subjectivities.

104 There were certain Nicobarese who abandoned their traditional cultural practices, for instance: change in food habits, clothing, ceremonies, pig rearing, and pattern of clothing; through these changes, they are being normalised. These changes in the Nicobarese subjectivities and their negotiations with new subjectivities are the effect of power and knowledge.

Foucault argued that space is fundamental in the exercise of power. This is evidenced in the spatial reorganisation of the Nicobarese that inhabited the southern part of the islands. The change in the spatial location of the Nicobarese has adversely impacted their culture and caused irreparable damage to their social structure. An analysis of pre and post-tsunami spatiality indicates that decisions regarding the post-tsunami spatiality were not bereft of vested interests.

The tsunami obliterated the housing and livelihoods of the Nicobarese, which resulted in their immediate evacuation and relocation to New Chingeh and Rajiv Nagar. These intermediate shelters were constructed at sites far away from the original habitats of the Nicobarese. The Nicobarese who were used to living in semi-permeable societies, were suddenly exposed to a different and dominant culture. The extended stay in these shelters ruptured their very socio-cultural fabric.

### **7.1.1.1 *The Nicobarese Heterotopias*<sup>105</sup>**

The evacuation of the Nicobarese led to the destruction of their indigenous habitats, which were originally heterotopias of crisis<sup>106</sup>; in order to avoid confusion and facilitate the offered juxtaposition, the author calls these lost heterotopias as heterotopias lost<sup>107</sup>. The post-tsunami intervention led to the destruction of these heterotopias. On the other hand, it also led to the formation of new heterotopias—the first wave of resettlement at New Chingeh and Rajiv Nagar leading to heterotopias of deviation<sup>108</sup>. The heterotopias of crisis<sup>109</sup> emerged with the second wave of resettlement, that is, the construction and allocation of permanent shelters at the tribal reserve areas.

The socio-cultural order in these three heterotopias reflects the politics of spatiality and evolution of changes orchestrated by the welfare and development work initiated in these islands. The Nicobarese possess distinct subjectivities—heterotopias lost, heterotopias of deviation and heterotopias of crisis. The Nicobarese subjectivities are therefore the product of their socio-cultural and spatial experiences in these heterotopias. The destruction and formation of the Nicobarese heterotopias in the post-tsunami phase have also influenced their subjectivities.

The construction of temporary shelters amidst the non-Nicobarese populations for seven years points at the politics of spatiality. This was a disciplinary technique to make the communities adopt modern ways of life and enable the administration to bring about certain changes in the Nicobarese. The communities were therefore expected to conform to the rules of cultural, economic and ecological behaviour patterns of modern society. They were expected to imitate, learn, unlearn and try to become like their modern counterparts.<sup>110</sup> These newly constructed spaces were not ordinary and apolitical spaces, they were what Foucault (1967) referred to as heterotopias of deviation created by the administration to diminish the cultural diversity of the Nicobarese. The role played by heterotopias of deviation can be understood from the perspective of economic and socio-cultural transformation.

The economic transformation of the Nicobarese can be gauged by analysing the changes brought about by monetary compensations. Money had little role to play in the Nicobarese society and they

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105 Spaces where the Nicobarese lived in pre and post-tsunami phases qualify for heterotopias because these spaces were/are outside of or they were/are different to all other spaces inhabited by modern populations; irrespective of their difference, they also exist(ed) within and relat(ed) to the general social order/space which distinguish(ed) their meaning as difference.

106 Tribal reserve areas were heterotopias of crisis, simply because of the functions associated with them. Government recognised these areas because it perceived that the Nicobarese inhabiting these islands were in a situation of crisis due to their cultural diversity and consequent exploitation by populations from modern societies. The unchecked contacts of outsiders with the Nicobarese were threatening cultural diversity and the survival of latter was in crisis. Reserving these islands as tribal reserve area was a spatial solution to this crisis. These islands, being tribal reserve area, served many purposes: protection of cultural diversity, livelihood, environment and indigenous knowledge of the Nicobarese.

