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Settler Memory and Islanding: An Archipelagic Perspective

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Settler Memory and Islanding: An Archipelagic Perspective[1]

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Abstract

The post-independence history of the Andaman Islands is shaped by the Indian State's 'colonization' and 'rehabilitation' policies, which among other mainland populations, settled a large number of Bengali refugees and migrants of the Partition in the Islands. During this period, the Indian state took active measures to alter the notion of 'remoteness' attached to the Andaman Islands and consciously promoted the 'integration' of the islands with the mainland through socio-cultural and infrastructural mediation. Transportation of mainland communities to the islands played a key role in implementing this agenda. In combination of the colonization and the rehabilitation scheme, a total of 3695 Bengali refugee families were settled in the Islands, with the rehabilitation scheme accounting for 803 Bengali, 45 Burmese, 72 Sri Lankan, and 330 ex-servicemen families settled across the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The current paper focuses on the first- and second-generation settlers' memory of this process of settling the islands, that is, 'islanding'. The paper will demonstrate with three accounts, between the early 1960s to the 1970s, the inter-connected histories of settlement across the islands which prioritises an archipelagic understanding of its making over an islanded one. In weaving together these events, the paper highlights two key concepts— first, settler memory, and second, the process of islanding or making of the island settlements—to reflect on the role of the state's rehabilitation policy in producing the Andamans' post-colonial island-scape that underwent massive changes from the 1960s to the early 1980s. By putting into conversation the state's archive with field-based interactions, the paper brings out the complex network of settler-state interactions across the settlement locations, the slipperiness of memory encountered in piecing together a history of settlement, and finally, rapidly altering settler geographies in the face of developmental changes from 'terra nullius' to agricultural settlement to coveted tourism destination.

Keywords: Andaman Islands, islanding, Island Studies, Partition, refugee, rehabilitation, memory

[1] This paper is a revised version of the public lecture delivered at PMML, New Delhi on 4 April 2024.

Introduction

The period between the early 1960s to the early 1970s was one of great movement—both mainland-island, as well as, inter-island—in the Bay of Bengal region. Schemes for promoting agriculture in the war-ravaged Andaman Islands and building a self-sustaining colony in the geopolitically sensitive Bay of Bengal region had begun soon after India's independence. Most notable among these efforts was the 'colonization scheme' between 1949-60 that was led by the central government's relief and rehabilitation department and the government of West Bengal in the South, Middle and North Andaman. The scheme, however, had not been successful in inducting settler families of diverse occupational backgrounds from the mainland, and the pace of clearance of forested land for cultivation work, too, fell short of projected estimates (Dhingra, 2005, p. 83). Further, growing geopolitical concerns in the aftermath of the Sino-Indian War of 1962 led to serious deliberations over the nature of development required to fortify this 'bordersea' (Bhattacharya & Lorea, 2020) region. It was under these circumstances that a 'bolder plan' (Dhingra, 2005, p. 90) was proposed for the integrated and accelerated development of the Andaman Islands. Consequently, the new 'rehabilitation scheme' (1965-80) led to the settlement of mainland populations in the Andaman Islands, particularly 803 Bengali, 45 Burmese, 72 Sri Lankan, and 330 ex-servicemen families across the archipelago (Dhingra, 2005, p. 99). On the one hand, these statist interventions were aimed at 'integrating' these 'remote' islands with the mainland Indian territory (Banerjee, 2024b). On the other hand, simultaneous attempts were also being made by the transported population to integrate themselves in the island settlements (Banerjee, 2024b). The current paper focuses on the first- and second-generation Bengali settlers' memories of 'islanding'[2] (Teaiwa, 2007; McCusker and Soares, 2011; Baldacchino and Clark, 2013; Pigou-Dennis and Grydehoj, 2014; Larjosto, 2020), that is, the process of settling themselves on the islands and consequently settling the islands. It contributes to the existing literature on refugee-turned-settlers' memory (Sen, 2011, 2017, 2018; Zehmisch, 2018) in the Andaman Islands by foregrounding the interwoven nature of settler-state interaction that informs the early settlers' memory-making.

[2] 'If islandness is a particular state or condition of being, there is a corresponding action in islanding. We propose island as a verb, islanding as an action. … We need this verb to critique hackneyed notions and flashy brandings of islands …' (Baldacchino and Clark, 2013, p. 129); 'By adding the verb to island, islanding, to our theoretical instruments, we are better equipped to maintain perspectives on islands as historical processes of 'weaves of existence', as currently ongoing and commonly contested processes of creation and becoming, with largely indeterminate futures.' (Baldacchino and Clark, 2013, p. 130)

Islanding, then, is a consequence of this interfacing—sometimes collaborative but often contested—between the settlers and the island administration.

The paper demonstrates with three accounts the inter-connected histories of settlement across the islands, which prioritises an archipelagic understanding over an islanded one. It draws from both archival material, chiefly collected from the Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archive in Port Blair as well as field-based interviews across the islands. The first section titled 'Mainland to Port Blair', introduces the case of an educated Bengali couple's arrival to the islands in 1961, due to the woman's employment as stenographer with the ministry of rehabilitation and the setting up of a photography studio by her husband. The second section titled 'Agitating Settlers of Diglipur', presents the case of a settler woman who had organised a hunger-strike in Diglipur, North Andaman in 1968, inquiry into which opens up the possibility of studying the archive-field interface around the event. The third section titled 'Making an Outlying Island Settlement', takes up the settlement of Neil Island (now Shaheed Dweep) where a similar unrest was brewing in 1969, followed by the history of establishing Neil as a model settlement and a successful example of tourism economy in the Andamans. The final section titled 'Un-settling the Onges of Little Andaman', turns to the remotest inhabited island in the Andamans, namely Little Andaman, where a Bengali photographer's lens preserved the indigenous Onge way of life in the face of expanding settlements in the 1970s. The key objective in presenting these interconnected histories is to capture the multiple, intersecting, and connected flows of human migration and settlement altering the islandscape in the 1960s to the 1970s, during which mainland populations settled in the islands and the island's indigenous population was 'unsettled' into designated reserves.

