

# Onge Tribe through the Ages: Continuity of Change

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**Abstract:** The term Onge means man. The Onge are one of the least fertile and most sterile people in the world. About 40% of the married couples are sterile. Onge women rarely become pregnant before the age of 28. Infant and child mortality is in the range of 40%. The net reproductive index for the Onge is 0.91. They are living in difficult conditions, adverse geographical situation but it is true and paradoxical that still they are the happiest people of the world.

**Keywords:** Onge Tribe, Continuity of Change, Little Andaman.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Onges have been in contact with civilized society for over hundred years. They still observe the tribal rites and rituals. Initially the Onges were scattered all over the Little Andaman Island in different bands. Later they have been settled at two places viz. Dugong Creek and South Bay in Little Andaman Island. In spite of the resistance of the Onges they were rehabilitated in two places during the year 1976-77 and 1980 one at Dugong Creek and other at South Bay respectively. The Onges are included among the darkest people of the world. The Onges speak in Onge dialect as common language among them. Regarding religion, unlike many other communities, the rituals of the Onges do not involve any religious worship as such, propitiation or sacrifice. In fact, they do not have an organized religion, but rather some beliefs and fears emanating from them. The Onges believe that the death of human beings, loss of weight, and the dispersal of smell are always and steps in which humans are transformed into spirits. It is these spirits who then can move any and everywhere. The Onges of Little Andaman are basically hunters and food gatherers.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The Onge tribe is one of the primitive tribe of little Andaman belong to Negrito Racial stock. In the 18th century the Onge were distributed across Little Andaman Island and the nearby islands, with some territory and camps established on Rutland Island and the southern tip of South Andaman Island. Friendly contact with the Onge was made in 1885 (131 years ago). But prior to that there had been several violent and hostile encounters with British ships and their crews. Sometimes the latter got killed and on other occasions the Onge had to retreat, leaving heavy casualties.

Originally restive, they were pacified by M. V. Portman in the 1890. Today, the surviving numbers of Onges are less than 100 and mostly confined to two AAJVS provided settlements on Little Andaman, Dugong Creek in the northeast and South Bay. The Onge were semi-nomadic and used to be fully dependent on hunting and gathering for food. The Onge are one of the aboriginal peoples (adivasi) of India. They have now experienced the impact of outsiders, as efforts at befriending them have proved successful. They have been provided with pucca houses, food, clothes, medicine etc. by the Administration. They eat turtle, fish, roots and jack fruits etc. They have developed artistry and crafts. The Onges can make canoes. A primary school has also been functioning at the Dugong Creek settlement of Onges.

As of 2011 Census of India, the population of the Union Territory of Andaman and Nicobar Islands was 379,944, of which 202,330 (53.25%) were male and 177,614 (46.75%) were female. The sex ratio was 878 females per 1,000 males. Only 10% of the population lived in Nicobar islands.

### 3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

The study is conducted among the Onges of Little Andaman Island of Andaman and Nicobar Island, India. The Andaman and Nicobar Island lie among the eastern side of the Bay of Bengal and a distance from Calcutta (Kolkata) 1255 Km and from Chennai 1190 Km to the Andaman district headquarter Port Blair by sea route. There are 572 islands but only 36 are inhabited, 24 in the Andaman group and 12 in the Nicobar group. In terms of area it has 8249 Sq. Km. Geography of Andaman is a cluster of named and unnamed islands, running from north to south and lying to south-east of the Indian sub-continent in the Bay of Bengal constitute the Andaman islands, the Andaman islands lie between 10°13'–10°30' north latitude and 90°15' – 90°10' east longitude.

