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RILE -Revista Interdisciplinar de Literatura e Ecocritica
ISSN: 9788-5232

The ecology and history of the Andaman Islands: Bottom up and through the lens of fiction

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Abstract
This paper is a first person account and reflection on research and activism in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, but viewed through the lens of fiction. The key questions this reflection seeks to ask are about the challenges and relevance of fiction as a form of communicating the wide-range and multi-disciplinary nature of any particular bio-geography, of the possibilities that this might offer for creative expression and for communication and the nature of responses in one particular case involving this author. I will be approaching these questions through my personal experience of activism in the islands for 20 years and the publication in 2014 of my debut novel *The Last Wave*, which is a story deeply embedded in the history, ecology and people of the islands. I will also present some of the responses the book has received, particularly from readers in the islands themselves.

Key words
Andaman, activism, fiction, communication, literature

The Last Wave – a synopsis from the back of the book:

> Ever the aimless drifter, Harish finds the anchor his life needs in a chance encounter with members of the ancient – and threatened – Jarawa community: the 'original people' of the Andaman Islands and its tropical rainforests.
>
> As he observes the slow but sure destruction of everything the Jarawa require for their survival, Harish is moved by a need to understand, to do something. His unlikely friend and partner on this quest is Uncle Pame, a seventy-year-old Karen boatman whose father was brought to the islands from Burma by the British in the 1920s. The islands also bring him to Seema, a 'local born' – a descendant of the convicts who were lodged in the infamous Cellular Jail of Port Blair. Seema has seen the world, but unlike most educated islanders of her generation, she has decided to return home.
>
> Harish's earnestness, his fascination and growing love for the islands, their shared attempt to understand the Jarawa and the loss of her own first love, all draw Seema closer to Harish.
>
> As many things seem to fall in place and parallel journeys converge, an unknown

contender appears: the giant tsunami of December 2004. *The Last Wave* is a story of lost loves, but also of a culture, a community, an ecology poised on the sharp edge of time and history.

Introduction:

I don't remember the exact date, but it was a day in February 2005. I was sitting in Chennai airport on my way back home from the post tsunami Andaman Islands, reading Amitav Ghosh's elegant and deeply enriching story based in the mangroves of the Sunderbans, *The Hungry Tide* (Ghosh 2004). I was towards the end of the book and today, while I remember little of the details of the story, I have a vivid memory of that 'tubelight' going off in my head. If this can be such an engaging and interesting ecological-historical novel based in the Sunderbans, maybe, I thought to myself, I too could write something based in the Andaman Islands. A certain wisdom in literature has argued that it is not the author who writes a story; it is a story that finds its narrator– the author is indeed only a means to an end. And as I look back and think about my debut novel, *The Last wave* (Sekhsaria 2014), a story deeply embedded in the ecology, history and people of the Andaman Islands, I don't think I can disagree in any substantial way. I have wanted to do many things in my life, but writing a novel was never one of them. That I did write one eventually was contingent, I believe, on a whole set of things coming together and for the right configurations to fall into place.

The whole might indeed be greater than the sum of its parts but those parts needed to come together first in the right combination. And this article is the story of what those various parts and strands were, how and why they came together and what configuration was actually created that allowed for *The Last Wave– an island novel* to finally happen.

My journey in/to the islands

It was more than two decades ago– sometime in late 1994– that I first journeyed to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to visit a dear friend who was then in the Indian Navy and had a Port Blair posting. I spent two months then travelling the length of the islands– from Diglipur in the north to Indira Point on Great Nicobar island the extreme south, a couple of 100 nautical miles from the island of Sumatra. I had some great experiences– snorkelling in the waters of the Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park on the west coast, watching Giant Leatherbacks nest and their little hatchlings emerge on the island of Great Nicobar and making a couple of heart-thumping journeys on the Andaman Trunk Road through the core of the territory of the

feared Jarawas. I also met some interesting people, none more interesting or influential than Samir Acharya, joint convenor of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH) and founder-secretary of the Society for Andaman and Nicobar Ecology (SANE). A Port Blair based shop owner and trader, he single handedly pioneered awareness and activism in the islands on issues of indigenous rights and the environment and was a big influence on me as well (Sekhsaria 2020). The islands were strongly imprinted on my mind and this took a more concrete form about a year later when I moved to Delhi for my post-graduate studies. Here began the association with the environmental action group, Kalpavriksh, whose members, working philosophy and commitment to environmental and social issues became a key aspect of my learning and growth. My work in the islands found a home and shape that continues even today.

