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Historical Transformation, Socio-Economic Development, and Cultural Resilience of the Nicobarese Community: An Overview of the Nicobar Islands

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Abstract

The Nicobar Islands, situated in the Bay of Bengal, are home to the indigenous Nicobarese community, whose distinctive cultural heritage, traditional institutions, and ecological knowledge have evolved over centuries despite geographical isolation and external influences. This review examines the historical evolution, geographical characteristics, demographic profile, socio-economic development, and cultural resilience of the Nicobar Islands by synthesizing evidence from published literature, government reports, census publications, and anthropological studies. A qualitative descriptive research design based on systematic document analysis was adopted to explore the dynamic relationship between indigenous traditions and developmental processes. The findings indicate that the Nicobarese community has maintained strong social cohesion, customary governance, and cultural identity while adapting to changes brought about by colonial administration, missionary activities, post-independence development initiatives, and modernization. Government interventions in education, healthcare, infrastructure, and tribal welfare have significantly improved living standards; however, challenges such as climate change, natural disasters, limited connectivity, environmental vulnerability, and cultural transitions continue to affect sustainable development in the islands. The study emphasizes that future development strategies should adopt a community-centered approach that integrates indigenous knowledge, environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and inclusive governance. By consolidating multidisciplinary literature, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical transformation and contemporary development of the Nicobar Islands and provides policy recommendations for balancing socio-economic progress with the protection of indigenous cultural heritage.

Keywords: Nicobar Islands, Nicobarese, Indigenous Communities, Cultural Heritage, Socio-economic Development, Sustainable Development, Historical Transformation.

Introduction:- Twenty-two picturesque islands are scattered over a large area of the Andaman Sea to form the Nicobar district of the Andaman and Nicobar Union Territory of India. It can be considered one of the most beautiful and, at the same time, mysterious part of the Indian Territory.

Nicobar has so much to offer the world that is extra ordinary beautiful and very unique. There are very few parts of our country so fascinating as the Nicobar Islands but about which so little is known.

Although these islands are quite different from the neighboring Andaman Islands and although unlike the latter, the Nicobar Islands had hardly any penal settlement in the past, an average person on the mainland of India tends to link both these groups of islands and regard them both as “Kalapani”- dismal and inhospitable areas fit only for criminals and riff-raff of the country. The tribal people of the Nicobar Islands are often thought to be barbaric people devoid of all culture and civilization. There can be nothing further from truth these popular images of the Nicobar Islands. In reality these islands are livable pleasant places, gifted with great scenic beauty, and have gentle and smiling tribal people with a colorful culture of their own **(Kaushal Kumar Mathur IAS 1994)**.

The Nicobar Islands, since ancient times, fell on the trade route joining the western world with the South-east Asian countries. These islands were the preferred area of landing for western travelers and traders to replenish their stock of food and water as they passed by them. Foreign traders and explorers could interact with the people of the islands comfortably as they were very friendly and simple, unlike those of the Andaman Islands, which were inhabited by the hostile Negrito tribes at that time. People of the Nicobar Islands were generally scantily dressed due to the warm weather of the region. **(Dr. Tilak Ranjan Bera 2006)**.

Although numerous studies have documented the history, anthropology, geography, and tribal culture of the Nicobar Islands, much of the existing literature focuses on specific aspects such as ethnography, colonial history, disaster impacts, or tribal administration. Few studies synthesize these dimensions into a comprehensive understanding of how historical transformation has shaped the socio-economic development and cultural resilience of the Nicobarese community. Furthermore, rapid socio-economic changes, environmental challenges, and evolving development policies highlight the need for an updated review that integrates historical, cultural, demographic, and developmental perspectives. This study addresses that gap by providing a holistic analysis of the Nicobar Islands and identifying implications for sustainable development and indigenous cultural preservation.

Significance of the Study:- The study contributes to the growing body of literature on indigenous communities by providing a comprehensive synthesis of historical, socio-economic, cultural, and environmental dimensions of the Nicobar Islands. The findings will be valuable for policymakers, researchers, planners, anthropologists, tourism scholars, and development practitioners engaged in indigenous development, cultural preservation, disaster management, and sustainable island governance.

Objectives of the Study:- The present study aims to:

1. To examine the historical evolution of the Nicobar Islands and its influence on the socio-cultural development of the Nicobarese community.
2. To describe the geographical, climatic, and demographic characteristics of the Nicobar Islands.

3. To analyse the socio-economic transformation of the Nicobarese community in the context of colonial administration, post-independence development, and government welfare initiatives.
4. To explore the traditional customs, indigenous institutions, arts, architecture, language, and cultural practices of the Nicobarese community.
5. To assess the role of protective legislation and public policy in preserving indigenous identity while facilitating sustainable socio-economic development.
6. To identify opportunities and challenges for achieving sustainable development without compromising the cultural and ecological integrity of the Nicobar Islands.

Research Methodology

Research Design:- The study adopts a **qualitative descriptive research design** employing historical and documentary research methods. The research synthesizes published literature and official documents to examine the historical transformation, socio-economic development, and cultural resilience of the Nicobarese community.

Nature of Data:- The investigation is based entirely on **secondary data**.

Sources of Data:- Secondary information was collected from:

- Census of India publications
- Government reports of the Andaman and Nicobar Administration
- Anthropological Survey of India publications
- Ministry of Tribal Affairs reports
- Books on Nicobar history and culture
- Peer-reviewed research articles
- Historical documents
- Official statistical publications

Data Collection:- Relevant literature was identified through systematic searches of scholarly databases and government repositories. Publications focusing on the Nicobar Islands, indigenous communities, demographic change, socio-economic development, cultural heritage, geography, and tribal administration were selected.