107 Centuries old pre-tsunami habitats of the Nicobarese which were evacuated immediately after the tsunami.

108 New spatiality is considered 'heterotopias of deviation' and not 'heterotopias of crisis' (they could have been called heterotopias of crisis since the Nicobarese were settled at new places because of a crisis that emerged because of tsunami) simply because of their spatial location. The Nicobarese could have been temporarily settled anywhere, but their relocation amidst modern populations is not exclusive to disciplinary strategies of administration.

109 The post-tsunami permanent settlements at tribal reserve areas.

110 Referring to the non-Nicobarese populations of the islands whose lifestyle is considered normal and modern.

did not possess much of it before the tsunami. The communities earned their livelihood by engaging in activities which ensured their subsistence and all their needs were fulfilled by the available indigenous resources. Copra was sold to procure money for purchasing commodities from the market. Monetary compensation provided cash to the Nicobarese, which triggered consumerism and over dependence on these funds. There is also a loss of interest in indigenous livelihood patterns as they fail to provide the lifestyles that they are now accustomed to. The Nicobarese are currently looking for unconventional livelihood sources like wage labour. A majority of the people are unable to do anything as they lack motivation to resume indigenous ways of livelihood and at the same time lack formal education and skills required for jobs. Change in the economic patterns has had a ripple effect the socio-cultural ethos of the Nicobarese society.

Heterotopias of deviation were conceived to diminish the cultural differences and restructure relations between the Nicobarese and the mainstream modern society. Restructuring mainly focused on making the Nicobarese understand that their culture was outmoded and needed overhauling. These spaces were characterised by a multiplicity of activities that influenced Nicobarese culture. When the Nicobarese lived in their heterotopias lost, they were engaged in plantations, making copra, fishing, rearing pigs, hunting and collecting available food. All these activities encouraged a self-sustaining and harmonious society. Based on their experiences with nature and their surroundings, the Nicobarese built their group identity and identities of those who were not like them. The change in the location of the Nicobarese led to a complete change in association with the space they inhabited.

The Nicobarese have undergone the trauma of losing their family members and kinfolk. This trauma has been magnified by the fragmentation of the Nicobarese society: the partial disintegration of joint families, the impending dangers of new spatial locations, erosion of traditional leadership and authority, goods lost, and land and resources lost after their evacuation from their original habitats. Although there were no strong counter-hegemonic measures adopted by the Nicobarese community, they are disillusioned with the non-Nicobarese populations and have developed strong prejudices against the latter.

The administration was able to increase surveillance over the Nicobarese in heterotopias of deviation rather than in heterotopias lost. The concurrence of facilities provided to the Nicobarese in these two heterotopias reflect the contradictions inherent in the claims of developmental work undertaken after the tsunami. Seven years after the tsunami, basic amenities required for present survival are found wanting. Consequently, many Nicobarese are reluctant to live at these heterotopias of crisis. Their reluctance or unwillingness does not necessarily mean that they do not like the indigenous attributes of these heterotopias, or that they loved the heterotopias of deviation.

By juxtaposing the available amenities at these heterotopias, the wide gap in the amenities is clearly visible. The facilities at the heterotopias of crisis are not even at par with what they used to be in the pre-tsunami phase; the communities thereby miss those facilities. Although it has been observed that the Nicobarese have been influenced by the material culture of the non-Nicobarese, the non-material culture of latter has not appealed to them much. There has been no infrastructural development in these heterotopias of crisis. Technologies pertaining to livelihood have not been developed. The Nicobarese were provided monetary compensations which enabled them to purchase modern goods that changed their material culture immediately and consequently, influenced their non-material culture. Consumerism, alcoholism, inactivity, dependency, individualism, social conflict, disintegration and detribalisation are the repercussions of changes in spatiality.

### **7.1.1.2 *Panopticon Heterotopias***

Heterotopias of deviation also worked as 'panopticon'. These panopticon heterotopias were used as surveillance mechanisms by the administration against the Nicobarese. Nuances of their socio-cultural milieu were watched and instant feedback was given to them through social approval or disapproval by the modern population. This process influenced changes in the behavioural patterns and lifestyle of the Nicobarese. For instance, the Nicobarese started covering their bodies when they frequented mar-

kets and other public areas. The young Nicobarese started purchasing modern apparels and electronic goods to fit in with the modern society. The Nicobarese also started eating spicy and junk food. A comparison of the Nicobarese living at Rajiv Nagar with the Nicobarese living at New Chingenh highlights the nature of the panoptican shelters. Acculturation amongst the Nicobarese living at Chingenh is less in comparison to the Nicobarese living at Rajiv Nagar. While the Nicobarese of Rajiv Nagar live amidst the non-Nicobarese societies, the Nicobarese of New Chingenh live in the forest.

