The Last Island of the Savages

Journeying to the Andaman Islands to meet the most isolated tribe on Earth

By Adam Goodheart | September 5, 2000

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The lumps of white coral shone round the dark mound like a chaplet of bleached skulls, and everything around was so quiet that when I stood still all sound and all movement in the world seemed to come to an end. It was a great peace, as if the earth had been one grave, and for a time I stood there thinking mostly of the living who, buried in remote places out of the knowledge of mankind, still are fated to share in its tragic or grotesque miseries. In its noble struggles too—who knows? The human heart is vast enough to contain all the world. It is valiant enough to bear the burden, but where is the courage that would cast it off?

—Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*

Shortly before midnight on August 2, 1981, a Panamanian-registered freighter called the *Primrose*, which was traveling in heavy seas between Bangladesh and Australia with a cargo of poultry feed, ran aground on a coral reef in the Bay of Bengal. As dawn broke the next morning, the captain was probably relieved to see dry land just a few hundred yards from the *Primrose*'s resting place: a low-lying island, several miles across, with a narrow beach of clean white sand giving way to dense jungle. If he consulted his charts, he realized that this was North Sentinel Island, a western outlier in the Andaman archipelago, which belongs to India and stretches in a ragged line between Burma and Sumatra. But the sea was too rough to lower the lifeboats, and so—since the ship seemed to be in no danger of sinking—the captain decided to keep his crew on board and wait for help to arrive.

A few days later, a young sailor on lookout duty in the *Primrose*'s Watchtower spotted several people coming down from the forest toward the beach and peering out at the stranded vessel. They must be a rescue party sent by the shipping company, he thought. Then he took a closer look at them. They were small men, well-built, frizzy-haired, and black. They were naked except for narrow belts that circled their waists. And they were holding spears, bows, and arrows, which they had begun waving in a manner that seemed not altogether friendly.

Not long after this, a wireless operator at the Regent Shipping Company's offices in Hong Kong received an urgent distress call from the *Primrose*'s captain, asking for an immediate airdrop of firearms so that his Island crew could defend itself. "Wild men, estimate more than 50, carrying various homemade weapons are making two or three wooden boats," the message read. "Worrying they will board us at sunset. All crew members' lives not guaranteed."

If the *Primrose*'s predicament seemed a thing less of the twentieth century than of the eighteenth—an episode, perhaps, from Captain Cook's voyages in the Pacific—it is because the island where the ship lay grounded had somehow managed to slip through the net of history. Although its existence had been known for centuries, its inhabitants had had virtually no contact with the rest of humanity. Anthropologists referred to them as "Sentinelese," but no one knew what they called themselves—indeed, no one even knew what language they spoke. And in any case, no one within living memory had gotten close enough to ask. Whether the natives' prelapsarian state was one of savagery or innocence, no one knew either.

The same monsoon-whipped waves that had driven the *Primrose* onto the reef kept the tribesmen's canoes at bay, and high winds blew their arrows off the mark. The crew kept up a twenty-four-hour guard with makeshift weapons—a flare gun, axes, some lengths of pipe—as news of the emergency slowly filtered to the outside world. (An Indian government spokesman denied reports in the Hong Kong press that the Sentinelese were "cannibals." A Hong Kong government spokesman suggested that perhaps the *Primrose*'s radio officer had "gone bananas.") After nearly a week, the Indian Navy dispatched a tugboat and a helicopter to rescue the besieged sailors.

The natives of North Sentinel must have watched the whirring aircraft as it hovered three times above the great steel hulk, lowering a rope ladder to pluck the men safely back into modernity. Then the strange machines departed, the sea calmed,

and the island remained, lush and impenetrable, still waiting for its Cook or its Columbus.

Epochs of history rarely come to a sudden end, seldom announce their passing with anything so dramatic as the death of a king or the dismantling of a wall. More often, they withdraw slowly and imperceptibly (or at least unperceived), like the ebbing tide on a deserted beach.

That is how the Age of Discovery ended. For more than five hundred years, the envoys of civilization sailed through storms and hacked through jungles, startling in turn one tribe after another of long-lost human cousins. For an instant, before the inevitable breaking of faith, the two groups would face each other, staring—as innocent, both of them, as children, and blameless as if the world had been born afresh. To live such a moment seems, when we think of it now, to have been one of the most profound experiences that our planet in its vanished immensity once offered. But each time the moment repeated itself on each fresh beach, there was one less island to be found, one less chance to start everything anew. It began to repeat itself less and less often, until there came a time, maybe a century ago, when there were only a few such places left, only a few doors still unopened.

Sometime quite recently, the last door opened. I believe it happened not long before the end of the millennium, on an island already all but known, a place encircled by the buzzing, thrumming web of a world still unknown to it, and by the mesh of a history that had forever been drawing closer.

North Sentinel Island is not located in one of those parts of the world that are famous for having been "discovered"—the Caribbean, say, or the South Pacific. The Andaman Islands, though rarely visited until the nineteenth century, have been

known to Western civilization for much longer. Here are some things that have happened in the course of the last thousand years or so:

In 1296 or thereabouts, Marco Polo described Andamanese generally as "a most brutish and savage race, having heads, eyes, and teeth like those of dogs. They are very cruel, and kill and eat every foreigner whom they can lay their hands upon." Historians believe that he based this on hearsay, and did not visit the islands.

One night in 1771, an East India Company hydrographic survey vessel, the *Diligent*, passed by North Sentinel and sighted "a multitude of lights . . . upon the shore." This is the first recorded mention of the island. The surveying party did not stop to investigate, however. In those days, bonfires still beckoned from hundreds of coasts, all over the world. The ship sailed on.

In 1867, toward the end of the summer monsoon season, an Indian merchantman, the *Nineveh*, was wrecked on the reef off North Sentinel. Eighty-six passengers and twenty crewmen got safely to the beach in the ship's boat. On the morning of the third day, as these survivors sat down to a makeshift breakfast, they were suddenly attacked. "The savages were perfectly naked, with short hair and red painted noses, and were opening their mouth and making sounds like *pa on ough*; their arrows appeared to be tipped with iron," the *Nineveh*'s captain later reported. (The Sentinelese had probably scavenged the metal from flotsam on the beach, as they apparently still do today.) He had fled at the first shower of arrows and escaped in the ship's boat, to be picked up several days later by a brig bound for Moulmein. The Andaman Islands were now officially part of the British Empire—they'd been settled as a penal colony—so a Royal Navy rescue party was dispatched by steamer to the site of the wreck. It arrived to find that the *Nineveh*'s passengers had managed to fend off their attackers with sticks and stones, and the savages had not been seen since.

In 1896, a Hindu convict escaped on a makeshift raft from the main penal settlement on Great Andaman Island. He drifted across thirty miles or so of open ocean and landed on the beach of North Sentinel. A search party found his body there some days later, pierced in several places by arrows and with its throat cut. No natives were sighted. After this, the island was left alone for nearly a century.

In the spring of 1974, North Sentinel was visited by a film crew that was shooting a documentary titled *Man in Search of Man*, along with a few anthropologists, some armed policemen, and a photographer for *National Geographic*. In the words of one of the scientists, their plan was to "win the natives' friendship by friendly gestures and plenty of gifts." As the team's motorized dinghy made its way through the reefs toward shore, some natives emerged from the woods. The anthropologists made friendly gestures. The Sentinelese responded with a hail of arrows. The dinghy proceeded to a landing-spot out of arrow range, where the policemen, dressed in padded armor, disembarked and laid gifts on the sand: a miniature plastic automobile, some coconuts, a tethered live pig, a child's doll, and some aluminum cookware. Then they returned to the dinghy and waited to observe the natives' reaction to the gifts. The natives' reaction was to fire more arrows, one of which hit the film director in the left thigh. The man who had shot the film director was observed laughing proudly and walking toward the shade of a tree, where he sat down. Other natives were observed spearing the pig and the doll and burying them in the sand. They did, however, take the cookware and the coconuts with evident delight.

In 1975, the exiled king of Belgium, on a tour of the Andamans, was brought by local dignitaries for an overnight cruise to the waters off North Sentinel. Mindful of lessons learned the year before, they kept the royal party out of arrow range, approaching just close enough for a Sentinelese warrior to aim his bow menacingly at the king, who expressed his profound satisfaction with the adventure.

By this time, quite a bit more was known about the Andamanese aborigines than in the days of Marco Polo. Those incomparable observers and cataloguers of humanity, the British, had enjoyed nearly a century of unchallenged dominion over the archipelago, and had taken full advantage of the opportunities this offered to observe and catalogue its inhabitants (with the notable exception of the reclusive Sentinelese). On the whole, they were not impressed by what they saw.

Unlike the mainland Indians, the black-skinned Andamanese were of Negrito stock, and they lived as hunter-gatherers, subsisting mainly on fruits, tubers, fish, crabs, honey, wild pigs, and the eggs of turtles and seagulls. They were so small as to be almost pygmies: adult males often measured several inches under five feet. The islanders wore no clothing, and few ornaments; neither sex troubled to cover its genitals. (Indeed, Andamanese men often waggled their penises at visitors by way of friendly greeting.) Though not cannibals, they might easily be mistaken as such, for they wore the jawbones of deceased relatives around their necks. Most astonishingly, they had never learned to make fire, counting instead on the occasional lightning strike and then preserving embers carefully in hollowed-out trees. In short, concluded the first official report to Her Majesty's government, "it is impossible to imagine any human beings lower on the scale of civilisation than are the Andaman savages."