Mainland to Port Blair

Sabita Sanyal and Pramatha Kishore Sanyal arrived in Port Blair in the year 1961.[3] A graduate of Ashutosh College in Calcutta, Mrs. Sabita Sanyal was working as a stenographer in the Ministry of Rehabilitation when she was offered a transfer to either Delhi or to Port Blair. Sabita Sanyal had a relative in Andaman—an uncle who owned a coconut and arecanut plantation in North Bay—and this became a deciding factor in her choosing Port Blair over Delhi for the transfer. A substantial increment was given to entice her into this so-called remote

[3] Interview with Abhijit Sanyal, Aberdeen Bazar, Port Blair, 15 January 2024 and 20 January 2024. Parts of this interview has been published online at Essay: The Memory-Keeper of Port Blair by Raka Banerjee - KITAAB.

posting. Her husband Pramatha Kishore Sanyal was trained in photography and cinematography from the iconic Bourne & Shepherd studio in Calcutta. Bourne and Shepherd, established in 1863, is considered to be the world's oldest photography studio, which closed down recently in 2016 after a devastating fire (Mukherjee, 2016). He worked as an assistant cameraman with directors like Asit Sen in the Bengali film industry, and was a licensed cameraman with the West Bengal government. After arriving at the islands, Sanyal had to find work for himself. He decided to open a photography studio in Port Blair. Now, setting up a photography studio in an island cut-off from the mainland by at least 1400 kilometres was a challenging task. He rented a shop space on the ground floor of 'Ratanam Niwas', owned by the family of K.R. Ganesh, the first nominated Member of Parliament from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (1967). Studio equipment had to be shipped from the mainland, which took months to arrive. When he could not manage to find a photographic enlarger, he had to create a homemade device with whatever was at hand. According to his son Abhijit Sanyal, 'He had the condenser and lens but he did not have the box, so he used a Parag powder milk tin instead to create a makeshift enlarger.' His ingenuity was not limited to photography alone; in fact he even tried his hand at carpentry during the making of the studio. Finally, "Memory Studio" was established by Pramatha Kishore Sanyal in 1962. At present, the studio occupies a small section in the ground floor of an obviously old wooden building. The first floor of the building had long been abandoned. The studio itself is a fairly well-maintained setup with a small reception desk and photography area in one room, another room for the computer-printer-photocopier system, and a small room at the back for miscellaneous storage purposes. Pramatha Kishore Sanyal's younger son, Abhijit Sanyal, is the current and perhaps the last proprietor of the studio.

In course of conducting the current research, I had come across the name "Memory Studio" on small paper envelopes carrying passport size photos of island residents preserved in the official files of the Secretariat archive in Port Blair. The studio also used to have a collection of photographs from the 1950s and 60s when large numbers of refugees of the Bengal Partition were being resettled in the Andaman Islands. Most of these images were taken for administrative documentation depicting a range of activities undertaken by the rehabilitation, forest, agriculture, and public works departments in the newly established island settlements. An academic based in the island had shared softcopies of such images from Neil Island that showed refugee-turned-settler families deboarding LCT (light cargo transport) ships near a temporary wooden jetty. The series also contained a few images (provided in the section titled 'Making an Outlying Island Settlement') of freshly erected barrack-like structures to house

these incoming families as well as images of deforested plots of land where these families were to be eventually settled.

Most mainland Bengali women arriving to the islands during this period came as "attached women", that is, women who were attached to the male head of the household seeking rehabilitation benefits from the state unlike Sabita Sanyal, who arrived to the islands, during the same period, as a government employee with her husband as the dependent family member and who belonged to a very different socio-economic background (Banerjee, 2023). The dominant discourse has constructed settlement as a masculine prerogative and man as the 'settler' prototype. So, the archival evidence of one Smt. Sarojini Samaddar observing a hunger strike in Diglipur of North Andaman, stood out even more starkly.

Agitating Settlers of Diglipur

This account[4] is from 1968, wherein a female settler began a hunger-strike protesting the collection of loans given to families settled under the colonization scheme (1952-1961). The protest began with the objective to pressurize the administration into writing off colonization loans. Settlers of the colonization scheme had received a loan of Rs. 1730 per family (house building loan of Rs. 800, Rs. 700 for purchase of plough animals, cost of utensils, seeds and manure adding up to Rs. 230), at 4.5% interest, recoverable in ten annual instalments. However, the administration found it difficult to recover these loan amounts from the settlers. The task of settlement and agricultural expansion could not move at the pace anticipated by the administration. Settlers struggled to grow crops, sell them at profitable margins and squirrel away the extra money to repay these loans. Further, the first few batches of settlers were given these amounts not as loans but as initial capital for settling in the islands. These factors constrained the new settlers' ability to repay the colonization loans as expected by the administration. Under these circumstances, a settlers' agitation which can easily be considered historic due to a settler woman's pioneering role in leading the agitation, began in Diglipur, North Andaman.

