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## A NEW NOTE ON THE BELIEFS AND CUSTOMARY PRACTICES OF NICOBARESE

Jayasree Dolvi<sup>1</sup> and Dr. B. Sheela<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University.

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of History, Annamalai University.

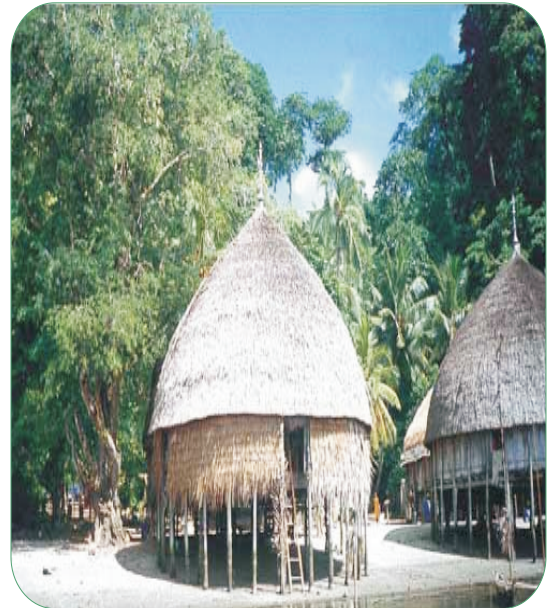
### ABSTRACT

**T**he Nicobarese tribes are the largest tribal group inhabiting twelve islands in Nicobar Islands who are well educated and advanced than many of their counterparts in these islands and mainland India. Many aspects of social, cultural and economic system characterize in the society of Nicobarese. It also mentioned their belief on various rituals in Nicobarese life cycle, sports as some of their festivals have links with customs and practices. Animism has been the traditional religion of the Nicobarese. The geographical names for the different islands have all obscure, complicated, and interesting histories. The present paper shall provide a detailed account on the beliefs and customary practices of Nicobarese.

**KEYWORDS** :Nicobarese, Customs, Rituals, Festivals, Islands, Animism.

### INTRODUCTION

The term Nicobarese refers to community of the indigenous people of Nicobar Islands in general. It was given as a nomenclature to these people living in the Nicobar group of islands and Great Nicobar. This nomenclature was given by none other but their own man. These tribes of mongoloid origin settled in different islands in the Nicobar group, are fairly well advanced. The Nicobar seems always to have been known as the "Land of the Naked". The Nicobar Islands are an archipelagic island chain in the eastern Indian Ocean. They are located in Southeast Asia. Their settlements are reported in twelve islands which are very widely scattered. They are greatly



depends on the sea for their sustenance and as such their social, cultural and economic life is interwoven with their dependence on the sea. Thus the sea occupies a predominant position in the life the Nicobarese. A majority of the Nicobarese have Christianity, during the past four decades been converted to Christianity. The late Nicobarese Bishop John Richardson, who stands as a legend in the Nicobarese society. He wrote the first native primer and named it Car Nicobarese. The Nicobarese Bishop was phenomenon and largely instrumental in making the Nicobarese what they are today wished to bring about solidarity and fraternity among the people of the Nicobar Islands. The Nicobarese from different islands speak different Nicobarese languages. Through most of them can understand the Car Nicobarese language, there is no denying that quite a few Nicobarese in

the central and south group of islands can neither speak nor understand it.

## SOCIAL CONDITIONS

The social organization of the Nicobarese is marked by unity, fraternity and mutual co-operation. The strong sense of belonging to a community is expressed in their life cycle rituals. They have a deep sense of loyalty which is imbibed through the social network of tuhet. (*joint family or family tree*).

## BIRTH

Among the people of Car Nicobar the whole process of birth is regarded as unclean. That is why delivery is not allowed to occur in the dwelling house. They maintain a separate communal delivery house. It built outside the village near the coast, often a stone's throw from the mortuary house. Before the Christian era in the Nicobar Islands more than four decades ago birth normally took place in the delivery house. According to the belief of the people a pregnant women must abstain from hard work, such as sewing and stitching, cooking, and weaving mats. She has observed dietary restrictions also, like not taking spicy food. She can eat fish but not octopus, which many lead to the birth of an albino or a child whose skins is covered with patches. The prospective father has to observe certain restrictions too; for instance, he cannot undertake knotting or fastening wood, fencing, nailing etc. Such activities may harm the child in the womb. However, the prospective father can carry out the usual light work which is believed to have no ill effect on the child before, at the time of or after delivery.