As unimpressive as the Andaman savages may have been to the hardheaded colonial administrators, they provided first-class material for the burgeoning field of anthropology. During the first half-century after the British arrived in 1858, a continuous stream of books, reports, and scholarly articles appeared, often accompanied by handsome photographic plates: silvery rotogravures in which naked tribesmen fished, danced, or brooded picturesquely over pagan talismans. The interesting hypothesis was advanced that they might be the remnant of a primitive race, one that, some time in the distant past, had inhabited all of southern

Asia. Yet suddenly, unaccountably, not long after the turn of the century, the scholarship stopped. The Andamanese, it seems, were no longer considered a fruitful subject of research.

I came across North Sentinel Island late one night on the other side of the world. Browsing through an online database, I found it mentioned in an article in a small scholarly journal, with an almost offhand reference describing it as the scene of what was probably the last "first friendly encounter" in history. Only in 1991, the author reported, had an Indian government anthropologist, after more than twenty years of unsuccessful attempts, finally managed to interact face to face with the Sentinelese. Intrigued, I searched the Web some more, and found almost nothing: a few sketchy wire-service reports about the grounding of the *Primrose*, and the home page of an evangelical organization in California that listed the inhabitants of North Sentinel (along with Buddhists, Jews, and "Gays in San Francisco") in its database of 1,573 "unreached peoples."

I remember how unreal the place seemed, that night in my fluorescent-lit office, as I surfed on the oceans of information, the island emerging and then submerging again. I think I already knew that I would try to go there.

The anthropologist who had made the first contact, the scholarly journal said, was a man named T. N. Pandit. As I did more research, I discovered that he had also published the only book ever written about North Sentinel: a slim volume, from a small press in Calcutta, titled *The Sentinelese*. I telephoned Pandit in New Delhi, where he now lives in retirement, and he told me a bit about his work in the Andaman Islands.

In 1966, when Pandit first embarked by steamer for the archipelago, his idea of what awaited him was based on the decades-old images of noble savages. Though he had paid no special attention to the Andamanese during his university studies—

he had focused instead on the mountain tribes of his native Kashmir—Pandit had read one or two of the classic texts. And when, after applying successfully for a government job with the Anthropological Survey of India, he was posted to the islands, he thought he knew what to expect.

He found something quite different. In the main bazaar of Port Blair, the Indian administrative capital on Great Andaman Island, a little dark-skinned old lady begged for alms outside a tea shop. Other half-caste Andamanese lived as squatters on the waterfront, in abandoned bunkers built during the wartime Japanese occupation. Except for these survivors—some two dozen in all—the ten tribes that British scholars had so lovingly documented were now no more than a litany of names: Aka-Bea, Akar-Bale, A-Pucikwar, Aka-Kol, Aka-Kede, Oko-Juwoi, Aka-Jeru, Aka-Kora, Aka-Cari, Aka-Bo. Only one tribe on Great Andaman, the Jarawa, had managed to escape this fate—by withdrawing into the remotest parts of the jungle and dealing ruthlessly with anyone who trespassed.

After he had been in the Andamans for a few months, however, Pandit began to hear vague reports of another native tribe, one he had not seen mentioned in any of the anthropological literature. By some accounts these people were small, dark, and smooth-skinned, like the rest of the Andamanese, while by others they were, tall, fair, and bearded—descendants, perhaps, of escaped convicts from penal-settlement times. Everyone agreed that they were ferocious warriors. Strangest of all was that the island they inhabited, this unexplored place of myth and legend, was just a few hours by boat from Port Blair.

There seems to be no simple explanation of why North Sentinel Island was permitted to remain so isolated for so long. For one thing, though, it is too small and inconveniently located to offer much enticement for colonization—lying, as it does, away from the main settlements on the east side of Great Andaman, opposite that island's wild and storm-lashed western coast. It has no natural harbors, and its surrounding abatis of uncharted coral reefs keeps out all but the most persistent or

foolhardy seafarers. (Those reefs also keep in the natives' unseaworthy dugout canoes, which they use only in the placid water of the lagoon.) The place never had much appeal, in other words, until it came into its own as a historical curiosity—the last place in the world where all the tragedy and farce of the Age of Discovery could still be played out, if on a miniature scale.

It was not Pandit's idea to try to go there. He is not, by temperament, an explorer. (He has traveled outside India only once in his life, to attend an academic conference in Germany.) I did not understand this before I met him, and the stories I had heard of his experiences in the Andamans had led me to imagine a bearded, barrel-chested man, swathed in khaki and bravado. This is what I expected to find when we finally met in New Delhi. Instead, Pandit is small and slope-shouldered, with a wispy mustache and gentle brown eyes. We sat in my hotel room and, over endless cups of milky tea, he told me more about his adventures.

One day, after Pandit had been in the Andamans for less than a year, the governor of the islands summoned him for a meeting and announced that he was planning a large-scale expedition to North Sentinel, complete with armed police, naval personnel, and two large patrol boats equipped with inflatable rubber dinghies for navigating through the reefs. "There was a feeling that we were trying to establish friendly contact, which would be considered an achievement at the government level," Pandit told me. He was offered the honor of being the first anthropologist ever to land on the island.

If friendly contact was its objective, the expedition failed. As the explorers approached North Sentinel, they could see through their binoculars several clusters of people, both adults and children, standing on the shore. But as they drew nearer, the natives disappeared into the forest. At last, after half a mile or so, Pandit and his companions reached a clearing. There they found a group of huts, small lean-to shelters made of branches and leaves. There were fires still burning outside each one. The huts were empty.

Pandit remembers that the contact party left gifts in the empty huts: plastic buckets, bolts of cloth, packaged candy. He remembers the festive air of the occasion—half military mission and half school picnic—and how, despite his protests, the policemen and naval officers took as souvenirs some of the household goods the Sentinelese had left behind: bows, arrows, a basket, the painted skull of a wild boar. His strongest memory, he told me, is of the way the sunlight fell on the huts as he first emerged into the clearing from the shade of the jungle, filtering down onto roofs of leafy branches.

When I listen now to the tapes I made of my interviews with Pandit, I hear civilization's din in the background, a perimeter of sounds enclosing us: the bleating horns of auto-rickshaws and the cries of chaiwallahs from the alleyway behind the hotel; the comings and goings of tea trays and the soft automatic cough of the air conditioner switching on.

Only one tribe on the island, the Jarawa, had managed to escape extinction—by withdrawing into the remotest parts of the jungle and dealing ruthlessly with anyone who trespassed. (Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives)

This is how you get to the most isolated human settlement on earth: You board an evening flight at JFK for Heathrow, Air India 112, a plane full of elegant sari-clad women, London-bound businessmen, hippie backpackers. You settle in to watch a movie (a romantic comedy in which Harrison Ford and Anne Heche get stranded on a desert island) and after a quick nap you are in London.

Then you catch another plane. You read yesterday's *Times* while flying above the corrugated gullies of eastern Turkey, watch a Hindi musical somewhere over Iran. That night, and for the week that follows, you are in New Delhi, where the smog

lies on the ground like mustard gas, and where one day you see an elephant—an elephant!—in the midst of downtown traffic.

From New Delhi you go by train to Calcutta, where you must wait for a ship. And you must wait for a ticket. There are endless lines at the shipping company office, and jostling, and passing back and forth of black-and-white photographs in triplicate and hundred-rupee notes and stacks of documents interleaved with Sapphire brand carbon paper. Next you are on the ship, a big Polish-built steamer crawling with cockroaches. The steamer passes all manner of scenery: slim and fragile riverboats like craft from a pharaoh's tomb; broad-beamed, lateen-rigged Homeric merchantmen. You watch the sun set into the Bay of Bengal, play cards with some Swedish backpackers, and take in the shipboard video programming, which consists of the complete works of Macaulay Culkin, subtitled in Arabic. On the morning of the sixth day your ship sails into a wide, sheltered bay—steaming jungles off the port bow, a taxi-crowded jetty to starboard—and you have arrived in the Andamans, at Port Blair.

In Port Blair you board a bus, finding a seat beneath a wall-mounted loudspeaker blaring a Hindi cover of "The Macarena Song." The bus rumbles through the bustling market town, past barefoot men peddling betel nut, past a billboard for the local computer-training school ("I want to become the 21st century's computer professional"). On the western outskirts you see a sawmill that is turning the Andaman forests into pencils on behalf of a company in Madras, and you see the airport, where workmen are busy extending the runway—out into a field where water buffalo graze—so that in a few years, big jetliners will be able to land here, bringing tour groups direct from Bangkok and Singapore. A little farther on, you pass rice paddies, and patches of jungle, and the Water Sports Training Centre, and thatched huts, and family-planning posters, and satellite dishes craning skyward. And then, within an hour's time, you are at the ocean again, and on a very clear day you will see the island in the distance, a slight disturbance of the horizon.

Although T. N. Pandit did not know it, someone else had already set foot on North Sentinel and encountered a few of its inhabitants—even though the contact was not what anyone would describe as "friendly." This previous explorer was, in fact, a man curiously similar to himself: a young government administrator, recently arrived at Port Blair from the mainland, who had taken it as his mission to improve the lot of the surviving aborigines.

