

The Study of Culture and Socio-Economic Status of Karen People in North & Middle Andaman District

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Abstract

The Karen community migrated from Burma (now Myanmar) to the Andaman Islands nearly a century ago and has successfully adapted to the physical, social, and cultural environment of their new homeland. While preserving many of their traditional customs, language, and cultural practices, they have also adopted certain cultural traits from neighbouring communities such as the Bengalis, Tamils, Ranchis, and others. This cultural interaction has enabled them to integrate into the diverse society of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands without losing their unique identity.

INTRODUCTION

India is a vast Country where people from different other countries came in different period of time and found out place to live in the neighborhood of various indigenous groups of people. They in course of time were able to adjust themselves with the prevailing ethnic and cultural environment of the areas of their settlement. For a long time these Andaman & Nicobar Islands are peopled by many groups. Long after the British Government occupied the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, They thought of establishing colonial settlements in different parts of these islands North , Middle & South Andaman and also in different satellite islands . So they drew up plans for clearing the forest for establishing settlements and also for preparing cultivable land for the settlers. For clearing the forest in different parts of Andaman Islands they required labourers . More over Andaman Islands being far away from mainland of India, they considered this area as the safer place to keep and settle the criminals rebels, freedom fighters and others. All of them gradually settled down with varied occupations.

The introduction of Anthropology as an academic discipline at the University of Calcutta in 1920, followed by its establishment in several other Indian universities, played a significant role in the development of anthropological research in India. Since then, numerous anthropologists have contributed to the understanding of the cultural, social, and economic life of diverse Indian communities. This article examines the tradition and transformation of the Karen community in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with particular emphasis on their socio-cultural changes over time. The Karen, who are presently settled in several villages of North Andaman, were brought to the islands by the British Administration with the assistance of Christian missionaries in March 1925 (Coomar, 1994, p. 87).

According to Venkatesan, the first Karen settlement was established at Webi in 1925. Over time, the Karen community expanded into several villages in North Andaman, including Deopur, Latoo, Burmadera, Karmatang-10, Karmatang-9, Borang, and Ganeshnagar. These settlements continue to

preserve many aspects of Karen culture while also adapting to the changing social and economic environment of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Research Methodology

The present study is descriptive in nature and is based entirely on secondary data. The required information was collected from government records, published reports, books, research articles, journals, and other relevant sources. The collected data were systematically organized, classified, and analyzed to understand the socio-cultural and economic characteristics of the Karen community in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The findings were interpreted using descriptive analysis to examine the traditions, transformations, and present status of the Karen community.

Statement of the Problem

The Karen community in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands consists of people who were brought from Burma (now Myanmar) by the British Administration during the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly in 1925. They may be regarded as an immigrant community that settled permanently in the islands. At present, the Karen population is concentrated in a limited number of villages in North Andaman.

This study focuses on six Karen settlements and examines various aspects of their social, cultural, and economic life. It also compares selected features of Karen society to understand the changes that have taken place over time.

Migration is generally associated with a specific purpose, such as economic development, agricultural expansion, industrial growth, or settlement of new regions. Even when migration occurs due to natural disasters, political unrest, or other unavoidable circumstances, migrant communities often contribute significantly to the development of their new place of settlement.

The migration of the Karen community to North Andaman was also linked to developmental objectives. After their arrival, they cleared forest lands for settlement and agricultural cultivation, thereby contributing to the development of the region. An important factor that encouraged the Karen people to migrate was the similarity between the ecological conditions of their native homeland in Burma (Myanmar) and those of North Andaman. This environmental resemblance facilitated their adaptation and enabled them to establish stable settlements while preserving many elements of their traditional culture.

The study therefore seeks to understand how the Karen community has maintained its cultural identity while adapting to the social, economic, and environmental conditions of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Tehsil-wise Population of Andaman & Nicobar

In 2006, two new tehsils—**Little Andaman** and **Great Nicobar (Campbell Bay)**—were created to improve administrative efficiency in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The population distribution across districts and tehsils, based on the **2001 and 2011 Census**, provides valuable insights into demographic changes over the decade. The district- and tehsil-wise population, along with the percentage share of each tehsil in the total district population, is presented in the following table.

