

INTRODUCTION

THE Andaman Islands are part of a chain of islands stretching from Cape Negrais in Burma to Achin Head in Sumatra. This line of islands forms a single geographical system, as it were a submarine range of mountains, the highest points rising here and there above the surface of the ocean. Some 80 miles or so from Cape Negrais lies the first of the islands in the chain, Preparis Island, between which and the mainland the sea depth does not exceed 100 fathoms. Southwards of this the submarine ridge sinks to a depth of about 150 fathoms, rising again to form the small group of islands known as the Cocos, some 50 miles from Preparis. Geographically the Cocos may be regarded as part of the Andaman Group. Landfall Island, the most northerly point of the Andamans proper, is only distant from them some 30 miles, and the sea depth between does not exceed 45 fathoms. The Andaman Group itself consists of the Great and Little Andaman with their outlying islets, and occupies a distance approximately north and south of about 210 miles. Eighty miles to the south of the Andamans lie the Nicobar Islands, a scattered archipelago occupying a distance of about 160 miles from north to south. The sea between the Andamans and the Nicobars is over 700 fathoms deep. Deep sea also divides the Nicobars from Sumatra, which is about 110 miles distant from the most southerly point of Great Nicobar.

This line of islands is part of a long fold extending from the eastern end of the Himalayas, which includes the Arakan Yomah Range of Burma and the Andaman and Nicobar

Islands and finds its continuation in the islands off the west coast of Sumatra¹.

On the west the Andamans are separated from the coast of Madras, 700 miles distant, by the Sea of Bengal. On the east the Andaman Sea, a depression with a depth of over 1000 fathoms, separates the Andamans and Nicobars from the Malay Isthmus and Peninsula. Across the Andaman Sea, less than 100 miles distant from the Andamans, there runs a line of volcanic activity, marked by two small islands, Barren Island in Lat. 12° 15' N. and Long. 93° 50' E., and Narkondam in Lat. 13° 26' N. and Long. 95° 15' E.²

The Cocos, the Andamans and the Nicobars are now part of the Indian Empire. The Cocos Islands are occupied by a station for wireless telegraphy. In the Andaman Islands there is a penal settlement at Port Blair, to which are sent the criminals of India and Burma. The Nicobars are treated as one with the Andamans for administrative purposes.

Until the nineteenth century the Cocos Islands were uninhabited. The Andamans and the Nicobars have for many centuries been inhabited by two entirely different races. The Andamanese belong to that branch of the human species known to anthropologists as the Negrito race. They are short of stature with black skins and frizzy hair. The Nicobarese, on the other hand, resemble the races of Indo-China and Malaya, and have brown skins and lank hair, and are of medium stature.

The Andaman Islands consist of the Great Andaman and the Little Andaman, and a number of smaller islands. The Great Andaman may be regarded as one island, although it is divided by narrow sea water creeks into four areas, often spoken of as separate islands and called North Andaman,

¹ The formation of the Arakan Fold (including the Andaman and Nicobar Islands), dates from the middle of the Tertiary Period, and was apparently connected with the great movements that produced the Himalaya-Alpine mountain system and the Circum-Pacific Fold. The Andaman Sea, in the later Tertiary period, was prolonged much further to the north, over the region now occupied by the Pegu Yomah.

² This line of volcanic activity is a minor continuation of the Sunda Range of volcanoes of Java and Sumatra. It is continued northward, parallel to the Arakan Fold, as far as the extinct volcano of Puppadoung, east of Pagan, not far from Lat. 21°.

INTRODUCTION

3

Middle Andaman, Baratang and South Andaman. It is a long narrow stretch of land with a much indented coast, surrounded by many smaller islands, of which the most important are Interview Island off the west coast, Ritchie's Archipelago on the east, Rutland Island at the extreme south, and the outlying North Sentinel Island. The length of the Great Andaman with Rutland Island is nearly 160 miles, while the breadth from sea to sea is nowhere more than 20 miles. The Little Andaman lies to the south of the Great Andaman, about 30 miles distant from Rutland Island, from which it is separated by a shallow strait with a maximum depth of only 21 fathoms. The island is about 26 miles long from north to south and about 16 miles wide.

Viewed from the sea the islands appear as a series of hills, nowhere of any great height, covered from sky-line to high-water mark with dense and lofty forest. The hill-ranges run approximately north and south, in the same direction as the islands themselves, and attain a greater elevation on the east than on the west. The highest point of the North Andaman is Saddle Peak (2402 feet), that of Middle Andaman is Mt Diavolo (1678 feet), while the South Andaman has the Mt Harriett Range (1505 feet), and in Rutland Island there is Mt Foord (1422 feet). There are no streams of any size. The water drains from the hills into tidal creeks running through mangrove swamps, often many miles in length. The coast is broken by a number of magnificent harbours. The shores are fringed with extensive coral reefs, and on these and in the creeks there is abundance of fish and molluscs.