Much happened in the years that followed and this included traveling back to the islands, research, writing and photography and a couple of investigations into the key issues facing the islands (Sekhsaria 1999a). What this led to eventually, and to cut a long story short, was legal intervention in 1998 that Kalpavriksh initiated in the islands along with SANE and the Mumbai based Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS). The story of the legal interventions is itself very complicated and interesting, and one that took many unexpected twists and turns. I won't go into those details here, except to say that is a story that is still unfolding. I've written about it extensively including in *Islands in Flux– the Andaman and Nicobar story* (Sekhsaria 2019), a compiled edition of my journalistic and academic writing on the islands.

Supreme Court of India, 2002

What is crucial here for the story of my journey into fiction was the year 2002. Our legal intervention led the Supreme Court of India, in May that year, to pass a very detailed and omnibus set of orders (SC 2002; Sekhsaria 2019; Singh 2002) that we believed were in the best interests of the environment, biodiversity, and indigenous peoples of the islands. This was a high for me– in some senses the best outcome a researcher-writer-activist can ever expect. It was not long, however, before the sense of achievement started to face serious challenges.

Many parts of the order were never implemented and one, in particular, that asked for the Andaman Trunk Road (ATR) to be closed where it runs through the Jarawa Tribal Reserve was vociferously opposed by settlers in the islands and the political parties that represent them. It was argued that the road was a key strategic and economic asset, that it was a sign of the

development of the islands, and a lifeline that provided crucial connectivity and support to residents of the Middle and North Andaman Islands. What was striking was that the Andaman and Nicobar Administration played along, and in what was and is a clear violation of orders from the highest court of the land, refused to initiate steps for the closure of the road.

The excitement of the SC orders of May 2002 turned, first, to a sense of disbelief– it was difficult for me to understand why and how the local administration was willing to so risk the wrath of the Supreme court– and then to huge disappointment as we realised that the admin was going to use all the tricks it had in its bag to ensure that the road is not closed. This was a period also of hectic advocacy on our part– there were interventions we filed in the court and in the SC appointed Central Empowered Committee (CEC); we approached the Planning Commission of India and also the National Advisory Council (NAC) that was chaired by Sonia Gandhi, the president of the Congress party that led the coalition in power at the Centre; we filed an application under the Right to Information (RTI) Act and kept bringing the issue to the attention of the media. All these institutions responded positively. The CEC passed an explicit order asking again for the road to be closed (CEC 2004), a NAC committee under the joint leadership of Jairam Ramesh and Syeda Hameed published a report (*Report on the Sub-Group of experts on the Jarawas* 2006) broadly agreed with what we had to say, and the response to our RTI application made it clear that there were no explicit orders by the court to 'not' close the road (PIO 2011). The A&N Administration was in clear contempt of the Supreme Court of the country, but it did not matter. The disappointment was huge and even as we were wondering what we could do to get the court orders implemented, the islands experienced the massive earthquake of 26 December 2004 and the gigantic tsunami that followed in its wake.

The earthquake and tsunami of December 2004

I visited the islands a few weeks later and travelled extensively to see what the earthquake and the tsunami had done. The damage was unprecedented and the scale of geological change so huge that it was difficult to believe. The earthquake had caused a permanent shift in the lay of the land. Parts of the Andaman Islands, like off the west coast of Interview Island, saw huge uplift as the land was thrust upwards and many sq. kms of coral reef now lay permanently exposed. The Nicobars, in contrast, saw equally massive submergence– parts of the Central Nicobars and the southern tip of Great Nicobar island experienced nearly 15 feet of permanent subsidence (Andrews & Vaughan 2005; Anon. 2006; A. J. Malik & Murthy 2005; Sankaran 2005; Sekhsaria 2009).