According to an age-old practice the pregnant women is smeared with the blood of a pig to keep both the mother and the unborn baby in good health. The prospective father has to attend to all the women's need too. During pregnancy the abdomen of the expectant mother is massage with coconut oil from the time to time. Several women experienced in midwifery attend to the massaging of the abdomen. They believe that this facilitates the free movement of the baby in the womb and makes delivery easier too. After delivery special arrangements are made for the disposal of the umbilical cord, it is buried in the *kinval*, an isolated place off the graveyard. The mother remains ceremonially unclean for at least two to three months, which is why she cannot eat with her fingers. She eats food with either a stick or spoon. During these periods she is confined to the actual birthplace within the delivery house. She is not allowed to go through the main entrance in the front. After three months her hair is shaved off. Now she is allowed to use the main entrance in the front. She can without a stick and spoon. The concept of uncleanliness or birth pollution is prevalent among the people of Car Nicobar. Traditionally the people of Car Nicobar used to kill the second of a pair of twins, because he or she is regarded as an evil spirit. A deformed newborn child is also put to the death, and is regarded as a bad omen. When an illegitimate child is born, it is looked after by girl's parents. There is no stigma attached to such children who can enjoy all the rights that the others have. In case an illegitimate child born to unmarried persons the child is legitimate by the marriage of the parents.

On Chowra Island there was no special delivery house, but delivery was not allowed in the dwelling place. Normally birth takes place in a nearby bush or jungle where an expectant mother is advised to assume a half kneeling position. For this purpose, or a pillar is prepared which supports her for an easy delivery. When any obstruction occurs at the time of delivery relatives cut a tender coconut into two parts, which are smeared with pig's or fowl's blood and then exposed in an open space to appease the spirit so that the unborn child in mother's womb is set free. Recently new delivery house come up in Chowra due to the incessant effort of village level workers and midwives who are in the central and southern group a pregnant women cannot eat fish whereas among the people of Car

Nicobar she can.

On Teresa when a woman gives birth to a son the husband and other relatives whip the roofs of the houses in the village. They communicate with the spirit by uttering words like, 'let us fornicate and duel.' They beseech the spirit to be merciful and give them a valiant son. In the case of the birth of a daughter they draw water from the well, clear the forest and carry out other tasks usually performed by women.

The Nicobarese of central Nicobar Islands like Katchal, Kamorta, Nancowry and Trinket cannot kill a bat or an octopus during the period of pregnancy because this may trap the baby womb. Although the mother is ceremonially unclean she can prepare food and eat with her fingers.

The Nicobarese of Kondul, Great Nicobar and other islands in the southern group have separate delivery huts, but these are not well maintained in comparison to the village communal delivery houses found on Car Nicobar. In the southern group of islands a pregnant woman has to carry some specific herbs, cane leaves and a heart-shaped wooden plank. This, they believe, protects the malevolent spirit from entering her womb or trapping the unborn infant. The prospective father has to observe some taboos and restriction so that nothing harmful to the child is transmitted by evil spirits.

## MARRIAGE

Prior to the Christian era in the Nicobar Islands premarital sexual relations were common. When a boy and a girl were in love and started having sexual intercourse frequently, their union was regularized by the village council. Their traditional marriage was held without any rites but with a grand feast. On Car Nicobar a portion of poor was distributed to all *tuhets* in the village, declaring the couple as married. Marriage was solemnized in a somewhat different manner in the central and southern groups of islands.

In the marriage the Nicobarese matrimonial alliances can be established between persons belonging to any family and *tuhet*, provided that they are not related consanguineously for at least two generations.

There is no stigma attached to remarriage. Dowry is unknown to them, but bride-price in kind is prevalent among the people of Chowra and Teresa islands, though not among the other Nicobarese. Gift articles like cloths, pigs, fowl and coconuts are treated as bride-price. Post-Christianity this has been reduced and is no longer considered compulsory as was customary with the Chowrites and Teressans earlier. Divorce was very frequent in the past, but now such cases are discouraged and reconciled by the village council. They are very rare and occur if there is a proved case of adultery. Some Nicobarese boys and girls have recently married non-Nicobarese. A few of them have entered into a kind of relationship with non-Nicobarese, just living together as they do in modern-day western societies.

## OLD AGE, DEATH AND FUNERAL RITES

The elderly, who have proved their efficiency, skill and wisdom by virtue of age, hold major responsibilities and other privileges. The management and maintenance of the community is in their hands. It is for this reason that old people are treated with great respect and tenderness. The lineage family members take care of the old among the Nicobarese. As a people they are law-abiding and peace loving. Hence, when a person becomes old he or she is looked after with care and not allowed to carry out any domestic chores. The elderly, when they are sick, are treated with indigenous herbal medicines. When they become seriously ill, the people take the help of shaman, known as *totarong* or *tomiluono* among the different island communities.