Born in Surrey, Maurice Vidal Portman was just nineteen—two years younger than the British settlement itself—when, in 1879, he was given the impressive-sounding position of Officer in Charge of the Andamanese. It is unclear whether he was so favored because of family connections (his grandfather was a viscount) or because, as must already have been evident, Portman was exceptional among colonials for his curiosity about the natives and their customs. In any case, he had been in the Andamans only a few months when he organized an expedition to North Sentinel, hoping to learn about a tribe already renowned for its reclusiveness. Portman landed on the island at the head of a large party of armed men, including officers, convict orderlies, and trackers recruited from the Andamanese tribes that the British had already befriended.

The explorers tramped through the jungle, systematically crisscrossing the small island in search of the natives. They found a network of pathways, and several small villages that looked to have been freshly abandoned, and the skeleton of an aborigine hidden between the buttress roots of a large tree. Portman was impressed by the island's fertile soil and its stately groves of tropical hardwoods. But he did not encounter a single living soul. The Sentinelese simply melted into the forest when they heard the Europeans approach. Finally, after several days, Portman and his men managed to flush out a few stragglers: an elderly couple and some children. In the interest of science, the adults and four of the children were brought aboard the exploring party's schooner and taken back to Port Blair for observation. Unfortunately, Portman later wrote, all the captured Sentinelese "sickened rapidly,

and the old man and his wife died, so the four children were sent back to their home with quantities of presents." They had remained in British hands long enough, however, for Portman to note their "peculiarly idiotic expression of countenance, and manner of behaving."

In later years, Portman gained moderate renown for his anthropological and antiquarian researches, and for having, as his obituary in the *Times* of London put it, "above all other men . . . the 'native touch,' that rare and mysterious gift that attracts and makes friends at once with natives." Over the course of his long association with the aborigines of Great Andaman, he grew quite fond of them, and came to believe, as he wrote, that "in many ways they closely resemble the average lower class English country schoolboy."

Once, on a visit to London, Portman addressed a meeting of the Royal Geographical Society, where he described his various adventures among the Andamanese. He concluded his speech by saying: "Their association with outsiders has brought them nothing but harm, and it is a matter of great regret to me that such a pleasant race are so rapidly becoming extinct. We could better spare many another."

There are three small openings in the ring of coral that surrounds North Sentinel Island. Most of the year, even these are effectively closed, since during the monsoon season—which lasts from April or May through November—the surf runs so high that any boat shallow-drafted enough to pass through would almost certainly be dashed to pieces.

From December to April, however, an unbroken spell of perfect weather settles over the Andamans. The air is warm, the skies are high and cloudless, and the sea, as travel books say, is gin-clear, reflecting immaculate beaches shaded by coconut palms. This is when the foreign backpackers converge on the islands—young

Europeans, mostly, clutching their Lonely Planet guides, seeking a few weeks of sweet oblivion in beachside hostels well supplied with cheap hashish and expensive beer. This is also the period when North Sentinel Island is exposed to incursions by sea. A large boat can anchor safely within a mile of shore, and then a small motor launch, guided by a skillful pilot who knows the territory, can—usually—make its way through the gaps in the reef to the beach.

During the 1970s and 1980s, T. N. Pandit made many such trips to the island. At first, the visits were sporadic, inspired by the whim of some local official or visiting dignitary who wanted to brave the arrows of the aboriginal warriors. Pandit came along as an expert adviser on such missions, not as their instigator. He had his hands full dealing with the aborigines of Great Andaman—figuring out how to handle the still-hostile Jarawa, and trying to aid the disease-ridden, opium-addicted relicts of the "friendly" tribes. Also, he couldn't help wondering whether the Sentinelese, if successfully befriended, might not meet a similar fate. But sometime after 1975—when *National Geographic* published, under the headline "The Last Andaman Islanders," dramatic photographs of the expedition on which the film director was wounded—trips to North Sentinel began occurring more frequently. This was partly because of the island's increasing renown. If the chief commissioner of the Andamans made an exciting excursion to North Sentinel, before long the deputy commissioner would want to go as well, and so would the inspector-general of police. Since such officials, in the Indian bureaucratic system, are generally sent out from the mainland on a two- or three-year hardship posting to Port Blair, there was a steady supply of new dignitaries clamoring to go. (Occasionally, foreign scholars have applied for permission to visit the aborigines, but the Indian government is sensitive about the Andamans, and does not like outsiders nosing around. Jacques Cousteau once came to shoot a documentary on the islands, and was chased away. Claude Lévi-Strauss asked Indira Gandhi to let his students do fieldwork among the Andamanese, and she refused.

Anyhow, wasn't it merely romantic fantasy to think that the Sentinelese could maintain their isolation forever? The population of the Andaman Islands was doubling every decade, as the Indian government encouraged emigrants from the overcrowded subcontinent—Bengalis, Tamils, Sikhs, Punjabis—to settle there, joining the descendants of convicts brought by the British. As a "Tribal Reserve Area," North Sentinel Island was off-limits to outsiders, under pain of a prison sentence; Indian Navy helicopters and ships made regular patrols to keep anyone from approaching. The longer it was kept isolated, however, the more attractive it became to local fishermen, who occasionally visited its outlying reefs with a wink from the navy. And then there was the problem that the Andaman archipelago was, and still is, a haven for outlaws. Its thousands of miles of uninhabited coastline provide hideouts for gold smugglers, gunrunners, pirates, and drug dealers plying the complicated underground trade routes of Southeast Asia. Illegal loggers come from Burma to cut valuable hardwoods; poachers come from Thailand for sharks, sea cucumbers, and rare shells. The outlaws have fast boats and heavy weaponry, and they brook no interference with their work.

So there were ample reasons for Andamanese officialdom to decide, as it did around 1980, that the Sentinelese must somehow be brought into its sheltering embrace. There was no need to repeat the mistakes of the past, not at this late date in history. The Indians were not the British; they had ample experience of the harm done by overzealous colonizers, and their hands were unstained by racial guilt. "Generations ago, we were all tribals," said one territorial governor. "Now nobody wants to go back. We got light, so let's spread it."

The Indian government had staked its definitive claim to North Sentinel in 1970, when an official surveying party landed at an isolated spot and erected—atop a disused native hearth—a stone tablet proclaiming the island part of the Republic of

India. Since the Sentinelese were not, and to this day still are not, aware of the existence of either writing or India, it is unlikely that this monument has made much of an impression.

Beginning in 1981, though, expeditions were dispatched to North Sentinel every month or two during fair weather, bearing gifts intended to propitiate the fractious aborigines. Pandit and his fellow team members were given use of the governor's own official yacht, the MV *Tarmugli*. They would leave Port Blair after nightfall, double the southern tip of Great Andaman, and anchor off the reef at North Sentinel about six hours later. The next morning, after breakfast, a contact party would set off toward shore in the *Tarmugli*'s motorized lifeboats.

On some visits the party would see Sentinelese; on others they would not. Invariably, however, they would try to land—at a place out of bowshot, if there were natives on the beach—and leave gifts. These included sacks of coconuts, bananas, and bits of iron conveniently sized to be hammered and scraped into arrowheads; occasionally they brought special presents like mirrors, red ribbons, rubber balls, and bead necklaces. Sometimes the Sentinelese would make gestures that appeared friendly, waving their hands as the dinghies chugged across the lagoon; sometimes they would make gestures that were probably hostile, turning their backs toward the visitors en masse and sitting on their haunches as if to defecate. It was not out of character for them to rush out of the jungle and grab the gifts, then shower their retreating benefactors with arrows.

Occasionally there were incidents more reminiscent of the Keystone Kops than of Captain Cook. Once, a high-ranking naval officer, newly deputed to the Andamans, accompanied the expedition. "He was a very fat guy, a Punjabi, with a very loud manner, and talking too much, that type of character," Pandit recalls. As the officer's dinghy approached shore, and Sentinelese were seen emerging from the forest, he stood up and started waving his arms over his head, shouting at the tribesmen in Punjabi: "Hello! Hello! I am your friend!" A second later, an arrow

clanged against an iron shield that a crewman had held up, just in time, in front of the officer's belly. During another expedition, a boat carrying the superintendent of police turned turtle in the surf. Some armed Sentinelese watched from the beach, but did not shoot the struggling men. This was seen as an encouraging sign.

But still, by the early 1990s, after more than a decade of such attempts, the hoped-for breakthrough—the triumphant moment when the natives would "reach out and accept the hand of friendship," as local politicians liked to put it—had not occurred.

Elsewhere in the Andamans, Pandit and his colleagues had already gotten an intoxicating taste of what such an encounter might be like. In the early 1970s, they had used similar tactics to establish friendly relations with the Jarawa, the one tribe on Great Andaman that the British and their Indian successors had not subdued. This was a matter of greater urgency than the Sentinelese missions, since outsiders were rapidly encroaching upon the Jarawa tribal reserve. The Jarawa fought back by shooting arrows at hunters, loggers, policemen, and road workers who entered their jungle—and, unlike the Sentinelese, the Jarawa rarely missed. They crept into neighboring villages by night and shot people, livestock, family pets, even the elephants used for shifting felled timber. After several years of gift-dropping missions to the western coast of Great Andaman, however, the Jarawa began welcoming the contact parties onto the beach, swimming out to the dinghies unarmed and embracing the delighted anthropologists.