Table: District and Tehsil-wise Population (2001 and 2011 Census)

District/ Tehsil	Male (2001)	Male (2011)	Female (2001)	Female (2011)	Total (2001)	Total (2011)	% Variation
North & Middle Andaman	56,057	54,861	48,556	50,736	105,613	105,597	-0.015
Diglipur	22,617	22,599	20,260	20,584	42,877	43,183	0.71
Mayabunder	12,748	13,329	11,164	12,459	23,712	25,788	7.85
Rangat	20,692	18,933	18,132	17,693	38,824	36,626	-5.66
South Andaman	114,262	127,283	94,209	110,859	208,471	238,142	14.23
Port Blair	78,822	89,411	63,495	76,343	142,317	165,754	16.47
Little Andaman	9,540	9,964	7,988	8,859	17,528	18,823	7.38
Ferrargunj	25,900	27,908	22,726	25,657	48,626	53,565	10.16
Nicobar	22,653	20,727	19,415	16,115	42,068	36,842	-12.42
Car Nicobar	10,663	9,735	9,629	8,106	20,292	17,641	-12.08
Nancowrie	7,288	5,967	6,274	4,667	13,562	10,634	-21.59
Great Nicobar	4,702	5,025	3,512	3,342	8,214	8,367	1.86
Total	192,972	202,871	163,180	177,710	356,152	380,581	6.86

(Source:Census2011)

Area of the Study

The study focuses on the Karen settlements in North Andaman, particularly in and around the Mayabunder region. The historical development of this area is closely associated with the forestry activities initiated during the post-independence period.

In 1950, the Government of India invited global tenders for the extraction of approximately **7,500 cubic metres of commercial timber annually** from the North Andaman Forest Division, covering an area of about **707 square kilometres**. The contract was awarded to **M/s P.C. Ray & Co. (India) Pvt. Ltd.**, a company with operations linked to Burma (now Myanmar). The agreement between the company and the President of India was signed on **31 September 1951**. To facilitate timber extraction and transportation, the company acquired two ships, **S.S. Ray Andaman** and **S.S. Ray Mayabunder**. It also established a sawmill and developed supporting infrastructure, including a club, tennis court, Durga Mandap, and a dance hall, which contributed to the growth of the local settlement.

However, the company later encountered serious financial and managerial difficulties, leading to prolonged legal disputes. As a result, it ceased operations in **1964**, and the company was officially liquidated in **1975** following an order of the Supreme Court of India.

The town of **Mayabunder** has an interesting historical background. It was once referred to as "**Bonney Town**", and the name is believed to have originated from the British forester **M. C. Bonnington**, who prepared the working plan for the forests of North Andaman in **1914**. Historical records also mention the name **Port Bonnington**.

The migration of the Karen community to the Andaman Islands was influenced by both economic and social factors. The British Administration faced an acute shortage of skilled forest labourers in the Mayabunder region and therefore sought experienced workers from Burma. At the same time, many Karen people in Burma were experiencing political unrest and social instability, prompting them to seek a more secure place for settlement.

Thus, the migration of the Karen community was driven by both the demand for skilled labour in the Andaman Islands and the search for better livelihood opportunities and social security. After settling in North Andaman, the Karen contributed significantly to forest development, timber extraction, agriculture, and the establishment of permanent settlements, thereby playing an important role in the socio-economic development of the region.

Socio-economic Culture of the Karen Community

Key Features of the Karen Community in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands

1. Matriarchal Society

- The Karen follow a **matriarchal family system**, where women hold an important position in the household.
- The **daughter is the legal heir** to the family's ancestral property, similar to the matrilineal systems found in parts of **Meghalaya** and **Kerala**.

2. Marriage System

- After marriage, the **bridegroom moves to his mother-in-law's house** (matrilocal residence) and lives with his wife's family.