Once the Onges were scattered all over the Little Andaman today the Onges are confined to the Dugong Creek and South Bay of Little Andaman areas. It was only happen after the formation of Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS) constituted under special assistance from Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs in March, 1976 with the idea to welfare of the primitive tribal of Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Observations have been conducted through participant observation methods. Detailed information on Bio-Cultural Diversity, Socio-Demographic Status, Dynamics of Change, Social Change, Cultural Change, Demographic Change, Life Style Changes, Natural Change was investigated through participants observations as well as secondary data of Andaman Administration. The dialect was not understood by us so we take a translator who were long working as social worker and know all about the way of life. All the house hold of both the Onges settlement (Dugong Creek and South Bay) has been covered from Little Andaman Island. All the available individuals of each house hold have been covered under the study.

### 4. BIO-CULTURAL DIVERSITY

The Onges culture in Dugong Creek and South Bay (Little Andaman) is passing through a phase of economic change with the rest of the Islands. Modern technology and concepts have been developed. The Onges economy too is witnessing a continuous impact of the new modern economics, which is evident from the fact of the emergence of some new economic typologies among them like plantation worker, attendant to Government department, introduction of cash economy, introduction of co-operative society, etc. It is very difficult to find a simple and precise form or trend of change in tribal economy as it is fast changing on local levels. But the best approach to the identification of the change would be to consider the different new economic activities and development on one hand the description of a few resultant forms of economics, which have emerged on the other.

### 5. SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

The socio-economic structure in tribal communities is markedly different from that of the non-tribals or advanced group of people. They have a very simple technology which fits well with their ecological surrounding and conservative outlook. Moreover their economy can be said to be of subsistence type. We find the tribal of Andaman and Nicobar Island especially of Little Andaman belonging to different economic stages, from hunting, and food gathering nomadic to settled, plantation worker, wages labourer, and government employee which present their overlapping of economic stage. The tribe is considered an economically independent group of people having their own specific economy and thus having a pattern of labour, division of labour and specialization, gift and ceremonial exchange, trade and barter, consumption norm, tangible and intangible-economic status.

The first and foremost characteristic of the Onges economy is the close relationship between their economic life and the natural environment or habitat which is, in general, the forest-and coastal areas. They depend on sea produce like fish, dugong (sea mammal) turtle. The economy revolves around the sea and forest. The Onges obtained their numerous requirements from the area they inhabit with the help of most simple implements and without any technological aid from outside. Nothing seems to escape them-edible roots, tuber, fruits, vegetable, flower and honey, insects, fish Dugong, pig, turtle etc. The traditional occupation of the tribals has become obsolete / discarded with the process of rehabilitation / settlement and with the process of coconut cultivation pattern. Now they are mainly daily wages labour and have communal coconut plantation, though some of them are still in practices of their traditional occupational pattern of hunting and food gathering.