The islands, save for the clearings of the Penal Settlement, are covered with dense tropical forest. There are few mammals, the only two of any size being a species of pig (*Sus andamanensis*, Blyth) and a civet-cat (*Paradoxurus tyleri*, Tytler). The other mammals are a few species of rats, a tree-shrew and some species of bats. Of birds there are many different species, some of them peculiar to the islands. The reptiles include a considerable number of species of snakes, and a few species of lizards, of which the most noteworthy is the large Monitor lizard (*Varanus salvator*).

The climate is warm and moist, and fairly uniform throughout the year. The mean temperature for the year at Port Blair is about 86° F. (80° F. on the wet bulb thermometer). The lowest temperatures are recorded in January and February, and the highest in March, April, or May. The average lowest temperature in the South Andaman over a period of seven years is 66·7° F., the minimum during that period being 63° F. The average highest temperature in the shade for the same period was 96° F., the maximum being 97°. The average diurnal variation is 10°.

The average rainfall of seven stations in the Penal Settlement of Port Blair, for a period of seven years, was 138 inches per annum, the averages of the different stations varying from 104 to 172 inches. For the same period the average number of rainy days in the year was 177, the minimum being 160 and the maximum 196.

The islands are sufficiently far from the Equator to have a single well-defined rainy season. The greater part of the rain falls during the south-west monsoon, which lasts from the middle of May to the middle of November. The north-east monsoon extends over the other six months of the year, which include the dry and hot seasons.

The average weather can be shown most conveniently by means of a calendar.

January. Cool; little or no rain; wind N.N.E.; nights sometimes foggy.

February. Cool; little or no rain; wind N.N.E.; very clear; light airs.

March. Hot by day, cool nights; little or no rain; wind N.N.E.; light airs, occasional haze; the weather gets hotter as the month passes.

April. Very hot; little or no rain; wind variable, off-shore at night and on-shore by day; calm and hazy.

May. The first half of the month like April; the south-west monsoon sets in about the 15th; the remainder of the month cooler and with wind W.S.W.

June. Fairly cool; heavy rains; wind W.S.W., squally.

July.

August. } Do. do. do. do.

September. }

October. Variable wind and weather; generally some calm weather; waterspouts may occur.

INTRODUCTION

5

November. During the first half of the month the wind and weather are very uncertain ; a cyclone may occur ; after the middle of the month the north-east monsoon sets in.

December. Fairly cool ; not much rain ; wind N.N.E.

Many of the violent cyclonic storms that sweep across the Sea of Bengal seem to form themselves a little to the south of the Andamans. Cyclones of exceptional violence struck Port Cornwallis in 1844 and Port Blair in 1864 and 1891.

The aborigines of the Andaman Islands have been in their present home for a great many centuries. It is not possible to say with any degree of certainty how or when they first reached the islands. Geological and other evidence would seem to show that the Andamans were united to the mainland along the line of the Arakan Fold in later Tertiary times, but even this is perhaps not quite certain¹. In any case the period of past land connection seems to be so remote that it had probably ceased to exist at the time when the islands were peopled by the ancestors of the present natives. If the ancestors of the Andamanese reached the islands at the time of a past land connection, they can only have done so from the Arakan region of Burma. On the other hand, if they travelled by sea they must almost certainly have started from the Burmese coast (Pegu or Arakan). The north-east monsoon would drift them thence on to the Andamans. It is conceivable that they might have travelled from Sumatra by way of the Nicobars, but the north-east monsoon would have opposed their progress in this direction, while the south-west monsoon would have driven them to the east of the Andamans². It is hardly possible to imagine them coming from the Malay Peninsula across the wide

¹ The flora of the Andamans and Cocos contains a number of species, the presence of which can only be explained by the supposition of a past land connection with the Arakan region. (See Prain, "The Vegetation of the Coco Group," *Journ. Asiatic Soc. of Bengal*, Vol. LX, Part II, pp. 283—406.) On the other hand, the paucity of mammalian fauna is such as to lead to the conclusion that the islands were isolated at a period when the mammals now typical of the mainland did not exist there. (See Miller, "Mammals of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands," *Proc. National Museum, U.S.A.* Vol. xxiv.)