True, these same Jarawa continued to shoot villagers with undiminished enthusiasm whenever an opportunity arose. But every month or so, when the official gift-bearing parties arrived on their shore, it was like a joyous reunion. Video footage shows the jet black aborigines swarming over the visitors' boats—men, women, and children, all naked, grabbing coconuts and bolts of red cloth, grasping the visitors' hands, reaching out curiously to pinch their light skin. Later, by the water's edge, they danced and sang, their voices joining in a strange, oscillating trill: *alay, oday, otalay, laday, alay, laylay, yamolay, alay . . .*

The anthropologists could not understand the Jarawa language; they still cannot. But there were other ways to communicate. “They loved to play with us, young and old, men and women,” Pandit says. “They thought nothing of climbing onto our shoulders, naked, to go for a ride down the beach. I remember once that I was running down the beach with two Jarawa girls, with a hand on each of them, on their shoulders, when one of them seized my hand and placed it over her breast as we ran. It did not seem sexual—just that it was perhaps a more convenient place for my hand to rest. You know, clothing and things like that are inconveniences of modern man.” Indeed, before landing, the anthropologists would strip down to shorts or underpants so as not to frighten the aborigines. Sometimes several Jarawa would surround a helpless scientist and, laughing, tear his remaining clothes off.

There were a few untoward incidents over the years. Once or twice, some young policemen and sailors tried to take advantage of the Jarawa women’s innocence; the Indian authorities did not invite them back. Several young male Jarawa, in turn, once came aboard the *Tarmugli* and attempted to take certain sexual liberties with a female journalist from Bombay. The woman had to be locked in her cabin until the frustrated aborigines departed. And the natives would seize as a “gift” anything that struck their fancy, including jewelry, watches, and such. Pandit lost several pairs of spectacles this way.

Still, he remembers those visits as among the happiest days of his life. “As an anthropologist, such an experience is a matter of professional interest,” he told me, “but more than that, you are reacting as a human being, and as a member of the civilized world, so-called. It has been so exhilarating. One feels humble in so many ways in their presence.”

One night in my hotel in New Delhi, I saw a television commercial—it was on the BBC World Service—that shows the landing of Christopher Columbus. The Spanish ships glide, impossibly, right up to the beach; topsails and royal standards

unfurl against the sky; the admiral strides through the surf and presses his forehead against the sand, transformed by his discovery, exalted. Then—"Excuse me, Mr. Columbus? I've got a package for you." The admiral looks up. It's a uniformed delivery man for one of the international express-mail companies, already waiting on the beach. The voice-over tells us that they'll deliver anything, anywhere in the world; there's nowhere they won't go.

It is not certain whether, outside the Andaman Islands, there still exists any community that has had as little contact with civilization as the Sentinelese. Pandit and his colleagues say there is none. Several American anthropologists I have spoken to agree with them. (But then, they had not previously heard of the Sentinelese, either.) The "Stone Age" tribes I read about in college, ten years ago, were—I now discover—already well acquainted with the outside world, and are now even more so. The Yanomamö ("the fierce people," as the subtitle of one of my textbooks described them) prostitute themselves to Brazilian gold miners, while the !Kung San are chased off game reserves to make way for ecotourism in the Kalahari Desert.

Even so, every few years there is a report of one "lost tribe" or another—usually in the Amazon rain forest or the highlands of New Guinea—staggering naked from the jungle into the dazzling glare of modernity. Such stories are almost invariably followed by a retraction: the tribesmen turn out to have T-shirts and cigarettes stashed back in their huts, and the original report turns out to have been a mistake or a fraud. (The most famous such incident was the so-called Tasaday hoax of 1971, involving a supposed Stone Age tribe in the Philippines; the tribesmen were Filipino farmers whom local politicians had coerced into posing as naked cavemen for the camera crews from CBS and National Geographic.)

At a cousin's wedding reception last summer, I happened to meet an anthropologist named Stuart Kirsch, who has researched the reality behind recent stories of first contact. As we sipped champagne, he explained to me that lost tribes are usually not so much lost as they are in hiding. The reason that relatively small areas of New Guinea and Brazil generate so many of the reports, he said, is that these regions are now crowded with peoples whom interlopers have driven farther and farther into the hinterlands, until they end up encircled. Their "lost" status is purely voluntary, a matter of prudent foreign policy.

One can understand, of course, why the old myths still exert their appeal. The notion of a lost tribe both flatters and consoles the discoverers; it transforms them, in the telling, from gauche trespassers into honored guests. And some latitude has always been granted to the heroes of such tales: Did not even Columbus's discovery turn out to be fraught with qualifying footnotes? Were not Melville's noble Typees, by his own admission, already in hiding from the French colonizers of Polynesia?

Lost tribes, Kirsch has written, "are destroyed at the moment of their creation." That might explain why explorers have been so eager to create new ones, and why, now that the lost tribes of the earth are used up, we are moved to invent new ones beyond it. If there are no more dark places in this world, there may be, perhaps, dark places still in the universe, where others live, like us and unlike, twins separated at a distant birth to show us what we might have been.

At the entrance to the harbor of Port Blair sits a small island that, until the beginning of World War II, served as the local center of British administration. Ross Island was abandoned after the war, and the jungle has been allowed to reclaim it, with the notorious efficiency of tropical nature. Tall coconut palms sprout from the mossy tennis courts, and vines have seized the pretty Gothic steeple of the Anglican church, pulling it roughly back toward earth. Already, the place

seems more like some ruined city of Olmec kings than like a settlement that thrived only a few decades ago. It is sweetly strange to think that in London veterans' hospitals or Yorkshire nursing homes, there probably live people who in their youth hit volleys on those courts, or traded pleasantries with the vicar of that church.

But the best place to get a sense of the Andaman Islands under British rule is not in the archipelago at all, but rather in New Delhi, in the main reading room of the National Archives of India. The reading room is a dreary place, lined with shelves of indexes to the annals of the British Raj, their covers warped and stained by a century's worth of monsoon humidity. Opening one of these volumes to the section on the Andaman District and skimming the list of topic headings is enough to give the flavor of late-nineteenth-century life there:

> Flogging to check unnatural crime in the Settlement of Port Blair.
>
> Mortality among the sheep sent from Calcutta.
>
> Branding of life prisoners.
>
> Sentence of death passed on Bealalo alias Philip, an Andamanese.
>
> Port Blair Superintendent applies for a large ice-machine.

In the early days of the Andaman penal settlement, no important decision could be made without consulting the imperial authorities back in Calcutta. (The seat of power, along with all its records, was shifted to New Delhi in 1912.) In the archives, therefore, still bound in their original dossiers of olive drab paper, are thousands upon thousands of pages of correspondence between the administrators

in Port Blair and the masters of British India. No subject preoccupied these gentlemen as much, none generated as many pages of anxious inquiry and earnest recommendation, as the question of what to do with the Andamanese aborigines.

The British arrived in the islands determined that their conduct would be above reproach. They did not behave like the Americans on the Upper Plains or the Belgians in the Congo, raping and butchering for sport. Nor had they any desire to repeat the unpleasant experience of their compatriots in Tasmania, whose careless expansionism had led to the accidental extinction of an entire race. Rather, the first superintendent was dispatched to the Andamans, in 1858, with unequivocal instructions that the natives be treated with "the greatest forbearance and humanity," and that they be promptly informed "that our intentions towards the people of the islands are of the most friendly character."

Yet that message somehow failed to get across. The problem, at first, was that the Andamanese rarely let the Englishmen come close enough to have any semblance of conversation. No quantity of gifts left in their huts would soften their hostility. A surveying party would be out planning a road, or a team of convicts would be clearing jungle to make way for barracks, when the natives would suddenly set upon them from ambush, murdering as many as they could before being driven off. Afterward, the British felt they had no choice but to organize a retaliatory raid. (In one such engagement, seventy Andamanese were killed, and five soldiers received the Victoria Cross.) Some weeks later, fretful letters would arrive from the viceroy and his secretaries, urging renewed "conciliation and forbearance," reminding local authorities that "the Andaman Islanders, however low on the scale of civilisation, are British Subjects." But by that point the cycle had usually repeated itself.

Then, suddenly, the hostilities ceased almost entirely. There was one cataclysmic battle—fifteen hundred naked warriors came charging out of the jungle, straight up against the guns of a British warship, with predictably ghastly results—and after that, only a few desultory clashes. Quite unaccountably, the natives started

wandering out into the settlement and behaving like friends: odd, bright-eyed little people whose merry air suggested that they had forgotten there had ever been bloodshed. The Andamanese would ask for gifts (coconuts, bananas, and, before long, tobacco and liquor) and make amiable sport with the British soldiers, plucking at the brigadesmen's red coats and pulling on their whiskers. They even began coming voluntarily to live in the "Andamanese Home," an institution for their welfare that the British established on Ross Island.

But in some ways, their presence was now even more nettlesome than it had been before. The Andamanese had certain noteworthy talents, but few that could profitably be applied to the needs of a colonial settlement. They were excellent bowmen, amazingly proficient swimmers (some could even shoot arrows accurately while treading water), uncanny mimics, and skilled jungle trackers, able to communicate across miles of forest by banging out signals on the buttress roots of certain trees. So the British put them to use hunting down escaped convicts—a reasonable occupation, though hardly enough to occupy them full-time. A few of the natives were employed as nannies, since it was quickly noticed that they were remarkably affectionate with children, the Europeans' as much as their own. Others were kept as objects of amusement in Port Blair households, to be dressed up and coddled—at least until their masters' tours of duty ended, when they were left to fend for themselves. "The Government of [British] India," one official noted approvingly, "[has] adopted a policy towards the aborigines of the Andaman Islands which has made them, above all races of savages, the most carefully tended and petted." Here are some names given to Andamanese in the nineteenth century by the British, which I came across in various old documents: Topsy, Snowball, Jumbo, Kiddy Boy, Ruth, Naomi, Joseph, Crusoe, Friday, Tarbaby, King John, Moriarty, Toeless, Punch, Jacko, Jingo, Sambo, and Queen Victoria.

