

THE TRIBALS OF ANDAMAN-NICOBAR ISLANDS AND THE FORGOTTEN BATTLE OF ABERDEEN

The Andaman and Nicobar islands is at the juncture of the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea, comprising of about 572 islands. The tribal groups of Andaman islands include: the Great Andamanese, the Jarawas, the Sentinelese, the Onges, the Shompen and the Nicobarese. They are much primitive and for livelihood they depends on hunting, gathering etc. They have a nomadic life. Among them Sentinelese lives an complete isolation and are very much hostile. According to Kumaraswamy Thangaraj(CCMB Scientist), the Jarawas, Onges and other Andaman tribals are among the most ancient people of India and people with oldest history of living in India. We people are not giving any such importance to the study of these tribals who are having an history of thousands of years. And it's interesting that these tribals are part of our present era but nobody is taking any initiative in knowing more about a culture /group of people who are much more ancient than any other groups that we know today.

When it comes to the history of the Andaman Islands, it's said that the first migrants from Africa populated these islands about thousands of years ago. By about the 11th century, Rajendra Chola conquers the islands and used them as their naval base. In the 17th century, Marathas also used the islands for their maritime purposes. The Andaman islands were made a Dutch colony in 1756 and later named as Fredericks Island. Then in 1789, the British set up their Penal colony in Catham island. This settlement is now known as the Port Blair. Later it was occupied by the Japan during the Second World War. In 1943 the islands were re-named as Shaheed and Swaraj by Subash Chandra Bose. It became a part of India in 1950 and was declared as a Union Territory of the nation in 1956. In 2018, Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi renamed three islands of Andaman and Nicobar such as the Ross islands as Netaji Subash Chandra Bose Dweep, the Neil island as Shaheed Dweep and the Havelock islands as the Swaraj Dweep respectively as a tribute to Subash Chandra Bose.

While keeping all these information in mind, let us remember a battle which was valiantly fought by the tribals against the British which is famously known as the Battle of Aberdeen. The battle dated May 17th, 1859 was between the natives of Andaman armed with arrows and spears against the British who had all the sophisticated weapons. The origin of the battle is with the betrayal of a convict named Dudnath Tiwari, who backstabbed the natives for the British. Dudnath and many others were incarcerated in the Ross island Penal settlement after the rebellion of 1857 but they escaped the Ross island on 23rd April and when the contingent penetrated into the jungle, they were encircled by the armed indigenes. The entire contingent was massacred. Dudnath was a sepoy of the 14th Regiment of the Native Infantry who had been convicted of the mutiny and desertion. He was marked as Convict No-276. Even though Dudnath was hit by three arrows, he managed to escape but soon he was caught by the tribals. Surprisingly his pleas for mercy was granted and the tribals took care of him. The most unimaginable thing happened was Dudnath was added into the tribe: Termugu – da Sept of the Aka-Bea- da, one of the ten Andamanese groups.

The advent of the Britishers to set up their Penal colonies and other establishments led to large scale deforestation and ruination of indigenous resources. Andamanese opposed the colonisation of their islands and retaliated. Meanwhile Dudnath got married from the tribe and for more than a year wandered with

the tribes . At the same time Britishers were ruthlessly expanding their base which led to many confrontations with the tribals .

The Andamanese undertook three major raids in 1859 : on April 6th , on April 14th and on 17th of May . In the last raid there was large scale participation of the indigenes who attempted a well organised raid on the Aberdeen Station with the aim to exterminate the British. Their last raid is known as the Battle of Aberdeen . But Dudnath betrayed the tribe by passing on information to the Superintendent of the Penal settlement . The results of the battle was terrifying as a large number of Andamanese were slaughtered in a single day . The British got first hand and they also got to know about the rare accounts and informations about the Andamanese society from Dudnath . Its said that the raids and battles that followed had a devastating effect on the strength and population of the tribe and after all these unfortunate events they were hunted down by many other disasters in the form of diseases and natural calamities . The Andamanese were chased by diseases like Syphilis and Measles which cut down their population , which came down up to ninety in 1931 . After independence also, it kept on declining up to nineteen in 1961 . They were relocated to Strait islands in 1969, where they were protected under the Government of India .

There is a memorial in Port Blair to commemorate the Battle of Aberdeen . “ This monument is built in memory of those Andamanese aborigines who bravely fought the Battle of Aberdeen in May 1859, against the oppressive and retaliatory policy of the British Regime ”, reads the inscription in the monument . Still on every 17th of May, islanders pay their tributes to those Andamanese warriors who with their primitive weapons fought the largest empire of all time . It's also very interesting to know that these tribals survived the tsunami of 2004, as not a single tribal man was killed in the calamity . It's said that they had some kind of premonitions and know how about these kinds of natural catastrophes . We people living in the modern era should try to know and learn more about these tribals who can be called as the existing heirs of our ancient forefathers , but in a way that our intervention should not affect them and their way of life even in a minute way so that they can continue their life peacefully in their own ways.