

The New Canoe of Botale: Experiences among the Onge of Andaman

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The Onge, like other indigenous populations of Andaman and Nicobar archipelago like the Jarawas, the Sentinelese, the Great Andmanese and the Shompens in, remains little known and least understood tribal citizen of the modern world. The Onge are negrito gatherer-hunters who have been found inhabited an isolated island in the Andaman Sea, about 162 nautical miles away from Port Blair. Little Andaman is the southernmost island, among the Andaman group of islands, in the Bay of Bengal. It is about 44 km in length and 16-26 km in breadth. Once it was the exclusive habitat of the Onge.

It is always very much exciting and awe-inspiring experience observing and mingling with a less known community thriving in their prelithic hunter-gatherer society. I felt like riding a time-machine to myself among the living ancestral society existed at least twenty thousand years ago. It was my first field research phase of three months among the Onge of Little Andaman Island during 1986.

The Onge and other indigenous tribes of Andaman and Nicobar archipelago like the Jarawas, the Sentinelese, and the Shompens, still remains less known and least understood citizens of the world. Migration history of the negrito groups like the Onge, Jarawas, Sentinelese, also known as 'Asiatic Pigmies' is still shrouded under mystery regarding the route taken to reach these islands, whether directly out of Africa or branched out from Australian aborigines.

There were just 96 souls of surviving Onges, an independent tribal community who are now around 100. Once they enjoyed the whole of 730 square kilometres of Little Andaman, an isolated Island located 162 nautical miles south of Port Blair town. Around eight hours voyage by a passenger cum cargo ship landed me at Hut Bay jetty, the only in this island with an adjacent market and some administrative offices.

Local officials helped our team of three to reach up to a creek head travelling some 22 kms northwards by a four wheeler. After a short trek inside the coastal mangrove forest we met three Onge adults with two dugout canoes waiting for us. After 20 minutes boat

journey the creek, Bara Nala, meets the sea. We had to take land route along the sea beach for around half an hour to reach another *nala* head, the Dugong Creek. Another large canoe took us across and reached Dugong Creek jetty, a small one. Ours baggage including provisions, although, were taken through the open sea route. We found ourselves surrounded by curious eyes of several Onge men, women and children as we walked inland and occupied respective wooden huts, the best available shelters for next three months in this god's own land. In fact, from that very moment, we unknowingly and automatically started reversing our cultural clock in a memorable drive in adapting to a habitat of the foraging society.

'Onge' the perfect human

After a couple of weeks familiarities developed among 'us' and 'them' we started addressing most of the Onge residents by their name and started using a few nouns and verbs of their language, unique to them. Their level acceptance of us, the outsiders, could be gauged from certain voluntary gifts like coconuts and fresh fish, which in fact made us feel being a part of their society. Moreover, those fresh food items actually became absolutely tempting to us in this lifestyle with minimal of food and civic amenities available.

A month of stay and being more 'Onge-ised' made us truly motivated and active for the systematic research work. Perhaps I was drawn by spirit of adventure in my energetic young age to participate in their fishing and hunting expeditions. But sadly most such expressions of interests were discarded by the elderly hunters in anticipation of various dangers for me. But a long and persistent coaxing and pleading I and the young medical officer could finally convince them our ability through demonstration of certain activities around the settlement area to pass the qualifying round. Rowing a canoe alone, using a dagger properly or catching fish with hook and line (for occasional return gifts), etc. actually worked.

The D Day

Almost daily lone visit inside forest for a moth by Mr Botale, the middle aged Onge, made me curious because two aspects. First, they rarely go to forest alone and secondly, once they hunt a wild boar or two they thoroughly relax till they feel really hungry for

the sweet and fatty meat of *Sus Andmanensis*. I finally came to know about his new canoe from Botale himself being religiously attending the digging and finishing works, the most laborious part of the work. These dugout canoes, the primeval form of water vessel are built by dig out the core of the tree trunk and then smooth finishing of the hull of the canoe. Around a week ago Ramesh, the son-in-law of Botale, informed us with his usual big grin that the hull was ready to be brought to the shore for fixing the outriggers on it. We had to coax him and Botale a lot to take me and the Doctor with them on that instance.

