



Satadru Sen. *Savagery and Colonialism in the Indian Ocean: Power, Pleasure and the Andaman Islanders*. London: Routledge, 2010. 256 S. ISBN 978-0-203-86308-4.

Reviewed by Harald Fischer-Tiné  
Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (June, 2013)

## S. Sen: Savagery and Colonialism in the Indian Ocean

In his fourth monograph, New York based historian Satadru Sen is revisiting familiar terrain. More than a decade ago, his PhD dissertation (published in 2000 under the title *Disciplining Punishment*) provided a detailed analysis of the Convict Society in Britain's largest penal settlement in Asia, the Andaman Islands. This remote archipelago, situated between the Indian subcontinent and South East-Asia, served the British colonial rulers of India for almost hundred years as a dumping ground for mutineers, felons and 'seditionists' from their South Asian possessions. However, when Sen returns to the Andamans in his new book on *Savagery and Colonialism in the Indian Ocean*, he is only marginally interested in the penal system set up by the administrative elites of the *Raj*. His new study focusses rather on an outsider group only peripherally related to the punitive machinery: the aboriginal population inhabiting the island. The various Andamanese tribes were collectively regarded as particularly dangerous »savages« by both the British colonisers as well as the Indian convicts, and rumours that the Andamanese practiced cannibalism persisted well into the 19th century (p. 16f.).

It is this fascinating triangular constellation, transcending both the 'savage encounter' of early explorer colonialism as well as the 'tutelage' characteristic of the late 19th century 'civilizing mission' type of colonial rule, that renders Sen's study so fascinating. The discourse of savagery is at the centre of Sen's investigation and he asks questions that are as predictable as they are pertinent: "What are its uses, what is its relationship to power and governance, how is it mapped on a wider world of race, and how is it produced?" In his attempt to answer his research questions he draws on a number of theoretical warrantors ranging from post-colonially informed scholars like Alice Bullard, Nick Dirks and Anne Mc Clintock via Stephen Greenblatt to Martin Heidegger, from whom he borrows the concept of the »clearing« (*Lichtung*). Not exactly in line with the Heideggerian use,

however, the author defines the clearing as an ambiguous middle ground and contact zone in the colony of a colony, in which the self-proclaimed "civilised", those about to be civilised and the outright savages meet, an "evolving, transformed and transforming space, both literal and metaphorical, that is neither settlement nor jungle" (p. 10). As he argues in the introduction, important shifts in the meaning of savagery for British colonial administrators as well as in the ways in which it was produced discursively and in practice can be observed even in the relatively short period under study (i.e. 1858-1900) (p. 12 f.).

Sen uses the book's six substantive Chapters to reconstruct these changing "models of the savage" (p. 13). The first chapter addresses the important question of how to locate Andamese 'savages' on the global maps of race, the drawing of which was an important preoccupation of mid- and late Victorian ethnology, anthropology, and 'race-science'. The racialising of the Andamanese, Sen maintains, ended the period where the image of savagery had been backed by wild fantasies of cannibalism and turned them into objects of scientific endeavours. In the course of the debate, various theories were brought forward comparing the aboriginal islanders with other ethnic groups in the British Empire and projecting them as 'a lost race' of Africans, Papuans or even Tasmanians that had gone astray (pp. 35-42). As the chapter aptly demonstrates, these pseudo-scientific constructions were not least exercises of self-assurance, allowing the British administrator-scholars to make sense of their own role in 'the clearing'. That the relationship between Europeans and 'savages' in this semi-civilised contact zone as well as in the 'uncivilised' wilderness of the jungle continued to be tense for decades becomes obvious in Chapter 2, which deals with British 'counter-insurgency measures' against the belligerent tribals. The various strategies of counter-insurgency that Sen identifies in this context start with the building of isolated fortified bridge-

heads and occasional punitive expeditions into the jungle during the 1850s. In later decades these pioneer tactics increasingly give way to the creation of a number of homes, orphanages and medical institutions aimed at partially 'taming' and at the same time preserving the members of the 'lost race' (p. 54). According to the author, however, the complete 'domestication' of the aboriginal population was never really intended, not least because the existence of a savage threat allowed the civilisers themselves to behave in an uncivilised manner (pp. 82-86). This "delinquent whiteness" (p. 88) frequently expressed itself in man-hunts, village-burnings, and sadistically harsh floggings from which, Sen contends, the Europeans involved derived the pleasure of performing superiority.