Correspondence[5] between the Deputy Commissioner and the Chief Commissioner of Andaman and Nicobar Islands informs Smt. Sarojini Samaddar and Sasidhar Mondal began a hunger

[4] Parts of this account have been published online at https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol25/iss1/9.
[5] File No.: 15-52/68-J(1). Subject: Agitation by settlers at Diglipur to write off colonisation loan. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue Section. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair.

strike on 25 May 1968, after the Tahsildar of Mayabundar attached a settler's property in Kishorinagar village and settler processions were being taken out daily to press for their demand to release the land. All revenue officers were issued instructions not to resort to coercive measures like attachment or sale of movable and immovable settler property for recovery of government dues. While the settler's property was immediately released, a group of 42 settlers including a former member of the Home Minister's Advisory Committee (Shri Bipad Bhanjan Biswas) observed a token hunger strike on 17 May 1968, and began building the base for a prolonged agitation to write off the colonization loans. MP K.R. Ganesh asked the leaders to call off the strike and the local administration advised the agitators to 'go back and start cultivation'. However, following a public meeting on June 8, they resolved to picket government offices if their demands were not met within the next few days. They even left their ploughs in front of the B.D.O.'s office as an indication of their resolve. From 25 May to 10 June the peaceful protests carried on without the administration yielding to the settlers' demands. It was reported to the Chief Commissioner that Horlicks, barley, water, lemons and lime juice were noticed in the hunger strikers' pandal. They were also seen eating thin arrowroot biscuits and were being taken to attend the call of nature. This further led the local administration to believe that they might have been taking also milk surreptitiously. Moreover, the letter begrudged the hunger-strikers' 'satisfactorily healthy condition' indicating it was not a 'hunger'-strike at all. Yet another correspondence notes the agitation a 'political stunt'. The letter stresses on the hunger-strikers' normal health condition and details of their alleged food consumption, to anchor the image of the settlers as 'troublemakers' and inauthentic, conniving persons looking to con the administration for resources and facilities. The administration believed the settlers were 'reluctant' to repay the loans, implying their financial capability to repay the loans but their assumed unwillingness to do so. The inability of the settlers was painted by the administration as premeditated reluctance, highlighting the innate mistrust between the two.

Eventually the agitation and the hunger strike were called off on 10 June 1968, after the island administration decided to write off the settlers' debts. Correspondence from the file further notes that while the 'ill-advised' agitation was allegedly being conducted on 'no party lines', it was being supported by the Secretary (Suresh Haldar) of the Revolutionary Communist Party of India, in addition to (Ramesh Mazumdar of Diglipur) and 'some Congress men' in their 'individual capacity'. Eager to quarantine the island settlements from the refugee militancy of Bengal, the island administration took active steps to prevent the rise of 'self-appointed

leaders'[6]. The recurring need to produce the island space as 'non-political' – in the vein of promoting anti-factionalism and strengthening its diversity as resource – feeds into the idea that politically oriented settlers are undesirable and 'trouble-makers' as was the case in the mainland. In his book, the island-based academic Swapan Biswas[7] (2009, p. 51) mentions how two 'ring-leaders' were sent back to the mainland presumably for protesting upon arrival in the Islands, reaffirming the need to produce the Islands as a 'sanitized' space that could be socially engineered to become a 'mini-India' (Zehmisch, 2017).

Instances of such overt resistance are rare therefore, in an attempt to trace Sarojini Samaddar's family in Diglipur, I contacted several second-generation settlers including late MP Manoranjan Bhakta's associate Nagen Halder. As a Congress party worker, and later a member of the Home Minister's Advisory Committee, he played a key role in negotiating the pardon of the settlers' loans. Now in his 80s, he was at the forefront of these protests and strikes, but failed to recollect any Sarojini Samaddar or Sasidhar Mondal ever having participated in their protests, let alone conduct one in a leadership position.[8] Nagen Halder mentioned there were other sporadic and smaller protests across the villages of Diglipur, and mused that these settlers could have been part of such protests. Others like Dwijen Sarkar,[9] who was a young boy at the time of the protests, recalled one Sasidhar Mondal who passed away a few years back. But he too could not tell me who Sarojini Samaddar was. However, he ventured an interesting guess that during the strikes government officials must have spoken to only a few people at the gathering and someone or the other may have supplied a fictitious name. And since multiple gatherings were taking place the name could have been given to divert attention from (or to protect) the 'real (male) leaders'. A Port Blair-based artist who was born and brought up in Diglipur revealed on condition of anonymity that settlers were aware of the clause to repay the loan and they had in fact agreed to it in the beginning. Later, they were incited to refuse repayment by local leaders who were looking to establish themselves as political representatives. He further claimed, there were even provisions for later generations of settlers to receive land from the administration. But the largely unlettered settlers were not appropriately counselled by those self-appointed leaders and thus failed to claim this additional land to the tune of 7 *bighas* from the administration. When settlers began their hasty agitation

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[6] File No. 1-723/50. Subject: Rehabilitation Scheme for Settlers from Bengal. Subject list: Judicial/Revenue. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archive, Port Blair.

[7] Currently an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science, Mahatma Gandhi Govt. College, Mayabunder, North Andaman.

[8] Interview with Nagen Halder, Subhashgram, Diglipur, 7 January 2023.

[9] Interview with Dwijen Sarkar, Deshbandhugram, Madhupur, Diglipur, 6 January 2023.

to stop the repayment of loans, the administration too backtracked on their promise of allotting land to future generations. According to him, "settlers used their cunning to beat the government but ended up losing in the long run." Irrespective of the veracity of this claim, local NGOs have attempted to trace this provision in the island's land reforms act through RTIs, but to no avail.

This episode highlights the slipperiness of public memory in the face of evidence provided by the state's archival memory. It is also significant on another more practical aspect, that is, this case of the Diglipur settlers provided all other Bengali settlers across the island's settlements with a model of protest to get their loans revoked. During the same timeframe, protests became a regular feature in the settlements and the administration had to adapt various strategies in dealing with the settlers in order to effectively quell such events. The settlement of Neil Island is one such example.