3. Major Groups

- The Karen community in the Andaman Islands is divided into **two major groups**:

- **Sgaw Karen**
- **Pwo (Pow) Karen**

4. Religious Belief

- Many Karen traditionally consider themselves to be one of the "**Lost Tribes of Israel**."

5. Education

- Modern education and exposure to new ideas have significantly transformed the Karen community.
- **Alice Bwa** became the **first Karen doctor**.
- More than **577 Karen students** are pursuing education in various fields.

6. Forest Conservation

- The Karen regard the **forest as sacred** and an integral part of nature.
- They traditionally avoid:
 - Hunting female or pregnant animals.
 - Eating animals accidentally injured in the eye.

7. Respect for Forest Spirits

- Forest deities are worshipped and respected.
- Spitting or urinating in the forest is considered disrespectful to forest spirits.

8. Sacred Plant

- The **Ta Aye Wa** plant is considered sacred.
- It is never planted in dirty or impure places.

9. Traditional Dance and Music

- The Karen are known for their cheerful and festive lifestyle.
- They perform several traditional dances.
- A **long bamboo pipe** is commonly used as a musical instrument during cultural performances.

10. Naming Pattern

- Male names usually begin with "**Saw.**"
- Female names usually begin with "**Naw.**"

11. Traditional Medicine

- The Karen use **medicinal forest plants** to treat various ailments.
- Some villages traditionally have **male midwives**.

12. Lifestyle

- Many families keep **cats and dogs** as pets.
- The **guitar** is a popular musical instrument during celebrations.
- They traditionally live in **farmhouses** surrounded by agricultural land.

13. First Karen Settlement

- The first Karen settlement in the Andaman Islands was established at **Webi** in **1925**.

14. Major Karen Villages in North Andaman

- Deopur
- Latoo (Latow)
- Burmadera
- Karmatang-10
- Karmatang-9
- Borang
- Ganesh Nagar (Landfall)

Economic Activities of the Karen of the Andaman Islands

The Karen community was brought from Burma (now Myanmar) by the British Administration primarily to work as labourers in the forests of North Andaman. Their main responsibility was to clear forest land for settlement and cultivation. They were also employed as forest guards and performed other forestry-related activities. For many years, forestry remained their principal occupation.

After settling permanently in North Andaman, the Karen were allotted agricultural land for cultivation. They began growing crops and gradually adopted farming as their primary source of livelihood. However, as the population increased and families expanded, the available land became insufficient to support all households. Some families owned very little land, while others had no agricultural land at all. As a result, many Karen people sought alternative occupations such as government service, private employment, teaching, business, and wage labour to improve their economic condition.

Apart from agriculture, the Karen continue to depend on forest and marine resources. They traditionally hunt wild animals in the forests, fish in the sea, and engage in shell diving as a commercial activity. Many households also maintain home gardens where they cultivate a variety of fruit trees and other useful plants.

With increasing access to education and modern employment opportunities, many members of the Karen community have entered professional occupations in both the public and private sectors. Although agriculture remains an important occupation, the community has diversified its livelihood sources to

include salaried employment, business, and other non-farm activities. The Karen community has also consistently demanded recognition as a Scheduled Tribe, believing that such status would provide greater educational, economic, and social opportunities.

Conclusion

The Karen community migrated from Burma (now Myanmar) to the Andaman Islands nearly a century ago and has successfully adapted to the physical, social, and cultural environment of their new homeland. While preserving many of their traditional customs, language, and cultural practices, they have also adopted certain cultural traits from neighbouring communities such as the Bengalis, Tamils, Ranchis, and others. This cultural interaction has enabled them to integrate into the diverse society of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands without losing their unique identity.

Today, the Karen community continues to balance tradition with modernity. Improvements in education, employment, and living standards have transformed their socio-economic life, while their respect for nature, strong community values, and rich cultural heritage remain important aspects of their identity. Their contribution to the development of North Andaman, particularly in forestry, agriculture, and settlement, makes them an integral part of the history and society of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

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