## 7.2. The Nicobarese Knowledges: Subjugated Knowledges

The Nicobarese knowledge has been subjugated in the post-tsunami phase. The Nicobarese apathy towards traditional ceremonies, indigenous art, traditional medicine, indigenous livelihood, house making, *hodi*<sup>111</sup> making, and so on, has been pushed to the brink of extinction. The reasons for which are not spontaneous, but orchestrated. Government interventions for maintaining and promoting indigenous knowledge has been negligible. The construction of modern shelters<sup>112</sup> instead of houses based on indigenous technology and designs, the culturally insensitive nature of work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, the lack of promotion and preservation of indigenous art, handicraft and livelihood sources, and the culturally insensitive curriculum in schools are some of the major lacunae of the post-tsunami welfare and development interventions. The tsunami has delinked the Nicobarese from their indigenous wisdom and knowledge. The modern curriculum, which is deemed superior, has moved away from the indigenous knowledge base of the Nicobarese. As a result, the youth have have practically forgotten their culture.

The Nicobarese are not taught about their own history or the symbolic representation of their culture. Uprooted from their social context, the knowledge that they receive, and the technology they are exposed to, is far from the experience and socio-cultural milieu of their society. Examinations conducted in schools, therefore, serve two purposes for the administration: surveillance and normalisation. Through examinations, the Nicobarese children are expected to reproduce certain knowledge pertaining to modern cultures or societies that are alien and unfamiliar to them.

The Nicobarese children are categorised and labelled as intelligent or dull on the basis of knowledge that they are successfully able to cram and reproduce. They are compared with non-Nicobarese children and also among themselves. Education in the southern group of the Nicobar islands is transforming children into objects of knowledge. Examinations at school have helped the Nicobarese children to develop their own identities. Examinations have helped modern (read disciplinary) society normalize and exercise surveillance on the Nicobarese children as individuals and as a whole. Hence the nature of the curriculum merely provides a means for normalization, thus serving the purpose of disciplinary society.

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111 A Nicobarese boat.

112 Constructed by imported and non-indigenous material.

## SECTION VIII

### 8. DISCUSSION

Prince (1920) and Sorokin (1942) stated that disasters have significant capacity to produce socio-cultural changes; and empirical studies conducted by Bates and others (1963), Bates (1976), Cuny (1983), Dyer and others (1992) and Picou and others. (1992), Nigg and Tierney (1993) have traced varied socio-cultural changes post the occurrence of disasters. This paper also concludes that the Nicobarese of the southern group of Nicobar islands have undergone various socio-cultural changes in the post-tsunami period. These changes are primarily the corollaries of their cross cultural contact with modern populations and the manifestations of culturally insensitive welfare and development programmes initiated by the administration in the post-tsunami phase. The Nicobarese culture has been ruptured after the tsunami causing significant changes that include the destruction of indigenous livelihood and knowledge, modernisation of housing patterns, adoption of modern technology, food and clothing, changes in spatiality and natural resources, techno-centric recreational activities, and so on.

Cuny (1983) argued that sometimes aid is provided in a manner that impedes recovery. The welfare and development work initiated in the post-tsunami phase has actually harmed the Nicobarese in numerous ways as discussed in detail in the arguments put forth in the paper. Welfare and development activities have, as evidenced, adversely impacted the Nicobarese culture. Self-identity of the Nicobarese has been negatively impacted and social relations among them have become less cohesive due to the disintegration of the *tuhet* system. Indigenous ceremonies and festivals have lost their spirit and traditional authority of the elderly has been replaced by the administrative authority. Traditional social order and cohesion among the Nicobarese has also waned, and many social problems—alcoholism, consumerism, unemployment, disobedience and inactivity have destabilised the community's societal equilibrium. Brochmann (2003) argued that hasty technological changes disrupt the functioning of people after disasters. This disruption and confusion is evident among the Nicobarese who purchase modern gadgets immediately after they received monetary compensation.