Making an Outlying Island Settlement

At the beginning of the 'rehabilitation scheme', Neil[10] Island was used to provide transit accommodation to the refugee families before they could be sent to their respective settlements (Biswas, 2009, p. 66). The Bengali settlers who eventually settled in Neil arrived in two batches—in 1967 and one in 1969. A 1968 survey by the ministry of rehabilitation estimated on the possibility of clearing 525 acres of flat land for paddy cultivation which could sustain 175 cultivator families at the rate of 1.2 hectare of paddy land and 0.8 hectare of plantation land per family (Roychowdhury, 2011, p. 251). However, this appeared to be an inflated estimate and the number of settler families far outweighed the land available. Further, the land in Neil was rocky and flat land was limited, as a result, settlers arriving from riverine regions of Khulna, Faridpur, Barishal and Comilla in East Pakistan, declared the land unsuitable for paddy cultivation.

[10] Neil Island has no recorded history of habitation prior to the arrival of the settlers. Neil is situated 36 kilometres north-east of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands' capital city Port Blair. The island's total area is about nineteen square kilometres of which 34 per cent is forested. The widest part of the otherwise narrow and long island is about five kilometres wide. Over seventy per cent of the island's land, about 850 hectares, is used for agriculture. Neil Kendra, the entry point to the island, is its commercial centre with one-third of the island's population – 3,040 according to the 2011 census – residing in that particular revenue village, followed by Ramnagar and Bharatpur. Seventy-eight per cent of the island's population is concentrated in these three settlements.

In a memorandum[11] in October 1969, addressed to the Members of Parliament visiting the island, the 'settlers of Neil Island' furnished evidences of discriminatory policies of the rehabilitation scheme that they were faced with. Unlike the earlier settlers who received 5 acres of paddy land and 5 acres of hilly land, Neil settlers received not only significantly smaller land-holdings but also faced arbitrary allotment of land while some settlers benefited over others. In their 12-point memorandum, the settlers also stressed that they should not be used as "PWD labour and Forest labour", as, they were brought to the islands to become cultivators. They even cited the case of Campbell Bay in Nicobar where ex-servicemen were settled by the state,[12] stressing on the differential treatment meted out to ordinary settlers of a refugee background. The use of Campbell Bay, a part of Nicobar district, as a point of reference indicates the settlers' awareness of rehabilitation benefits allotted to migrants elsewhere in the archipelago and challenges the notion that living on an outlying island meant complete isolation. Apart from illuminating the plight of Neil's settlers, the joint appeal also indicates a more collectivised approach on the settlers' part, addressing their grievances directly to the visiting MPs instead of appealing to the island administration, and finally, resorting to constitutional forms of protest. As a result of the settlers' continued appeals to the administration, it was decided in 1972 that 48 settler families from Neil will be allowed to shift to Little Andaman for settlement. The remaining 98 settler families were allotted 5 acres of flat land and 5 acres of hilly land in Neil.

[11] File No. 8-15/70RH. Subject: Settlement of families in Neil Island. Subject list: Rehabilitation Department. Andaman and Nicobar Secretariat Archives, Port Blair.

[12] "people who have been brought after us at Campbell Bay for settlement are getting 20 kg ration whereas we are getting only 4kg 800 gms. Without any subsidised rate. For a number of families less than 50 at Campbell Bay they have by now got a 20 beds hospital, middle school with two trained senior teachers, cent per cent free ration for the first year, 75% free ration for the second year and 50% free ration for the third year where as others do not have any such facilities."

Figure 1: Newly arriving settlers onboard the LCT near Neil's temporary jetty. (Image shared by the island-based academic Dr. Swapan K. Biswas)

Figure 2: Deforestation for extraction of commercial timber and clearing lands for cultivation work in Neil Island. (Image shared by the island-based academic Dr. Swapan K. Biswas)

Figure 3: Temporary shelter for incoming settlers in Neil Island. (Image shared by the island-based academic Dr. Swapan K. Biswas)

The settlers' early years were marked by acute scarcity of all manner of resources. The ship took seven days to reach Neil from the mainland port in Calcutta. As there was no jetty, the transportees disembarked onto smaller boats to reach the island's shore. The island had a thick forest cover with only a handful of temporary shelters for the incoming settlers and offices for departments concerned with settling the island. Sukhen Haldar[13] recalls, since Rathin Nag was a 'senior' and sort of a 'leader', settlers would form a group and walk with him some two kilometres from camp No. 1 (Lakshmanpur) to the place where the jetty stands today, to collect their weekly ration from the supply godown. Rathin Nag would lead with a stick in one hand and a torch in another, instructing them to hide behind tree trunks if any elephants were spotted. Interestingly, these elephants were brought from the mainland to drag felled tree trunks and timber, thus introducing exotic elements to the island's ecology. The island received heavy rainfall for a better part of the year. The sun would not come out for months on end. Swapna Boral[14] remembers these early days of settlement—the lands were densely forested and infested with mosquitoes, snakes and giant centipedes! Chitra Das's[15] husband used to work as 'labour',

[13] Interview with Sutapa Haldar and Sukhen Haldar, Bharatpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.
[14] Interview with Swapna Boral, Ram Nagar, Neil Island, 25 January 2019.
[15] Interview with Chitra Das, Lakshmanpur, Neil Island, 26 January 2019.