Data Analysis:- The collected information was analysed using **qualitative thematic analysis** and **documentary content analysis**. The findings were organised under major themes including:

- Historical evolution
- Demographic characteristics
- Socio-economic development
- Traditional customs
- Cultural heritage
- Indigenous governance
- Environmental characteristics
- Development challenges

Descriptive statistics from Census reports were incorporated to support the discussion of demographic trends.

Scope of the Study:- The study covers the Nicobar Islands with particular emphasis on the Nicobarese community and examines their historical development, geography, demography, economy, culture, and contemporary development.

Historical Evaluation:- The Nicobar Islands present the panorama of a tribal society in the throes of change. The islands lie in the south eastern corner of the Bay of Bengal separated by hundreds of miles of ocean from the mainland of India. Due to their isolated geographical position, the outside contacts in the past were so limited that they hardly touched the life of the people and for centuries the Nicobarese tribal society had remained more or less immune to change.

In spite of their isolated geographical position, there have been some outside contact with these islands from very early times. This was partly due to the fact that the Nicobar Islands were situated along the line of ancient trade between India and countries of South-East Asia and partly because unlike many other tribal people, the Nicobarese had attained certain minimum standard of organized life very early and had coconut and betel nut which they could exchange for some goods from outside. Thus, these islands appear to have attracted attention from very early times. It is accepted by scholars that there is mention of the Nicobar Islands in the works Hellenic writers such as Gerini and Ptolemy. They are also believed to be referred as ‘Lankhabalus’ in the Arab Relations (851 A.D) and as ‘Lo-jen-kuo’ i.e. ‘ Land of the Naked People’ in the accounts of the Chinese Buddhist Monk, I-Tsing, who came to India in the Seventh Century.

The first definite reference to the Nicobar Islands is, however, found in the great Tanjore inscription of 1050 A.D. Chola kings, who with their strong navy had contacts with these islands, have described them in the inscription as ‘Nakkavaram’ which means the ‘Land of the Naked’. It is significant that in all earlier accounts, the description of the Nicobar Islands as ‘Land of the Naked’ is repeated. This was perhaps due to the fact that previously all Nicobarese men used to wear loincloth of very diminutive proportion with one end hanging behind loose in the shape of a tail and from the ships passing these islands, the people must have appeared as naked and with tails. The name ‘Nakkavaram’ was taken up by other medieval writers and its variations are found in the later works of Portuguese, Dutch, Dane, and Swede mariners and indeed the modern name Nicobar of this group of islands has been derived from it.

From the Sixteenth Century onwards, the islands attracted the attention of Christian missionaries. The Jesuit, the Danes, the Italian, the French all missionaries’ attempts to spread Christianity were failed in sixteenth and seventeenth century. As the colony set up by the Danes in 1756 did not flourish and their missionary activities failed, in 1848 they relinquished the sovereignty over these islands and removed all remains of their settlement. In 1869, as a result of negotiation with the Danish Government, the British formally took possession of the islands.

Although the efforts of the earlier missionaries to spread Christianity were unsuccessful, they did contribute something to the life of these islands. Many vegetables and fruits now found in these islands as well as cows and some breeds of pigs were probably introduced by the missionaries. The wooden fencing used by the Nicobarese to protect their plantations is believed to be learnt from the Danish Moravian missionaries. Some of the missionaries have also left valuable accounts of the life in the islands in those times.

The British made the Nicobar Islands a part of the state of Andaman and Nicobar Islands which were governed by a chief commissioner from Port Blair in the Andaman Islands. They were not interested in elaborate administration of the islands and only an Agent was posted at Car Nicobar which being the most populous and developed island of the Nicobar Group became the head quarter for the administration of the entire group of islands. The job of the Agent was largely to keep liaison with the local people and to maintain law and order.

Unlike their occupation of the mainland of India, the British were not motivated by any desire of economic profit from these islands. Thus no special taxes were levied on the people and in general they were spared of exploitation. The British, however, maintained an attitude of non-interference in the lives of the people and pursuing this negative attitude, they did not take any steps for the development of the islands and the economic advancement of the people.

With the British occupation of the islands, the contacts with the mainland of India grew. Many Indian traders, especially those from Laccadive and Mincoy Islands, came for trade of coconut and betel nut and established shops in these islands. The traders brought a variety of items of general merchandise with them and the people of the islands, especially of Car Nicobar, adopted many articles of daily use of the people of the mainland of India. The traders, however, exploited the simple and trusting Nicobarese to the utmost. The British administration which was not particularly concerned about the welfare of the people did not take any steps to check the traders and maintained an attitude of strict neutrality. Indeed, though with the coming of traders, the material culture of the people was somewhat affected, their lot did not improve and they remained in dire poverty and usually under heavy debt of the traders.

The most significant feature of the British occupation of the islands was the beginning of the spread of Christianity. One mission of the Church of England was established at Car Nicobar which was encourage by the British Administration, in 1895, Vedappan Solomon, who was an Indian missionary with great zeal, was posted as Agent in Car Nicobar and the Christian movement acquired a new force. He established the first Anglican movement acquired a new force. He established the first Anglican church-called St. Thomas Church- in the Nicobar Islands at Mus village of Car Nicobar (which was at that time the head quarter of the administration) in 1895. He was also smart enough to realize that if Christianity had to be spread in the islands, he would have to select some outstanding local boys to carry on his work in the future. With this end in view, he and his wife opened the first school at Mus village in Car Nicobar in which he enrolled bright and promising young boys, mostly the sons of the village headmen as they were likely to command more influence. One of these boys was John Richardson who was later destined to become a great leader of his people and who can be said to have ushered a new era in the history of these islands. From very early childhood, John Richardson showed qualities of leadership and remarkable intellectual powers. Agent Solomon, therefore sent him for higher studies in Burma under missionary guidance. On return from Burma, John Richardson took up the work of the missionary school. He being one of the people had greater influence on them and the number of students in his school grew steady and mainly because of him, Christianity started to spread.