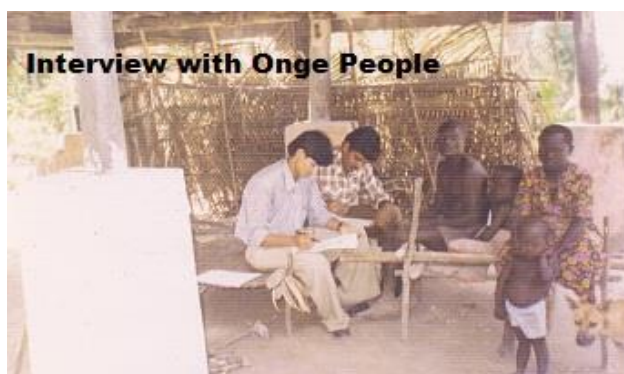
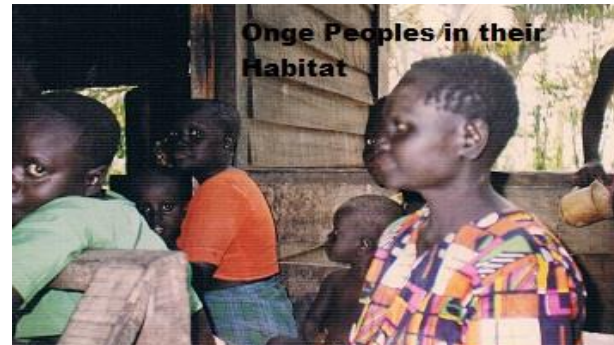
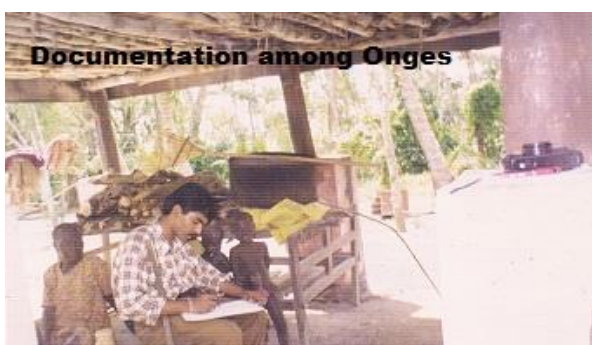
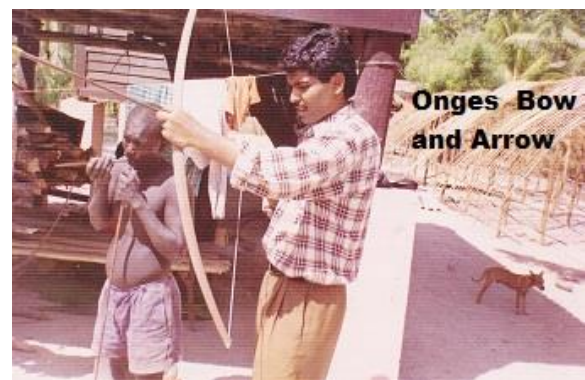
The indigenous occupation of the tribe has been changed to a great extent. It has become a part of the local economy. Commercialization of the cropping pattern and introduction of cash economy have replaced the hunting, fishing and

collection of minor forest produce have been turned into a subsidiary status. Introduction of free rations (foods) to the tribal has also effected the economy of the hunting, fishing and food gathering tribes of little Andaman. They are mainly settled as daily wages labourer in the coconut plantation and also engaged in various departmental work like-diesel Generator attendant, water pump house helper, medical sub centre attendant, police radio helper etc. therefore traditional occupation of the tribal nowadays subsidiary role in the subsistence economy.

## 6. DYNAMICS OF CHANGE

These are some of the aspects of diverse nature of dynamics of change among the Onges of Little Andaman:

*(i) Socio-Environmental Change:* On 26 December 2004 the coasts of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands were devastated by a 10 m (33 ft) high tsunami following the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake. More than 2,000 people were confirmed dead, more than 4,000 children were orphaned or suffered the loss of one parent, and a minimum of 40,000 people were rendered homeless. The worst affected Nicobar islands were Katchal and .Indira Point; the latter subsided 4.25 metres and was partially submerged in the ocean. The lighthouse at Indira Point was damaged but has been repaired since then. The territory lost a large amount of area which is now submerged. The territory which was at 8,073 km<sup>2</sup> (3,117 sq mi) is now merely at 7,950 km<sup>2</sup> (3,070 sq mi). While newer settlers of the islands suffered the greatest casualties from the tsunami, most of the aboriginal people survived because oral traditions passed down from generations ago warned them to evacuate from large waves that follow large earthquakes. After the 2004 Tsunami all Onge abandoned their respective settlement area and moved to safer and higher grounds.



***Participation of Author with different aspects of Onges Life:***

(ii) **Cultural Change:** The tribal culture is cognised to tribal economic system can be understood in the purview of the cultural factors. In the conventional wisdom of economic science, non-economic factors like social and cultural relations are considered non-essential though they are the tribal reality for the very organization of their economic process.