It was also clear, however, that this was in the nature of things here because these islands are part of the Ring of Fire- Seismic zone V- the earth's geologically most active and volatile region (Abbany 2016; "Earthquakes in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands, India 2010; J. N. Malik, Murty, & Rai 2006). Volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis are regular occurrences here; these have played a central role in the creation and re-creation of these islands and this is visible even in the stories of creation of the Great Andamanese as recorded by MV Portman in his 1899 account *A History of our relations with the Andamanese*:

> "All Andamanese tradition dates back to some great cataclysm which submerged a greater part of the land. The Andamanese say that before this cataclysm they were all one tribe, and spoke the same language, but after it the survivors became separated into tribes, their languages gradually differed until at last they became mutually unintelligible as at present…
>
> …It is quite possible that this tradition may be an account of what occurred when, by subsidence, the Andamans were cut off from the mainland of Arracan, and though geologists are slow to allow of sudden convulsions, yet it is certain that the subsidence, whether sudden or gradual did take place. A general gradual subsidence, ending in a severe earthquake which lowered a large track of land, a few feet, and thus submerged a considerable area, might be sufficient to account for this tradition.
>
> It is curious that, though there are no wild beasts larger than a pig at the Andamans now (excepting reptiles and marine mammals), the Andamanese state that large and fierce beasts, as well as many aborigines, were drowned in the cataclysm; and, even in the Little Andaman the people have names for animals which they cannot describe, but evidently have traditions of.
>
> It is also scarcely probable that, with Burma and the Malay Peninsula so full of big game, none should have strayed on to the Andamans when they were attached to the mainland.
>
> Whatever value we may attach to these legends, however, one thing seems certain, viz., that the Andamanese have inhabited these islands in their present state for a period which can only be considered by thousands of years…" (Portman 1899)

I have argued elsewhere that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are marked by a specific configuration of geological, tectonic, ecological, and historical forces and the Great Andamanese story of the great cataclysm is as much evidence of the presence of this particular configuration as it can be considered an outcome of its existence and specific context

(Sekhsaria 2009, 2017). I found the above extract from Portman's account to be of particular salience and it also became the epigraph for *The Last Wave* as it helped me set the tone and the context for what the islands are and what the reader might expect in the novel.

Catalysts for the novel

But that's jumping the gun here, because in the storyline that I have sketched out so far, the novel was still not written. And I come back here to the moment in February 2005 when the idea of a novel first occurred to me. One catalyst, as I have mentioned already, was Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*. The other, as a large part of my narrative above clearly points to, is the disappointment with (I wouldn't say failure of) the activism we had been engaged in. The research, the photography and the journalism I had engaged in thus far, clearly had its limitations and I wondered if there was another form of communicating the issues and telling the story that would reach out to more people or at least differently to the same set of people.

I had also learnt, in the preceding years, of many parallel realities of the islands– of their unique bio-diversity and ecological richness, of the politics and the social structures here, of the geography and geology of the people and the many histories of the islands that became part of India only because the British had sought to create a penal colony here. The work (advocacy and activism) and forms of writing (journalism and some academic) that I had engaged in thus far were, I realized, limited in doing full justice to the diversity and wide range of issues that characterizes and constructs a place. It had been only marginally possible, if possible at all, to include the many dimensions in one single narrative. This was on account of both, the length a piece of writing was allowed and the inherent challenges− to use a more academic kind of terminology−of making the story inter- or multi-disciplinary. Maybe, I thought, and *The Hungry Tide* clearly illustrated that possibility– the novel might be the form I needed to explore.

