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The Nicobarese Tribe

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Keywords

Nicobarese Tribe, Indigenous Communities, Tribal Culture, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Tribal Transformation, Post-Tsunami Development, Tribal Food, Sustainable Development, Community Identity

Objectives of the Research

1. To understand the traditional lifestyle, culture, and social organization of the Nicobarese tribe.
2. To explore the changes brought about by modernization, governmental policies, and external influences.
3. To examine the impact of the 2004 tsunami on the Nicobarese community and their recovery journey.
4. To highlight the role of food, traditions, and language in preserving cultural identity.
5. To assess current challenges and suggest sustainable development strategies respecting tribal autonomy.

Abstract

This research explores the culture, social structure, and transformation of the Nicobarese tribe, who reside in the Nicobar Islands. The paper examines the tribe's traditional practices, including food, language, religion, and social organization, alongside the impact of modernization and external influences. A significant focus is placed on the effects of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, which displaced communities and introduced new governance and development efforts.

The study highlights the tribe's unique food practices, especially the ceremonial pig feast, and discusses the challenges faced by the Nicobarese as they balance traditional lifestyles with modern development. Through secondary sources such as government reports and ethnographic studies, the paper evaluates the shifts in their economy, language, and cultural practices, while raising concerns about the loss of cultural identity.

The research advocates for development policies that respect the Nicobarese tribe's traditions, encouraging a balance between modernization and the preservation of their cultural heritage.

Introduction

The Nicobarese tribe is one of the six officially recognized Scheduled Tribes of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, primarily residing in the Nicobar group of islands. They are of Mongoloid descent and speak Nicobarese languages, a branch of the Austroasiatic language family. The Nicobarese are known for their deeply rooted cultural values, unique social organization, and strong community ties. Their settlements are typically coastal, with thatched roof huts built on stilts to withstand the humid, tropical environment.

Historically, the Nicobarese had minimal contact with the outside world and lived a self-sufficient life based on fishing, horticulture, and animal husbandry. Their socio-cultural life revolves around communal cooperation, and they follow customary laws and village councils (Tuhet) that regulate social conduct and conflict resolution.

Colonial and post-colonial interactions, especially missionary influences, introduced significant changes in their lifestyle and religion, leading to widespread adoption of Christianity. Yet, many of their indigenous practices have survived and co-exist with modernity. This research aims to understand the evolution of Nicobarese identity amidst the dual forces of cultural preservation and transformation.

Methodology

This research is based on secondary sources such as government reports, ethnographic studies, scholarly articles, and historical records. Qualitative analysis of existing literature has been conducted to understand the evolution of the Nicobarese tribe's cultural identity, social structure, and the impact of modernization. Official census data and tribal welfare reports have also been referenced to provide demographic and developmental insights.

Geographical and Demographic Background

The Nicobar Islands are located in the south-eastern part of the Bay of Bengal. Out of the 22 islands, only a few are inhabited, with the Nicobarese primarily residing in Car Nicobar, Little Nicobar, and Great Nicobar. According to recent data, the Nicobarese constitute a significant tribal population in the region.

(a) Inhabited island's :

S. No.	Geographical Name	Native Name
1	Car Nicobar	Pu
2	Chowra	Sanenyo
3	Teressa	Luroo
4	Katchal	Tihayu
5	Kamorta	Kamorta
6	Nancowry	Mout
7	Little Nicobar	Long
8	Great nicobar	Tokieong long
9	Tillang Chong Island	La-ukg
10	Pulomillow island	-

(b) Uninhabited island's :

S. No	Geographical Name	Native Name
1	Battimaly	Kuono
2	Meroe	Meroe
3	Teris	Teau
4	Menchal	Menchal
5	Tark	Fuya
6	Cubra	Konwana
7	Bompuka	Poahat
8	Kondul	-
9	Trinket	Laful
10	Isle Of Man	-
11	Megapod	-
12	Pigeon	-

Social Structure and Family Life

The Nicobarese society is community-based with an emphasis on collective welfare. They live in nuclear families but maintain strong clan and village ties. Marriage is mostly monogamous, and women play an active role in household and community affairs.

