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Native Among Savages: Reading the Escape Narrative of Dudhnath Tewari
 By Satadru Sen

On the 23rd of April, 1858, Dudhnath Tewari, a sepoy convicted by the British regime in India of mutiny and desertion and sentenced to hard labor in transportation, escaped from his guards in the Andaman Islands penal colony. Reappearing in the town of Port Blair a year later, he warned J.P. Walker, the superintendent of the prison, about an impending attack on the colony by Andamanese aborigines. He also reported to Walker about his year among the aborigines. The warning allowed Walker to organize an effective defense in the "Battle of Aberdeen" of May 1859. Tewari was rewarded with a pardon and briefly became a minor celebrity. (He has, logically enough, become a 'traitor' in Indian-nationalist narratives and recently been accused of contributing to Andamanese extinction.¹) What Tewari told Walker became the basis of an article, "Adopted in Andamans," which appeared in *Chambers's Journal* in 1860.² It remains a rare narrative about a "native" among "savages," often recycled for European consumption during a time when concretizing the distinctions between colonized populations was increasingly central to the organization of empire.

Located in the Bay of Bengal to the south of the Indian mainland, the Andamans were the largest and most complex prison in British India. There, administrators not only sought to punish and rehabilitate troublesome mainlanders, they also engaged in interconnected experiments in warfare, ethnology and photography involving the indigenous population.³ British engagement with the Andamanese proceeded alongside a parallel colonial encounter: that between aborigines and convicts from India and Burma. White Britons could not mediate whenever convict-settlers confronted aborigines demanding bananas, convict officers impregnated indigenous women at the Andaman Homes (institutions where aborigines were detained and occasionally put to work⁴), or runaways met the inhabitants of the jungle. Indians encountered the Andamanese in overlapping roles: as prisoners of the Raj, as sepoys, and as settlers in their own right. In each of these capacities, they approached aborigines with their own political and cultural lenses and their own agendas of power, interpretation and pleasure.

The lenses and agendas were only partially autonomous, because the niches that Indians occupied in the Andamans were all essentially colonial: they existed with (imperfect) reference to British demands on occupation, spatial distribution, political status and vocabulary. Nevertheless, non-whites in the islands did not approach each other exclusively as "Indians" or "Andamanese." Those categories were more consistently meaningful to Britons than to their subjects, who learned and revised their assigned identities in the process of their own experience.

Delinquent behavior (such as escape) and illicit knowledge informed shadow identities in which official categories of aboriginal/savage and native/criminal were not so much irrelevant as differently meaningful.

For Indians criminalized and punished by the colonial regime, Britons and British authority came with a familiarity that was both oppressive and reassuring. But the Andamanese also became familiar to them in the course of their punishment, and even unfamiliarity was charged with social and political possibilities. The savage personified the limits of British power. Convicts often feared the Andamanese, but they also looked to them for shelter from the punishing colony. Sepoys like Tewari were not "one" with the regime they served in most circumstances,⁵ and armed convicts in the islands existed at a double ideological remove from their white jailor-commanders. They fought for the regime and occasionally shared its priorities, but they also fought for themselves, and they fought their own savages, who often remained invisible or incredible to Britons.

The Andamanese themselves maneuvered between licit and illicit relationships with convicts, adopting contingent positions of alliance and animosity, intimacy and distance. They killed or captured runaways in exchange for rewards from the regime. They also appeared to distinguish between the agents and the victims of the penal colony, attacking the former and helping the latter. They were both discriminating and random, and this simultaneity – while not inconsistent with the normative 'treachery' of 'ignoble' savages⁶ – rendered them inscrutable and incoherent as a colonized population. Not surprisingly, Britons in the Andamans saw autonomous relations between convicts and aborigines as an ideological and political threat that had to be managed rhetorically when it could not be defeated. The article in *Chambers's Journal* should be read as one such exercise in political management.