Experts—English clergymen and educators handpicked for their intelligence and conscientiousness—were entrusted with the task of civilizing them. They tried various techniques. Some did their best to teach the aborigines about clothing and the alphabet; others, attempting to win the natives' trust, smeared themselves with ochre body paint and joined in the tribal dances. They didn't make much progress either way. How could decent social behavior be taught to people whose culture had no concept of individual property, privacy, or political authority? How could Christianity be understood by people who—while they believed in various spirits, both benign and malignant—undertook no form of religious worship? How could math and science be imparted to people whose language had no numerals higher than three? So the Andamanese Home eventually became a sort of souvenir factory, where residents passed the time sitting on the ground, making their traditional baskets, bows, and arrows to be sold to English visitors.

At least the aborigines were not attacking settlers anymore. (A special constabulary force, the Bush Police, kept the still-hostile Jarawa safely at bay, while the Sentinelese, of course, remained in isolation.) But the natives' vitality had vanished along with their hostility. The first disquieting sign was what happened to their children: between 1864 and 1870, 150 babies were born in the Andamanese Home, and not a single one of them lived past the age of two. Venereal diseases soon appeared, despite the administrators' early hopes that Andamanese women would not prove sexually enticing to European men. (They based these hopes, in part, on what one of them delicately termed "an excessive development of fat around the gluteal region" of native females.) The history of the period can be summarized as a series of epidemics and dates, like a roster of military campaigns: pneumonia (1868), syphilis (1874), ophthalmia (1876), measles (1877), mumps (1886), Russian influenza (1890), gonorrhea (1892). When one of their number died, the Andamanese would weep piteously and embrace each other, but eventually they would seem to forget that the loved one had ever existed.

In 1858, it is believed, the aboriginal population of the Andaman Islands numbered at least 5,000. In 1931, the last time the British tried to count, it was estimated at 460.

On January 8, 1991, alongside articles titled "Poultry Training for Women" and "Oil Conservation Week Begins," the following front-page headline appeared in Port Blair's government-owned newspaper, *The Daily Telegrams*:

FIRST FRIENDLY CONTACT
WITH SENTINELESE

Four days earlier, a government contact party had paid a visit to North Sentinel, the first such expedition in more than a year. At first, as the anthropologists, constables, and officials approached the beach in the *Tarmugli*'s motorized dinghy, they could see no one on shore. Then, finally, a few Sentinelese stepped out from behind some bushes and started to gesture at the explorers, seemingly trying to indicate that they wanted gifts. As usual, the dinghy moved down the beach to a safe spot, and a crewman jumped out to drop off a bag of coconuts. As usual, the Sentinelese rushed down to grab it. But for the first time ever, the aborigines brought no weapons with them when they approached the water's edge—only mesh baskets and the iron-tipped wooden adzes they sometimes used to chop apart the coconuts. Emboldened, the dinghy's passengers tore open another sack of coconuts and threw them into the water. Five of the Sentinelese swam out to collect the nuts, and a few others brought out one of their canoes. The contact team members gestured to them to come closer, but the natives got nervous and went back onshore. Deciding that they had taken enough risks for one morning, the explorers went back to the *Tarmugli* for lunch.

In the afternoon, however, some of them decided to return. This time, they found at least two dozen aborigines waiting for them. One, a young man, was holding a bow and arrow, which he pointed at the intruders, but a woman quickly came over and pushed the arrow down. The man took his weapons and buried them in the sand. At this, a great many of the Sentinelese started running down the beach and splashing through the surf toward the dinghy. The leader of the contact party, a small, officious bureaucrat with the title Director of Tribal Welfare, stood up and started personally throwing coconuts out to them. Then the Director leapt from the boat into the chest-high water—one of the young Sentinelese men recoiled in fright—

and handed coconuts to the tribesmen as they crowded around him. After he had gone through five bags of coconuts, he climbed into the dinghy, headed back to the *Tarmugli*, and returned to Port Blair to spread word of his triumph.

The news did not create much of a stir. There was some back-slapping among the local officials and, later, a bit of internal squabbling over which one of them really deserved the credit. An editorial declared that the Director of Tribal Welfare was a very brave man, and the Indian government really ought to give him some sort of medal. The story went unnoticed by the overseas press, perhaps because foreign-desk editors were preoccupied that week with a story that seemed far more momentous: the impending war over Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

T. N. Pandit missed the great event, too; he'd had a family emergency to take care of in Port Blair, so he'd sent two assistants in his place. A few weeks later, however, in February, he returned to North Sentinel with another expedition. This time, several Sentinelese men went so far as to climb into the dinghy and grab entire sacks of coconuts; one of them also spotted a policeman's rifle hidden in a corner of the boat and reached out curiously to touch it Toward the end of the visit, Pandit was alone in the water with a group of Sentinelese; the other explorers had returned to the dinghy and started to drift away from him, and suddenly he found himself much nearer to the aborigines than to his own comrades. One of the young tribesmen looked at him, scowled, pulled out an iron-bladed knife, and made a gesture, Pandit says, "like he was going to cut out my heart. Maybe he thought I was planning to stay on the island." But the dinghy quickly returned to pick Pandit up. He would return to North Sentinel several more times before retiring from the Anthropological Survey in 1992.

Pandit says he was thrilled, at first, by his encounters with the Sentinelese. "That they voluntarily came forward to meet us—it was unbelievable," he told me, the last time we met at my hotel in New Delhi. "They must have come to a decision that the time had come. It could not have happened on the spur of the moment.

“But there was this feeling of sadness also—I did feel it. And there was the feeling that at a larger scale of human history, these people who were holding back, holding on, ultimately had to yield. It’s like an era in history gone. The islands have gone. Until the other day, the Sentinelese were holding the flag, unknown to themselves. They were being heroes. But they have also given up.

“They would not have survived forever—that, I can reason out. On a scientific basis, we can say that this population might have lived for another hundred years, but eventually … Even destruction takes place in the natural course of things; no one can help it, it happens. But here we have been doing it in a very conscious way, knowing full well what the consequences could be. What would be and what could be are the same.”

On December 31, 1857—the last day of the last year before their world began to end—a group of Andamanese went down to catch fish off the beach at South Reef Island, a tiny islet in the northern part of the archipelago. They brought with them bows and arrows, nets woven of bark fiber, and seven outrigger canoes, delicate little craft that they had made by laboriously hollowing out the trunks of fallen trees. (Many of the possessions they were carrying that day are now in the British Museum.) Before the fishermen had a chance to push their boats out into the surf, however, they saw something strange in the distance: an immense black shape, half ship and half sea monster, coughing out great exhalations of dark smoke as it moved across the ocean. It was coming toward them.

The vessel was a small East India Company steamer, inauspiciously named the *Pluto*, that had left Calcutta several weeks earlier on a mission to investigate the Andaman Islands, particularly their suitability as the site of a new penal colony. (On the Indian mainland, the Great Mutiny was in full blaze, and British jails were overflowing.) Despite the gravity of their assignment, the explorers had had a pleasant journey. Like many ships of its era, the *Pluto* was a kind of floating

experiment in multiculturalism—its crew and officers included not just Britons but Irishmen, Italians, Maltese, Scandinavians, Portuguese, Americans, Chinese, Africans, Bengalis, Burmese, Malaysians, a Frenchman, and an Arab—and in this case, the experiment turned out quite well. A Scottish sailor entertained his shipmates on the bagpipes; some Goan sailors formed an impromptu band; and the Arab boatswain strummed melancholy airs on his guitar. At Christmas, crewmen held sack races on the steamer's deck and boat races around its hull. The government officials on board—members of a special "Andaman Committee" appointed by the East India Company's directors—were also in a good mood, because they had already found a splendid site for a penal settlement (the future Port Blair) and were headed back to Calcutta with this happy news.

Their one disappointment was their failure, so far, to have any significant interaction with the Andamanese aborigines. There had been a few brief glimpses, a few arrows ineffectually fired, and that was all. So when the officials caught sight of the native fishermen on the beach at South Reef Island, they decided that here was an opportunity they did not want to miss. The *Pluto* hove to and lowered its longboats; the native canoes also put to sea and approached the steamer. As they drew closer, the chairman of the Andaman Committee stood up in the stern of his longboat and started waving a white pocket-handkerchief, hoping that the aborigines would recognize this international symbol of peaceful intentions.

A beautiful old lithograph freezes in time the moment before the two sides met. Sunlight slants down through high banks of cumulus clouds. The *Pluto* rides gracefully on the water, twin masts slightly raked, British ensign flying proudly at the stern rail. The longboats, bristling with oars, cut across scallop-edged waves. The canoes are little more than lines above the water, their passengers stick figures silhouetted by the sun. On the beach more stick figures watch from beside a mound of jungle.