(iii) **Demographic Change:** The Onges also suffered grievously at the hands of the colonisers and early settlers. In 1901 their number was estimated at 672 and in 1961 Census 129 of them were counted. In 1971 their count was 112, while in 1981 it further reduced to 97. In 1991 their count increased to 101, but, in 2001 it fell to 96 and in 2011 still it is 101.

(iv) **Life Style Changes:** In the Little Andaman nature is full of sufficient amount of food resources for them and they never have to face any scarcity. They do not have any ideas or necessity of storing food articles. It is only done when they migrate from one place to another for short time. Until recently they did not have any idea of any kind of exchange or barter. Consequently, their economic system was marked by the absence of any medium of exchange.

(v) **Natural Change:** Indigenous people hold great significance as they observe the world carefully, share findings, conduct experiments and adjust conclusions on a continuing basis. Their knowledge is often wrapped up in superstition or tradition-instilled ways. Tradition is a social process of learning and sharing knowledge and it has a social meaning and legal character unlike other knowledge. The biggest challenge is to find effective ways of synthesizing the best of traditional knowledge and the best that scientific analysis can bring. Such knowledge is often embedded in cultural and religious systems, which give them strong legitimacy. For example, sacred groves are often protected as homes of ancestors, but also serve an ecological function for watershed, landscape and biodiversity protection. Such knowledge and understanding takes time to build and is rapidly lost. Among the so-called primitive tribal groups surviving in Andaman Islands are the Onge. The Onge were the sole occupant of little Andaman where they maintained, until as late as the 1950's, a largely undistributed traditional way of life. The state of Onge's dwindling population is a cause for concern today. There are only 97 of them left from thousands 100 years back, due to disease, battles, way of living, contact with outsiders, marriage patterns, changing environment, etc. In 1967 the island of little Andaman was opened up for settlement from outside. The Onge's use of a traditional knowledge system for effective natural resource management can be illustrated by several examples. Other than the food they buy from outsiders by barter system they mainly consume 3 types of terrestrial resources, wild boar, honey and honey-based products, some birds and 6 types of aquatic resources (fish, turtle and turtle egg, dugong, crabs, shells). The Onge follow certain nature rules for extraction of resources: in the months of April to June, the time for wild boar's reproduction, they don't hunt and survive completely on jackfruit and seafood. Similarly December to April is their honey collection season, as June to November is the breeding season of bees. The study showed that the Onge have identified almost 146 plant varieties used for day to day-to-day purposes such as hut making, medicinal use, making of bows, arrows and instruments, ornaments, making, fishing nets, dresses and apparel, as well as for cultural ceremonies. Different roots and tubers, collected in the forest, are consumed as food.

**7. PAST ASSETS**

The Onge were left more or less alone by the British administration except for occasional visits by the administrators and occasional visits by Onge groups to Port Blair (quite often in their own canoes). This situation continued till the late 1960s. In 1953 a coconut plantation was built by the Agricultural Department at the Dugang Creek Onge settlement, though coconut is not a traditional food item of the Onge or other Andaman tribes. In 1967 a big change occurred when the island of Little Andaman was opened for resettlement of outside people and with the starting of a red oil palm plantation by the Forest Development Corporation. Today the Onge share the island with several thousand settlers in several big villages. A big jetty and breakwater have been built near Hut Bay (once an Onge settlement area). This has been a major new development, as for the first time the Onge have had to live face to face in their once exclusive habitat with an alien population (3000 or so) which is 30 times their own number and likely to increase. During the 1970s and 1980s the two major Onge settlements were redesigned with new huts of an altogether new design being built, with consequences which have not been too happy. This has gone on with parallel efforts to sedentarise them to enable the official agencies to take welfare aid to them more easily. A social worker, a doctor and a nurse, a plantation worker, etc., have been posted there. A teacher was also there for several years, but this did not lead to any literacy among them.