that is, a menial worker, under the Forest Department. She recalled, 'one of the Forest Department staff died after a tree trunk fell on him, his bones were crushed so badly he had to be bundled up with leaves and taken away'. 'The sturdy trunks couldn't be struck down with axes, besides we wouldn't know which way they would fall! People have even died due to such incidents!', recalled Rathin Nag,[16] who worked as 'labour' himself. Settlers often got lost in the forests and had to be rescued by Forest Department officials. Settler children would help their cultivator parents carry headloads of vegetables and paddy to and from the market, while also attending school as first-generation learners. The boat service from Port Blair would bring provisions once a month (and later every fifteen days). In the meantime, the settler women boiled seawater to make salt, prepared meals out of boiled papayas and foraged the jungle to make ends meet. Even the clothes on their backs were provided by the government, reminds Anita Pal[17] – 'the government gave us two pairs of blouses, petticoats and sarees upon arrival, but how long can it last! Sometimes, we could only drape the saree around us, without any blouses or petticoats.'[18] 'We cleared the forests, built our own house and now we are firmly placed here', she asserted, echoing most first-generation settlers. The settlers' interaction with the island's unfamiliar ecology went hand in hand with their constant negotiation with scarcity. Their stories of these early years highlight the community's hardships in creating a familiar landscape especially through cultivation work. Their narratives of struggle, therefore, are both narratives of adaptation as well as 'islanding'.

Eventually, Neil came to be locally known as the 'vegetable bowl' of Andaman ((Zehmisch, 2018, p. 72), catering to over 75 per cent of the island's food supply.[19] Tomatoes, drumsticks and papayas grew particularly well. However, the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami gravely impacted the archipelago, and led to an increase in groundwater salinity which adversely affected Neil's soil productivity.[20] This altered nature of the island's once-fertile soil is a recurring theme in interactions with the settlers. In her research Deol (2021, p. 215) notes, 'farmers noticed a decrease in yield due to changes in wind patterns and the presence of "salty air" in the fields'. In addition to untimely rain, overuse of pesticides to counter pest infestations, and a shift to organic cultivation without adequate support mechanisms have significantly decreased Neil's agricultural output. This has resulted in increased reliance on livestock-rearing and poultry

[16] Interview with Rathin Nag, Ram Nagar, Neil Island, 25 January 2019.
[17] Interview with Anita Pal, Lakshmanpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.
[18] Interview with Swapna Boral, Ram Nagar, Neil Island, 25 January 2019.
[19] Interview with Sukhen Haldar, Bharatpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.
[20] Interview with Anita Pal, Lakshmanpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.

farming. While the first-generation settlers note this loss of the 'soil's power'[21], many agree that it is not just the soil that has lost its previous robustness, but also the people of the island.[22] Tourism is held responsible for altering the 'hard-working' nature of the settlers and making younger generations 'lazier' and more reliant on 'easy' income.[23]

In a perverse turn of events, both domestic and international tourism started to flourish in the Islands, particularly in Neil and nearby Havelock, after the archipelago gained global attention following the devastating tsunami (Amrith, 2013, p. 10; Abraham, 2018, p. 3). Contrasting Neil's contemporary prosperity and connectedness (via airways and waterways) with the initial days of struggle, Anita Pal commented, 'there wasn't even one bicycle on Neil back then!'[24] The expansion of the tourism industry has resulted in a shift of the islanders' occupational pattern from the traditional agricultural economy and cultivation work to the tourism sector (Andaman and Nicobar Administration, 2014). There is an acute shortage of wage labourers as most locals choose to find employment in tourism and related industries. Higher daily wages in comparison to the mainland attract a lot of migrants, especially from the Sundarbans region of West Bengal, to the island. Sukhen Haldar,[25] who was about ten years old when he came to the island with his family, narrates the process of settling with respect to the current spatial organisation of the island's streets and landmarks: "Neil isn't quite a village, like you must have noticed while coming from the jetty to the market, the streets are lined with vehicles, tourists and a constant flow of population. Our camp was in No.1, where the Tango Resort stands today. Our allotment initially was elsewhere, but that land was sandy and rocky, not suitable for agriculture. So, we left those lands but those lands are now selling for crores! All because of tourism. The 'withouts'[26] came at least fifteen years after we did and encroached on these lands. They are much richer than us now! They have huge hotels and businesses now – Tango Hotel, Neha Palace etc."[27]

In narrating their pasts, first- and second-generation settlers choose to privilege one spatial map of the island—that is, the original settler geography drawing from their memory—over another.

[21] Interview with Sukhen Haldar, Bharatpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.; Interview with Bimala Saha, Bharatpur, Neil Island, 25 January 2019.
[22] Interview with Anita Pal, Lakshmanpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.
[23] Interview with Bimala Saha, Bharatpur, Neil Island, 25 January 2019; Interview with Sukhen Haldar, Bharatpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.
[24] Interview with Anita Pal, Lakshmanpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.
[25] Interview with Sutapa Haldar and Sukhen Haldar, Bharatpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.
[26] A local term for migrants from the mainland who arrived to the islands on their own accord and 'without' assistance from the state, as opposed to the settlers under the 'colonisation' and 'rehabilitation' schemes.
[27] Interview with Sukhen Haldar, Bharatpur, Neil Island, 24 January 2019.

Settler memory reveals layered geographies—one that settlers built in order to 'settle' on the island, another that is being produced as a result of contemporary changes, and the transitional space between these that make the island a palimpsest which the early settlers navigate in narrating their histories of islanding (Banerjee, 2024a). Looking back to the time of his arrival to the island in 1967, Rathin Nag[28] shared, 'to this day you will find a tree stump on my land from that time', reminding us of the palimpsest nature of the island's geography.