A moment later, everything exploded. The aborigines fired first; the Andaman Committee, an instant later. Three Andamanese were shot dead, including one warrior—a "chief," the committee later decided—who sank down in his canoe "almost with the dignity of Caesar." The survivors leapt into the sea and made for shore. All was chaos in the explorers' longboats as well: men howled in pain, some of them wounded by arrows and others by a volley of bullets that the second boat had accidentally discharged at the first.

And somehow, amid this confusion', an Andamanese ended up inside one of the European boats. It is not clear how he got there. The only sources we have are two different accounts by the Andaman Committee chairman; one says that the man was seized as he tried to swim away; the other, that he grabbed a leather strap thrown to him from the longboat. Willingly or not, he fell into enemy hands, and was brought back to the *Pluto*.

Once aboard the steamer, at least, he does not seem to have struggled. The sailors promptly named him Jack, and dressed him in an old coat and trousers. (The clothes must have belonged to one of the cabin boys, since Jack, though a full-grown adult, was well under five feet.) One of the crewmen gave him a plug of chewing tobacco, which he swallowed; another tried to teach him, unsuccessfully, to smoke a clay pipe. Meanwhile, the members of the Andaman Committee earnestly debated what to do with him. They finally decided, in "the interests of humanity," to take him with them. So the *Pluto* got up steam and headed north again, with Jack gazing wistfully over the rail as the Andaman Islands slipped into the distance. The only thing that cheered him up was Neptune, the ship's dog, who came trotting over to sniff at him. Remarkably—for dogs were completely unknown to the Andamanese—Jack threw his arms around the animal's neck and began to caress it, and the two were inseparable companions for the rest of the voyage.

Back in Calcutta, where the Andamanese warrior was kept in the Andaman Committee chairman's own house, he became an object of intense interest, and his spirits improved a bit. He was given a fine suit of clothes, shown off at tea parties, and taken out for drives in a carriage. He was introduced to the viceroy, Lord Canning, as well as to Canning's wife, whom he attempted to greet in traditional Andamanese fashion by blowing into her hand with a cooing murmur. (Her ladyship declined the honor.) He was also taken to visit a photographer so that his picture could be sent to the great German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. Jack's keepers wanted him to pose naked for the camera, but by this time he had grown used to European modesty, so it took some effort before he acquiesced, and in the resulting photograph, he squints awkwardly into the lens. Still, it is recorded that when this picture was shown to its subject, he laughed heartily and exclaimed, "Jack!"

One night, however, after Jack had been in Calcutta for less than two weeks, he awoke with severe pains in his abdomen. A doctor rushed to his bedside and found that his case presented all the symptoms of cholera. Mustard poultices and blisters were applied, and after a few days the cholera seemed to pass, but by now Jack was also suffering from severe inflammation of the lungs. Earnest consultations were held at the highest levels of government (in the National Archives of India, there is a scribbled note in Lord Canning's own hand, inquiring anxiously about Jack's health), and it was quickly agreed that the unfortunate captive should return to his home. Since this meant depriving him of European medicine, it is odd that the British officials were so eager to relieve themselves of his presence—but in any case, they were.

So, by order of the viceroy, Jack was loaded with as many presents as he could carry—pots, pans, beads, mirrors, carpentry tools, cloth, thread—and put again aboard the *Pluto*. The steamer reached South Reef Island early one morning and,

after a final set of anatomical measurements was taken, Jack was put ashore. (When the longboat approached, some natives were spotted watching from the beach, but they fled before it reached them.) By this time, his medical condition had worsened.

"It could not be ascertained," the *Pluto*'s surgeon reported, "whether he was pleased or not at being restored to his home." But the sailors made their affectionate farewells, unloaded the gifts, and set Jack's fine new clothes by his side, in a little heap on the sand. As they rowed back toward the steamer, they could see him standing there silently where they had left him, naked again on the beach.

One day in Port Blair, I went to visit the Mohameds' scrapyard. The Mohameds are five Muslim brothers from Madras, ship-breakers who were given a government permit to salvage metal from the wreck of the *Primrose*. They live and work near the waterfront in a big tin-roofed shed, a museum of the reclaimed junk of the twentieth century: huge rusty cogs and chains, oil drums and sections of hull plating.

Only two of the brothers were in when I went to see them, but they courteously offered me tea and shared their recollections of North Sentinel Island. They had gone there sporadically for nearly a decade until 1997, often spending days at a time living aboard their boat, which they anchored near the freighter's hulk. On their first visit, some Sentinelese came down to the beach waving weapons, and even though one of the brothers waved a white sheet in response, the natives started shooting arrows, so one of the salvors' police escort fired shots in the air. Thereafter, the Mohameds worked unmolested. They often saw the tribesmen fishing from their canoes, and sometimes, on nights when there was a full moon, they would be awakened by voices singing around bonfires on the beach. The salvors never tried to go ashore.

"But one day," the elder of the two brothers told me, "when I was working on the *Primrose*, I saw something floating in the water, and I jumped in to get it. I can show it to you, if you want." He went upstairs and rummaged around for a few minutes in the loft that served as his bedroom, and when he returned he was carrying a Sentinelese bow. It was a lovely thing, tall and very slightly flexed, fashioned from the wood of some exotic tree. Its curved surfaces were broken into planes, long scraped striations from the adze that had shaped it. When I ran my fingertips along the concave side, they brushed against something rough: several tiny rows of zigzag lines incised into the wood. "You know," I blurted out, "if you ever wanted to sell this, I would give you, I don't know, six thousand rupees." It was the first sum that came into my head, but I knew it was far more than most Indians earned in a month. The scrap dealer looked at me steadily. "No," he said. "Even my oldest brother has asked me many times to give him this. If I cannot give it to him, I cannot give it to you." Suddenly I didn't want the bow, felt wrong for having wanted it, but I smiled to show that I understood.

I had arrived in Port Blair expecting to learn the worst—that North Sentinel was already a stop on the ecotourism circuit, or that the local administration (as it's done with the surviving remnants of the other, "friendly" Andamanese tribes) had gone in and built a new settlement for the Sentinelese, complete with a communal television set. Instead, there was much more surprising news: the island, for the first time in thirty years, was being left completely alone. The gift-dropping missions had ended in 1996. There was still no television set on North Sentinel; it remained, like Prospero's island, a place where the air shimmered with invisible signals, with unseen Hindi soap operas and Thai music that drifted, unheard, across the Andaman Sea.

None of the local officials would give me a clear explanation of why the visits had been suspended. I was chased out of offices, and bureaucrats whose job it was to set tribal policy told me it wasn't their job to set tribal policy. The most I could learn

was that there had been occasional visits after Pandit's retirement, but that they hadn't always been friendly. Several times, the Sentinelese had aimed their arrows at the contact party, and once they had nearly destroyed a wooden dinghy, hacking at it with their adzes. The explorers had never progressed much beyond the point of handing coconuts to the natives as they stood in the surf.

But when I went to the office of the Anthropological Survey and met the young scientist who now has Pandit's job, he told me something that, when I thought about it long afterward, seemed to answer some of my questions. "You're in luck," he said when I told him I had come to the Andamans to research the native tribes. "You have arrived here at a very interesting time. The Jarawa seem to have finally decided to end their isolation." The way he said this left me uncertain whether he was pleased about it or not.

Actually, I'd already heard hints of the big news about the Jarawa. When I'd arrived in the Andamans, I hadn't expected to see anything of them—even though the Jarawa live in the jungles of Great Andaman, and had their "first friendly contact" with anthropologists two decades before the Sentinelese, Pandit had told me that they'd remained mostly hostile to outsiders, untouched by modern culture. Only a few dozen living people had ever even glimpsed a Jarawa in the flesh, he'd said. But I'd hardly stepped off the ship from Calcutta before I'd been invited to visit them.

On my first full day in the islands, a Sunday, I'd gone snorkeling at the Mahatma Gandhi Marine National Park, which lies off the west side of Great Andaman, a short bus trip from Port Blair. At the park's entrance, I boarded a ferryboat, along with a few dozen other tourists—mostly middle-class Indians from the mainland—and was taken out to a tiny, gloriously uninhabited island, where for the next few

hours we had the run of the place. Honeymoon couples from Calcutta held hands on the shore, while in the water the director of a mining company in Rajasthan paddled gravely back and forth, looking at tropical fish.

I'd heard that on clear days you could see North Sentinel from this island, so I walked around to the part of the beach where I thought it might be. The sky was too hazy, it turned out. But as I stood there looking, someone came up to me and asked, in broken English, if he could help. The man—I'll call him Jyoti—was a Bengali, short, tanned, and deep-chested, with a ragged fringe of beard. He lived, he told me, in one of the nearby fishing villages, and had worked as a shell diver until recently, when he began trying to earn a living as a tourist guide. I asked him if he had ever gone to North Sentinel.

"Yes, many times I am going. Never landing, staying offshore, two hundred meters, catching fish, catching shells. Sometimes seeing people."

"Could I ever go there with you?" Jyoti laughed.

"No, too much danger. I go in fishing boat, Coast Guard helicopter coming, seeing me, waving, no problems. You come in boat, helicopter seeing you, coming, arresting. Very un-legal."

However, if I was interested in the Andamanese tribes, Jyoti told me, there was another place he could take me without running afoul of the law. He had some cousins who lived near a village called Tirar, up against the edge of the Jarawa Tribal Reserve. He'd heard from them that over the past few weeks, some Jarawa had occasionally come out of the jungle and into the outskirts of the Indian settlements. If we went there, he could help me interview the villagers, and I might even see some aborigines.