Svensen (2009) argued that class divisions, alliances, priorities of authority and ideologies are visible after disasters. The agenda of the administration in this context can be analysed through the changes they have influenced in the socio-cultural fabric of the community. A package of 'modernity' that included housing, rations, material goods, technology and monetary compensation was provided at the intermediate shelters which initiated changes in their culture. Welfare and development strategies thus focused on ecological and cultural transformation among the Nicobarese along the lines of modern, rational and logocentric order.

Oliver-Smith (1996) and Bolin (1993) argued that the relocation of communities after disasters could have negative consequences. The policy of uprooting the Nicobarese from their original pattern of settlement had serious repercussions on their cultural identity. The post-tsunami interventions of the administration intended to change the subjectivities of the Nicobarese, which have already been altered to a considerable extent. Change in the spatiality of the Nicobarese led to the alienation of their indigenous subjectivities and the subordination of their cultural identity to that of mainstream culture. Post-tsunami interventions have subjugated subaltern knowledges and shunned the cultural practices of the Nicobarese. This period of seven years has been strategically used to create a degree of change that was pre-planned and this is evident in the techniques used by the administration to bring various psychological and political dynamics into play to shape the subjectivities of the Nicobarese. A whole process of normalisation was necessary to support the necessary change and this was initiated through post-tsunami interventions. The age old traditions and cultural systems of the Nicobarese were normalised by a series of disciplinary measures taken by the administration.

In conclusion, it can be stated that though a disaster like tsunami was not preventable, but the policies and programmes for habitat and livelihood reconstruction could have been culturally sensitive and context specific. A broader national policy on rehabilitation and reconstruction implemented in a

bureaucratic manner can have serious consequences on the people and their culture. The Nicobarese people, ravaged by the tsunami, had little say in planning and implementing resettlement and rehabilitation programmes meant for their own society. The outcome has thus been detrimental to their social organisation. In addition to the loss of lives and livelihoods, they are left to live with dysfunctional social and cultural institutions. With the nature of resources that were available for rehabilitation in the aftermath of the tsunami, significant positive changes could have been initiated with the participation of affected people.

**APPENDIX 1**  
**ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS**  
**A CHRONOLOGICAL HISTORY OF OCCUPATION<sup>113</sup>**