The vulnerable Andaman communities

That particular moment was however seized with the immediate reality and experience of what the earthquake and tsunami of December 2004 had done in the islands. The many years of trying to understand issues in the islands had suggested to me that the Jarawa community, though indigenous and resident here for 1000s of years, were structurally the most marginalized and vulnerable. The history of the other communities like the Onge and the Great Andamanese that the Jarawa have shared the islands with since time immemorial suggests quite dramatically what has happened to the indigenous peoples here. The Onge that live on Little Andaman were

a population of at least 600 people in the census of 1901. Today they are only about 100, with pressures on their land, resources and way of life increasing with every passing day. Worse is the situation of the Great Andamanese who numbered about 5000 individuals in the middle of 19th century. Today, in 2017, their population has been reduced to only about 50 and their's is the story I also tell in *The Last Wave* using parts of Portman's account. I quote:

> It [Certain parts of the islands] had been home [for the Great Andamanese] forever and had continued as their stronghold till contact with the British and disease initiated the process of their almost complete extermination in the period leading up to the second world war. Estimated at anywhere between five and eight thousand people when the British set up their colony in the islands in 1858, the Great Andamanese were left with a population of under a hundred individuals when the Japanese came visiting less than a century later.
>
> One account of how this came to be was M. V. Portman's 1899 classic about the islands and its islanders, which Harish had perused in fascination and horror. Portman had described in detail the impact of the 1877 epidemic of measles, the worst to hit the Great Andamanese. At least half the Andamanese population in the Great Andaman islands had died and Port Campbell was among the areas worst hit. Portman's was a bleak, chilling record of what had happened to an entire people. It read almost like a dispatch from the war front:
>
> > *At the Viper Home – 71 Andamanese were attacked and 6 died. Of the syphilitic patients, 43 were attacked and 10 died. Of the visitors in hospital, 77 were attacked and 37 died. Self treated in the jungle, say, 350 attacked and 56 died.*
>
> The final prognosis, as it were, came in another report published by Portman a little more than a decade later.
>
> > *. . . All the people on Rutland and Port Campbell are dead, and very few remain in the South Andaman and the Archipelago. The children do not survive in the very few births which do occur, and the present generation may be considered as the last of the aborigines of the Great Andaman . . .*(Sekhsaria 2014, pp. 126–127)

Would this be the fate of the Jarawa too? was not a hypothetical question. In the late 1990s (Sekhsaria 1999b) and then again, in the year 2006, the Jarawas did indeed experience two

epidemics of measles. The impact was not as dramatic as what Portman had recounted in the case of the Great Andamanese but for many the worst fears were beginning to come true. Their land was under threat, their way of life was under threat, and now these epidemics… their very existence, in some ways, appeared to be hanging in the balance.

The wave as paradox and metaphor

But then the tsunami threw up an interesting paradox– or at least that is how I saw it. One of the biggest and most destructive events in living memory had occurred in the Andaman Islands and the Jarawa, the community that was the most vulnerable, reported virtually no damage and loss of life. At least some have argued (and many would like to believe it) that this was proof of their knowledge and understanding of nature, that they had seen (or sensed) the tsunami coming and were able to react and save themselves. There is no evidence, actually, of anything of this sort happening; it is most likely that this upland, forest dwelling community was not in harm's way in the first place and thus escaped the worse.

But even as I thought of this certainly positive, though contingent reality, there was no denying the continued vulnerability and marginalisation of communities like the Jarawa. And it was in this paradox that lay the seed of the idea that eventually became the title of the novel − *The Last Wave*. While this massive, physical wave that came as a tsunami caused a lot of damage, it did eventually withdraw. It had only a momentary existence and its destructive power was dissipated almost instantly. If, however, we were to look at 'time' as a metaphorical wave and place in its line the history and the future of a community like the Jarawa (and the Onge and the Great Andamanese and many more), we see a different reality playing out– because here time works like a slow, relentless, never ending wave that keeps moving in and never goes back. It appears to allow for little space and little chance for certain sets of people and for certain ways of being. This is what seemed to be the case in the Andamans as well and this is the story I wanted to tell. I wanted also, at the same time, to explore the possibility of marking my narrative with a twist, or at least a turn to/in this idea of the inexorable march of history. Maybe I had failed in the role of an activist, but could the novelist mount that challenge? Perhaps, I might argue, it is only the novelist who could have, because the story in the 'real' world of the Andamans, of the local administration and the courts had already been written.