Un-settling the Onges of Little Andaman

Situated roughly 70 kms southwards of Port Blair, Little Andaman tehsil is the southernmost outlying part of the South Andaman district and the remotest inhabited island (Venkateswar,2004, p. 15).[29]The island is mostly flat with a small hilly section in the north and has a few perennial streams (Venkateswar, 2004, p. 15). Little Andaman was considered particularly well-suited to paddy cultivation due to its predominantly flat terrain and existence of perennial streams.[30] The Inter-Departmental Team recommended the clearance of a net area of 60,000 acres for agriculture and plantation work, as well as the expansion of forest operations in vein with Great Andamans.[31] Settlement under the rehabilitation scheme (1965-80) took place in Little Andaman between 1968 and 1974. During this time a total of 366 Bengali families were settled in primarily four villages: Netaji Nagar (48 families), R.K. Puram (291 families, including both Bengali and Tamil families), Rabindra Nagar (28 families), Vivekananda Puram (99 families) (Biswas, 2009, p. 88). The other village of Hut Bay is the island's largest settlement and harbour. In addition to the Bengali settlers, the scheme also settled 8 Burmese families and 25 Sri Lankan families in Little Andaman (Dhingra, 2005,p. 99). The entire settlement area comprised of 2677 acres (Dhingra, 2005, p. 99; Biswas, 2009, p. 90). Later, 165 tribal Nicobarese families from Car Nicobar were settled in Harmander Bay for plantation work and 95 Moplah families were also shifted from South Andaman to Little Andaman (Biswas, 2009, pp. 90-91). In addition to agriculture, incoming settlers were trained

[28] Interview with Rathin Nag, Ram Nagar, Neil Island, 25 January 2019.

[29] The island is 44 kilometer in length and varies between 16 kilometer to 25 kilometer in breadth (Venkateswar,2004, p. 15). The island has a geographical area of 731.60 square kilometer with a revenue area of 34.34 square kilometre. According to the census of 2011, the island had a male population of 9964 and a female population of 8859.

[30] File No. 45-13/72-J(1), Subject: Recovery of colonisation loan. Subject lists Judicial/Revenue, Andaman and Nicobar Islands Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair. 'Department of Rehabilitation, Notes on Special Areas Development Programme and rehabilitation activities in A&N Islands.

[31] Report by the Inter-Departmental Team on Accelerated Development Programme for Andaman and Nicobar Islands, 1965, Ministry of Rehabilitation, Government of India, pp. 66.

in forest operations in order to fully 'exploit' the abundant natural resources of the island.[32] Moreover, a rubber research-and-development station covering 500 acres was opened in 1965 to promote the cultivation of rubber, wherein 37 repatriate families from Burma were employed.[33] In Little Andaman, the settlers received 5 acres of cultivable land; 1/3 acres of homestead plot; house-building loans amounting to Rs.2000-3000; loan of Rs.800 for buying plough animals; loan of Rs.1500 for purchase of seeds, fertilisers and pesticides; loan of Rs.1200 for paddy bunding and soil conservation; and finally, loan of Rs.200 for installing homestead wells.[34]

Unlike Neil, Little Andaman was already inhabited by the indigenous Onge people prior to transportation of mainland populations under the scheme of rehabilitation. The Onges are one of the last surviving hunter-gatherer populations of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, The Indian state's desire to gather knowledge of the Onges began with the establishment of a sub-regional office of the Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) in Port Blair in 1952, which would regularly send research teams to Little Andaman (Venkateswar, 2004, p. 127). According to Venkateswar (2004, p. 128), this was the inception of plans for colonising the Little Andaman island and confining the Onges to circumscribed areas within the island. The coast-dwelling Onge people were able to continue with their 'hunting-gathering-fishing way of life' till the mid-sixties, when programmes for 'developing' the island were announced and mainland populations started being transported to the island (Venkateswar, 2004, p. 14). Venkateswar (2004, p. 129) notes, much of these developmental activities from the mid-sixties to the late-seventies—namely, clearing 30,000 hectares of forest for settler villages; commercial exploitation of forests under the Andaman and Nicobar Forest and Plantation Development Corporation (ANFPDC); extraction of timber by private traders and illegal logging—took place at the expense of the Onge people's way of life. In addition to deforestation for the construction of roads, public offices, private industries, a harbour, a sub-naval base, an agricultural farm, and a helipad, the introduction of red oil palm plantations further pushed the Onge to the fringes of the island (Venkateswar, 2004, p. 129).

[32] File No. 45-13/72-J(1), Subject: Recovery of colonisation loan. Subject lists Judicial/Revenue, Andaman and Nicobar Islands Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair. 'Department of Rehabilitation, Notes on Special Areas Development Programme and rehabilitation activities in A&N Islands.

[33] File No. 45-13/72-J(1), Subject: Recovery of colonisation loan. Subject lists Judicial/Revenue, Andaman and Nicobar Islands Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair. 'Department of Rehabilitation, Notes on Special Areas Development Programme and rehabilitation activities in A&N Islands.

[34] File No. 45-13/72-J(1), Subject: Recovery of colonisation loan. Subject lists Judicial/Revenue, Andaman and Nicobar Islands Archives, Secretariat, Port Blair. 'Department of Rehabilitation, Notes on Special Areas Development Programme and rehabilitation activities in A&N Islands.

