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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Tilak Ranjan Bera. *A Journey through Nicobars: A History of Nicobar Islands Pre and Post Tsunami*. Salt Lake City: Woodland Publishers, 2011. ISBN 978-81-906121-4-2.

Aparna Vaidik. *Imperial Andamans: Colonial Encounter and Island History*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xvii + 282 pp. \$89.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-57605-6.

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Published on H-Asia (January, 2013)

Commissioned by Sumit Guha

The parallel reading of *Imperial Andamans* and *Journey through Nicobars* creates a fortuitous pairing. *Andamans* is very much a scholarly monograph by an academic researcher with a smart, analytic thesis, a parsing of documentary evidence, and a strong engagement with historiographical literature. It gestures to contemporary questions, but is preponderantly based in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as an interrogation into Andaman, Indian, and British interests in the islands.

Nicobars is more of a traveling memoir, penned and photographically illustrated by a medical doctor with strong historical interests, and draws on chronicles and observations to frame what is essentially a peregrination around the Nicobar Islands after the devastating tsunami of 2004. One work is academic, the other a personal, almost ethnographic account, yet the stories are complementary and in some instances supplement each another.

Though the Andamans and Nicobars are different island chains, there is much to connect them—the former lie just north of the latter—and both are key places of passage and encounter in the Indian Ocean. Vaidik, for example, traces the gradual settlement of the islands as strategic locales along trading routes from the Indian coast both east and west, built upon centuries—if not millennia—of trade between China, Southeast Asia, the merchant ports of the subcontinent, and on to the Persian Gulf and East Africa. It is the dialectic between such island histories, playing off the changes and transformations of the British Empire and a subsequently independent India, that propel the narratives.

Imperial Andamans offers suggestions of larger resonances for an Indian nationalist history of the present day, though as a research work hews rather closely and cautiously to its resource and archival base in painting a political, administrative, and social portrait of the Andamans under British rule, particularly as shaped by the implantation there of a penal colony in 1857.

The Andamans penal colony shared many of the attributes of other prison settlements from the same period, stretching from the British at Port Arthur in Australia, or the French in Guyana and, especially, New Caledonia. The latter is instructive because of its similar island nature, and Vaidik does well to tease out the remarkable registers of imagination that shaped such carceral island implantations.

The very “island” qualities of such prisons were presumed to ensure they were distant, isolated, and in some ways “untouched,” thus ideal for experiments in social engineering premised upon transforming convicts and criminals into redeemed citizens who could, during their sentences, also serve as cheap labor for building up colonial settlements—the “imperial” prerogative of the title. “Are islands natural prisons? The answer to this question is encrypted in the histories of modern colonial encounters” (Vaidik, p. 187). Vaidik’s critical frameworks are formed around issues of space and place—conceiving “empire” not as a political entity, but rather a project of managing topographies, geographies, and the bounding of territories.

Vaidik’s focus is on colonists and prisoners, largely

the dynamic between British administrators and Indian criminals and political prisoners. The uniqueness of the settlement by outlanders, both free and forced, stems from the origin of the primary colony, built around a famous panopticon—the cellular prison just after the great rebellion of 1857, the “Sepoy Mutiny,” that shook British rule in India.

Because of this, the Andaman location would inevitably be not only a historical artifact of carceral state power and punitive justice, but a commemorative and memorial site for the Indian independence movement that would rise on the mainland. The Andaman jail would become a place of martyrdom and memory for liberation from empire, the “redemptive space of Indian nationalism” (Vaidik, p. 2).

The details of prisoners’ fates are well elucidated, from condemnation to arrival, to regimes of work, despair, and survival. Much of the narrative is the stuff of solid political, social, and institutional histories: the policies, the reconstructed statistics about numbers of deportees and enumerations of crimes. One point of argument well developed is the category of “social death” for those taken to the Andamans. Here is where much of the richest analysis takes place.

Vaidik points out that transportation to the Andamans was not only a sentence of labor, but one of such perceived dislocation from natal surroundings that loss of social, cultural, religious, familial, and moral ties meant the effective death of the prisoner as a subject. It is at this focal point that many despaired or took their own lives, upon which debates raged about the reformatory potential to “reshape” and re-create new lives for individuals.