Due to some spread of education and conversion of a few people to Christianity many of the old beliefs in witchdoctors, spirit worship etc. started diminishing. The British Administration also put down some evil practices such as ‘Devil Murder’ in which a person considered to be a menace to the society was murdered as he was said to be under the influence of the Devil.

Despite these changes, at the outbreak of the World War II, the Nicobarese were more or less still following their primitive customs and, except for handful of Christians, clung to the age old beliefs in spirit worship and lived in dark superstitions and fear of witchdoctors.

The Second World War and the consequent Japanese occupation of Car Nicobar and other islands from 1942 to 1945 brought the greatest upheaval in the history of these islands. So far no outsiders had come to the islands that had used force against the people or had inflicted any special cruelty on them. However the Japanese, who occupied the islands without any resistance, were so much carried away by considerations of enmity to the British subjects that they inflicted extreme torture and cruelty on the people particularly in Car Nicobar. They cut down many coconut trees, got huge areas of the island cleared and made the Nicobarese to do forced labour for construction of a network of roads as well as bunker on the fringe of the island and two runways and a small jetty. In all these construction works the Japanese were motivated by the desire of strengthening their hold on the island and to fortify themselves against external attacks. However, in this process the entire face of the island was changed within a few years. The Japanese occupation ended in 1945. After a brief period of British possession, like the rest of the country, the islands also got Independence on the 15th August, 1947.

At the time of the Independence, the Nicobarese, particularly the people of car Nicobar, were in a completely changed mood. The Japanese occupation had shaken them out of their age old inactivity and they had realized the need for change. They were thus in a fit state to receive new ideas and learn new ways of life. Moreover, during the entire period of Japanese occupation, the greatest sufferings had been experienced by the Christian minority who on account of their knowledge of English and more advancement were considered by the Japanese as special allies of the British. However, throughout the dark period of war, the Christians led by John Richardson displayed great qualities of courage, heroism and leadership and were instrumental in keeping up the morale of the people. Thus, after the war, the Christians rose in the esteem of the people and Bishop Richardson (John Richardson was made Bishop in 1950) emerged as a great leader of the people. Indeed within a few years after the end of the Second World War almost all the people of Car Nicobar gave up their old animistic religion consisting of beliefs in spirits and witchdoctors and embraced Christian faith. In the other islands also there were many converts to Christianity, though its spread was not so swift or as complete as in Car Nicobar. The change of religion put an end to many primitive practices of spirit worship, sacrifices etc. and swept away many of the centuries old superstitions.

It was also fortunate for the people that the old unscrupulous traders, who in the past had exploited the Nicobarese ruthlessly, either had fled from the islands or was killed during the Japanese occupation. After the independence, the Government was keen that the traders do not return to exploit the people and to protect the interest of the people, Andaman and Nicobar islands

(Protection of Aboriginal Tribes) Regulation was passed in 1956 under which entry in the tribal area of the Nicobar Island is restricted and no outsiders can carry on trade and business without taking a license from the chief commissioner. The government also encouraged the co-operative movement and co-operative societies were established in all the villages of Car Nicobar and at important places in the other islands. Due to the growth of the co-operatives and the end of their economic exploitation, the Nicobarese acquired new prosperity. They now had resources to purchase new articles from the shops of the two companies to which license was given to carry on trade in the islands under the conditions of the license. This too helped in bringing about many changes in the daily habits of the people **(Das S T 1982)**.

Demographic Character:- The population of the Nicobar Islands is growing rapidly. In 1921 census the population of these islands was found to be 9272 which reached to 36842 in the year 2011 which exhibit a growth of 297%. This is remarkable because usually it is observed that when the tribal people come into contact with outside civilization, they decrease in number. The fact that in the case of the Nicobarese, the population has increased, rather than decreased, is a tribute to their virility and organized way of life. The fact that all the people get enough to eat has further enabled them to resist any harmful influence from outside. Decadal Variation of Total Population in the District of Nicobar is given below in the table.

Table No.5.1

S/No.	Census Year	Total Population	Percentage Decadal Variation
1	1921	9272	----
2	1931	10240	10.4
3	1941	12452	21.6
4	1951	12009	-3.6
5	1961	14563	21.3
6	1971	21665	48.8
7	1981	30454	40.6
8	1991	39208	28.7
9	2001	42068	7.3
10	2011	36842	-12.4

Source: www.censusindia.gov.in

In fact, after the Independence, with the increased prosperity, availability of medical facilities and other programs of their welfare, the death rate have been cut down greatly, while their birth rate remains as high as before. As the availability of land for plantation purposes in these islands is limited, now some population pressure has started being felt in Car Nicobar. The problem is not serious at present because still there is sufficient land and other resources which can sustain the increased number of people, but if from now on the people do not plan their population growth and the present rate of increase is maintained, serious population problem would arise in the future.

But when we compare 2001 population with 2011 there is a decrease in the population growth that due to deadly tsunami of 2004 which devastated badly the Nicobar group's of islands and many Nicobarese lost their life and property in it.

Socio-economic Development:- The Government launched many programs for the development of these islands and the welfare of the people. As these islands were neglected for centuries, concerted efforts were made for their development and within a few years many important development works were completed. With the increased activities of the state, the number of Government officers and staff in the islands increased and the Nicobarese copied many items of the life of their fellow countrymen from the mainland who had come to the islands to serve them. These increased contacts with the mainland further helped in bringing about changes in the traditional way of life.