So, several days later, we hired a Maruti minivan and a driver, and headed up toward Jarawa country. I'd discussed my plans already with the anthropologists in Port Blair, and they'd suggested that on arriving in Tirar, I should check in with a certain Inspector Khan, who commanded the local unit of the Bush Police. This was the special constabulary founded by the British to contain the Jarawa—and half a century after the British left, it is still in place.

The road to Tirar starts out well enough, on a straight course through rice paddies and coconut plantations, and then, less than an hour outside Port Blair, becomes a rutted track hemmed in by banyans and peepuls, palms and hibiscus. For some time it continues indecisively, not sure if it wants to be paved or unpaved, before settling finally on un–. Past this point there are three more villages—no more than clusters of thatched huts by the roadside, really—and the last of these, the farthest outpost of civilization, is Tirur.

Our minivan pulled to a stop, and Jyoti leaned out the window to ask where we could find Inspector Khan. The man said something in Bengali and pointed up the road. Jyoti translated for me: "He says tribal people is come and Khan *sahib* is go in van and sit by jungle."

After just a hundred yards or so, the road veered left, into a sudden narrow sunny valley, where it ended. Ahead was a single strip of paddy land, bounded by the great dark wall of the jungle, which was higher than I'd expected it to be, blocking half the sky. Right in front of us was an ancient, navy blue police van, and next to the van stood two groups of men, apparently having a conversation. All of them were dressed in the faded khaki bush shirts that are ubiquitous in the Andaman back-country. As we got out to meet them, one of the groups turned to go, and I noticed that these men were much smaller than the others—tiny, even, like children. They were setting out single-file down a muddy little path through the

paddy toward the trees. Around their necks they wore odd fringes of brown fiber. The last one in line turned, waved, and smiled, teeth flashing preternaturally white in his dark face—and I realized at last that they were Jarawa.

They had come out of the jungle the previous night, eighteen in all, and camped by the edge of the rice fields. In the morning, the police had come to give them coconuts and bananas, and some of the villagers, offended by the tribesmen's nudity, had given them old clothes to wear for as long as they were in the settlement. Now, the last half-dozen Jarawa were making their way back toward the forest, carrying mesh baskets loaded with fruit. They waded across a knee-deep stream, and I saw that they were naked beneath the oversized shirts, their buttocks splashed with yellow mud. Every few steps they turned again, and waved, and shouted "*Lalay*!", and the people on the road shouted the same word back. This is one of the few words of Jarawa that the anthropologists think they understand; it means *friend*.

As the aborigines reached the midpoint of the field, the rearmost of them turned and seemed to notice me for the first time—I was convinced of it—and smiled, and waved, and shouted, and before I knew it I was grinning like an idiot, waving and shouting too: "*Lalay! Lalay!*" Then their small dark shapes merged with the great dark mass of the jungle, and the valley was empty except for a few water buffalo and a sudden flight of white cranes, and I took my first good look at the civilized men.

In the same year that the *Pluto* first came to the Andamans, on the other side of the world, Henry David Thoreau traveled up to Maine and—for the last time in his life—climbed Mount Katahdin, accompanied by a Penobscot Indian guide. It was a sacred place for him, one that induced transcendental raptures of a greater-than-usual intensity. Once, after crossing a secluded meadow on the mountainside (a place, he thought, "perhaps never seen by a white man before), he wrote:

> What is it to be admitted to a museum, to see a myriad of particular things, compared with being shown some star's surface, some hard matter in its home! I stand in awe of my body, this matter to which I am bound has become strange to me … What is this Titan that has possession of me? Talk of mysteries! Think of our life in nature,—daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it,—rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the actual world! the *common sense! Contact! Contact! Who* are we? *where* are we?

Khan *sahib*—a large man with a paunch and a gray mustache, the invariable attributes of Indian law enforcement—was the only policeman I saw in the group; the others were villagers. As soon as I had explained who I was and why I had come, they were eager to tell me about their recent experiences with the Jarawa. Although they had spent their lives mere yards away from the Jarawa reserve, few of them had even seen an aborigine until a few weeks before.

Tirar was settled in the 1950s, by Bengali rice farmers displaced in the Partition, and ever since—like other frontier villages in the Andamans—it had come under occasional attack from the aborigines. The bowmen shot from ambush, often at night; if you got close enough to glimpse one, it usually meant that you were seconds away from death. In 1997, however, something unusual happened: three Burmese poachers came straggling out of the jungle, badly wounded, and turned themselves in at the local Bush Police outpost. They had been illegally cutting rare hardwoods deep inside the tribal reserve when the Jarawa ambushed them. Three of their companions were killed on the spot. The bodies were found by a police boat on the western beach of Great Andaman some days later; they lay in a row, horribly mutilated, facing the sea.

After this, the attacks on Tirar intensified. Half-a-dozen villagers (in a population of 350) were killed by Jarawa arrows, the latest one just this past March. She was an old woman, the mother of a local farmer, and she was working alone in his rice paddy, a field not a hundred yards from us, when the Jarawa crept up on her from the forest. Her son found her, a little while later, with an arrow sticking out from—he gestured to show me—the middle of her chest. But after that, the killing had stopped. All was quiet until just a few weeks ago, when a group of Jarawa had come out, unarmed and perfectly cheerful, and showed by signs that they wanted coconuts. Since then, more had come every few days, taking gifts before they went back into the jungle. No one knew why.

After I'd finished talking with the villagers, we climbed into the minivan and followed Khan back to the Bush Police outpost. It was a simple structure, with walls of bamboo latticework. On a table sat a kerosene lantern, a few empty cartridge boxes, and a rifle that looked to be of World War I vintage. On another, higher, table, half-covered by a flower-printed cloth, was a small black-and-white television set.

The government's contact missions to befriend the Jarawa, Khan explained, had had a limited effect. After twenty-five years of the joyful encounters that Pandit had told me about, the Jarawa still hadn't stopped attacking settlers—and in any case, the expeditions had focused on only one group of aborigines, fifty miles north of here. Two years ago, those northern Jarawa started coming into the settlements and asking for gifts. As they grew bolder, they became more of a nuisance: stealing things from villagers, sleeping in Bush Police stations, even, recently, boarding public buses, much to the passengers' alarm. Not long ago, several were found to have chest infections that appeared to be viral pneumonia. The Andaman administration was at a loss over what to do. As long as it had been the civilized people who were sending contact parties to the Jarawa, everything had been simple

enough. Now that the Jarawa themselves were sending contact parties into civilization, matters had taken a most unpleasant turn. And now the southern Jarawa, too, the ones near Tirur, had started to emerge from the jungle.

Still, Khan said that he had no desire to return to the old days. One of his own constables had been wounded in an ambush early this year, probably by the same aborigines we'd seen this morning; the arrow's iron tip had entered his brain, poor fellow, and he was still in a rehabilitation hospital in Madras, with little prospect of ever leaving. Khan would rather give the Jarawa as many coconuts as they liked than have to face that again.

Then, too, he told me, there had been some interesting—even amusing—moments since the aborigines had become friendly. Just two weeks ago, for instance, several had happened to come to this police station while the constables were watching television. At first, they'd stared at the set in amazement, but then after a few minutes they sat down—one of them on the floor, two others atop Khan's desk—and started to watch. They laughed, pointed, talked excitedly in Jarawa. There was a Hindi film on the television, Khan remembered, and then a boxing match. They'd particularly liked the boxing match.

Later that day, after we'd left the Tirur police outpost, Jyoti and I were sitting outside his cousins' house, where we'd just finished lunch, and I asked him again, more urgently this time, about visiting North Sentinel Island. "Impossible," he said, shaking his head. "Too much risk." I pleaded my case yet again. And at last he looked up, shrugged, and said: "Is danger. Is risk. But I think we take risk."

In 1768, midway through his voyage across the Pacific, the French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville sighted a beautiful island rising out of the sea. When the mariners came ashore, the islanders spread the floors of their huts with flowers and green leaves, and as native musicians, in the captain's words, "sang an hymeneal

song to the tune of their flutes," crowds gathered and watched the Frenchmen and island women lie down, two by two, to make love on the leafy beds. The place already had a name—Tahiti—but Bougainville would call it *La Nouvelle Cythère*, after the island where Aphrodite was born from the waves.

In 1998, some German backpackers in Port Blair were out drinking with a local man, a notorious confidence artist, when they mentioned to him that they would like to have sex with a Jarawa girl. So the man found a half-Andamanese prostitute (one of the last descendants of the "friendly" tribes of British days), stripped her naked, and decked out her neck and arms in his best approximation of bark-fiber fringes. He showed her to the Germans and told them she was Jarawa. They paid him five hundred rupees and had sex with her, one after the other.

We went to the island a few days before I was to leave the Andamans. Jyoti arranged for a boat and crew; our cover story was to be that we were fishing, and if a navy patrol approached, I would duck under a tarp and pretend to be a sleeping fisherman. To be on the safe side, we would leave under cover of darkness. So the afternoon before our departure, I packed up all the special outdoor gear I'd brought from America (synthetic-fiber camping shirt, sun hat, pen-sized flashlight, new camera), boarded a bus in Port Blair, and rode to Wandoor, a village on the western coast of Great Andaman. I went to sleep that evening in Jyoti's house—a cottage with packed-earth floors and palm-leaf walls—and an hour or so after midnight, he shook me awake.