This brings us back to Pramatha Kishore Sanyal the photographer whom we encountered at the beginning of this paper. The then Chief Commissioner, who according to Abhijit Sanyal had an interest in anthropology, approached Pramatha Kishore Sanyal with a proposition to photograph the indigenous Onge, Shompen and Great Andamanese people in their habitats. Before leaving on this several months-long tour, Sanyal had to provide a written declaration to the island administration stating his individual interest and assuming individual risk in undertaking this task, relieving the administration of any obligation in case of any risk to his person. During this tour, which, Abhijit Sanyal recalls, lasted for over two months, his father spent several weeks in at least three locations: Onge settlements in South Bay, Little Andaman; Shompen settlements in Great Nicobar; and Great Andamanese settlements in Strait Islands. He spent weeks living with each indigenous community, eating the food they ate and accompanying them in the work they did. From the photographs shown to me by Abhijit Sanyal, his father spent a considerable time with the Onges of Little Andaman. The collection shows several photographs of wild pigs being roasted on an open fire, along with bountiful catches of sea fish and pandanus fruit. Of all the presents Sanyal carried with him in order to 'befriend' the indigenous people, tobacco seems to be the most favoured, making appearances in multiple photographs being consumed in a variety of ways including being smoked in a homemade 'pipe' fashioned out of crab legs. In addition to showcasing the unfamiliar practices of the archipelago's indigenous people, these images invite us to contemplate the ethical implications of photographing and projecting them as civilizations' others.

Figure 4: Onge couple with items carried by Pramatha Kishore Sanyal. (Image from Abhijit Sanyal's collection)

Figure 5: Wild pig being roasted. (Image from Abhijit Sanyal's collection)

Figure 6: Young Onge man with a fresh catch. (Image from Abijit Sanyal's collection)

Figure 7: Onge woman carrying Pandanus fruit. (Image from Abhijit Sanyal's collection)

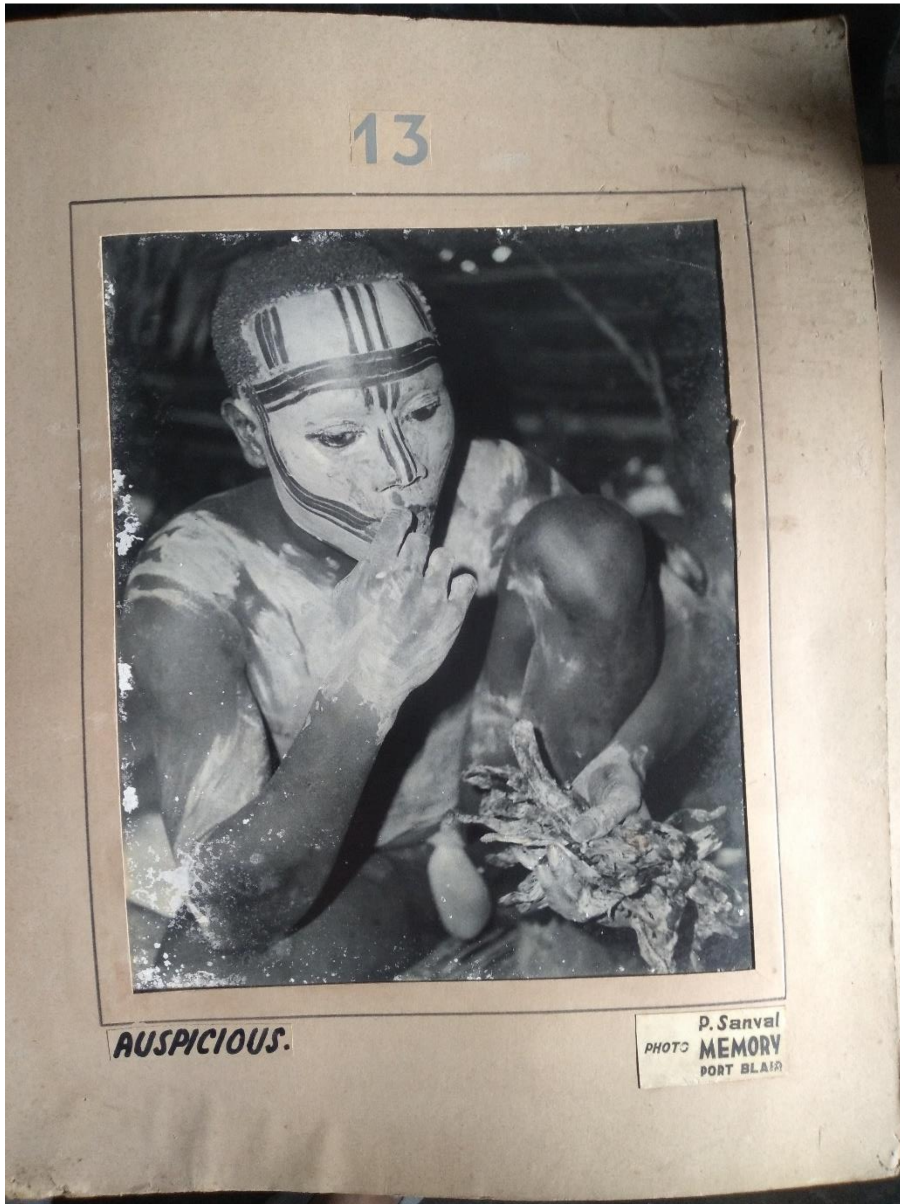

Figure 8: Onge man chewing tobacco. (Image from Abhijit Sanyal's collection)

Figure 9: Onge woman smoking tobacco from a pipe fashioned out of crab shell. (Image from Abhijit Sanyal's collection)

The community originally lived in the Hut Bay area where there was an abundance of freshwater (Tripathi, 2018, p. 76). The developmental activities and resettlement plans were implemented right in the middle of the Onge inhabited area. Over the years their habitational zone were confined to two 'permanent settlements'—Dugong Creek in the north (1976-77) and South Bay at the southern tip (1980)—in order to make way for developmental activities as well as to ensure the survival of the declining Onge population (Venkateswar, 2004, p. 14; Raviprasad et al., 2020). The first recorded census of the Onges in 1931 accounted for 250 people, which has seen gradual decline till the 1980s when it settled at 97. It remained stagnant for close to 30 years from the Census of 1981 to 2001 and then in 2011 the number rose to 101.