"Adopted in Andamans" was not received without skepticism in its own time,⁷ but even M.V. Portman – the pre-eminent ethnologist-historian of the colonial Andamans – grudgingly acknowledged that Tewari was "not nearly such a liar as he was supposed to have been."⁸ Tewari's overlapping reputations as a hero, a liar, and a source were grounded not just in his status as an informant who saved the colony, but in what he did in the year when he went missing from the colony. He had gone where no Indian – or Briton, which was entirely significant – had apparently gone before. He is in some ways one of the first anthropologists of the Andamanese, but as Portman's half-amused, half-exasperated acceptance of the narrative indicates, he could not be accepted as such by contemporary Britons. He was ultimately a silly native who wanted a full-fledged wedding in the jungle; his observations were not ethnology but ethnological data, once they had been prodded with leading questions and filtered by editors.⁹ In spite of (and because of) his willingness to compare

Andamanese and Bengali wives, he was himself an object of ethnology. He was, simultaneously, a myth and a monster authored by others. F.J. Mouat, one of the first Britons to study the Andamanese "scientifically," compared Tewari with Munchausen and remarked that it would be "amusing to see the offspring of the giant Brahmin and the tiny Mincopie."¹⁰ Partially anticipating Portman's belief that children of Andamanese mothers and convict fathers were 'interesting scientifically,'¹¹ Mouat's comment indicates that the pleasures and anxieties of freakish discovery could be located within the science of convict-aborigine encounters, reassuringly appropriated by fantasists and scientists.

Yet if we cut Mouat, Munchausen and Portman out of the picture, there is still something left of Tewari. Once with the Andamanese, Tewari dresses as they do, eats as they do, reproduces with them. At the same time, he retains an outsider's perspective that can be separated from British perspectives. He is not Portman, not Kurtz, not even Kim. He resembles the fictitious and autobiographical "beachcombers" who sought, and failed, to establish relations of reciprocity with island natives,¹¹ but he is himself a native. He is highly conscious that he has left the colony behind, and constantly compares the colony and the jungle. He notices not only that his Andamanese captors, like his British captors, deny him access to weapons, but also that, unlike Britons, they do not force him to work. He understands that a new social and categorical possibility has opened for him: like the jailors in Port Blair, the Andamanese see marriage as a way of stabilizing the disorderly,¹² but the women they offer Tewari are their own daughters; they seek to transform captivity into adoption by integrating him into their society more closely than Britons were willing to contemplate. He is not entirely resistant but neither is he absorbed: he calculates his political odds, gambles and wins. He forms his own ideas of what his British interrogators will want to hear, what will titillate them, what numbers will impress them. His convict self, with its convict eye – informed by British, north-Indian-Brahmin and Andamanese inputs – has a tenacious reality of its own, which sees and configures savagery and colonialism for its own purposes, and which compels British listeners and readers into acts of compensation.

Tewari was only one of many convicts who lived among the islanders in the Andamans. His story is the first, and most detailed, of a particular genre of texts from the islands: the "captivity narrative" (which is also an escape narrative) of the convict among savages. Nearly all such narratives are mediated through Britons: typically, convicts who had escaped into the jungle or been captured by aborigines would return and tell their tales for British administrators and storytellers to rephrase. The lack of unambiguous authorship allows us to glimpse how a given experience of savagery could serve multiple agendas simultaneously. Partial, temporary integrations of Indian escapees into the aboriginal world

might be seen as phenomena in which the edge of a society functioned as a resource, an experimental space, an instrument of power and, inevitably, a problem of colonial governance.

Escape narratives in the Andamans were informed by a broad set of jungle myths that permeated convict society. In the 1850s and 1860s, convicts insisted that Great Andaman was connected by land to India or Burma; Tewari and other escapees went through the motions of searching for a route that led through the jungle to a world beyond the colony. Some convicts informed each other, and ultimately their jailors, that a powerful king ruled a hidden kingdom on the other side of the wall of trees; others placed this kingdom in the Cocos Islands.¹³ Sometimes the kingdom was conflated with Burma; at other times it was a separate magnet for escapees who, having once been sepoys, declared that they wanted to "take up service" with the unseen king.¹⁴ Convicts thus had their own geography of the Andamans, with its own tracks in the jungle leading to destinations and historical outcomes that were distinct from the roads and sightlines of the British imagination. Paul Carter has observed, in the Australian context, that convicts borrowed their jailors' visions of inside/outside to construct their fantasies of escape, and that these apparently irrational fantasies (of roads to China or Botany Bay) engaged and subverted the logic of the penal colony.¹⁵ In the Andamans, administrators worried that the expanding network of roads was not under their control, and that convicts walked out of the colony and into the jungle using the colony's own tracks.¹⁶ When Britons sought to defeat the aborigines and assert some control over the fantasy of escape (they could hardly control the escapees themselves), they also sought to defeat this alternative jungle and its horizon.