The Nicobarese believe that natural death occurs only when a person becomes old; a young person may die due to evil of malevolent spirits. They also believe that the saren (wizard) has the power to cause death through sorcery. This is known as *viningen*.

When a person dies, all the villagers are affected they do not carry their usual routine work, out of respect for the deceased. Messages are sent to friends and acquaintances of the deceased in other villages to enable them to attend the funeral. Generally, they bring new cloths, incense and candle sticks when they come to pay their homage to the deceased. These are the part of the death customs. As a rule, they are bound to render all sorts to the deceased's family and relatives, such as the construction of the coffin, sewing of new garments and the like. On Car Nicobar there are separate mortuary house in every village. This kind of house is always situated near the cemetery, near the coast. As soon as a person is dead his dead body is carried to the common mortuary house, because the corpse cannot be washed in the main dwelling house; this is regarded as unclean. Nevertheless there have been cases, particularly those of influential personalities, where the final bathing and cleaning was done either at home in the village or in the community town hall *at the el panam*. (the biggest house in the whole village).

Later the body is dressed in new linen, especially white, and adorned with silver ornaments and necklaces. The dead bodies are buried in a crude type of coffin generally made of *savach* (wooden plank or plank made from the canoe).

On Chowra the dead body is buried near the sea but exhumed after two days and kept in a dilapidated canoe which stands on stilts near the beach. Unlike the Car Nicobarese, the property of the dead man is not destroyed but preserved in his memory in a treasure house for a considerable long period.

Among the Nicobarese of Katchal, Nancowry and Kamorta the relatives of the dead are expected to be present at the time of the burial ceremony. The corpse can remain in the house for 2-3 days until all of them and pay homage, and the preparation for internment is completed.

The Nicobarese of Great Nicobar it is customary to inflict pain on a fowl which is thrown into the grave and left in it for a considerable time. Later it is taken out of the grave, at the time of laying the corpse in the grave. The stretcher of the dead body is generally constructed by breaking up a canoe. It is placed in the grave, and then spathes are laid in a systematic manner on which the dead body is laid down wrapped in new linen. After this, rice, spices and turmeric powder is sprinkle on the dead body. Then areca palm spathes and wooden planks are kept over the dead body in order to prevent the earth from falling directly on the corpse; and finally it is buried.

## CULTURAL CONDITIONS

Fixity to tradition and persistence of customary belief and attitude are thus prominently intact. This creates opposition to Nicobarese advancement .a deep insight into the traditional hang over can be had from life-cycle rituals and religious attributes. Introduction of Christianity merely seems at a superfluous level in this aspect of life as it has not made any deep impact. Terror of various animistic forces and the ensuing beliefs, do play a significant role in their thinking and actual way of living.

## RELIGION

Animism has been the traditional religion of Nicobarese. This religion is largely marked by the dominance and interplay of spirit worship, witch-doctors and animal sacrifice. The Nicobarese identify malevolent as well as benevolent spirits. Pig and fowl sacrifice in the name of good spirits is believed to help people. They drove away the evil spirits and helped live a happy life. Fear of the spirits formed an

integral part of the religious complex. People continue to have great faith in ghost. As a result a Nicobarese have adopted Christianity, especially in Car Nicobar, the new faith has indifferently reacted to some of the old religious beliefs and practices. The belief in spirits still goes strong among the central and the south islanders. Even in Car Nicobar the performance of certain rituals and ceremonies continues to mark the Nicobarese faith in the spirits. From December to March various religious ceremonies are observed for honoring good spirits and for keeping away the evil once. This is done even when people have embraced Christianity and attend to church service. In all there are about fifteen churches in Nicobar group of islands. The persistence of old belief in certain aspects of the Nicobarses religious life is not denied. The same is for witch-doctor, except in case of Car Nicobaerse who mostly does without them.

## FESTIVALS

Music has a very important place in the live of Nicobarese. It is not an essential feature of the traditional feasts and festival of the people but it is also from a part of their day- to- day lives. The Nicobarese sing while they work to relieve the monotony of their daily chores. Moreover unlike sophisticated people, they have no inhibitions about singing loudly in hearing of others. Indeed, it is a common daily scene in the islands that while three-four men are drawing water from carrying loads on their shoulders or working on their plantations or fishing in the sea, suddenly one of them bursts into a song, the other pick up the strain and there is a loud chorus singing many songs one after another till the work is finished. On festivals like the ossuary feast, men, women and children all dance and their staying powers are so remarkable that when they get into the mood, they can dance the whole night almost continuously. After the spread of Christianity and translation of a book of hymns in Nicobarese, the singing of hymns has become very popular. In Church schools also many hymns in Nicobarese and some in English are taught and thus the people pick them up very early in childhood. They are practiced diligently and on special religious occasions as well as in usual Church service; the standards of hymn singing are very high.