² There is no evidence of the former existence of Negritos in the Nicobars, but on the other hand, there is equally no direct evidence of their former presence in Lower Burma.

stretch of the Andaman Sea. The balance of probability is in favour of the view that the Andamans were peopled, either by sea or by land, from the region of Lower Burma.

Of the Negrito race, to which the Andamanese belong, there are two other branches still in existence. The first of these consists of the people who may be conveniently spoken of as the Semang, inhabiting the interior of the Malay Peninsula between 5° and 7° N. Latitude. The other branch of this primitive race is found in the interior of the Philippine Islands. From their present distribution it is clear that the Negritos must at some long past time have wandered over a wide area in south-eastern Asia. The connection between the Andamanese and the Semang can only have been either through Sumatra and the Nicobars, or, more probably, by way of Lower Burma. Communication between the Malay Peninsula and the Philippine Islands must have been either by way of Borneo or Celebes, or else by way of Annam and Cochin China. It is certainly many centuries, and probably many thousands of years, since the three surviving branches of the race were cut off from all communication with each other¹.

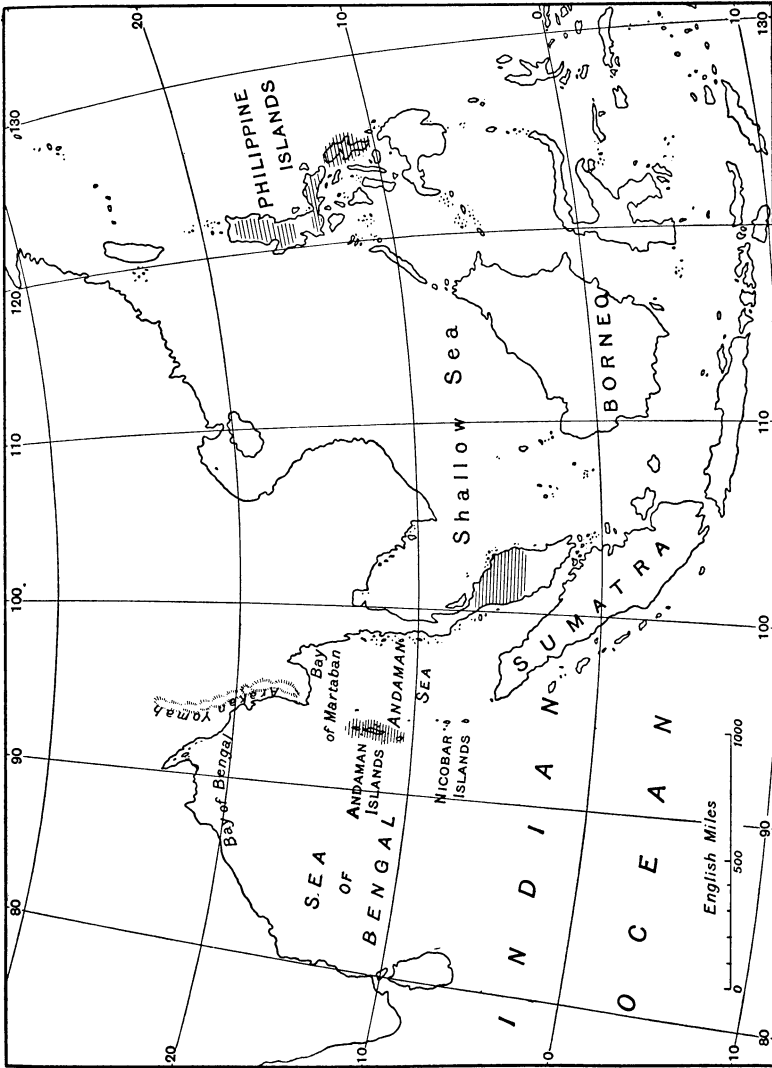
In the Malay Peninsula and in the Philippines the Negritos have for a long time been living in contact with other races. They have been driven back from the coasts and fertile valleys into the less accessible districts. There is ample evidence that they have adopted many of the customs of the races around them, and have even adopted to a great extent the language of their alien neighbours. The original Negrito culture and language and even perhaps the original physical type have been modified in these two branches of the race.