The convicts understood that this parallel jungle made sense only when it was full of savages. These alternative savages were a metaphor not only of terror, but also of resistance. The internal chatter of convict society that seeped into the colonial archive is full of references to secret villages inhabited by mixed communities of aborigines, runaways and maroons.¹⁷ Henry Corbyn, who created the Andaman Home, heard about sick and exhausted escapees taken by angelic aborigines to a huge camp in the recesses of Great Andaman, to be fed, medically treated, and released.¹⁸ A returned escapee named Boorhana told Walker about two dozen Indian and Afghan pilgrims, rescued by the Andamanese from a Turkish lifeboat, living with aborigines on Rutland Island.¹⁹ Unable to dismiss the story, Walker professed his inability to react: he lacked the resources for a military operation that might recover the maroons. Decades after the incident, Portman sought to reassert a shaken order by declaring that the story was obviously false, and that the Andamanese had assured him retrospectively that they would have "massacred" any Indians in that

situation.²⁰ He conceded, however, that the Andamanese had occasionally sheltered runaways “for a very short time,” and may have wanted to “make common cause” with them against the British.²¹

Walker's half-believing paralysis and Portman's fear of a “common cause” underline the value of the story to the convicts. Stories about Indians living amongst the Andamanese represent alternative social-racial orders that are within the geography of British colonialism and yet outside British authority. The mythical villages are experiments in which the premises and procedures have not been determined by Britons. The jungle is a transforming space: here, runaways pretend to be settlers, Indians fade contingently into the aboriginal world, mutineers become ethnologists.²² The Andamanese, imagined by Britons as indiscriminate killers and the scourge of the shipwrecked, make alarming appearances as rescuers and friends of Indians. Such discriminating savages, narrated by other discriminating natives, manipulate individual colonizers and subvert the values attached by the regime to race, savagery and experimentation.

Broadly speaking, British administrators as ideologically different as Walker and Portman were committed to a vision of permanent race-war in the Andamans. They believed that “the Andamanese” would inevitably clash with “the Indians,” and that Britons must manage the conflict, aligning strategically with one group or the other. The major difference between Walker and Portman on this issue is that Walker tended to align himself with Indians and Portman with the Andamanese. Otherwise, they shared an administrative outlook derived not only from colonialism in India, with its emphasis on the management of mutually hostile social compartments,²³ but also from precarious oppositions between savagery, an inferior (inexpert, unenlightened, criminalized, non-white) civilization, and a dominant civilization that monopolized the ability to strategize. It did not dismiss cooperation between convicts and aborigines, but restricted that possibility to the tame worlds of the penal colony and the Andaman Homes. The jungle, from this perspective, was wild not only because it was unsupervised and antithetical to the possibility of natives of different stripes working peacefully together, but also because sometimes they did in fact work (and eat, sleep, and strategize) together and lose their stripes in the process.

The colonial government understood that it was powerless to pre-empt these irruptions, and sought to come to terms with them. Superintendent J.C. Haughton was instructed by the Home Department in 1860 that, “convicts who have...lived with the aborigines, may be made the means of opening a more friendly intercourse with them.”²⁴ By taking this position, the regime impressed its own authority on processes – escape and return – that otherwise indicated its limitations. It insisted, in other words, on the prerogative of concession by conceding to savagery patches of space in

the jungle, and giving up considerable power to the convicts. The fragmentation of the savage in the jungle thus enabled the “friendly intercourse” between islanders and convicts that the Home Department chose to interpret as a sign of successful governance and Portman later associated with the ineptitude of colonial rule.

It is tempting, in the light of the evidence of “fellowship” in the jungle, to see convict-aboriginal relations as the solidarity of two colonized populations. It would not be a wild leap: Britons who sought to depoliticize the jungle (by insisting, for instance, that convicts obeyed aborigines only because the latter were terrifying) did so precisely because they saw a common cause. They knew that the Andamanese often appeared to liberate convicts working in the jungle, and that aborigines shot guards but so frequently spared chained prisoners that guards refused to wear badges or other signs of authority.²⁵ Nor would such solidarity be unique in the history of penal colonies established among aborigines.²⁶

Such possibilities must, however, be treated with skepticism in the Andamans. There was little consistency in the Andamanese treatment of convicts and guards, not least because the political distinction between convicts and guards was not always obvious in an environment where many guards were also convicts, and those in the vanguard of forest-clearing and settlement were also natives, prisoners and colonial subjects. Neither convicts nor their jailors had a fixed vision of the political identity of Indians in the islands, and aborigines could not be expected to read this identity predictably. Convicts contemplating escape could take nothing for granted.

