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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Tides of Change in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

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1. LOCATING OUR ENGAGEMENT

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) in the Bay of Bengal came to be a part of India via the colonial legacy of a penal settlement, but seldom figured – barring the Indian freedom struggle of 1857 – in the nation's collective consciousness. From Indian independence until the beginning of this millennium, the archipelago was a developmental backwater neglected by mainstream planning interventions. On the other hand, its ecological uniqueness has been recognized for long because this archipelago is encompassed within two global biodiversity hotspots: the Andamans form a part of the Indo-Burma hotspot and the Nicobars form the northwestern extremity of the Sundaland hotspot. Many conservation imperatives have emerged from the high levels of diversity and endemism seen here for many taxa.

Furthermore, the islands encompass unique socio-ecological systems that are characterised not only by deep connections between people and nature, in the form of traditional resource use and management systems, but also by extensive interlinkages between marine, littoral and terrestrial systems. For example, the Andamans are home to indigenous islanders such as the Jarawa and the Sentinelese, whose societies are still perhaps among the last remaining representatives of hunter-gatherer cultures anywhere that survive on limited contact with outsiders. Similarly, the Shompen (on Great

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Nicobar) are forest-dwelling hunters and foragers, with a culture distinct from the coastal Nicobarese who practice horticulture, animal husbandry and maritime occupations. The Shompen have their own resource management systems and cultural practices that are tied to their long-standing local ecological knowledge, which plays a significant role in the management of critical common pool resources (Singh 2006; Chandi 2018).

However, a closer reading of the past also reveals a story of disruption and change. For example, the fate of the Onge and the Great Andamanese peoples — the latter having been reduced to a mere handful of surviving individuals—are evidence of destruction of traditional ways of life and the decimation of indigenous populations as a consequence of encounters with outsiders during colonial and contemporary times. In recent decades, increasing contact with outsiders has been instrumental in the breakdown of indigenous adaptive approaches to the management of natural resources. This is because settlers from the Indian mainland (including Bangladesh and Myanmar) have gradually come to form the largest part of the ANI demography. They are an extremely diverse group and their arrivals were triggered by different historical events, starting with the colonial penal settlement. Despite their oppositional positioning to the indigenous groups, the settler communities are vulnerable on account of their initial status as migrants, their continuing political marginalization, as well as their dependence on various natural resources for subsistence and commercial purposes.

But now, in contrast to this complex history of neglect and displacement, these islands have suddenly been catapulted into the spotlight due to India's interest in the emerging Indo-Pacific Great Game. There has been increased media focus on the strategic importance of these islands with respect to maritime trade and security, along with a strong political desire to convert this far-flung archipelago into “a prized piece of mid-ocean real estate” (e.g. Malik 2014). Recent development agendas such as those proposed by the NITI Aayog have also emphasized the expansion of sectors such as tourism and fisheries.

As can be seen in the diversity of views expressed in academia and popular media, the response to these developments are largely rooted in the contrasting ideologies and backgrounds of different commentators (Oommen and Shanker 2012; Malik 2014; Rae 2015; Sekhsaria 2017), whereas the ground realities for local communities (both indigenous and settler) remain poorly articulated at this point. Moreover, calls to increase India's oceanic interests as well as the development of the islands' natural resources and tourism capabilities have, so far, paid scarce attention to the attendant challenges at the interface of society, economy and environment.

While many of these challenges, such as the consequences of climate change, are similar to the challenges faced by small island developing states the world over, the putative impacts on the socio-ecological systems specific to ANI remain to be assessed. This includes the need for an evaluation of several public policies proposed with reference to tourism, fisheries and coastal urbanization - all with the aim of transforming this region into a network of 'smart' islands.

2. INCOMING TIDE

As mentioned earlier, at the forefront of these burgeoning changes is a set of factors related to tactical positioning and economic growth, both of which are exogenous to the region. For example, the central government has announced significant outlays in marine fisheries (ICAR 2014), port-led coastal development (Ministry of Shipping 2016), and tourism (NITI Aayog 2018).

While investments in tourism for the high-end sector is anticipated to usher in significant social and environmental changes ranging from cultural transitions to altered resource exploitation patterns, synergies between tourism development plans and landscape-level impacts are yet to be understood in detail. Tourism activities in earmarked indigenous spaces such as Little Andaman as well as the Nicobar group of islands are likely to be problematic in this regard because past studies have shown (Anderson *et al.* 2015; Venkateswar 2004) that a sudden exposure to 'mainstreaming' policies as well as an influx of outsiders has a debilitating effect on the well-being of traditional societies and the natural resources their lives are closely connected to. Project proposals also need to pay attention to issues of equity and justice, which are often debatable in the case of high-end tourism interventions. On the other hand, such 'opening up' has benefitted some sections of the settler population. For instance, the tourism boom has attracted many informal service workers, including seasonal migrants, and associated infrastructure projects have provided steady employment to many. Keeping in mind the contingent nature of such outcomes, ANET and partner organisations have been involved in organising fine-grained workshops and awareness generation events to help local communities' access opportunities while being mindful of sustainability and long-term ecological impacts.

Similar to the mixed impacts of tourism, increased connectivity and market linkages may improve the status of fishing communities, who are another significant section of islanders. However, fisheries sustainability is likely to be a casualty unless large-scale plans such as long-lining and deep-sea

fishing are well-regulated. We find that several boom and bust fisheries driven by sea-food export markets in nearby Southeast Asia offer important lessons for Indian conditions and need to be incorporated into policy and management (Jaini *et al.* 2017). We also recognize that local development interventions combined with large-scale threats such as climate change and seismic events can result in cumulative impacts that can be overwhelming. Hence, one of the emerging areas of research by ANET and its partners is the impact of climate change on coral reefs and associated fisheries. In the future, this work is poised to provide evidence-based inputs on long-term sustainability research and practice for the islands.

3. POLICY ENGAGEMENT

In our opinion, the inherent vulnerability of the islands' socio-ecological systems calls for policy measures that are committed to long-term sustainability and take into account the perspectives of multiple stakeholders, including indigenous and settler communities. Therefore, one of our current goals at ANET is to actively seek inputs from the island administration as well as local traditional institutions of governance, so that on-ground challenges are recognised and addressed appropriately. A second goal is to improve integration of sectoral policies. For example, if ecotourism is expected to be one of the key developmental interventions in the islands, we believe that there needs to be a corresponding commitment to the maintenance of ecological integrity and promotion of eco-friendly practices. Hence, we participate in formal planning committees as well as facilitate community-based initiatives. We have also been instrumental in initiating discussions on natural resource management between multiple stakeholders such as the island administration, communities and commercial entities. Most recently, in partnership with WWF-India, ANET arranged a multi-stakeholder meeting with the representatives of NITI Aayog to discuss concerns specific to ANI and identify further steps for the region's holistic development. Overall, given the complex interlinkages that characterise these unique islands, we would like to contribute to a policy environment that supports the aspirations of the settler communities over the long-term, including better integration with the mainland and other regions, but at the same time we would like to ensure due concern for the rights, livelihoods and spaces of indigenous inhabitants. In other words, our intention is to contribute to a development vision for ANI that acknowledges social and environmental sustainability as a central issue and thereby ushers in positive local as well as national outcomes.

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