The subsequent chapter explores a similar type of pleasure but this time from the kidnapping of Andamanese who then were supposed to serve as "trophies, texts and playmates" (p. 94). That these colonial fantasies rarely worked out in the manner envisaged by the colonisers is beautifully illustrated in a section on 'resistance in the clearing' (pp. 110-18). It highlights aboriginal agency and discusses the manifold varieties of opposition and evasion used by the captive tribals, who for instance stubbornly refused to work or learn languages. Likewise, the expected shock and awe effect did not occur when the kidnapped 'savages' were shown the marvels of civilisation: a group of Andamanese guided to Calcutta in 1863, for instance, did not show the slightest sign of astonishment or fear when confronted with railways and the latest technical gadgets (p. 121). Chapter 4 takes up and develops the issue of the 'lost race' inasmuch as it focusses on the discourse of Andamanese extinction. The expectation that 'inferior races' would inevitably vanish when clashing with their superiors was not only a widespread trope in the social Darwinism of the T.B. Huxley variety (tremendously popular in the period under study), it also has some empirical grounding. In the 1870s and early 1880s the spread of diseases like syphilis and measles, brought to the islands by the colonisers and their Indian captives, decimated the aboriginal population significantly. As Sen argues, it was primarily this disaster which brought an end to the attempts to civilise the savage Andamanese and exploit their labour. From the mid-1880s onwards, aboriginals were instead widely held to be "medically unfit for civilization" (p. 156) and the ideals of nature conservatism increasingly replaced the ideals of the civilising mission.

Chapter five, arguably the most original and fascinating in Sen's monograph, examines the complex rela-

tionships between 'natives' (Indians) and 'savages' (Andamanese) in the 'clearing'. The interactions ranged from violent encounters to occasional alliances, sexual contact, and at times even intermarriage. Satadru Sen shows that especially the latter forms of alliance were deeply troubling for the British, who were at pains to keep the two groups neatly apart and protect the "biological-genealogical purity" of the Andamanese. The fascinating sources that he analyses in this context allow a rare micro-historical perspective on the often neglected interactions of two groups that were, no doubt, both 'subaltern' under the conditions of colonialism, albeit in strikingly different ways. The final chapter zooms in on the anthropological and medical research conducted on Andamanese men, women and children during the 1890. Based on a succinct and incisive reading of both textual and visual sources, Sen lays bare both the naked (sic!) violence inherent in these 'scientific' experiments as well as the "celibate homoeroticism" of British administrators-cum-amateur scientists - such as M.V. Portman, later celebrated as 'father of the Andamanese' - who conducted them. The short conclusion (pp. 208-15) should perhaps more appropriately have been titled 'epilogue', since its purpose is mainly to show that the various models of the savage developed under the colonial regime still loom large in independent India.

Satadru Sen's new work is valuable not because it breaks completely new ground but because it further refines and complicates existing insights on, amongst others, 'savage encounters', 'marginal whitenesses', 'porno tropics' and the 'colonial ethnographic state'. The study is well-structured and the author shows an astounding command of his fascinating source material. The book, therefore, certainly deserves a large audience beyond the community of South Asianists. That being said, it is also necessary to point out some obvious weaknesses. At times, Sen is apparently carried away by the fascination of his own sources, leading to a predilection for excessively longish quotes (e.g. pp. 85f., p. 140). Secondly, and even more annoyingly, the author's fancy for sometimes obfuscating post-colonial/post-modernist jargon makes *Savagery and Colonialism* unnecessarily heavy reading. This tendency is reinforced by the many passing references to a rather eclectic lot of theoretical authorities including, of course, Hegel and Heidegger. As has already been mentioned above, particularly the latter's concept of the clearing/*Lichtung* is not adequately explored. One wonders if it would not have been preferable if Sen had steered clear of his short excursions into German philosophy and instead used the insights generated by his

case study more often to show the weaknesses and limitations of existing concepts and approaches precisely, as he occasionally does to great effect (pp. 185f.). These few criticisms aside, *Savagery and Colonialism* can unquestionably be recommended as a laudable piece of micro-

history, representing an original and well-conceived contribution not only to a neglected sub-field in South Asian studies but also to the history of colonial anthropology and the history of colonialism more generally.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

**Citation:** Harald Fischer-Tiné. Review of Sen, Satadru, *Savagery and Colonialism in the Indian Ocean: Power, Pleasure and the Andaman Islanders*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. June, 2013.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39386>

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.