Thus, the process of change which had started with the British occupation of these islands acquired a new height after Independence on account of the change of religion of the people, launching of development programs, increased contacts with their countrymen from the mainland of India and the growth of prosperity and purchasing power of the people. The pace of change was so remarkable that within a few years the habits, beliefs and attitudes of the people were altered almost as much as they had been previously in centuries of historical evolution of the Nicobarese culture. The process of change is even now going on with unabated vigor and is affecting all aspects of the life of the people.

And yet, much of the old Nicobarese culture still remains and is likely to endure. The basic occupations of the people and the nature of village economy have not changed. The social organization with the joint family system as its cornerstone has also remained intact. In the islands other than Car Nicobar, the old animistic religion still survives. Even in Car Nicobar, with slight modifications many of the old customs are still followed and traditional feasts and festivals are celebrated. The age old beliefs die hard and some of them continue to influence the lives of the people in spite of the change of religion. The calm and peaceful atmosphere of the islands and the isolated geographical position further favor the retention of much that is old. The outside contacts, have no doubt, increased tremendously in recent years but they are still limited on account of infrequent means of communications with the mainland and the scope of other cultural influences affecting the life of the Nicobarese becomes restricted. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands(Protection of Tribes) Regulation, under which entry in the Nicobar Islands is restricted and only Government servants on duty and their families as well as a few employees of the trading companies are normally allowed to enter these areas, has also helped in the preservation of the basic characteristic of the Nicobarese culture. The policy of the Government of helping the tribal people to advance and make economic progress without interfering with their lives and of respecting their customs and tradition has further forward the conservation of their culture. The reluctance of the Nicobarese to marry outsiders has also contributed to their remaining a distinct cultural group above all; the innate conservation of the tribal minds contends against the forces of change in all spheres and retards their pace as well as reduces their effect.

Indeed, at present there is and conservation in the Nicobar Islands and only by constantly keeping both these factors in view, a true picture of the socio-economic conditions of the islands and the life and character of the people can emerge (**Kaushal Kumar Mathur IAS 1994**).

Traditional Custom: The marriage which takes place due to continued affection resulting from courtship is performed through the negotiation of the parents of both the sides. After the marriage the couple may either live in the bride's or bridegroom's house depending on the need of the helping hand in any family. Dowries are given to the wife's people. As a religious rites, their heads are shaved off during the marriage and are confined in an enclosed place for 7 days. Adultery is considered as a crime against the society.

The religion is undistinguished animism. In their community life there is abundance of ceremonies and festivals which are mostly aimed at exercising and scaring spirits. They are highly afraid of the spirits and ghosts and the festivals are held during the night. The superstition is so deeply ingrained among Nicobarese that the efforts of eradicating them have proved fruitless.

Cultural Heritage: The persons who are charged for serious offences such as murder, habitual theft and public annoyance are put to death with great cruelty in public. However such devil murders of the Nicobarese are gradually decreasing. Still now, however a large number of taboos condition their activities. Witches and witch-finders still now abound in numbers.

Language: Although they speak their own language, they understand other language too. Of many languages, Portuguese, English, German, Malay and Chinese, which had been in vogue in the islands, English, Burmese and Hindustani are well understood.

The uneven distribution of the population is a distinct feature of the islands. Some of the smallest islands, the Car Nicobar and choowra have the maximum agglomeration and in consequence the highest density.

Geography: Both the Andaman and Nicobar group of islands are believed to have once formed the part of the land mass of South East Asia. It is said that there was a continuous mountain range connected to the Arakans of Burma (Cape Negrais) at one end and to the Sumatra Island of Indonesia (Achin Head) at the other. About 150 million years ago, due to geological activity, the land near about these islands-submerged and the summits of the mountain range and other elevated areas standing out of the sea became the islands of the present day. The district of Nicobar lies between 6° and 10° north latitude and between 92° and 94° east longitudes covering an area of 1,841 Sq. Km. This district also consists of three tehsils viz. Car Nicobar, Nancowry and Great Nicobar comprising of 90 inhabited and 110 uninhabited villages. The northern most inhabited Island of Nicobar district is Car Nicobar and that of the southernmost is Great Nicobar. It is worthy to mention here that the southernmost point of Nicobar district viz. Indira Point is the southernmost part of our country. This district covers only 22.32 per cent of the total geographical area of the Union Territory.

The Islands of the Nicobar group are generally less hilly and present flat to undulating terrain with rare hills and hill ranges. Car Nicobar, with an area extent of 129 sq.km. forms the northernmost extension of the Nicobar group of Islands. It is a flat Island, except for the central part. The elevated

area is gently undulating with low linear ridges trending NNW- SSE. The maximum elevation in the central raised parts is approximately 69 m above mean sea level. The Island shelf is fringed by coral on all sides. The shelf is relatively steep in the east and west sides of the island as compared to the north and south sides. The coral reefs around the Island get submerged during the high tide period. Sandy beaches, with a width varying between 5 m and 50 m, occur all along the coast of the Island between the coral reef and the main landmass. Most of the water courses to the south converge in an extensive mangrove swamps, north of Kimois village. The high tide water enters all these water courses for over 2 km along upstream. The Great Nicobar Island exhibits highly undulating and immature topography, formed by coastal highland gradually coming down to the sea all around. The shape of the Island is roughly elliptical. Mt. Thullier (642m) is the highest peak and lies in north-central part of the Island.