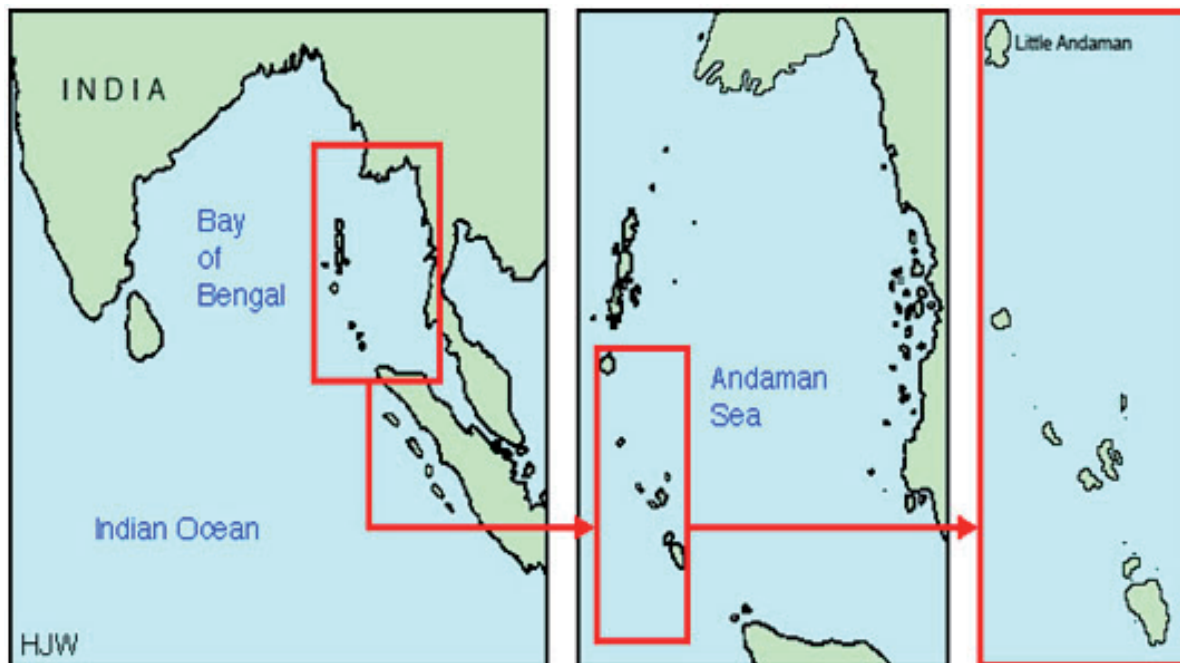
<b>Date/Year</b>	<b>Events</b>
12/12/1755	Danish settlers arrive in the Nicobar Islands
1/01/1756	Nicobar Islands a Danish Colony, named New Denmark
December 1756	Nicobar Islands renamed Frederiksoerne (Frederiks Islands)
14/4/1759-19/08/1768	Nicobar Islands abandoned
1/06/1778-1784	Nicobar Islands occupied by Austria, (annexed 12 July 1778), renamed The Theresia Islands.
1787-July 1805	Nicobar Islands abandoned
September 1789-May 1796	Andaman Islands a British possession (Port Cornwallis), Part of British India (abandoned May 1796)
1807-1814	Nicobar Islands occupied by Britain
1814-31/07/1831	Nicobar Islands abandoned
31/07/July 1831	New Danish settlement named Fredrikshoi
13/06/1834-5/01/1846	Nicobar Islands abandoned
5/01/1846	Nicobar Islands reclaimed for Denmark (re-annexed 15 Feb 1846)
1848	Nicobar Islands abandoned
22/01/1858	Andman Islands resettled by Britain. (subordinated to British India [to Burma 1864-1868] )
16/10/1868	Danish rights to the Nicobar Islands sold to Britain, part of British India.
23/03/1942-6/10/1945	Japanese occupation
December 1943-August 1945	Administered by the Japanese-sponsored Free India Movement (Provincial Government of Free India); Andamans are renamed Shaheed Islands and Nicobars are renamed Sawaraj Islands.
15/08/1947	Part of Independent India

<sup>113</sup> Source: Cahoon, Ben 2000; World Statesmen.org

## APPENDIX 2 INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI<sup>114</sup>



Andaman and Nicobar Islands<sup>115</sup> (India)