In the case of the Andaman Islanders it is possible that they have been entirely isolated in their island home, and have not been affected by contact with other races, but have been free to develop their own culture in adaptation to their own environment. If a hypothesis to this effect were accepted we should see in the Andamanese the direct descendants, in physical character, in language, and in culture, of the original Negrito

¹ On the accompanying map of south-eastern Asia the regions now occupied by the Negritos are shown by the shading.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-62556-3 - The Andaman Islanders
A. R. Radcliffe-Brown
Excerpt
[More information](#)

MAP I



South-eastern Asia, showing the present distribution of the Negrito Race

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-62556-3 - The Andaman Islanders
A. R. Radcliffe-Brown
Excerpt
[More information](#)

race. In historical times it is known that the islands have been avoided by mariners navigating the adjacent seas, owing to the fact that the natives attacked all strangers who landed or were wrecked upon their shores. Moreover, the islands offered little inducement to visitors or settlers. The coconut, which is one of the mainstays of life in tropical islands, was not found in the Andamans prior to the first European settlement.

The earliest authentic reference to the Andaman Islands seems to be that of two Arab travellers dating from A.D. 871. In the eighteenth century the Abbé Renaudot translated the account of these travels. Of the Andamans we read, "Au dela de ces deux Isles on trouve la mer appelée d'Andeman. Les peuples qui habitent sur la coste, mangent de la chair humaine, toute cruë. Ils sont noirs, ils ont les cheveux crespus, le visage et les yeux affreux, les pieds fort grands et presque longs d'une coudée, et ils vont tout nuds. Ils n'ont point de barques, et s'ils en avoient ils ne mangeroient pas tous les passants qu'ils peuvent attraper. Les vaisaux se trouvant retardez dans leur route par les vents contraires, sont souvent obligez dans ces mers de mouiller à la coste où sont ces Barbares pour y faire de l'eau, lors qu'ils ont consommé celle qu'ils avoient a bord. Ils en attrapent souvent quelques-uns, mais la plupart se sauvent¹."

It would seem that the Chinese and Japanese knew the islands in the first millenium A.D., and referred to them by the names Yeng-t'o-mang and Andaban respectively². Marco Polo gives a brief notice of the islands. "Angaman is a very large island, not governed by a king. The inhabitants are idolaters, and are a most brutish and savage race, having heads, eyes, and teeth resembling those of the canine species. Their dispositions are cruel, and every person, not being of their own nation, whom they can lay their hands upon, they kill and eat³." Some of Marco Polo's statements about the Andamans, as that the natives

¹ *Anciennes Relations des Indes et de la Chine*; De Deux Voyageurs Mahometans, qui y allerent dans le neuvième siècle; Traduites d'Arabe (par M. l'Abbé Renaudot). Paris, MDCCXVIII, pp. 5 and 6.

² Takakasu's Edition of I-tsing, pp. xxviii seq.

³ *The Travels of Marco Polo*, Edited by John Masfield, *Everyman's Library*, 1908, p. 347.

live on rice and milk, and that they have coconuts, and plantains, are incorrect. It is evident that all he knew of the islands was derived from hearsay. The passage quoted is only of importance as showing that the reputation of the Andamanese was such as to cause them to be feared and avoided.

A more trustworthy account is that of Master Caesar Frederike, who passed near the Nicobars in 1566. "From Nicubar to Pegu is, as it were, a row or chain of an infinite number of islands, of which many are inhabited with wild people; and they call those islands the Islands of Andemaon, and they call their people savage or wild, because they eat one another: also, these islands have war one with another, for they have small barques, and with them they take one another, and so eat one another: and if by evil chance any ship be lost on those islands, as many have been, there is not one man of those ships lost there that escapeth uneaten or unslain. These people have not any acquaintance with any other people, neither have they trade with any, but live only of such fruits as those islands yield¹."

There are numerous references to the Andamans in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, and all of them show that the islands were feared and avoided. During these and the previous centuries wrecks must have occurred in considerable numbers, and it is probable, from what is now known of the natives, that the mariners would be immediately slain. Visits were also paid by ships whose water supply had run out, and by Malay pirates. There is evidence that boats, either Malay or Chinese, sometimes visited the islands in search of edible birds' nests and trepang. In some cases Andamanese were captured and carried off as slaves. It is extremely improbable

¹ Extracts of Master Caesar Frederike: his Eighteene Yeeres' Indian Observations, *Purchas: his Pilgrimes*, London, 1625; Vol. II, p. 1710. In spite of the repeated descriptions of the Andamanese by early writers as ferocious cannibals, there is good reason to think that they have not deserved quite so evil a reputation. If they had ever been cannibals they had certainly abandoned the custom by the time the islands were occupied in 1858. It is improbable that such inveterate man-eaters, as they are supposed to have been, would have entirely altered their ways in the course of a century or two. The legend probably had its origin in the fact that the Andamanese attacked all strangers who landed on their coasts, and (in the North Andaman, at any rate) often disposed of the bodies of slain enemies by cutting them in pieces and burning them on a fire.