I grabbed my knapsack and we walked in silence down to the shore, through groves of coconut trees thrumming with the noises of the tropical night. The moon was out, a pale half-circle ringed with cloud. The path through the trees was uneven in places, churned up by the passage of people and animals, so I reached for my flashlight, but before I could turn it on, Jyoti whispered sternly, "No torch. Moon is our torch." We continued until we came to a gravel road along the seawall, and

there Jyoti left me, in a shadowed spot by the water's edge, and went down to the jetty to find the boatmen. I waited for a long time—looking at the stars, shivering a little in the night air—before he returned, so long that he startled me when I heard his footsteps again. Now he took my flashlight from me, pointed it out to sea, and switched it on and off quickly, twice. From somewhere in the distance, among the dark silhouettes of the inshore islands, came the *chuk-chuk-chuk* of an engine.

One of the silhouettes seemed to detach itself and float nearer, and as it drew toward us the engine cut off and the dinghy glided up to shore. Jyoti and I waded through the water and climbed in. The fishing boat was small, less than twenty feet, and made of hand-hewn teak, with an inboard motor amidships. I could make out two figures at the tiller, short and slightly built, like boys; they did not speak, but passed me a plastic tarp to keep close at hand. I took my place in the bow. There was no deck, no seat, just the hard timbers of the boat's frame. It was so narrow I could grasp both gunwales with my elbows bent at my sides.

The boatmen had decided it would be too dangerous to go to North Sentinel alone: if a storm blew up suddenly, or we had engine trouble, there would be no one to save us. So even though it meant splitting up the money I had agreed to pay them, they'd brought a second boat. Off the farthermost of the inshore islands we lay to; our flashlight signaled and was answered, and soon the other dinghy joined us, trailing somewhere off astern.

Then for a long while there was nothing but the nearness of the warm black sea, the noise of the engine, and the white lines of our wake falling endlessly away. On this voyage there would be no raising or lowering of sails, no depth soundings, no sextant readings. The boatmen were steering by the stars, or by some private sense of direction; I couldn't tell. Jyoti wrapped himself in a tarp and slept. A light rain fell, and then stopped. Every so often, a spark leaped from the exhaust pipe of the

inboard motor pipe of the inboard motor and tumbled into the sea, where it seemed to float for an instant before dying out. Once, I saw a faint reddish glint far to the west, like the beacon of a ship.

The clouds, high and scattered, were the first things to catch the rising light, then gradually the faces of the two boatmen, who I saw now were not boys at all, but men, skinny and bearded. One of them had a cloth wrapped, turbanlike, around his head. They spoke no English, and in any case the din of the engine made conversation impossible. I wondered what they knew about why we were going on this journey, and then I wondered what I knew about it, myself.

I crouched down and slept between the wooden walls of the bow, and when I woke up a little while later, a red band lay over the horizon behind us—and the island, like its dark reflection, on the horizon ahead. Sheet lightning flashed beyond it, far away. I could now make out the boat that was following us; it was built in a traditional shape that I'd seen before in the Andamans, with a high squared-off prow like a war canoe's. In both boats, the men had fishing lines out—it was our alibi, and besides, why not fish?—and every so often they would stop to pull in a tuna or a snapper, hand over hand, without tackle.

As we drew nearer to land, green leaves drifted past us, and the mangled limb of some tropical plant. From a stripe of neutral color, the island resolved itself gradually into a slab of beach piled high with trees—now visible, now invisible behind the swells. The closer it came, the more the sea around us sprang to life: dolphins leaped around our bow, flying fish skittered past, and startling turquoise shallows, crowded with corals, surged suddenly from the depths. The dreary land gave out no such signs; it was like a place where no one had ever lived, or ever would. The clouds above it looked more substantial than itself.

In a curio shop in Calcutta, on a whim, I had purchased a telescope: an ancient, cumbersome thing, bound in brass and leather—doubtless, I'd imagined, a relic of some long-dead Conradian sea captain. I unscrewed its lens cap now, and trained it on North Sentinel. We were as close now as we could safely come; a bulwark of breakers, ten feet high, rolled down onto the reef not far ahead of us, and two hundred yards or so beyond that lay the shore. Every tree trunk I looked at was a man, every piece of driftwood a beached canoe. But they were just trees and more trees, driftwood and more driftwood. Hoping to circumnavigate the island, we turned northward now and skirted the reef, and the incessant coastline unscrolled before us, like a loop of silent film.

I looked up at the thickening clouds. When I'd planned my trip to the Andamans, I'd checked to find out when their yearly monsoon season ended. Some of the guidebooks said October, others November. Because I was eager to make the trip, I'd decided to believe the ones that said October. They were wrong. It was now mid-November, and the monsoon was still in full force. Since I'd arrived in Port Blair, the storms had come every day or two, sudden and intense. I hoped this wouldn't be one of those days. There was no radio in our boat, of course, no life preservers. We were twenty-five miles from home, and had seen no other ships. And we were already taking on a bit of water through our hull. Every few minutes, one of the boatmen would stoop to bail with a plastic bucket.

Then Jyoti grabbed my arm. "Look," he said. "Tribal."

At first, I couldn't see the thing he was pointing at. And when I saw it, it looked too small to be a person, too small to be a tree stump, even. Then it stood up and walked across the beach.

Along this part of the shoreline, the forest grew high and dense, seeming almost to overhang the surf. The man, or perhaps it was a woman, had walked over to stand under this canopy, beneath a low, spreading tree. We cut our engine and I stood up

with my telescope. I glimpsed two other figures beneath the tree, their upper bodies in shadow, their bare legs shifting shapes against the sand. They were facing us, and one of them was holding something long and thin—a spear? A bow? Impossible to tell. I couldn't hold my telescope in position with the swell beneath our boat; the small circle of vision momentarily caught the group of figures, then swung wildly toward the ocean or the sky. The reefs allowed us no closer. We were too far to shout or signal, even if we'd known what to say. There was nothing to do but move on.

So our dinghy continued, with the other still trailing behind, across the north coast of the island now, past dunes overgrown with scrubby bushes, and vapor rising from the jungle beyond. As we approached the far corner I saw that it came to a point, with a tiny islet lying just offshore. The breakers here were higher than we'd seen elsewhere, stretching in an unbroken line along the reef, and just inside them another, smaller line of surf crashed against something else: a low barrier of blackened metal. It was the *Primrose*, pruned back by the Mohamed brothers nearly to the waterline.

And between the *Primrose* and the beach, there was another boat: a Sentinelese canoe. It lay several hundred yards off, but we could see its profile clearly—a brown line above the water, with one figure seated toward the bow and another standing, poling, at the stern. They were probably fishing. I was sure they were watching us, though I now realize I could not possibly have seen that from such a distance. But beyond the impenetrable fence of surf, they were following a course like ours, westward alongshore, riding more easily than we were on their calmer patch of sea. For a minute or so the three of us were all parallel. I was standing in the bow—snapping pictures, scribbling notes—and saw our vessels click into alignment: two small fishing boats, with an upright figure in each, and between us, the dystopian ruin of the freighter.

Suddenly, I noticed that Jyoti was not paying attention to the canoe. He was staring in the other direction, seaward. “Look,” he said to me, for the second time that morning.

It was a waterspout. I watched it in amazement: an elegant column, hundreds of feet high, drifting toward us across the gray pavement of the sea. Behind it, I saw, was a wall of black clouds. “Is weather,” Jyoti said. “Very, very bad danger. Now we go back.”

The crewmen were shouting in Bengali, standing up and waving to the other dinghy: go back, go back. I realized what had happened. We’d just been rounding the northwest corner of North Sentinel, coming around onto the island’s farther shore; there was nothing beyond it for hundreds of miles but the Indian Ocean. Now the weather that the land had blocked from view lay directly in our path. We reversed course and started to flee.

The dinghy made as much headway as its eight-horsepower engine could manage across the mounting swells. It was pitifully slow. After five minutes or so we’d all realized the effort was useless. The waterspout had disappeared now, absorbed somewhere into the shifting curtains of water behind it, but the storm front looked worse, and was coming up fast. The boatmen waved and shouted again, and this time they brought us around toward the storm. Jyoti explained: they’d seen a gap in the clouds—black wall on one side, black wall on the other, but a narrow gray defile in the middle—and our best hope was to try to run through it.

A minute or two later, the opening in the clouds slid shut. We could only ride out the storm. The crewmen brought us up as close to the reef as they dared, pointed our bow at the advancing weather, and dropped anchor. I was as near to the island then as I would ever get. The boatmen pulled out several blue tarps and ducked beneath them, hunkering down in the bottom of the dinghy. They gestured at me to

duck under my tarp, as well, but I preferred to see what was coming. I was more worried at this point about my notebook and camera than anything else, so I zipped them into my knapsack, wrapped it in the plastic sheet as well as I could, and cradled the unwieldy bundle in my lap.

The island was dark again, as it had been when we'd seen it in the distance at sunrise, but this time the sky was darkening too, and rushing to meet the land. The Sentinelese canoe had vanished. White streamers of mist that had lain atop the jungle reared upward, sucked by a sudden swift draft. For a moment everything was silent except the crashing of the surf, until the wind blew in. Waves struck against us; the line of breakers exploded like a train of powder. And then the rain came, aimed almost from the land itself; drenching the telescope, and the knapsack, and the Nikon camera, soaking through my clothes into my moneybelt and bleeding the ink of my passport; beating down on the island, and the wreck of the *Primrose*, and our nameless boat.

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