

Arrival of 12 Families of Karen in Andaman: Adaptation and Present Status of the Karen Community

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Abstract

The arrival of twelve Karen families in the Andaman Islands during the British colonial period marks a significant historical event in the cultural and demographic evolution of the region. The Karen, an indigenous group from Myanmar, faced immense challenges in adapting to a new environment, shaping their socio-economic practices, cultural traditions, and integration into the broader Andaman society. This research paper aims to explore the origins of the Karen migration, the factors influencing their adaptation in the Andaman Islands, and the present socio-economic and cultural status of the Karen community in contemporary times.

Keywords: Karen, indigenous, socio-economic, Andaman

Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands has been a melting pot of diverse communities and ethnic groups, with migration waves contributing to the cultural fabric of the region. One of the lesser-known migrant groups is the Karen community, who arrived from Burma (present-day Myanmar). This paper investigates the historical circumstances leading to the migration of the Karen families, their adaptation strategies in a new geographical and socio-cultural setting, and the current status of the Karen community in the Andaman Islands.

Historical Background

The Origins of the Karen in Burma

The Karen people are one of the major ethnic groups of Burma, largely concentrated in the hilly regions of Eastern Myanmar and along the Thai-Myanmar border. Traditionally, the Karen has been marginalized and subject to exploitation by the dominant Burman ethnic group and other ruling powers in the region. Their livelihood primarily revolved around shifting agriculture, hunting, and forest-based activities, with a strong communal structure and distinct cultural identity based on animistic and Christian beliefs.

The British colonial administration's interaction with the Karen in Burma was multifaceted. On one hand, the British relied on Karen labor for economic ventures such as forestry and other developmental projects; on the other hand, the British sought to pacify rebellious factions by offering the Karen certain privileges. This context became the foundation for the British decision to relocate a small number of Karen families to the Andaman Islands.

Migration to the Andaman Islands

In the early 1920s, the British administration in India and Burma faced labor shortages in the sparsely populated Andaman Islands. In 1924, Dr. Marshall, the principal of the Karen Baptist Theological Seminary, visited Michael Lloyd Ferrar, the Chief Commissioner of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands who is his cousin. Following the visit, Dr. H.I. Marshal published a note in the Karen magazine 'Hsah Tu Gaw' about a British scheme offering a year's rations and land for cultivation for anyone willing to work in the forests of these islands (Robert Khin, 2020). In response to that in 1925, the first twelve families arrived, led by a priest, named Reverend Luige. In 1926, another fifty families arrived, and the first Karen village, named Webi, to settle in the Andaman Islands, particularly in the North Andaman region. These families were chosen due to their reputation as skilled agriculturalists and their ability to adapt to new environments, with the help of the missionaries. The British provided them with agricultural land, tools, and support to develop the island's rural economy.

Adaptation to the New Environment

Environmental Challenges

The Karen families faced a range of challenges in the unfamiliar terrain of the Andaman Islands. The dense tropical forests, coastal geography, and unpredictable weather conditions necessitated a shift from their traditional subsistence patterns in Burma. The Andaman Islands' ecosystem, while offering fertile soil, was prone to heavy rains and occasional storms, which the Karen had to adapt to for successful farming.

To cope with these challenges, the Karen employed their traditional farming practices of shifting cultivation and supplemented their diet with forest resources, fishing, and hunting. Their deep knowledge of forest ecosystems allowed them to utilize medicinal plants and food sources that were unfamiliar to other migrant groups.

Socio-cultural Integration

Socially, the Karen community maintained a distinct identity while integrating with other communities on the islands. Their shared experiences of migration and settlement fostered bonds with other ethnic groups like the Bengali settlers, Nicobarese, and Indian laborers (Vishvajit Pandya, 2009). While they maintained their traditional customs, language, and religious practices, there was a gradual assimilation of local customs. Many adults have taken language courses in Hindi and Tamil to facilitate communication.