Climate: As the Nicobar lie close to the Equator, their climate is tropical. It is hot and wet throughout the year. However, due to the effect of the sea all rounds, good breeze and frequent rainfall, the temperature never goes up as much as in some parts of the interior of the mainland of India. The hottest months are March and April and the coolest December and January. The temperature in the hottest months is in the range of 32° C maximum and 24°C minimum, while in the cooler months in the range of 28° C maximum and 22° C Minimum. The climate is more or less the same throughout the year and there are hardly any sharp divisions of seasons. The only way to divide the year into seasons is according to the Monsoon blows, and it is the chief carrier of rain. It receives rainfall from both North-East and South West Monsoon.

Soil Condition: The soil varies from Island to Island. In general it may be said that the soil near the coast is sandy loam while in the interior at places it is even thick clay loam. On account of the sandy nature of the soil, there is no accumulation of water at the abadi sites and the areas near the coast and the villages remain remarkably clean and free of mud even after rainfall. At almost all places the soil is mixed up with decayed vegetable matter and is thus very fertile. The tropical climate and fertile soil favor thick luxuriant growth of vegetation. The vegetation differs from place to place according to the soil and distance from the sea.

Forest: The forests are very fascinating. There is rich variety of trees and plants and there is constant struggle for survival. The most important tree from the point of view of the Nicobarese is Coconut palm which is the main source of their economy. These trees specially thrive on the fringe of the islands near the sea coast where the soil is sandy and some salt water is available to the trees due seepage. Next to coconut palm the most important plant where the moisture is greater and the soil thicker. The betelnut got from areca palm plants is the second most important source of income of the people. Another very important plant for the Nicobarese is Pandanus which is called 'kevadi' in Hindi. The plant mostly grow near the shore, though it is also found in the interior. The Pandanus plant grows to a height of about 15 to 20 feet and has a fairly thick trunk with branches near the top. Each branch is topped by a crown of thin long leaves which look like giant blades of grass. The fruit is globular in shape, about 1-2 feet in diameter, and is made of several small pods with seeds inside. The ripe fruit is eaten. Mats are made out of the leaves.

Drinking Water Sources: The Nicobarese are very particular about drinking clean water and have separate well for drinking and for bathing and washing purposes. Drinking water wells are sometimes covered with coconut leaves to protect them from domestic animals. Except for Chowra Island, Adequate drinking water is available in all the inhabited islands of the Nicobar group. The normal sources of drinking water are wells, though in Great Nicobar there are also fresh water streams and at one or two places in other islands such as Ramjau in Camorta and Tapong in Nancowrie there are springs. Near the sea-shore sweet water is found sometimes just about 8-10 feet below the ground surface. The Nicobarese have a remarkable knowledge as to where good water is found and always select correct places for construction of wells.

Distance from other parts of the world: Across the sea between to the west of the Nicobar Islands is the mainland of India, in the north the Andaman Islands, in the east Malaysia and in the south Indonesia. The distance between Car Nicobar and Chennai and Kolkata on the mainland India is respectively about 650 and 850 nautical miles. Car Nicobar is 60 miles from Little Andaman, the southernmost island of the Andaman Group and 150 miles from Port Blair, the headquarter of the Union territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The distance between Indira Point (Pygmalion Point), the southern tip of Great Nicobar Island, and Achin Head, the tip of Sumatra Island of Indonesia, is just about 91 miles.

The Art and Culture: The art and culture of the Nicobarese are linked to their environment and needs. Their large seafaring canoes are skillfully outrigger structures, light and easily hauled and carried. Each is made of one piece of wood, hollowed out very carefully. This canoe is flat-bottomed, big-bellied, narrow towards the top, with a small raised taffrail, batten for seats at regular intervals and with long and projecting bows.



Large Seafaring Nicobarese Canoes



Sleeping Mat, Basket and Coconut Oil
Made by the Nicobarese Community

Two very important traditional handicrafts of the Nicobarese are Basket-making and Mat Making. These are usually made by women in their spare time. Baskets are made of cane which is plentiful in the jungle area. They are used for carrying loads and storing articles. Baskets are made both with and without lids. They are quite strong and have a good finishing.

The Nicobarese also manufacture diving masks and fishing harpoons. The Nicobarese cross-bow and arrow are symbols of their craftsmanship. The Chowra islanders are skilled potters; the huge pots are turned by hand. In Car Nicobar, every village has a Mahila Mondal Center apart from that one Industrial Training Institute where a craft instructor imparts training in stitching. They make

sleeping mats from pandanus leaves and basket from cane. On festive occasions, beautiful design and figures of stars, crosses and flowers are made from tender coconut and banana leaves, while coconut shells, with and without spouts, are used as toddy and water containers. Indigenous fish traps, tamatu, of many kinds, cages for fowls and pens for pigs are also crafted by them.

The articles of handicrafts most in demand by visitors are toy canoe models which are made from soft wood by shaping it with knife and putting sails of cloth, these Canoe models faithfully reproduce the shape of the canoe, complete with outrigger. Other than that the small Nicobarese hut, sleeping Mat, embroidery work on cloth, indeed, whatever the Nicobarese lack by way of quantity, they make up by the quality of their products, and if they start greater production of the articles of handicrafts and proper arrangements for their publicity and transport are made, they are bound to be very popular in the main land.

House Pattern: The houses of the Nicobarese before tsunami were unique in design and generally of high standard. These people had learn to make good houses very early in their history and even these days with slight modifications the houses are constructed in the traditional style. Most of the hoes are on stilts with their floor raised about 6 to 8 feet from the ground level and resting on strong posts. The materials used for the construction of houses are wooden logs, timber, stems of areca palm, thatching grass, cane, bamboo and coconut leaves, which were all available locally. After the tsunami the Andaman administration constructed tsunami permanent shelter in rectangular shapes on a high platform.