On a few occasions prisoners themselves looked to the Andamans as places of self-fashioning in anonymity, with pasts erased and possibilities for new lives. These questions of new lives and ‘starting over’ are indeed among the salient narratives. “The transported convict, who was marginalized and rendered “socially dead” by virtue of having been transported, was integrated into not only state-sponsored political hierarchies but also given space to re-build and re-enact his social life” (Vaidik, p. 190).

This story of rebuilding—for good or ill—in the islands, is also a narrative that carries through Tilak Ranjan Bera’s work on the Nicobars. The logic for him is plain: the story he tells lies both before and after the staggering tsunami of 2004 that swamped not only the Nicobars, but

much of the Indian Ocean basin, from Sumatra to the east coast of the African continent.

In fact, this evocation of “renewal” is very much the trajectory of Nicobars, as Bera traces the early contacts and settlement of the islands from Malay and Southeast Asian peoples as the indigenous inhabitants, through an island-by-island recounting of the devastation wrought by the 2004 tsunami and the attempts of the islanders to rebuild their lives. “I came to see the rejuvenation of the Nicobars, instead I found Nicobars in a reincarnated form, a new life and new way of living throughout the archipelago” (Bera, p. 279).

For readers, the special delight of *Nicobars* is to travel along with Bera from island to island, surveying the extraordinary foliage, atolls, trees, leatherback sea turtles, monkeys, red crabs, and megapode birds, while also appreciating the impacts of piracy, the shell and fiber trade, the Pacific War, Christian religious instruction, state education, and other human-made transformations that have changed the islands.

This is a richly illustrated work, with well over a hundred full-color photographs. Some are merely picturesque, but many more compare the outlines of islands now partially washed away or submerged since the tsunami, indicating the power of natural forces in shaping oceanic histories. Many more are scenes from villages and emplacements that underscore the continuity of living communities, constantly evolving in the face of newer challenges. “The tsunami was a great leveler. It has overhauled their way of living and possibly forced them to come closer culturally to the rest of the country” (Bera, p. 278).

That “rest of the country” is, of course, India. Both Bera’s and Vaidik’s works focus on islands, yet both are very much about the influences of the mainland. As Bera suggests, the old society in the Nicobars cannot be reconstructed, and the post-tsunami islands have been shaped by resettled communities, expanded state education programs, and greater economic support from India.

To his credit, Bera is never nostalgic for a lost paradise, even if some chapters border on simple description of sights and encounters. The early parts of the book do play up outsider reports of simple living by fruit, fish, and rainwater (“In this land of abundance, one can easily survive without any material wealth” [Bera, p. 29]), yet the latter chapters are about the political imbroglios and sovereignty questions that join the islands to India, underscoring Japanese invaders in 1942 who “began tor-

turing English-speaking Nicobarese on mere suspicion” (Bera, p. 59), and a 1968 visit by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi who made “efforts to establish a civilian Indian population in this strategically located island” (Bera, p. 168).

By focusing locally, Bera’s work is often a helpful complement to Vaidik’s related study in another way. Vaidik’s research is concentrated in the colonial period of the Andamans. The peoples of the Andamans, the indigenous inhabitants themselves, are discussed a bit, but do not figure consistently in the narrative. They are largely figures of imperial creation: “discursive cannibals, pesky natives, pliant guides, trackers, and anthropological specimens” whose presence is “marked by their absence” (Vaidik, p. 15). Bera’s ethnographic approach in the Nicobars is here a ready complement to Vaidik’s work on the Andamans. Vaidik concentrates heavily on the declared “imperial” and colonial focus, and thus the reader learns much about the Indian immigrants, prison-

ers, British authorities, and “savage” representations.

Bera provides the “savages” with their own chronicler, working through his own travel diary to produce extensive commentaries on the material situation, language, marital customs, trading systems, and political organization of the Nicobar island peoples. While still a series of representations, the local inhabitants become central characters, mediating between the interests of Indian governments and British legacies. In his case, Bera is particularly keen to describe the “new lives” that the Nicobar islanders are making for themselves since the devastation of the tsunami.

Vaidik is strongly analytic and rigorously discursive; Bera is lyrical and meditative. These are both engaging works of transformed lives, and the remarkable implications of small, island places, and the many political, cultural, and historical connections they maintain to the rest of the world.

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Citation: Matt Matsuda. Review of Bera, Tilak Ranjan, *A Journey through Nicobars: A History of Nicobar Islands Pre and Post Tsunami* and Vaidik, Aparna, *Imperial Andamans: Colonial Encounter and Island History*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

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