## 8. PRESENT REALITIES

The Onges are looked after by the autonomous body – Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti [AAJVS] set up by the government in the Dugong-creek area and rest of them lived in the Southbay, the southern part of the Little Andaman. They are semi-nomadic tribe, solely dependent on the food provided by nature. As a consequence, they move one place to another on the Islands. Thus a visitor in a Little Andaman may find Onges hut (Bera) all over the Islands, yet the density of the population is more on the littoral side than in the forest. On the coast there is a greater possibility of catching fish from Sea.

The abundance of food and water has made the life of the Onges completely easy going. All the groups are headed by a leader and each group is assigned a fixed territory. The community life seems to be extremely democratic in character in so far as it entertains and also maintains a perfect individual freedom. It is very amusing for them to think that man gives order to others. This means they have no real chiefs. A so-called Onge Chief or Raja, is only the head of a group of families living in the same communal hut and giving no orders but only advice. In other words no real chief exists among the Onges in the Little Andaman. Till recently they are a hunting and food gathering tribe. Now they live in quarters build for them by the administration in the Little Andaman Islands. They still remain to be good hunters and fishermen. They worked in their plantation raised in their habitat by the Government.

## 9. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Onge life-style has undergone certain important changes but these have not necessarily or always improved the quality of their life. It has actually led to certain confusion in their minds regarding the direction of their own life, as they are unable to take their own decisions about what and how to do whatever they may like to do. Most of the time decisions, however good they may be (but that is not the case always), are imposed on them. Because of demographic problems some boys and men are unable to have marriage mates. Further, the ill effects of the inbreeding of a small population of less than 100 are not yet visible, but sooner or later they will disappear. However, socially the Onge society is still viable and well-knit in spite of the changes that have taken place during the twentieth century. There is hope yet that it will be able to cope with the unwise and presumptuous interference with its functioning.

## 10. CONTINUITY OF CHANGE

Few years ago, for the support of the Onges the administration established a coconut plantation at Dugong Creek. The Onges collect coconut from the place with the help of their dug out canoe come to the government co-operative society for exchanging coconut for sugar, rice, flour, tea etc. There are many things which are declining among the Onges i.e. population, their inborn identity, cultural identity, behavioural aspect etc. Now it is a urgent need to maintain or stable the sustained life as well as they will live on with their own way of life without disturbing sentiments, identity, uniqueness and individuality.

## 11. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS

Successful achievement of the desired goals of tribal's welfare or development depends not only on the planning and quality of the schemes but also to a great extent on the degree of awareness, appreciation, acceptance and participation among the Onges. The main problem was the fast reduction of their population. To rehabilitate, government established a fishery station, to teach Onges the methods of fishing with nets but it yielded poor results. Coconut co-operation society was established for the benefit of people but its gains were maximized by outsiders. The Onges were encouraged to depend more on coconut and money given by the government. Man and women who were otherwise naked were taught to use clothes supplied by government. The environment was destroyed and cultural habits were changed. Although people were not prepared to accept changes in their environment and they always saw the outsiders as encroaching upon the land.

Anthropologist suggest that for making the tribals respond to various kind of programmes there must be planning from below in which the local needs and requirements are taken care of... Once people are prepared in advance they will respond well to all kinds directed and planned changes.

## 12. CONCLUSION

The new pattern of resource use and associated development projects in the Andaman Islands seriously affected the perfect environment on which the indigenous Negrito population depended. These policies inflicted great harm to their total way of life, economy, culture, etc. From this perspective we can see that the technological, the knowledge of the colonisers and their market imperative gradually changed the basic pattern of the daily livelihood strategies of the tribes. In brief, the root cause of all these changes, the deforestation and the associated pattern of degradation, lies in the emergence of the modern type of colonial state formation in the Andamans.

The winds of change have made significantly set in, changing the social, economic, demographic, environmental, holistic life of the Onges. To protect such a colourful tribe of our country serious efforts should be made by the ecologist, social workers, psychologist, sociologist and anthropologist with interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approach, otherwise they will soon become extinct from this land.

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