Outside view of Traditional Nicobarese Hut

In side view of Traditional Nicobarese hut

Traditional Nicobarese huts are huge structures with thatched roofs constructed on log pillar. The floor of the hut is made of bamboo sheets that permit cool air circulation and work as a natural air conditioner. They use ladder to climb the hut which is removed and kept inside the hut during the night. The elevation protects the inhabitants from the dampness of the land as it rains for more than six months in a year.

El Panam: The coastal area is called ‘el panam’. Here are situated their maternity home, public hall and graveyard. Just beyond this starts the inhabited part of the village. In this area called ‘Tuhet’, they build their houses. Beyond this towards the interior of the island is their garden area called ‘Tulong’. Here they generally grow cocoanut and betel nut trees (**Gupta B**).

Music and Dance: Music and Dance are components of Nicobarese culture. Dancing is always accompanied by singing. In Car Nicobar, men and women never dance together. But in the other islands they do. Folklore is narrated and folksongs are sung on festive occasions. They are specific to these occasions. Some of these, say, tot-ta-rong, to-ken, to-kilfut are well remembered while others have been forgotten. With the influence of film songs and Western vocal music, the Nicobarese have recently composed modern romantic music. They can play melodious tunes on the guitar and other modern musical instruments.

Car Nicobar: The northern most as well as the most important island of the Nicobar group is Car Nicobar. Carr Nicobar is also the capital of the Nicobar district. It is also the most populous island having about two-third of the total Nicobarese people. It is the first island to be encountered while approaching the Nicobar group of islands from Port Blair. It is further the most developed island of the Nicobar group and there is a great difference between the mental advancement and attitudes of the people of this island and those of the remaining islands of the Nicobar group.

Car Nicobar is a flat island of area 49.59 miles with a square shape remarkably similar to that of Australia. The island has slight elevation towards its centre which rises to about 200 feet in north-west. Although there is no proper river in the island, one stream emerges from the interior in the island and runs towards north-west where it meets the sea near Passa. On the south coast of the Island, near the village Kimus, there is a big creek which goes about four miles inwards and has fresh water in its upper reaches.

The soil of the island is very fertile. At its outer edge in a belt about 2-3 miles wide there are rich coconut plantation which above all gives a tropical look at the islands.

Villages of Car Nicobar Islands:-

There are 15 villages in Car Nicobar they are

1. Mus
2. Kinmaai
3. Small Lapati
4. Big Lapathi
5. Tapoiming
6. Chuckchukia
7. Kinyuka
8. Tamalu
9. Perka
10. Malacca
11. Kakana
12. Kimus
13. Arong
14. Tee-Top
15. Sawai

All these villages are situated near the coast and are connected by a 32 miles long round- the-island- road. On the south coast of the island are two small but beautiful and prosperous villages of Kakana and Kimus.

On the eastern coast of the island there is only one village Arong. The Government Coconut Demonstration Plantation is in this village at a place called Auckchung.

On the north coast of the island there are only two villages, Sawai and Tee-Top. The village Tee-Top is very small but is remarkable for its exceedingly beautiful beach. On account of having clean white firm sand and the sea being somewhat protected and with a very gradual slope, this beach is a favorite spot for sea bathing and picnic and is specially popular with visitors to the island. A rest house has also been constructed by the Public Work Department on the beach for the convenience of the visitor. As the sea at Tee-Top is comparatively protected on account of the curve of the coast line, it is the safest point in the island and consequently when the sea is exceptionally rough all around the island, ships anchor off Tee-Top beach and stevedoring work is also done here.

The other villages of the island, Mus, Kinmai, Small Lapati, Big Lapati, Tapoiming, Chuckchuckia, Kinyuka, Tamaloo, Perka and Malacca lie in this order from north to south on the east coast of the island. In the British time, the village Mus was the head quarter of the administration and the first Church and School were also established here it has added importance on account of being the village of the Chief Headman of the island as well as of Bishop Richardson who commands great influence over all the people of the island. It is remarkable for its beautiful church and play ground where all the inter village football matches take place. For six month in the year, from November to April, ship anchor opposite this village and a pucca jetty is constructed here.

The village Big Lapati has a certain place of pride in the life of Car Nicobar Island as it is said to be the parent village from where the Nicobarese spread to the other parts of the Island. In the past there was a tradition the chief headman of the island was always of this village, but it has now been given up. However, even now many important function of the island, specially receptions to visiting dignitaries, in which all villages participate, take place in this village. The village is also important as the office of the community development block, information centre, Training-cum-Production centre of carpentry, blacksmithy, tailoring and cane and bamboo work as well as the only Higher Secondary School in the Nicobar Island located here.

The village Chukchukia has the headquarter of the Car Nicobar Trading Company which does all trading in consumer goods as well as the copra and betel nut in Car Nicobar Island.

The village Malacca is important because for six months of the year i.e. from May to October, the ship anchor off its beach and stevedoring work is done here. A pucca jetty has been constructed here. The Government guest house, where visiting officer stay, is near this village and is a nice double storied building facing the sea.

About a mile inwards the island and extending over an area carved out of the areas of both Malacca and Perka villages is what is known as the Headquarter area of the Island. Almost all important Government offices and residence of officer and other staff are located here. It is indeed the headquarter of administration of the not only the Car Nicobar Island, but of all the Nicobar Islands

and the Nicobarese call it 'Dilli' among themselves on the analogy of the capital of our country. The office of the Additional Deputy Commissioner, Civil Hospital, Sub-treasury, Sub-Post office, Police Station, Community welfare centre and the Co-operative Canteen are among the important buildings in this area. Between the villages Malacca and Kakana, in an area taken out of both these villages, is the airfield and station of the Indian Air Force.