Around 7-15 a.m. we reached the Onge dwelling area to find nine of the most able and experienced Onge men were waiting for us. They greeted us as we joined the team but with a pinch of doubt about our ability and adaptability for such venture deep inside the forest. All of them were carrying *dao* (chopper and adze) while Kanjo the eldest one, was carrying his *pan* (betel leaves) and *chuna* (lime) in a sling bag hanging from his right shoulder. Three younger ones were wearing t-shirts with shorts while three other wore vests and Kanjo was only in traditional dress (*chaddi*). Interestingly, only the youngest Otalate was wearing a rubber slipper in contrast to his bare-footed brethren.

Botale and Kanjo took lead and all of us, a group of eleven, started following them northward along the eastern shoreline. The yellow sandy beach was spread quite wide that day due to low tide. For about half an hour brisk – walking we turned left to enter into the dense forest. At this point there laid three newly made canoes of different sizes. All those were at various stages of fixation of outriggers. There was a makeshift shade close to the forest with bamboo made bench to sit and relax. Only about 12-15 feet ahead an open path of approximately 10 / 12 ft. wide had already been created through which all those canoe hulls made inside the forest were brought out to the sea beach. Throughout this path straight tree branches of medium thickness had been placed across at a regular interval of about 5 – 6 feet. During the journey only Kanjo took a short break to have a bétel leaf. Others preferred not to have anything to eat or drink. Our pace of forest-walking became almost half that of beach-walking as we had to hop and dodge over those cross-laid branches and numerous left overs of the cleared smaller tree and bushy plant base. But the Onge men were walking smoothly unfazed by those obstacles.

We reached the desired site after about 25 minutes' walk inside the forest. It was really inside the core area of the forest with towering trees standing tall spreading their huge buttresses. The undergrowth had already been cleared where the newly curved hull of the boat was lying. That particular tree about 30 feet tall, was cut for making one canoe.

Botale, the maker and owner of his new boat was in happy mood bearing a prominent smile on his face. His teammates who joined hands on the day of felling the tree are again accompanying him cheerfully and voluntarily at this finishing stage to drag the huge hull out to the beach. There the outriggers would be fixed to the hull before launching into the sea. As we all reached the spot at first they appreciated that we had taken the trouble to see the boat and that we two were safe and sound. Then for a while they sat on the ground after examining the hull. Some of them took betel leaf and exchanged some happy words or thoughts among them. It was around 08.30 in the morning but there was hardly any direct sunlight. Rather the scattered inclined sunbeams cast a graffiti on the forest canvas. After a round of *biri* and betel leaf, the Onge discussed day's job in hand. Then, led by Botale, one by one, they picked up their adzes and started giving final touches especially to smoothen the outer surface of the hull. Some made wooden poles and sticks and started tying those across through the holes made for fixing outrigger. Each such pole measured about six and half feet was very straight. Two such poles of the length of the hull itself was then laid over the crosswise poles and being tied at every intersection using a particular fibre strip made from the outer bark of the tree. It took them almost two and half hours to make the hull ready to be dragged to the beach.

The next stage was to transport the hull. Then we decided for a break which was necessary for our thirsty throat and hungry stomach. In fact, since we left the settlement area, we have exhausted our stock of 200 gm biscuits and two litres of water brought by me and the doctor. Understanding the poor condition of their urbanized guests, ever-smiling Ramesh pointed at a huge tall tree close to our location. Kanjo and Botale also came forward near that tree and examined a high branch to show us a very large size honey comb hanging with thousands of bees on it. Those are the larger variety of honey bees found in Andaman forests in abundance. Three of them took little time to find a particular bushy plant and took out a small branch full of leaves. The same was handed over to Ramesh who took those and the *dao* while climbing the tall tree.

Ramesh, climbed the tree as smoothly, as if walking, without any climbing gear. On close observation I found, it was their soft but elastic shoal that help them getting good hold on the moderately rough outer bark of the tree. In fact, we get this kind of support using high grade rock-climbing shoes with thick rubber sole during rock climbing events. It was in concordance with David Cipriani's observation about the high elasticity and softness of skin of the Onge people.

At about 25 ft. above the ground, he was nearly three feet away from the honey comb. He stopped and started chewing those green leaves carried by him. Then he smeared some portion of the green paste on his face, neck, and hand. Then he started spraying the remaining paste from his mouth directly on the honey bees using long breath. Within a minute he started cutting the hive with the *dao* in his right hand and keeping hold and balance with the other three limbs, almost sticking to the huge tree trunk like a lizard.

