

Andaman and Nicobar Islands

Area: 8,249 sq. km

Population: 356,152

Capital: Port Blair

Principal Languages: Hindi, Nicobarese, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu

Union territory (pop., 2008 est.: 411,000), India.

LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR

ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

LT GEN (Retd) BHOPINDER SINGH



It consists of two groups of islands in the Bay of Bengal about 800 mi (1,300 km) east of the Indian subcontinent and Sri Lanka; the total area is 3,185 sq mi (8,249 sq km). The chief islands are North Andaman, Middle Andaman, and South Andaman (known collectively as Great Andaman), and Little Andaman. The Nicobar group includes Car Nicobar, Camorta (Kamorta) and Nancowry, and Great Nicobar. Of the hundreds of islands that constitute the territory, the number of populated islands of the Andaman group is about double that of the Nicobar group. Port Blair on South Andaman, established by the British in 1858, is the territorial capital.

Union territory, India, consisting of two groups of islands at the southeastern edge of the Bay of Bengal. The peaks of a submerged mountain range, the Andaman Islands and their neighbours to the south, the Nicobar Islands, form an arc stretching southward for some 620 miles (1,000 km) between Myanmar (Burma) and the island of Sumatra, Indonesia; the arc constitutes the boundary between the Bay of Bengal to the west and the Andaman Sea to the east.

The Andamans, situated on the ancient trade route between India and Myanmar, were visited by the navy of the English East India Company in 1789, and in 1872 they were linked administratively by the British to the Nicobar Islands. The two sets of islands became a union territory of the Republic of India in 1956. Port Blair (on South Andaman Island) is the territorial capital.

The territory has for more than a century been recognized for its indigenous communities, which have ardently avoided extensive interaction with ethnic outsiders. In 2004 the islands drew global attention when they were severely damaged by a large tsunami that had been triggered by an earthquake in the Indian Ocean near Indonesia. Area 3,185 square miles (8,249 square km). Pop. (2008 est.) 411,000.

Land

The Andamans comprise more than 300 islands. North, Middle, and South Andaman, known collectively as Great Andaman, are the main islands; others include Landfall Island, Interview Island, the Sentinel Islands, Ritchie's Archipelago, and Rutland Island. Little Andaman in the south is separated from the Nicobar Islands by the Ten Degree Channel, which is about 90 miles (145 km) wide.

The Nicobars consist of 19 islands. Among the most prominent are Car Nicobar in the north; Camorta, Katchall, and Nancowry in the centre of the chain; and Great Nicobar in the south. About 90 miles to the southwest of Great Nicobar lies the northwestern tip of Sumatra, Indonesia.

Relief and drainage

Both the Andaman and Nicobar groups are part of a great island arc, formed by the above-sea extensions of submarine ridges of the Rakhine Mountains and the Patkai Range to the north and the Mentawai Ridge (the peaks of which form the Mentawai Islands of Indonesia) to the south. The highest elevation is 2,418 feet (737 metres) at Saddle Peak on North Andaman, followed by Mount Thullier at 2,106 feet (642 metres) on Great Nicobar and Mount Harriet at 1,197 feet (365 metres) on South Andaman. In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, there were volcanic eruptions on Barren Island in the northern Andamans.

Formed of sandstone, limestone, and shale of Cenozoic age (i.e., formed during the past 65 million years), the terrain of the Andamans is rough, with hills enclosing narrow longitudinal valleys. Flat land is scarce and is confined to a few valleys, such as the Betapur on Middle Andaman and Diglipur on North Andaman. Perennial rivers are few. The coral-fringed coasts of the islands are deeply indented, forming safe harbours and tidal creeks.

The terrain of the Nicobars is more diverse than that of the Andamans. Some of the Nicobar Islands, such as Car Nicobar, have flat coral-covered surfaces with offshore coral formations that prevent most ships from anchoring. Other islands, such as Great Nicobar, are hilly and contain numerous fast-flowing streams. Great Nicobar is the only island in the territory with a significant amount of fresh surface water.

