

Underwater Cultural Heritage of Islands

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It is generally believed that till recently the natives of Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep (Laccadive) islands lived in isolation without having any contact with the mainland of India. But this is not true. Long ago the Andaman islands must have established cultural and trade contacts with Indian coastal settlements on the east coast of India. One of the reasons for coming to this conclusion is that a particular type of stone axes of the Neolithic period technically called the butt-end type has been reported from Andaman islands. This type which is distinct from the shouldered stone axes of the Neolithic culture of Assam occurs at an important Neolithic site known as Kuchai, 8 km north of the District town of Baripada in Orissa. The excavation by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1961-62 (Indian Archaeology 1961-62) revealed butt-end axes, packed and ground. The associated pottery is a coarse grit tempered handmade red ware. The excavation of Kitchenmidden sites in the Andamans by Caprient (*Illustrated London News Dec. 1960*), Ganguli (1984) and Bopardikar (1987) also yielded handmade red ware. Whether there are any earlier settlements of the Late Stone Age (microlithic) here as in Kuchai is yet to be explored. In this connection it may be noted that the absence of pottery in the Microlithic layers of Kuchai need not necessarily imply that the inhabitants ate food raw. In Bastar, Sharma reports

(A.K. Sharma 1986) that food is cooked in leaves on open fire by the tribals, and pots are not used for cooking. A similar method of cooking might have existed in Andamans before Neolithic or even in Early Neolithic period. The presence of butt-end Neoliths in Orissa and Andamans does suggest trade and cultural contact if not movement of population in prehistoric times, which in turn would suggest that the islanders were good navigators and could cross the turbulent Bay of Bengal in their canoes. The navigational aids used by them and their knowledge of astronomy are not known to us. Several ships of theirs must be lying buried in their harbours.

Another social custom common to the Neolithic folk of Andamans and those of mainland India is burial of the dead and painting of skulls with red ochre which is noticed in the Neolithic sites of the Deccan and Kashmir. Further, trephination for letting out blood to drive away the evil spirit or to remove the tumour in the brain as described in the *Mahavagga* was practiced by the Neolithic people of Burzahom and the Harappans at Lothal in India. The inhabitants of Andamans also practiced trephination and the circular piece of bone from the skull was worn as an amulet. Even now it is said this practice continues. At Lothal the 'trepan' a circular bronze saw was used for the operation. The trephined skull of a child has been found at Lothal (S.R. Rao 1973).

The Veddas of Little Andamans are said to show ethnic affinities with the Veddas of mainland India.

Apart from the Neolithic and Kitchen-midden sites there may be Late Stone Age sites in Andamans. In the early historic period the highly enterprising merchants who went from Gujarat to Java must have visited the Andaman and Nicobar islands, for they, like the Laccadive Islands are on the high way. In Laccadives Buddhist Stupas and sculptures have been found. The only reference found so far mentioning Takkalam (Takola of Ptolemy) on the coast of Kingdom of Pegu is the inscription of Rajendra Chola I (1026 A.D.). It also refers to the annexation of Kadaram (Kingdom of Pegu), the sea ports of Takkalam and perhaps Nakkavaram, that is, Andaman and Nicobar.

Subsequent history and archaeological remains are yet to be made known. During the British Period Andamans were visited by British ships, and a couple of them are reported to have sunk. The

Syren sank near Andaman islands and the Brig Richard Bell wrecked near Nicobar islands in 1840. But many more of Indian and foreign origin and those of Andamanese must have sunk. Each ship is an epitome of the society that builds it.

In this connection mention must be made of a large number of ships which sank in Laccadive waters and should not be forgotten. One ship which carried treasure also lies buried there. The details collected by the Marine Archaeology Unit of NIO agree with the location of the wreck plotted during geophysical survey.

The concept of Indian Ocean as a distinct unit is gradually emerging and in discovering and preserving its cultural heritage Marine Archaeology can play a very important role. Its capability has been proved by the discovery of the submerged city of Dwarka of 1500 B.C. and a Dutch ship-wreck in Goa waters besides generating data of scientific value on sea level fluctuation. It is high time that the cruises of Department of Ocean Development to Andamans, Laccadives and Mauritius have marine archaeologists also in the team. Andamans are a virgin ground for discovering prehistoric and early historic settlements and monuments on land and in the sea.