- **Community-Based Living:**

The Nicobarese live in tightly-knit village settlements, usually located along the coast. Each village functions almost like an extended family, where most members are related by blood or marriage. The traditional houses are built on stilts with sloping thatched roofs, symbolizing both functional design and shared aesthetics. These homes are generally organized in clusters, reflecting the communal spirit of the society.

- **Role of the 'Tuhet':**

At the core of Nicobarese social life is the Tuhet system — a traditional matrilineal clan-based structure. A Tuhet is a group of families descended from a common maternal ancestor. Each Tuhet has its own identity, taboos, and customary practices. While leadership roles are usually male-dominated, lineage and inheritance are often traced through the mother's line, especially in traditional contexts.

The Tuhet head or elders are highly respected and act as advisors, conflict-resolvers, and cultural custodians. They play an important role in community decisions, including marriages, land disputes, and resource sharing.

- **Marriage and Kinship Patterns:**

Marriage in Nicobarese society is exogamous at the Tuhet level, meaning individuals cannot marry within their own clan. Marriages are arranged or consensual, but always within the limits of customary law. After marriage, it is common for the couple to stay near the wife's family, reflecting matrilineal traditions in certain areas.

Weddings are often accompanied by feasts and community celebrations, where sharing food — especially pork and coconuts — is a symbol of unity. The exchange of gifts and mutual cooperation during such events strengthens kinship ties and reinforces social bonds.

- **Gender Roles and Family Life:**

Although traditional gender roles are observed — with men primarily involved in fishing, canoe-building, and agriculture, and women managing domestic tasks and childcare — there is notable flexibility. Women also participate in trade, weaving, and community decision-making, especially after the modernization efforts post-tsunami.

Family life is intimate and centered around cooperation. Children are raised not only by parents but by the extended family. Respect for elders is a key value, and oral traditions and stories passed down through generations help children learn cultural norms and community history.

- **Conflict Resolution and Customary Law:**

Disputes within the community are rarely taken to formal courts. Instead, they are resolved through customary councils involving Tuhet elders and village heads. Decisions are made collectively, often aiming at reconciliation rather than punishment. This system ensures peace and stability while maintaining traditional authority structures.

- **Social Values and Change:**

The Nicobarese community places high importance on hospitality, sharing, and respect for nature. These values guide social conduct and daily interactions. However, in recent decades, changes have occurred due to external influences, education, missionary activity, and government schemes.

Cultural Practices and Traditions of the Nicobarese Tribe

The Nicobarese tribe, one of the most prominent indigenous communities in the Nicobar Islands, has a vibrant and deeply rooted culture that reflects their close relationship with nature, community values, and spiritual beliefs. Their cultural practices are not merely rituals but are woven into their everyday life, guiding their behavior, social interactions, and even their economic activities.

- **Language and Oral Tradition:**

The Nicobarese speak various dialects of the Nicobarese language, which belongs to the Austroasiatic language family. Each island or group of islands has slight variations in dialect, yet the core linguistic patterns remain intelligible across the tribe. Oral storytelling is a key element of cultural transmission. Elders pass down myths, legends, and historical tales to younger generations, often around communal gatherings or during feasts. These stories are essential for teaching moral values and preserving identity.

(b) Festivals and Feasts:

One of the most significant traditions among the Nicobarese is the “Pig Festival” or “Ossuary Feast”, also known locally as “Panuohonot”. This festival is a community event held to honor the dead. It involves days of celebration, preparation, and ritual slaughtering of pigs — a sacred animal in Nicobarese culture. The bones of the deceased are exhumed, cleansed, and reburied with respect and ceremony. This event reinforces communal bonds and highlights the tribe’s respect for ancestors.

Feasts are central to social life. They are not limited to death rituals but are held during marriages, harvests, and communal decisions. Food sharing is symbolic of unity and prosperity.

(c) Belief Systems and Spirituality:

Before the arrival of Christianity in the 20th century, the Nicobarese followed an animistic belief system, where spirits (both benevolent and malevolent) were believed to reside in natural elements such as forests,

rivers, and stones. Even today, many traditional beliefs persist alongside Christian faith. Some families maintain sacred groves or spirit houses where offerings are made, especially during illness, natural calamities, or important life events.