Returning on the ground, with the help of Bairogegi he started cutting the hive primarily in two halves, one with the larvae inside was chosen by the Onge. Each one of them was enjoying his share of the piece of the hive with honey and larvae. At the same time Bairogegioffered me and the Doctor a six-by-three inch cube of the hive full of honey only. I was astonished to find a few bees were still on the hive but they looked very docile, as if those were under the spell of tranquilizer. As we chewed and sucked the piece, the honey entered into our throats like very sweet thick nectar with high sugar content. Though we two chewed the piece and discarded the wax, the Onges mostly took their pieces as a whole along with the larvae.

Having consumed the pure instant energy booster, I was feeling my body temperature rose a bit and was feeling terribly thirsty. Perhaps a similar feeling happened to the Onges as they were looking for some water. But our two bottles were already emptied. The Onge men instantly found a nearby pothole with some water, removed the decomposed leaves by hand and started drinking that brown water using an enamel mug. They even did not bother to check for the water -borne organisms in the water. As we two non-Onges refused to drink the same water, they smiled but never insisted. Ever-smiling Ramesh came up as a saviour and we started following him far inside the forest. Passed about 15 minutes of wriggling amongst entangling bushes, suddenly a

relatively open forest area appeared with a bit damp and softer soil below our feet. It can best be described as a canopy of full-grown canes. I was, with my level of perception, looking keenly for a cleaner source of water in the form of a stream or pool. But on my utter disbelief, Ramesh pointed out to the cane, saying: enge! (water). On query, he narrated that this type of cane and bamboo mixed forest areas are called *Tambojoko*. He then chose a huge cane of nearly four inches diameter hanging at 3 / 4 feet above the ground resembling a sagging rope. He instructed us to stand on either side of the cane approximately ten feet apart. Then he cut one end of the cane and asked me to hold it. It was pretty heavy and both of us were at our wits end by that time. Then the same thing was repeated by Ramesh at the end held by the Doctor. As he supported the piece of cane at the middle and instructed the Doctor to raise the end by his side slowly and that I should place my open mouth below the opposite end. I can never forget the first few drops of sweet and cold water dripped inside my mouth. It was almost a divine feeling. Then I raised the end of the cane of my side, the same thing happened to the Doctor. We repeated the process for four to five times and every time some quantity of the 'nectar' entered our throat.

But then with the sudden outburst of the shrilling sound of a species of forest cricket I came back to my senses to find, it was already 01:45 in the afternoon. These crickets, present in hundreds, practically invisible in the forest have the habit of making a loud chorus suddenly breaking the inert silence.

With the call from Botale and Kanjo, all of them were back to work. They started adding some more thin logs or branches tangentially across the cleared path made for the canoe hull to be dragged to the beach. The transverse logs were placed almost at every five feet. As they started pushing the hull along the cleared path, the logs laid on the ground acted as castor wheels. Once the hull was moved 10 to 12 feet forward, the logs left behind were brought to the front and again laid similarly. Thus, the huge hull was being relatively easily transported at an average pace of almost 50 feet in six to eight minutes by those nine men. There was no performance of any kind of ritual offerings or prayer came to our notice in any stage of the work so far.

We reached the sandy beach at around 03.00 PM. They placed the new hull stably parked on the upper end of the sandy beach and tied a nylon rope they carried for

fixing and anchoring the hull with the mangrove tree. After another break for rest and cleaning our hands and feet (including most of the Onges) in the sea water, we all started for the return journey after a really memorable expedition of lifetime.

Concerns

Since there is no Negrito population on the mainland of India, there are multiple speculations in circulation about their exact origin. Whether they branched out of the African Negritos or are one of the distant kin of the Australian Aborigines is yet to be definitely known. The present strength of population of the Onge is estimated to be around one hundred.

With their traditional knowledge of strong earth-quakes, not uncommon in this seismically and technically active zone, they could foresee the disaster of 2004. The elderly Onges of the Dugong Creek settlement ran to the sea beach after the tremor, in anticipation and then came back rushing to alert all the fellow members. Then they ran towards the forest and reached a known highland nearby and settled their temporarily beyond the reach of Tsunami waves.

Even now, the Onge of little Andaman Island is maintaining its biological and cultural identity though population had decreased from 150 in 1951 to 100 in 2017 within a span of six and half decades. The whole economy of the Onge has undergone a change after the Introduction of free ration of our kind. Their physical stamina seems to have greatly reduced and the incidence of overweight has increased in both men and women. It is very unfortunate to find modern day diseases like diabetes cardiac diseases and bone TB are reported among them. Tuberculosis and asthma are quite prevalent and psychiatric patients are also reported and are under medical treatment. Alarmingly cancer is one of the causes of death among them recently.