Besides the villages, an interesting spot in the island is a small cave which lies on the loop road joining the village Kakana and the Headquarter area. The cave which is about 120 Yards long is in limestone has marked stalagmite formation. There is a legend about this cave and it is said that in the distance past small pygmy-like people lived here who on account of exploitation by the normal men disappeared into the Bowles of the earth through the cave. During the Japanese occupation, Bishop Richardson is said to have remained hidden in the cave for some time to escape arrest. He was however, eventually spotted by the Japanese who later used the cave to dump ammunition and other stores.

Other Islands of Nicobar Group: The other islands of the Nicobar group are somewhat different from Car Nicobar. Except for Chowra, they are all very thinly populated. Due to scanty population, the villages on the other islands (except Chowra) are, therefore, no more than mere clusters of a few huts and the community activities such as in Car Nicobar is not possible. The people of these islands are also more backward than those of Car Nicobar and the lack of proper means of communication and the scattered nature of the population makes development of these islands all the more difficult. As the people of these islands, (except Chowra,) have a lot of land, they are richer than the people of Car Nicobar, but they are so lazy that they do not even want to do the minimum work on their plantations and the people of Chowra-and at some places from Car Nicobar-work on the plantations of these people. In these islands Christianity has not spread in all parts and many people still follow the old animistic religion. They live in the constant fear of spirit of all sorts, under the sway of witchdoctors and observe the traditional colourful, though cruel, practices of driving away spirits on all imaginable occasions with a lot of bloody sacrifices of fowls and pigs and with much dancing and singing.

Batti Malv Island: Of the other islands of the Nicobar group, the nearest to Car Nicobar is the small uninhabited island of Batti Malv which on account of its small size is called 'Kuon-no' or the 'Little One' by the Nicobarese. It is 18 miles to the south of village Kakana of Car Nicobar Island and on clear days can be seen from its beach. Indeed that it was formerly a part of Car Nicobar, but one small bird (saka) stole it in the night by pecking it away from the land mass. However the word could not go away very far and the dawn broke. To prevent theft being noticed, the bird dropped the strip of land in the sea and the island of Batti Malv was formed. The island is said to belong to the people of village Kakana of Car Nicobar who have planted some coconut trees in it. On their annual trip to Chowra, the people of Car Nicobar occasionally stop at the island when the sea is very rough or when they want to take rest. Pigeons abound in the island and there are a lot of fish in the water round it. Thus, occasionally the people of Car Nicobar go for shooting birds and fishing also to this islands.

Chowra Island: About 40 miles from Car Nicobar, is the small, but very interesting Island Chowra. It is a narrow flat island with a small hillock at its southern most tip dominating the whole view. It is called the ‘Devil’s Abode’ as it is believed by the people that the Devil lives on it. This island with an area of 2.8 square miles and population of 1,228 is the most thickly populated island in the Nicobar group. It has five villages which are all on the east coast. It lacks adequate drinking in summer months. Indeed it neither has enough coconut trees nor any other proper means of sustaining its economy. However, the people of Chowra are particularly hard working and clever and have capitalized on the superstitions of the tribal people. From early times they have created the myth of their superior magical powers and there are many legends emphasizing the misfortunes which befall those who arouse the wrath of the people of Chowra. Even the people of Car Nicobar, who now basically afraid of them. Now due to the spread of Christianity there have been many changes in the island and a school and dispensary have also been established recently. But, still it is the citadel of tradition where the people are very backward and the witchdoctors have a great say.

The people of this island make good canoes and earthen pots, even though the timber for canoes and clay for the pots are not available in the island and have to be brought from the neighboring island of Terassa. The Nicobarese believe that for all clean and ceremonial purposes the food must be cooked in Chowra pots and that a canoe should either be purchased from Chowra or be invested with the blessings of the priests of Chowra as otherwise it would come to grief in the sea. In these circumstances, the people of Chowra always get some commission as a broker.

When the sea is calm in the months from December to April, the people of the other islands, particularly Car Nicobar, come in their canoes to Chowra to take pots and canoes from the island in exchange of cloth, rice, knives, pigs etc. the visit is not only important from the commercial point of view, but rather every Car Nicobarese male has to at least make the trip once to pay respect to his spiritual master of Chowra and the maiden voyages of young boys to Chowra are accompanied by a lot of ceremony which has been described later. The people of Chowra also go to the other islands to exchange their goods.

Besides selling canoes and earthen pots, the people of Chowra earn their livelihood through intensive cultivation of yams and other vegetables and fruits in the limited land available to them and by working as labourers in the plantations of the people of the other islands (except Car Nicobar) who are themselves too lazy to do any work. They are skilful and very hard working and make good labourers. However, only the men go for working in the other islands and they too remain away from their homes for only two months. They keep count of every day spent away from their homes for only two months. They keep count of every day spent away from their homes by making marks on a stick. Once the stick has 60 marks (i.e. two months are over) nothing can induce them to work further and they must be taken back to their island. If no ship is available, very often they would take (or steal) a canoe and row it from a distant island to Chowra without any thought to the risk involved in taking long journey across the open and rough sea. This eagerness of the extra ordinary love for their homeland and partly because they are afraid that if

they remain away from their homes too long, their wives would be seduced and snatched by other men remaining behind in the island.

Terassa and Bompuka: Chowra is the Islands of Terassa and Bompuka, of these the latter is very small and is more or less a small hill hutting out of the sea. The handful of people who live in the island have some coconut plantations and occasionally go in canoes to the neighboring island of Terassa where they sell copra to the branch shop of the trading company and purchase some consumer goods in return. Terassa is a fairly big island of a sausage shape. Its area is about 35 sq. miles. It is hilly in the centre and has a prominent hump towards the north. Its soil is generally poor, but there are considerable coconut plantations near the shore. Citrus fruits and poultry are in plenty, particularly because the population is very scanty. The people of the island are extremely lazy and backward. Indeed the people of Terrasa are perfect ‘lotus eater’ and apart from consuming huge quantities of toddy and performing rites of spirit worship, they are not interested in anything. One interesting feature of these people is their hair style. Most of the men also keep plaits which they tie up in a fashion similar to that of the orthodox people of Tamilnad. It is believed that this hair style has been adopted by the people from those of the Tamil area with whom they had perhaps contacts in the Chola period.