Traditional healers or shamans, known locally by different names across islands, play a key role in mediating between the spiritual and physical worlds. They are respected figures in the community and are often consulted for healing, guidance, and rituals.

(d) Art, Craft, and Symbolism:

The Nicobarese are skilled in making canoes, mats, baskets, and decorative items from locally available materials like coconut palm leaves, bamboo, and wood. Their craftsmanship is not just utilitarian but carries cultural symbolism. Canoes, for example, are more than just fishing vessels — they represent mobility, connection between islands, and the tribe's long history as seafarers.

Tattooing was once a common tradition, especially among elders, with symbols representing status, clan, or spiritual protection. Although this practice has declined, it still holds cultural memory among the older generations.

(e) Dress and Adornment:

Traditional Nicobarese attire was simple and suited to the tropical climate. Men often wore loincloths, while women wore wrap-around skirts made of bark or woven cloth. With increased interaction with the mainland and missionaries, western-style clothing has become more common, especially among youth. However, during festivals or traditional ceremonies, older forms of attire and adornment are still embraced.

Beaded necklaces, headgear made of feathers, and painted facial patterns were once common in ceremonial gatherings. These accessories reflected status, tribal affiliation, or participation in rituals.

(f) Cultural Shifts and Continuity:

Like many indigenous cultures, the Nicobarese have faced significant changes due to external influences — including colonial rule, missionary activity, and government development programs. The introduction of Christianity brought changes in religious practices, while modern education and disaster recovery (especially post-tsunami) led to shifts in housing, attire, and occupation.

Despite these transformations, the Nicobarese continue to uphold many of their core traditions. Their communal festivals, traditional leadership structures, and deep respect for the natural world remain vital parts of their identity. There is also a growing consciousness among the youth to preserve their language, music, and folklore.

Food and Cuisine

The traditional diet of the Nicobarese tribe includes coconut, pandanus, tubers, bananas, fish, and pork. Coconut plays a central role not just as food, but also economically. Pigs are considered a delicacy and play an important role during feasts and ceremonies. Meals are often cooked using firewood, and dishes are seasoned with local herbs. Post-tsunami resettlement brought new food items through aid and markets,

slightly changing their dietary habits. Despite external influences, traditional food practices still form an integral part of their cultural identity.

Language and Religion

The Nicobarese speak a group of Austroasiatic languages known as 'Nicobarese languages'. Christianity, especially Protestantism, is the dominant religion, introduced during colonial missionary activities. However, traditional beliefs still influence their worldview.

Economy and Livelihood

Traditionally, the Nicobarese depended on fishing, coconut cultivation, and pig rearing. Barter systems were common, but in recent decades, monetary transactions and market interactions have increased. Handicrafts and forest produce also contribute to their livelihood.

Impact of Modernization and Government Policies

Modern education, healthcare, and infrastructure have gradually transformed Nicobarese life. Government policies aimed at tribal welfare have provided support, but also led to cultural dilution and dependency. Efforts are being made to balance development with preservation of identity.

Post-Tsunami Resilience and Development

The 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami caused widespread destruction in Nicobar. Many villages were wiped out, and the Nicobarese were displaced. Recovery programs helped rebuild communities, but also accelerated exposure to modern lifestyles and external influences.

Challenges and the Way Forward

Key challenges include loss of language, cultural erosion, youth migration, and ecological threats. There is a growing need for sustainable development policies that respect tribal autonomy. Community-driven initiatives and inclusive governance are essential for preserving Nicobarese heritage.

Conclusion

The Nicobarese tribe stands at the intersection of tradition and transformation. Their resilience, community spirit, and adaptive capabilities are noteworthy. While modernization has brought several benefits, it also poses risks to their cultural integrity.

Preserving their language, customs, and values should be a priority in any development initiative. Sustainable progress must be inclusive and participatory, recognizing the Nicobarese not just as beneficiaries of welfare, but as custodians of a unique cultural heritage.

Their future depends on a balanced approach that honors their past, supports their present, and empowers future generations to thrive while staying rooted in their identity. Recognizing their contributions and challenges is vital for building a diverse and inclusive Indian society.

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