So here I was, all ready, to take myself through a new journey of (re-)writing the Andaman story. Before I enter that narrative of how the writing happened and what it's

challenges were, let me quickly summarise the preceding account and the main catalysts that prompted me to write the novel in the first place: a) the disappointment of not eventually achieving what we thought we had managed throughout activism; 2) the imperative of find a form that allowed for bringing together the multiple strands that make the story of any people and place, and 3) the idea of the wave in its multi-faceted– physical, metaphorical and creative– dimensions that I was prompted to explore.

There was a 4th one as well– one that was more personal, even aspirational– of making my mark as a novelist, a creative writer. I can't deny here that I was influenced by the tremendous flowering of fiction writing in English we have seen in India in recent times and the visibility and success many of these writings and writers have managed to achieve.

Research and researchers

This brings me then to the act of the writing (typing?)[1] the book itself– a process that took me a little less than three years and where I drew extensively on my personal experiences in the islands of a decade and a half, of the many journeys I had undertaken along the length and breadth of this island chain and the multi-disciplinary research I had conducted over the years. Deeply embedded in the ecology, people and history of the place, *The Last Wave* became a story as much *about* the islands as it was a story based *in* the islands.

Here's a passage that digs out (in a very non-fiction way, I would add) one important aspect history of these islands:

> This was the Andamans in the 1920s, an excitingly important decade where new flavours from elsewhere were being added to the stew all the time – the Moplahs from the Malabar who came to the islands after their rebellion against the British; the wandering Bhantus from the fertile Gangetic plains, forced to flee as they were being implicated and regularly persecuted for being thugs and dacoits; and even a sizeable number of families from Buddhist Burma.
>
> Officers of the Empire, as always, were busy with a host of their own activities: missions to remote parts of these islands, attempts to establish contact with the dangerous natives of the dense forests and elaborate expeditions for botanical and zoological studies. One official had even helped organize the local borns into the Local Borns' Association. At the same time, the Great Indian Railway project on the mainland

[1] A major part of the book was created on the computer.

and demands of the British Navy meant that timber extraction in the rich forests on the islands grew rapidly and a need arose to induct new labour and expertise into the Forest Department. The rulers looked in both directions to get their work-force from – the thickly forested Chhota Nagpur Plateau on mainland India in the west and the famous teak forests of Burma in the east. The Church was forever willing to oblige the empire, and it soon became the recruiting ground for those to be brought to the islands with promises of plenty and prosperity. The Mundas, Oraons and Santhals were recruited through the Church in Ranchi, and came, ingenuously, to be called the 'Ranchis' in the islands. The Karens, Christians from the Baptist Mission, too were brought in from Bassein in Burma under the supervision of the Reverend Father Lugyi and the leadership, in fact, of Uncle Pame's father. Not surprisingly, when the decade of the twenties slid into the next one, nearly thirty different languages were being spoken by the 20,000-odd people inhabiting the Andamans – Urdu, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Andamanese, Telugu, Malayalam, Burmese, even Pashto. The islands had truly become a cultural melting point.

Over time, customs and rituals fused. Some were lost completely, while others were created anew, hybridizing rapidly with Darwinian enthusiasm, creating a new community that kept growing newer as the decades marched on. The Moplas, the Bhantus, the Bengalis, the Karens, the Local Borns had all, individually or together, been put away and forgotten as irrelevant deposits of the colonial project – a forgetfulness that Seema had an intuitive discomfort with. These identities had not only charted the trajectories of the islands, they had shaped the very contours of the land – rich stories and enduring legacies. Yet, those pasts were considered barely significant? (21-22)

The 'research' dimension in the book came via the many researchers that populate it as important characters– Seema Chandran, the anthropology student, David Baskaran, a crocodile biologist, Sreekumar Kutty, the botanist, and I present here a couple of short extracts to illustrate what I mean:

"For David, these night time boat-runs in the creeks were the highlight of his work. He was addicted to the adrenalin this brought, just as he was mesmerized every time he saw the glowing coals of a pair of crocodile eyes. This was a majestic animal, the undisputed monarch of the mangrove creeks, which had survived everything that evolution had thrown at it. A crocodile gliding smoothly, stealthily through inter-tidal