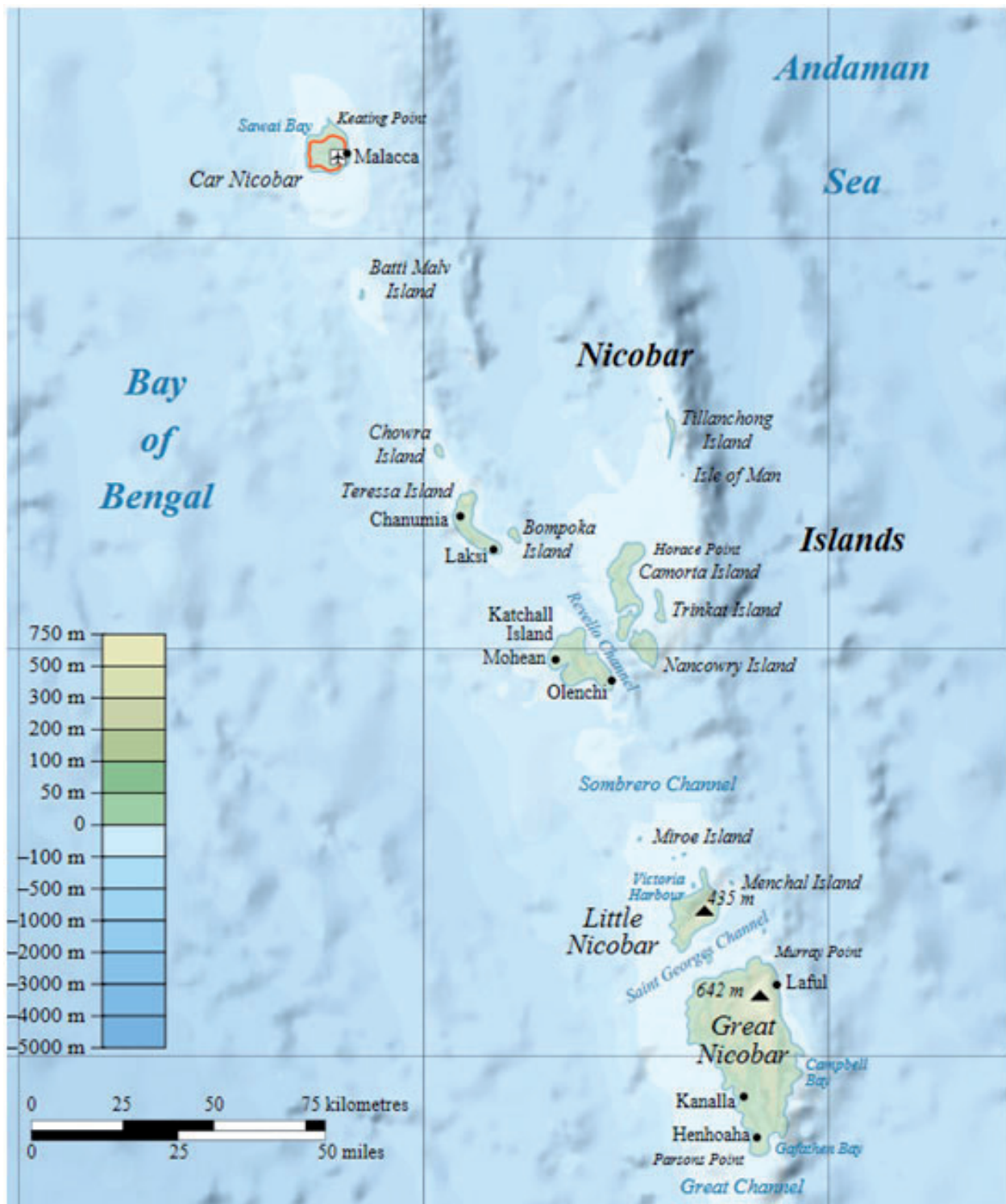
Nicobar Archipelago<sup>116</sup> (India)

<sup>114</sup> WorldAtlas.com, 2013

<sup>115</sup> *The Nicobar Islands: The Nicobar Maps, 2009*

<sup>116</sup> Wikipedia, 2013 (snipped)





## APPENDIX 3 FIELD SNAPSHOTS<sup>1</sup>



*Pic: 1 (Great Nicobar)  
The post-tsunami Nicobarese permanent shelters at Rajiv Nagar.*



*Pic: 2 (Great Nicobar)  
The post-tsunami Nicobarese intermediate/ temporary shelters at Rajiv Nagar.*



*Pic: 3 (Great Nicobar)  
Barnabaas explaining the structure of their indigenous houses,  
while the elderly man looks at the pre-tsunami photographs of his tribe.*



*Pic: 4 (Little Nicobar)  
Didi looking out from her post-tsunami self-constructed kitchen.*



*Pic: 5 (Great Nicobar)  
Omni Van, a post-tsunami purchase, rusting in peace.*



*Pic: 6 (Great Nicobar)  
The traditional kitchen of the Nicobarese*



*Pic: 7 (Little Nicobar)  
A Nicobarese with a hunting gun at Maka Chua*



*Pic: 8 (Little Nicobar)  
Primary Health centre at Maka Chua (locked)*



*Pic: 9 (Little Nicobar)  
Primary School, Maka Chua (locked)*



*Pic: 10 (Little Nicobar)  
Police outpost, Maka Chua (locked)*



*Pic: 11 (Little Nicobar)  
Gilbert indicating his pre-tsunami plantations that are submerged now*



*Pic: 12 (Great Nicobar)  
The Nicobarese of New Chingeh*

## ENDNOTES

1 The field snapshots were taken between December 2011 and January 2012

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