Camorta and Nancowrie Islands: Further south are the islands of which are all close to each other. The islands of Camorta and Nancowrie are hilly and have some flat areas only near the shore. The hill tops are grassy and with their undulating meadows have a look of English countryside. Between these islands, about 90 miles from Car Nicobar, is a magnificent natural harbor of exceeding beauty. The harbor has the added advantage of having two entrances towards east and west respectively. On one side of the harbor, in Camorta Island, there is the administrative headquarter of the Nancowrie group of islands (i.e. all islands of the Nicobar group except Car Nicobar and Batti Malv). It is at the same spot where Danish missionaries had in the past attempted to establish a settlement, but which had failed, due to unhealthy conditions, particularly the high incidence of malaria. However, some beautiful towering casuarinas trees and wild cows still remain as remnants of the Danish settlement. Now with considerable anti-malaria work, the spot has become healthier than before and there are various Government offices, residential quarters of government servants, hospital, Sub Treasury and Police Station.

On the other side of the harbor, in Nancowrie Island, is the head-quarter of the Nancowrie Trading Company, which is the only trading firm in the Nancowrie group of islands. Rani Lakshmi who is the tribal chief of Nancowrie and Camorta and who also wields considerable influence over the people of Terassa and Bompoka lives here.

There is no other important place in Nancowrie which is a small island of 19 sq. miles in area. Camorta is however, a big island of about 58 sq. miles and has three other important villages, Pillpillow, Kakana and Daring, where there is some concentration of human population and where schools, dispensaries and branch shops of the trading company have been established.

Trinket Island: Trinket Island is a small flat island which is opposite the eastern gate of the Nancowrie harbor. This island is approachable only by canoes as there is extensive coral reef round

it. The few people living in the island depend upon Nancowrie and Camorta for trade and other matters.

Katchal Island: Towards the west of Camorta and Nancowrie is the island of Katchal. It is a fairly big island and is about 61 sq. miles in area. It is slightly hilly in the centre, but has also considerable flat area. With the exception of Car Nicobar, it is the most developed island of the Nicobar group and has the best plantations of coconut and other fruits. In fact it has the best soil of all the islands of the Nicobar group and offers tremendous scope for future development. Of late, the island has been attracting the attention of the Government of India and in particular it is proposed to develop it for rubber plantations. On the western side of the island is a small bay and the village located along it is called West Bay Katchal. It is a beautiful spot which has added importance because the dynamic Rani Changa who is the Chief Head Woman of the island and member of the Home Minister's Advisory Committee, lives here. The other important place in the island is Kapanga on the east coast which the rubber plantation is proposed to be raised.

Pillomillo, Little Nicobar, Kondul and Great Nicobar Islands: The southernmost group of the Nicobar Islands consists of four inhabited islands of Pullomillo, Little Nicobar, Kondul and Great Nicobar. Pullomillo is a small island towards the north of Little Nicobar in which there is a school, dispensary and branch shop of the trading company. In fact the people of Little Nicobar depend upon this island for trading in copra and betel nut as well as for purchase of consumer goods. Pullomillo beach is exceptionally beautiful and is very much liked by visitor. Between Pullomillo and Little Nicobar, there is a good protected harbor.

Sustainable Development Challenges in the Nicobar Islands:- The Nicobar Islands face several interconnected challenges that affect their sustainable development and the well-being of the indigenous Nicobarese community. Climate change, sea-level rise, coastal erosion, and the long-term impacts of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami continue to threaten coastal settlements, livelihoods, biodiversity, and critical ecosystems. Geographical isolation and limited transport and digital connectivity restrict access to healthcare, education, markets, and economic opportunities. At the same time, increasing youth migration and modernization have contributed to changes in traditional lifestyles, raising concerns about the preservation of indigenous language, customs, and cultural heritage. Environmental degradation, including habitat loss and declining coastal ecosystems, further exacerbates these challenges. Addressing these issues requires an integrated and community-centred approach that combines climate resilience, environmental conservation, sustainable livelihood development, improved connectivity, and the protection of indigenous cultural heritage.

Suggestions: Based on the review, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthen policies for the preservation of the Nicobarese language, traditions, and indigenous knowledge.
2. Promote community participation in development planning and natural resource management.

3. Enhance climate resilience through ecosystem-based conservation and disaster preparedness.
4. Improve transport, digital connectivity, healthcare, and educational infrastructure in an environmentally sustainable manner.
5. Encourage sustainable livelihood opportunities, including value-added coconut products, fisheries, and handicrafts.
6. Support interdisciplinary and community-based research to inform evidence-based policymaking.
7. Ensure that future development initiatives balance socio-economic progress with environmental conservation and cultural preservation.

Conclusion:- The Nicobar Islands represent a unique example of the coexistence of rich indigenous heritage, ecological diversity, and socio-economic transformation. While government interventions have improved education, healthcare, and infrastructure, emerging challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, geographical isolation, and cultural transition require sustained attention. The review highlights that the long-term sustainability of the Nicobar Islands depends on integrating indigenous knowledge, environmental conservation, and inclusive development policies. A balanced and community-centred approach is essential to preserve the cultural identity of the Nicobarese while promoting sustainable and resilient development.

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