## HOUSING, CLOTHING, AND FOOD HABITS

Traditional Nicobarese huts are huge structures with thatched roof contraction on log pillars. The floor of the hut is made of bamboo sheets that permit cool air circulation and work as a natural air-conditioner. One has to climb the hut the help of a ladder, which is pulled up during night. The elevation protects the inhabitants from the dampness of the land as rain for more than six month in a year.

The traditional dresses of man as well as women have already been replaced by the new ones. The traditional grass skirt, a popular woman-wear in the past, is no more seen. Now the women wear blouses and skirts or lungis made of cloth. Lungis were worn in Burmese style, from the most popular dress among the women. Straw hats are popular among both male and female. Women have mostly bobbed hair and many wear artificially jewelry. The men, in village of Car Nicobar and certain others, in the central and southern group of Island swear beach-shots and skirts.

The staple food are the cheese like pulp made from coconut, pandaus, yam and banana. On certain occasions they eat boiled or roasted pork and chicken. Most of the people do not use spices. A few have, of late, started using salt, onion and chilly, only once a while. In past salt was unknown to them and they added little salt water to make their food preparation saltish. Tea is very popular in them. Milk in the past was not used. Lately few people started giving milk to their children. Both male and female are fond of betel-chewing and smoking. Today, they also have started using rum and whisky.

## SPORTS

People continue to observe the traditional sports of stick fight, pig fight, cock fight, wrestling and canoe race. Organization of boat and wrestling are considered as great events in sports, a part competition rejoicing and feasting from integral part of such events. A large number of pigs are killed and the pork served to participants, including those who come from other village to take part in the function. The latter are organized all over in the original form and context. In addition to the traditional sports, football and volley-ball have also been introduced among the Nicobarese of Car Nicobar. They are extremely good footballers and have acquired the skill at a rapid speed. The game of football was introduced in Car Nicobar through John Richardson who learnt it in Burma and managed to start in Car Nicobar on his return.

## ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

The economy of the Nicobar Islands is agricultural in nature. The economy of the Nicobarese people depends upon the produce of their plantations and forests as well as on their livestock and fishing. There are no industries and the few items of handicrafts of the people cannot be taken to be organized cottage industries. It is, however, very difficult to give some idea of the income of the people. This is so because most of the articles required by the Nicobarese are produced by them in their own plantations or got from the forest area and there is no correct equation of the value of these articles in terms of money. For the very few articles of daily need which they have to purchase from outside, they sell copra and betel nut at prices fixed by the Administration to the primary co-operative societies and the cash got by them is utilized to purchase consumer goods. However, the income in cash of a family is not the correct indication of their total income because due to the utilization of their own products, they derive advantages of a much higher income. Indeed, though there is no proper method of reckoning the income of the Nicobarese, any calculation made in this regard must include the value of the local products which the people consume in their daily lives.

Home greenhouses are universal in any tribal society and are kept up as a pare survival over eras. In the same way as other tribal gatherings, home greenhouses are available in each family and tuber crops, organic products trees (pandanus, pineapple, papaya), restorative plants and regular vegetables (brinjal, tomato, cucurbits, nippy, and so forth) were developed in home greenery enclosures which are fundamentally used to meet the family prerequisite. The strength of coconut is interesting to these islands and not quite the same as different parts of the nation where nourishment crops rule the trimming design. The most favorable aspects of the Nicobar Islands agriculture are the minimal level of chemical inputs used in majority of the cultivated areas and crops. There is a huge potential for organic farming especially cultivation of spices, coconut, tropical fruits and high value vegetables. The organic farming practices are feasible alternative policy to increase the crop production enhance the livelihood support. These Islands are ironic in biodiversity and the agro-climate conditions are very much pleasant for the organic farming of crops which are high demand in worldwide markets. There is a huge potential for organic cultivation of spices, coconut, tropical fruits, high value vegetables and to some extent fine quality of rice varieties in a combined farming system mode which provide more stability and income to the farmer. However farmers should be given access to attractive markets through value added and certified products which will enable the farmers to get best price for their crops.

## CONCLUSION

Nicobarese are mongoloid tribes origin settled in different islands in the Nicobar Islands. This



community is of indigenous people are fairly well advanced. They are greatly depends on the sea for their sustenance and as such their social, cultural and economic life is interwoven with their dependence on the sea. They have a deep sense of loyalty which is imbibed through the social network of tuhet. The Nicobarese were animist and at one time, they were superstitious and followed many peculiar rituals. Each island had characteristic customs of their own. Thus the Nicobarese are undoubtedly not only the most beautiful islands of the region but also complicated an interesting histories.

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**Jayasree Dolvi**

Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of History, Annamalai University.

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