Climate

The climate of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is tropical but is moderated by sea breezes. Temperatures typically rise from the low 70s F (about 23 °C) into the mid-80s F (about 30 °C) daily

throughout the year. The territory receives roughly 120 inches (3,000 mm) of rain annually, brought mainly by the southwest monsoon, which blows from May through September, and by the tropical cyclones that follow in October and November. In the Nicobars, Great Nicobar receives considerably more rain than the other islands. The Andamans have long provided meteorological data for shipping in the Bay of Bengal; a reporting station was in operation at Port Blair as early as 1868.

Plant and animal life

The great majority of the area of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is covered with dense tropical forest, which supports a broad spectrum of flora and fauna. The dominant tree species include narra (also called Andaman redwood, or padauk; *Pterocarpus dalbergioides*) and various large trees of the family Dipterocarpaceae. The harbours and tidal creeks often are surrounded by mangrove swamps. Many species of tree ferns of the family Cyatheaceae are found in the Nicobars but not in the Andamans.

The islands are inhabited by only a few dozen species of terrestrial and marine mammals, a number of which—such as the Andaman wild pig (*Sus scrofa andamanensis*)—are endemic to the region. Other common mammals include macaques, spotted deer, civets, shrews, whales, dolphins, and dugongs (*Dugong dugon*). The territory is home to more than 200 species of birds, including many endemic varieties. Numerous types of snakes and lizards inhabit the forests, and saltwater crocodiles, fish, turtles, and sea snakes are abundant in the coastal waters. Many species of flora and fauna have yet to be documented systematically.

People

Population composition

Although the Andaman and Nicobar Islands territory consists of hundreds of islands, very few of them are inhabited. Roughly two dozen of the Andaman Islands support human settlements, while only 12 of the Nicobar Islands are populated.

The vast majority of the population of the Andamans consists of immigrants from South Asia and their descendants. Most speak Hindi or Bengali, but Tamil, Telugu, and Malayalam also are common. The indigenous inhabitants of the Andaman Islands, the Andamanese, historically comprised small isolated groups—all speaking dialects of the Andamanese language. They used the bow and the dog (introduced to the Andamans c. 1857) for hunting but knew no method of making fire. Turtles, dugongs, and fish were caught with nets or harpooned from single outrigger canoes. The remoteness of the Andamanese and their general hostility toward foreigners prevented major cultural change until the mid-20th century. Few indigenous Andamanese survive today, most groups having been decimated by disease following their encounter with Europeans, Indians, and other outsiders. In the early 21st century the only Andamanese groups that remained intact and continued to practice the ways of their ancestors included a small group of Great Andamanese on Strait Island, the Sentinelese of North Sentinel Island, the Jarawa of the interior areas of Middle and South Andaman, and the Onge of Little Andaman.

The indigenous inhabitants of the Nicobar Islands, the Nicobarese (including the related Shompen), continued to constitute the majority of the population of the Nicobars in the early 21st century. They probably descend both from the Malays of insular and peninsular Southeast Asia and from the Mon (also called the Talaing) of Myanmar. The Nicobarese speak various Nicobarese languages, which belong to the Mon-Khmer language group of the Austroasiatic language family; some also speak Hindi and

English. In addition to the indigenous population, there are significant numbers of Tamils and other people from the Indian mainland living in the Nicobar Islands. Many came during the 1960s and '70s in conjunction with the Indian government's program to develop the region's agriculture.

More than two-thirds of the people of the Andaman Islands are Hindu; Christians make up about one-fifth of the population and Muslims less than one-tenth. Many Nicobarese are Christian, although some communities practice local religions or have adopted Hinduism, which is prevalent throughout the region. There is also a notable Muslim minority in the Nicobars.

Settlement patterns and demographic trends

The population of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands expanded particularly rapidly in the mid-20th century as immigrants took advantage of India's postindependence development initiatives in the territory. Growth began to slow by the 1980s, and by the early 21st century it had approached a rate roughly comparable to that of the rest of India. Port Blair is the only major town; it contains more than one-fourth of the territory's residents. The remainder of the population is spread across more than 500 small villages, most of which have fewer than 500 inhabitants.

Economy

Agriculture, forestry, and fishing

Agriculture is the occupation of most of the residents of the Andaman Islands. Principal crops include rice, coconuts, betel (areca nuts), fruits, and spices (such as turmeric). Rubber, oil palms, and cashews also are important. In addition to farming there is a small forestry sector on the islands, which focuses on production of sawn wood for domestic use; surpluses are exported to the Indian mainland. Similarly, the products of the islands' fisheries are intended primarily for domestic consumption.