A study published in 2020 indicates that the number rose to 118 at the time of their fieldwork in 2017 (Raviprasad et al., 2020). After the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami which had a devastating impact on Little Andaman accounting for 85 per cent of all lives lost in the Andaman Islands (Tripathi, 2018, pp. 91-92), population of both settlements were merged and only the Dugong Creek settlement exists now (Raviprasad et al., 2020). In the settlement, non-Onge personnel are temporarily posted by the Andaman and Nicobar administration, which includes two members of the Andaman Adim Janjati Vikas Samiti (AAJVS), four teachers, two health department staff, two Andaman Public Works Department staff, two wireless operators from the Police department, and one staff from the electricity department who operates the diesel generator set. Rest are police personnel posted for surveillance of the settlement. The settlement has a primary health care sub-centre, a community hall and a school up to the 8th standard. Two Onge women look after the operations of the Anganwadi which takes care of the pre-primary education of Onge children. There is also a helipad to airlift Onge patients to Port Blair in case of emergencies. (Raviprasad et al., 2020). According to anthropologists, these developmental activities led to the 'sedenterization'[35] (Venkateswar, 2004, p. 131) of the Onge population, who became sequestered much like the Jarawa people. After resettlement, the community underwent several structural and cultural changes due to the introduction of policies like supply of free ration. This led to a gradual change in diet with less reliance on hunting-gathering. Rice, roti, edible oil and beverages such as tea became part of this new diet which coupled with decreased physical activity led to reduced stamina. These changes also impacted the Onge lifeworld as they moved away from traditional skills like weaving baskets and crafting boats which were closely associated with their hunting-gathering lifestyle, and became increasingly reliant on a 'cash economy'. According to a recent study (Raviprasad et al., 2020), 34 per cent of Onge in the age group of 21–40 years are employed in electricity, education and forest department of Andaman and Nicobar administration. At the same time, the community is an introverted one. The previous Onge settlement at South Bay was in close proximity to the Nicobarese settlement but none of the Onges had any social or marital alliances with the Nicobarese. While the creation of a tribal reserve has ensured the survival of the Onges, the State's social-engineering policies on the island have gravely impacted the community's way

[35] 'Thus plans for the islanders did not occur in isolation but were mobilized within a larger context that was contingent on reducing the extent of forest available to them. The strategy for colonization of Little Andaman with settlers from mainland India coincided with the program for sedenterization of the Onge.' (Venkateswar, 2004, p. 131)

of life. Pramatha Kishore Sanyal's photographs are a melancholic remnant of the now non-existent Onge settlement of South Bay and the rickety 'Memory Studio' as its last custodian.

Conclusion

In weaving together these events, the paper highlights two key concepts—first, settler memory, and second, the process of islanding or making of the island settlements—to reflect on the role of the State's rehabilitation policy in producing the Andamans' post-colonial island-scape that underwent massive changes from the 1960s to the early 1980s. During this period, the Indian state took active measures to alter the notion of 'remoteness' attached to the Andaman Islands and consciously promoted the 'integration' of the islands with the mainland through socio-cultural and infrastructural mediation. Transportation of mainland communities to the islands played a key role in implementing this agenda. Settlements were established 'at the expense of tribal dispossession and marginalisation' (Sen, 2018, p. 95) and overall disruption of indigenous lives and habitats on the islands. On the other hand, refugee labour[36](Sen 2018) gave shape to the State's agenda: at the same time contributing to the process of 'place-making'[37] which inscribed settlers' histories onto the island geography. This history of transportation and settlement is alive in the memory of the first- and second-generation settlers, but due to the lack of intergenerational transmission there has been a gradual erasure of this history of islanding. Sanyals on the other hand, are not settlers but they are islanders and their family history demonstrates the multiple forms of migration and settlement that took place in the islands. Further, the fact that it is a Bengali family is also relevant to the story as Bengali staff was recruited with the explicit understanding that they would aid the task of settlement by drawing upon their 'cultural familiarity with that of the refugee populations'.

The paper argues that these changes altered the geography of the island alongside the identity of the actors administering these changes on the ground. In other words, for the later generations, integration is successfully achieved by virtue of forgetting their mainland past. By putting into conversation the State's archive with field-based interactions, the paper brings out the complex network of settler-State interactions across the settlement locations, the

[36] Prem K. R. (2018). 'Refugees as Surplus Population: Race, Migration and Capitalist Value Regimes', *New Political Economy* 23(3), 627–39.

[37] 'The roots of the term 'placemaking' can be traced to Martin Heidegger's foregrounding of the constitutive relationship between people and their physical environment in his notion of *Dasein* (being-in-the-world), which implies not only that we cannot exist independently of the world around us but also that the world around us cannot exist independent of the people who inhabit it.' (Sen and Silverman, 2014, pp. 1-18)

slipperiness of memory encountered in piecing together a history of settlement, and rapidly altering settler geographies in the face of developmental changes from *terra nullius* to agricultural settlement to coveted tourism destination. The transitions, however, do not imply an absolute overhaul of the islandscape: rather it is in the nature of change to retain residual elements of past geographies—like dead stumps of felled trees—that continually remind their witnesses of the multiple spatial and temporal histories of the space. Finally, an archipelagic understanding uncovers layered geographies that make the island a palimpsest which the first- and second-generation settlers navigate in narrating their histories of 'islanding'.

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