> waters was the tiger softly, silently stalking deer on a leaf-littered forest floor, was the majestic griffon soaring unbounded in the blue heavens. The crocodile evoked in David an emotion he could only explain as primordial. 'It does something to me, I can't explain,' he'd say every time he was asked 'Why crocs?'" (102)

My role in the islands as a researcher, perhaps, explains why the book is populated by so many different kinds of researchers. And yet I was not overtly aware of this reality till much after the book was published and out in the market. It was, in fact, a comment made by the moderator during a discussion on the book at the Ashoka Trust for Research in Environment and Ecology (ATREE) in Bangalore, that made explicit to me the key role researchers were playing in pushing forward the narrative of the book. I seemed to have successfully achieved at least one agenda– of exploring the many parallel realities– when I set out to write the novel!

So, how was the book received?

The key question that remains to be discussed is in relation to the larger goal I had in mind–that of reaching out the Andaman story in a different way to a larger audience? Did this happen? And if yes, how? Linked centrally to this, I think, is the craft and the challenges of writing a particular form of narrative. Each form of writing has its challenges and advantages, and I had to keep uppermost in my mind that what I was attempting was a novel. There are two main aspects here, I think, that invite a discussion. One is the process of writing and its various challenges; the other was the response that it drew from those who did indeed read the book.

Where the writing itself was concerned, the question before me was a rather simple one– how would I ensure that this writing was not another petition or another piece of journalism. I don't believe these are lesser kinds of writing, but that my agenda now was different. I found the answer, I think, in realising that a novel, unlike journalistic writing or petitioning the courts, allowed a lot more space for the greys of our lives and our worlds; I believe, in fact, that it demands an existence in and an exploration of these greys. The binaries of good and bad, black and white and of a certain normative positioning that activism and journalism sometimes demand will not work in the novel kind of narrative; conversely a novel that does not avoid these is unlikely to succeed. And this middle space, therefore, is the one I concentrated on– on drawing out the complexities, multiplicities and multiple duplicities of all of us, be it the researcher, the politician, the fisherman or even indeed the Jarawa. Complimentary to this was the effort on my part to give everyone a voice, in particular to the category of the Andaman Islander called the settler. This is the entity, who on account of a

series of historical accidents and decisions of the state, was moved into the land and forests of the Jarawa and placed at the sharp edge of the conflict with them.

If we had argued that the ATR needed to be closed in the best interests of the Jarawas, it was this settler population that argued vehemently the road could *not* be closed because their lives and livelihoods depended on it. This was the binary we were locked into (and are still locked in) and writing *The Last Wave* helped me, in some limited ways, to find a way of dealing with this, though mainly at a personal level. Whether I succeeded or not is for the readers to decide; different readers have, indeed, read the story and reacted to it differently, often imbuing it with meanings and explanations that the writer had never intended.

There was something, however, in the way the book was received, particularly in the islands, that suggests to me that there might have been some success. For one it was received here with warmth and enthusiasm, though at multiple levels and for different reasons. For some it showed a picture of the islands that was much larger and more complete than had been written so far, for some it offered a great opportunity of selling the islands even more aggressively in the world of tourism and travel and there were others who were just very happy that an Andaman novel had finally been written. They appeared to own it in a way I had not anticipated at all.

There was one reaction in particular that moved me immensely. This was when my friend and local journalist, Zubair Ahmed, mentioned in a conversation that islander friends of his who were upset because of the hardships inflicted on them on account of our activism now said, after reading *The Last Wave*, that the activist was right in what he was saying and doing. It was an unlikely twist in the tale. These readers had found their own stories reflected in *The Last Wave*, Zubair explained to me. Their concerns had been voiced; their voices were being heard. They didn't feel as aggrieved because they were not merely perpetrators; in some ways they were victims too and struggling with the same set of issues that are most often beyond our understanding, leave alone control. It was, I must admit, a hugely emotional moment for me. And a hugely liberating one– what the activist dealing with the real world had failed to do, the novelist, in fictionalising and telling a nuanced tale had surprisingly succeeded in achieving.

The small and the local matters and sometimes I think, these are the only things that matter! If there is one thing that the journey of *The Last Wave* has taught me, this is what it would be!

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