Manufacturing

Neither the Andaman nor the Nicobar island groups are highly industrialized. However, a variety of manufacturing activities are undertaken on both sets of islands. Furniture and other wood products are manufactured on the Andaman Islands. Processed foods and garments are among the principal products of both island groups.

Tourism

Tourism is a growing industry in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, with dozens of hotels scattered throughout the territory. Most tourists are from the Indian mainland. Popular historical attractions include remnants of the British colonial administration, such as the Andaman Cellular Jail (completed in 1906), in Port Blair, where the Indian revolutionary Vinayak Damodar (Vir) Savarkar was detained in the first half of the 20th century. The natural environment of the territory, with its many parks, gardens, and sanctuaries, is attractive to ecotourists and trekkers.

Transportation

Most of the paved roads are in South Andaman. Port Blair and Diglipur are important harbours of South Andaman and North Andaman, respectively. An interisland boat service connects Port Blair with North,

Middle, South, and Little Andaman islands. Air service is available to the northern and southern Indian mainland from Port Blair.

Government and society

Administrative framework

The administrative structure of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, like most other Indian states and territories, is defined by the national constitution of 1950. The territory is administered by the central government through a lieutenant governor, who is appointed by the president of India. The lieutenant governor is assisted by a Council of Ministers. The territory also has its own legislature with elected members.

Health and welfare

Basic health care is offered free of charge to residents of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Services are provided by hospitals in the more densely populated areas and by community health-care centres and primary health-care facilities in the more rural regions. There also is an extensive network of health-care subcentres spread across the islands. Malaria has been a perennial problem in the territory, and the government has participated in nationally sponsored mosquito-control and malaria-prevention initiatives to combat the disease. Similarly, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands territory joined the national government's leprosy-eradication program, with the result that the incidence of that illness has dropped dramatically in the territory since the 1990s.

Education

The number of educational institutions is limited, and most schools offer only primary education. Nevertheless, more than four-fifths of the territory's population is literate, which is well above the Indian national average. There are several postsecondary institutions offering industrial, technical, and teachers' training. The first nursing school opened in 2001.

History

Located on the trade routes from India to East Asia, the Andaman and Nicobar island groups have been known from earliest times. The 7th-century Chinese Buddhist monk I-ching, the Arab travelers of the 9th century, and Marco Polo (c. 1254–1324) are among those who mentioned the islands. The name Andaman most likely is derived from the name of the monkey god of Hindu mythology, Hanuman. The name Nicobar probably derives from the Tamil word *nakkavaram* ("land of the naked").

The British first surveyed the Andaman Islands in 1789 in search of a place to establish a penal colony for offenders from British India. Such a colony was established in 1790 but was abandoned just a few years later. In the mid-19th century, concern over native attacks on shipwrecked crews and the need for a penal settlement after the Indian Mutiny (1857–58) led the British to return to the Andamans. In 1858 they founded a new penal colony, named Port Blair. It was during a visit to Port Blair that Lord Mayo, viceroy of India (1869–72), was murdered by a convict in 1872. Meanwhile, the Danish, who had been the claimants of the Nicobar Islands—the ownership of which had since the 17th century shifted variously between France, Denmark, Austria, and Great Britain—relinquished their rights to the territory to the British in 1868.

The population of the region, particularly of the Andamans, was greatly changed by the settlement of convicts from the mainland and, beginning in the 1950s, of numerous refugees, especially from East Pakistan (since 1971, Bangladesh). Japanese forces occupied both the Andaman and Nicobar island groups from 1942 to 1945 (during World War II); after the British recaptured the islands, the penal colony in the Andamans was abolished. Administration of the Andamans and Nicobars was passed to India when it gained independence in 1947. The Andaman Cellular Jail, where Indian political prisoners were held, was declared a national monument in 1979.

In 2004 the Andaman and Nicobar island groups were struck by a tremendous tsunami that had been generated by an earthquake in the Indian Ocean near Sumatra, Indonesia. The inundation left thousands of people dead and many more displaced. The lower-lying Nicobars were most severely affected, with significant portions of some of those islands submerged by the tidal wave.