The Karen's Christian faith, introduced during the British colonial period in Burma by missionaries, played a vital role in their social structure in the Andaman Islands. They established small churches and maintained their religious practices, which became a source of social cohesion. However, their interaction with the predominantly Hindu and Muslim populations of the Andaman Islands led to some syncretic elements, particularly in the celebration of festivals and social customs (K. S. Singh, 1994).

Present Status of the Karen Community

Demographics and Geographic Distribution

Today, the Karen community in the Andaman Islands has grown significantly from the initial twelve families. Concentrated primarily in the Mayabunder (Web, Deopur, Law, Lucknow, Karmatang-9 and Karmatang-10) and Diglipur (Borang and Chipon) tehsils of the North and Middle Andaman district (Mohit M Rao, 2020), the Karen people continue to play a crucial role in the agricultural economy of the

islands. Although they represent a small fraction of the total population of the Andaman Islands, the Karen have retained their distinct cultural identity through language, customs, and religious practices.

Economic Activities

Agriculture remains the cornerstone of the Karen economy in the Andaman Islands. The Karen people have been instrumental in the development of rice cultivation, horticulture, and spice farming in the region. Over the decades, they have expanded their agricultural practices to include commercial crops like coconut, betel nut, and vegetables, contributing to the local markets. The Karen is known for their weaving skills, producing handicrafts such as traditional bags and clothing that are sold in local markets and to tourists.

In addition to agriculture, some Karen families have diversified into other sectors such as fishing, forestry, and small-scale business ventures. With the advent of tourism in the Andaman Islands, a few Karen individuals have also ventured into hospitality and eco-tourism, showcasing their unique cultural heritage to visitors.

Education and Social Mobility

The Karen community places a strong emphasis on education, with many younger generations pursuing higher studies and professional careers.

To educate the community, the Government Secondary School (GSS) in Webi was established in 1928 by the family of Reverend Luige. The Karen language was not formally taught for about 50 years, and Karen language textbooks were not available. The country's first textbook in the Karen language was published in 2010 after a group of local teachers convinced the district administration to support the initiative. As of 2018, Karen is officially taught as a language till Class V at GSS Webi (Mohit M Rao, 2020). On 12 March 2007, the government reserved government jobs and places in higher education for the Karen as one of the Other Backward Classes in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by including Centre list of OBC (The Gazette of India, 2007). This has allowed many more Karen youths to access to government-run schools and colleges in the Andaman Islands to enter professions such as teaching, government services, and technical trades. However, challenges remain in terms of educational infrastructure, particularly in remote areas, where access to higher education and advanced skill development is limited.

Cultural Retention and Modernization

The Karen have managed to retain much of their cultural heritage, including their language, traditional clothing, and religious customs. Community events such as traditional dances, ceremonies, and the celebration of Karen New Year continue to be held, providing a link to their ancestral roots. However, the influence of modernization and interaction with other communities has led to some changes in their way of life. The younger generation, in particular, is increasingly adopting modern lifestyles while still maintaining a connection to their cultural identity.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite their success in adapting to life in the Andaman Islands, the Karen community faces several challenges. Economic opportunities remain limited, particularly in remote areas where access to markets

and infrastructure is poor. Additionally, environmental degradation due to deforestation and changing agricultural practices poses a threat to the sustainability of their traditional livelihoods.

There are also concerns about the preservation of Karen culture, especially as younger generations move to urban areas for education and employment. While there are efforts within the community to pass down cultural knowledge and practices, the pressures of modernization continue to influence social dynamics.

Conclusion

The arrival of the twelve Karen families in the Andaman Islands is a testament to human resilience and adaptability. Over the past century, the Karen has carved out a place for themselves in the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the Andaman Islands. While they face ongoing challenges, the Karen community continues to thrive, balancing tradition with the demands of modern life. The future of the Karen in the Andaman Islands will depend on their ability to navigate economic, environmental, and cultural changes while preserving their unique heritage.

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