Tewari’s double escape and subsequent pardon generated a small flurry of episodes in which returned runaways told the Port Blair authorities about impending attacks by aboriginal armies. The story that Boorhana told Walker is very similar to Tewari’s, except that the invasion force poised for “imminent” attack on Port Blair was given as five hundred canoes and a thousand aborigines.²⁷ The Andamanese may not have been able to “count beyond two,”²⁸ but that only indicated the importance of numbers to the political community of civilization, and convicts knew it. Just as the regime had an interest in constructing an ambiguously cannibalistic savage that would deter escape attempts, convicts discovered the savage as a military menace that might balance the power of the colony, generate political rewards and produce the pleasure of frightening the jailors. This was, in a sense, the cultivation of a particular mode of settler-colonial paranoia that could speak to (and manipulate) the anxieties of Britons like Walker, who behaved as if they stood between besieged colony and besieging jungle. The British retelling of Tewari’s story might be seen as an attempt to reassert confidence and control in anxious circumstances.

Notes:

- ¹ Dilip Kumar Chakraborti, *The Great Andamanese: Struggling for Survival* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1990), iii-iv; T.N. Pandit, *The Sentinelese* (Calcutta: Seagull, 1990), 4
- ² "Adopted in Andaman," *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature*, no. 325, March 24, 1860, 177-9. On Tewari's return to the Andamans in 1866, see Edward Belcher, "Notes on the Andaman Islands," *Ethnological Society Transactions*, New Series 5 (1866).
- ³ Satadru Sen, *Disciplining Punishment: Colonialism and Convict Society in the Andaman Islands* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), *passim*; 'Savage Bodies, Civilized Pleasures: M.V. Portman and the Andamanese,' *American Ethnologist* 36 (2009): 364-379.
- ⁴ Satadru Sen, 'Policing the Savage: Segregation, Labor and State Medicine in the Andamans,' *Journal of Asian Studies* 58(1999): 753-773.
- ⁵ On sepoy politics, see Heather Streets, *Martial Races* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 18-51; Michael Fisher, *The First Indian Author in English* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 122-4, 132-6.
- ⁶ Bernard Smith, *European Vision and the South Pacific* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 132-58; Ronald Meek, *Social Science and the Ignoble Savage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 3
- ⁷ E.H. Man believed that Tewari had concocted portions of his story. See his "On the Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Andaman Islands," *Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 12 (1883): 139-40.
- ⁸ M.V. Portman, *A History of Our Relations with the Andamanese* (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, 1899), 279.
- ⁹ "Doodnath...assured me that he could discover no trace of religious worship or the acknowledgment of any unseen power among them," one administrator noted. Home Department records, Government of India, National Archives, New Delhi (in subsequent references, HD records), March 27, 1863, 85
- ¹⁰ F.J. Mouat, *Adventures and Researches Among the Andaman Islanders* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1863), 299, 310. "Mincopie" was an early British term for the Andamanese.
- ¹¹ Report of the Superintendent of the Andaman Islands (RSAI), 1892-93, HD records.
- ¹² Rod Edmonds, *Representing the South Pacific: Colonial Discourse from Cook to Gauguin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 63
- ¹³ Satadru Sen, "Rationing Sex: Female Convicts in the Andamans," *South Asia*, 30 (1999): 29-59.
- ¹⁴ Henry Corbyn, Narrative No. 2, HD Records, 1863.
- ¹⁵ Walker to Home Department, April 1858, HD Records, 1858.
- ¹⁶ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 293-319
- ¹⁷ RSAI, 1882-83.
- ¹⁸ RSAI, 1859-60.
- ¹⁹ Corbyn, Narrative No. 3, HD records, 1864.
- ²⁰ RSAI, 1858-59.
- ²¹ Portman, 288.
- ²² *Ibid*, 294.
- ²³ RSAI, 1875-76.
- ²⁴ Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 113-59.
- ²⁵ Government of India to Houghton, January 3, 1860, HD records 1860, 436.
- ²⁶ Portman, 276-8.
- ²⁷ Alice Bullard, *Exile To Paradise: Savagery and Civilization in Paris and the South Pacific* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 201-3.
- ²⁸ RSAI, 1858-59.
- ²⁹ Portman, 40; Maulana Jafar Thanasari, *Kalapani* (Delhi: Urdu Markaz, 1964), 64.